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Poll shows most Americans don't expect health care overhaul to affect their lives directly

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Most Americans don't expect a health care overhaul to affect their lives directly, but those who worry about the fallout outnumber those expecting to come out ahead, a poll out Tuesday has found.

The survey by the nonpartisan Robert Wood Johnson Foundation finds that Americans are tuning in to the debate in Washington, with 60 percent saying they're following it very closely or fairly closely.

Most see a change ahead for the nation, and they're divided on whether that will be for good or ill. But when it comes to their own personal lives, Americans say they don't expect much of an impact.

Asked how the health care overhaul would affect their own access to medical care, 57 percent said it would stay the same. Similarly, 61 percent said their personal financial situation would stay about the same.

Among those who do expect a change, 28 percent said they thought their access to care would get worse, while 15 percent said they thought it would improve. On finances, 27 percent said they thought the health care bill would make them worse off financially, while 12 percent expected an improvement.

"The majority of Americans do have health insurance, so to the extent they see the reform debate as a way to expand coverage for the uninsured, they may not see that they stand to gain as much from it," said Brian Quinn, a senior researcher with the foundation, which supports the general goals of health care reform.

Answers shifted when the poll asked about changes in store for the country as whole. Fewer than 30 percent thought things would stay the same if Congress passes legislation.

Americans split 35-35 on whether access to medical care would improve around the country. Concern about the federal budget was sharper, with 39 percent saying the nation's finances would be worse off, compared with 33 percent saying the legislation would improve the balance sheet.

Nonetheless, Americans seem to want lawmakers to tackle health care. Seventy-nine percent say it is important for President Barack Obama to include health care reform in addressing the nation's economic crisis.

The Democratic bills would require all Americans to carry health insurance, with government help to make premiums more affordable. They would ban insurance companies from denying coverage or charging more to people with health problems. They would set up new insurance markets for those who now have the hardest time finding and keeping coverage — self-employed people and small businesses.

The poll, a monthly status check on Americans' views about health care, also found that consumers' confidence in their health insurance coverage and ability to access care increased sharply in October. Indeed, Robert Wood Johnson's index of consumer health care confidence rose to 104.4 points, up about 8 percent from 96.6 in September. Researchers credited better news about the economy and progress on health care in the Senate at the

time the poll was conducted.

The telephone survey of 500 people was conducted between Sept. 24 and Oct. 27. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 4.4 percentage points.

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