



## U.S. Health Care in the Midst of a Global Pandemic: A Message from Rural America



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health care are equally accessible and affordable to all*





Key findings from a survey among 805 rural voters.

Conducted July 29 to August 5, 2020 by Hart Research Associates for Families USA Action.

# Why Rural Healthcare?

## COVID-19 in Rural America

- Nearly 60 million people live in rural communities, comprising 19% of the U.S. population.
- The pandemic has disproportionately affected communities of color in rural communities, where there are greater concentrations of racial and ethnic diversity.
- Immigrants make up one fifth of the national rural population and are growing. Certain rural areas have long-standing, majority communities of colors such as the "Black Belt" in Mississippi and Alabama where rural Black populations outnumber White populations.<sup>1</sup>
- Due to existing system vulnerabilities such as barriers to care that are specific to rural regions, rural populations have a higher risk for contracting coronavirus. Majority-minority" rural communities in Georgia, Mississippi, New Mexico and Arizona have some of the highest COVID-19 death rates in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

# Why Rural Healthcare?

## Health Care Priorities for Rural Residents

- Half of rural voters choose Coronavirus or healthcare as one of their top two voting issues.
- When rural voters volunteer the health issues that matter most to them, they emphasize affordability of coverage, COVID-19, and Medicare.
- Health care and COVID-19 both have major effects on jobs and the economy in rural communities.
- COVID-19 will play a major role in how rural residents vote in the 2020 Presidential election.

# Survey Methodology



## WHO

805 registered voters identified on the Target Smart voter file as living in a rural area. To be included in the sample, respondents also were required to say they live in a small town or a rural area.



## WHERE

405 interviews were conducted with rural voters nationally, and 400 additional interviews were conducted with rural voters in 2020 battleground states. The total battleground sample (including battleground respondents from the main sample) includes 554 respondents.

