

Views on health disparities fueled largely by political ideology

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Harry Perlstadt, a Michigan State University sociologist, contends party ideology is more important than party affiliation when it comes to public perception of health disparities. Credit: Michigan State University

When it comes to public perception about health disparities in the United States, political ideology plays a surprisingly large role – more so even than party affiliation, according to new research by a Michigan State University sociologist.

"As far as our beliefs about unequal access to health care, whether we are conservative or liberal seems to be much more important than whether we are Republican or Democrat," said Harry Perlstadt, professor of sociology.

Perlstadt's study is the first to scientifically examine political and

ideological beliefs on the issue of health disparities. He will present his findings today at the American Public Health Association's 138th annual meeting in Denver.

The issue is back in the headlines after Republicans captured the U.S. House Nov. 2 and vowed to repeal the new health care law that expands coverage to all Americans. Perlstadt said that while government officials and health workers are familiar with the social factors that create health disparities for minorities and low-income people, the perceptions of the general public have not been fully explored, particularly in terms of political values and identity.

Understanding the nuances of how the public perceives health disparities is important for lawmakers on both sides of the aisle as they shape their strategies on health care reform, Perlstadt said.

He commissioned a telephone survey with MSU's Institute for Public Policy and Social Research that gathered information on the respondents and asked a series of questions regarding their beliefs about health disparities. The questions included, "How often do you think the [health care](#) system treats people unfairly based on whether they have health insurance?" and "How often does a person's race or ethnic background affect whether they can get routine medical care when they need it?"

Perlstadt analyzed the survey data and found that race, age, sex, income and whether a respondent lived in an urban or rural community all influenced their beliefs on [health disparities](#). Political party and ideology also affected their beliefs – only not quite as Perlstadt had predicted.

"When I started this, I thought party affiliation would be more important than ideology," Perlstadt said. "And while party is still important, it takes a backseat to ideology."

Provided by Michigan State University

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