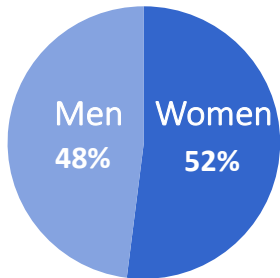


## HOW

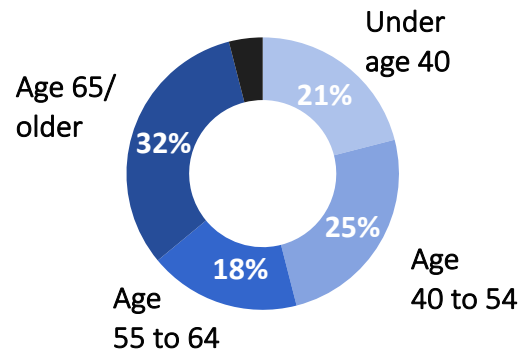
Live-caller telephone interviews

# Composition of the Sample

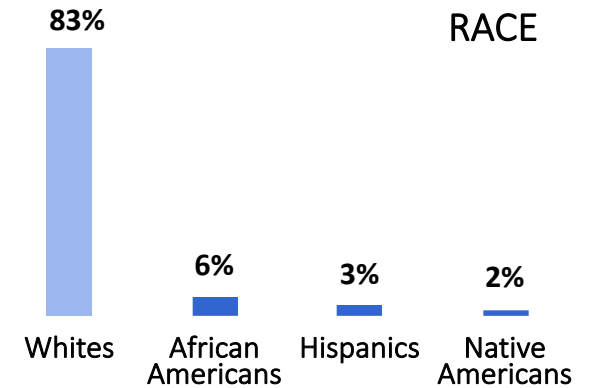
## GENDER



## AGE

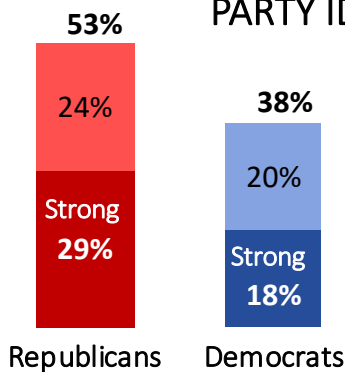


## RACE

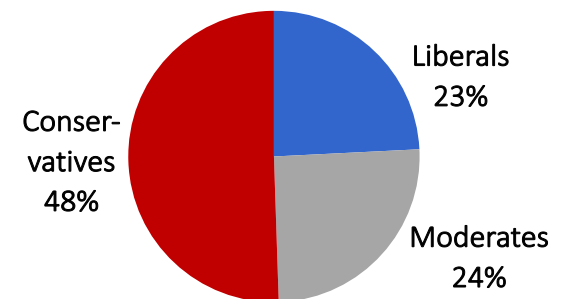


**53%**  
**EVANGELICAL**  
**CHRISTIANS**

## PARTY ID

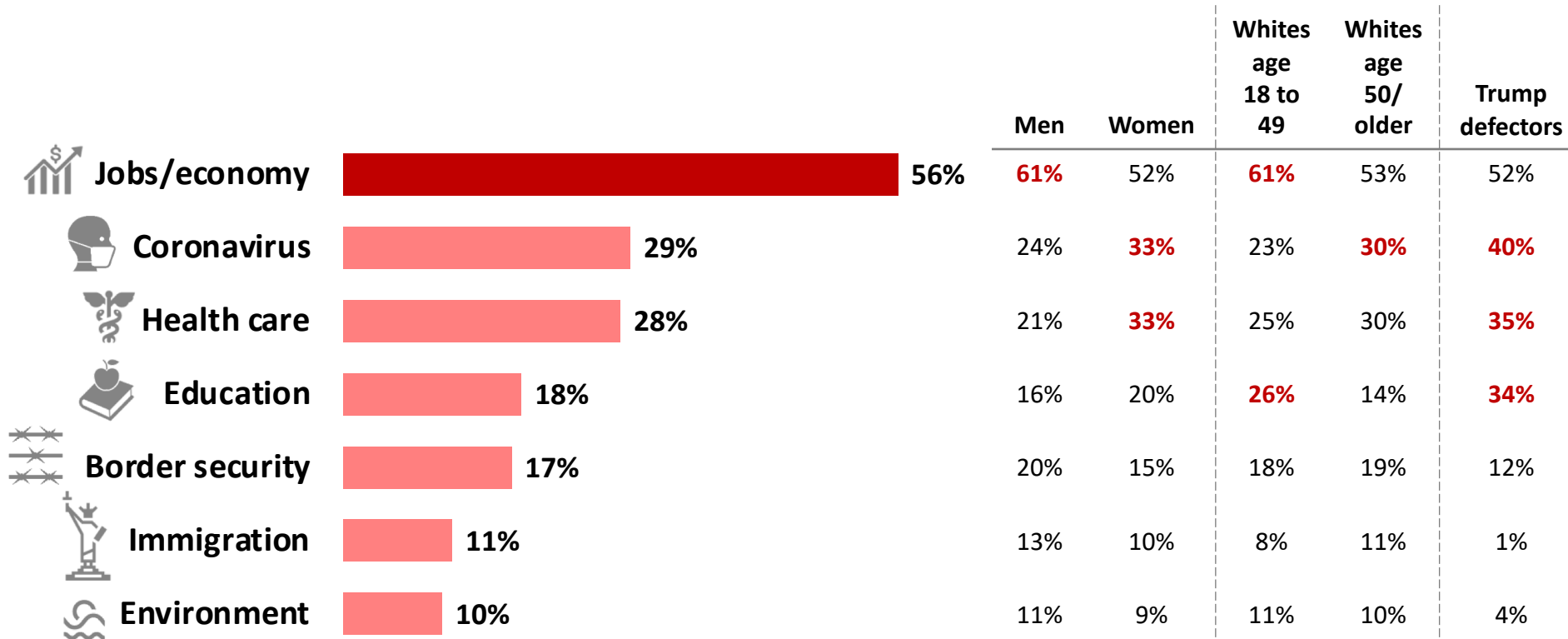


## IDEOLOGY



# Half of rural voters choose the coronavirus or health care as one of their top two voting issues.

## *Two Most Important Issues in my Vote Decisions this November*



When rural voters volunteer the health issues that matter most to them, they emphasize affordability, COVID-19, and Medicare, not “rural-specific” issues.

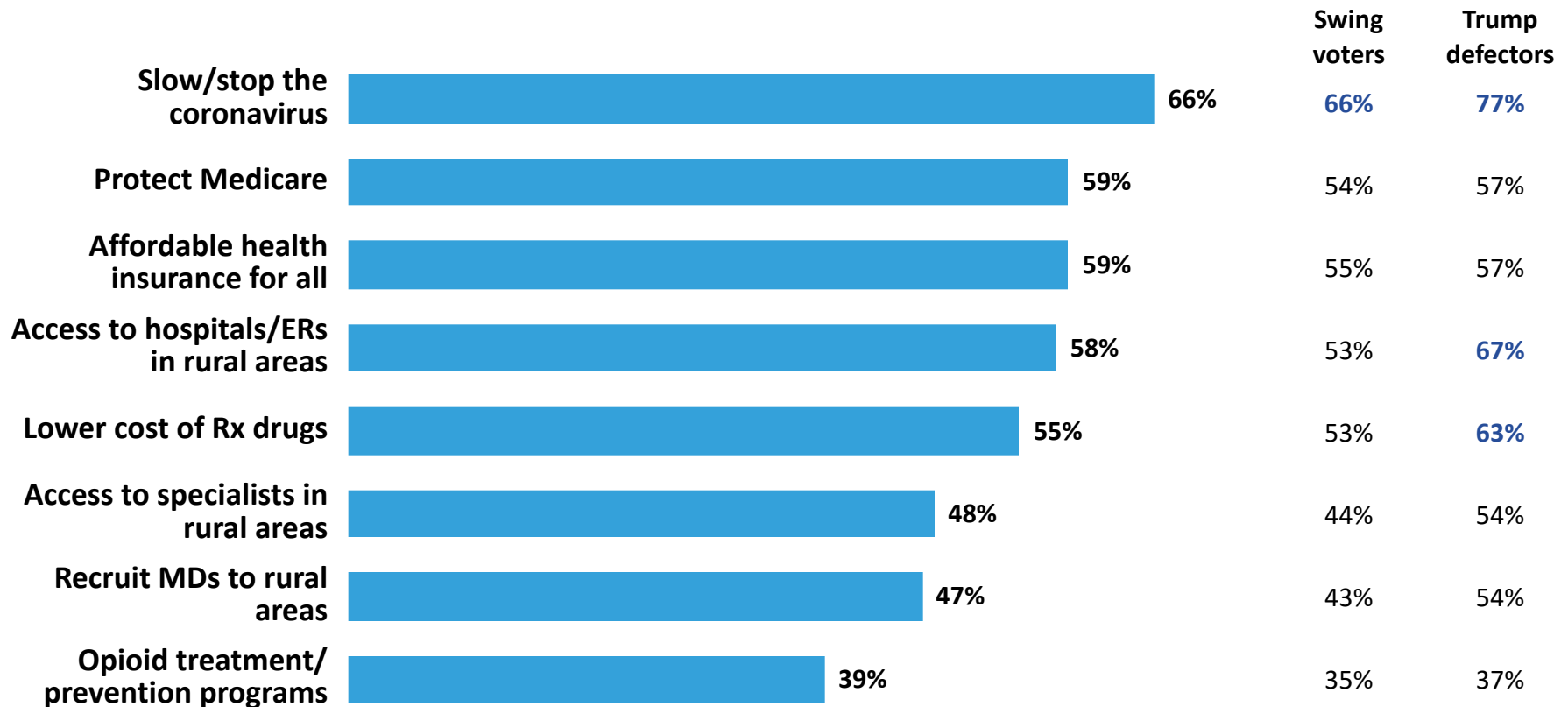
*What healthcare issues will be the most important to you personally when it comes time to vote this November?*

	All voters	Trump voters	Biden voters	Swing voters	Trump defectors
Affordable insurance, lower premiums, affordable coverage	17%	15%	19%	16%	10%
COVID-19, coronavirus, treatment, vaccine	14%	7%	21%	16%	24%
Medicare, protecting Medicare, Medicare for all	11%	8%	16%	13%	20%
Affordable medicines, drugs, reduced prices, cost of prescription drugs	11%	13%	10%	12%	10%
Affordable health care, affordable for all	9%	8%	9%	8%	13%
Equal health care for all Americans, equal access for all, availability, accessibility, health care for all	7%	5%	9%	5%	1%
Accessibility, access to good doctors, doctors to be there for you when you need them	5%	4%	6%	4%	2%



# The coronavirus, affordable coverage, Medicare, and access to care are most likely to be seen as extremely important.

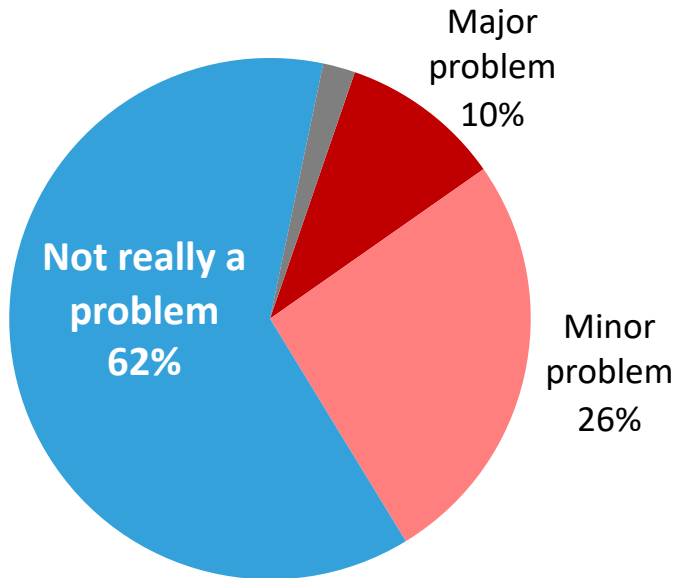
*Proportions saying each is an EXTREMELY IMPORTANT health care issue\**



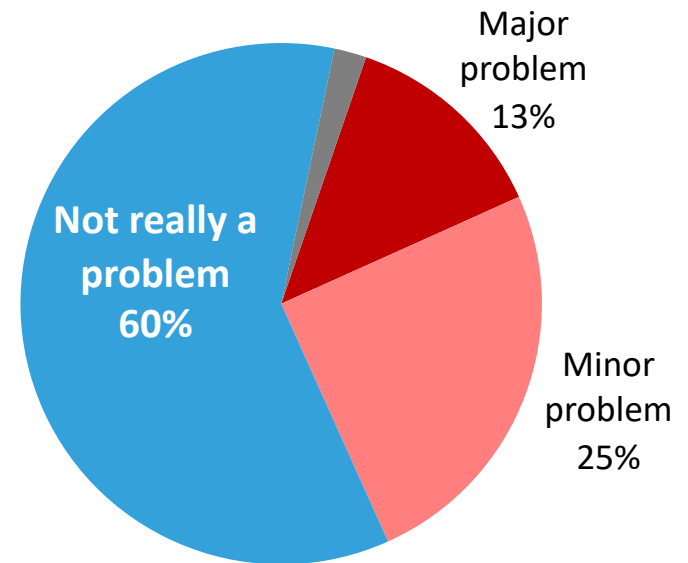
\*9-10 ratings on 0-to-10 scale, 10 = extremely important issue

When asked directly, less than 40% say that access to care is a problem in their own community.

*Lack of access to nearby hospitals, emergency care, and specialized medical care in my area*



*Lack of access to affordable dental care in my area*



# Takeaways and Recommendations

1. Health care issues move rural voters.
2. Affordability of health care (insurance, drug prices) should be the leading edge in communicating with rural voters.
3. While rural residents want to make sure they will continue to have access to hospitals and emergency room care, most do not see this as a current crisis, but more as a future danger. Although they are supportive of proposals that specifically address the needs of rural communities, it is important to communicate with rural voters about the broader issues of affordability, the importance of Medicare, and the need to control the spread of COVID-19.

## Takeaways and Recommendations (cont.)

4. While it will be important to build rural support for the expansion of coverage, affordable care is the key frame for the election, more than expansion of coverage (especially when the focus of expansion is low-income people). There is some resonance to GOP charges that Democrats are for “socialized medicine,” even among swing voters.
5. The best audiences for health care messaging among rural voters are women and those over age 50. The issue of drug pricing is particularly powerful with non-college-educated voters, but less so with voters who have a four-year college degree. Seniors are especially concerned about the spread of the coronavirus.

# Policy Recommendations

1. Reliable and comprehensive rural broadband is long overdue. Rural broadband is not just an American economic imperative, it is an American public health imperative.
2. Telehealth has enormous potential to increase access to care in rural areas. And the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated how quickly our health care system can ramp up telehealth when under duress. But telehealth is not a panacea for rural health care delivery, and indeed on its own greatly expanded rural telehealth could accelerate the closure of rural health providers who deliver services that are necessarily in-person. Instead rural provider sustainability policy should combine:
  - New types of reimbursement that are less dependent on fee-for-service revenue, such as Pennsylvania's rural hospital global payment model.
  - Sustainable telehealth payment policies and flexibilities for providers to prevent barriers to telehealth delivery from emerging after the pandemic.
  - Expanded Medicaid coverage in all 50 states and territories to close the gap in coverage for low-income rural adults.



## Policy Recommendations (cont.)

3. Congress should add dental coverage to Medicare, and states should maintain oral health funding and reimbursement structures in Medicaid to make dental care more affordable and accessible to rural residents.<sup>3</sup>
4. State Medicaid agencies should make dedicated investment in home- and community-based services for rural seniors and individuals with disabilities and complex care needs.
5. As federal agencies consider new mechanisms to address the social determinants of health, they should incorporate unmet social determinants of health that are specific to rural communities like access to education and transportation, as well as issues like safe living environments and access to high quality nutrition that are in common in rural and urban areas.<sup>4</sup>
6. Ensure equitable distribution of COVID-19 treatments and resources to all U.S. residents, with greater focus on historically marginalized communities and populations that have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, including rural communities of color and American Indians.<sup>5</sup>

# Sources

- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2019/07/17/471877/redefining-rural-america/>
- <sup>2</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/other-at-risk-populations/rural-communities.html>
- <sup>3</sup> [https://familiesusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/HE-98\\_-Policy-PCORI-Telehealth- Issue-Brief 7-22-20.pdf](https://familiesusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/HE-98_-Policy-PCORI-Telehealth- Issue-Brief 7-22-20.pdf)
- <sup>4</sup> <https://familiesusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/HE-267 Integrating-CHWs Report 7-21-20.pdf>
- <sup>5</sup> <https://familiesusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/HE-267 Integrating-CHWs Report 7-21-20.pdf>

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