

Americans Vote Against Greater Medicaid Reach



Voters on Tuesday opted to cast their ballots for multiple governors who would not be open to expanding Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, limiting access to health insurance for disabled and poor Americans in those states.

Health care reform was one of the key issues voters expressed unhappiness about leading up to Tuesday's midterms. As polls closed, it became clear that Medicaid expansion would become a more distant reality for many.

Under the Affordable Care Act, Medicaid eligibility can be extended to Americans with incomes of up to 138 percent of the federal poverty level, which is \$16,105 a year for an individual adult and \$32,913 a year for a family of four.

The move is one of the most contested portions of the health law. Even the Supreme Court agreed in 2012 that the federal government could not impose such a mandate on the states, instead making Medicaid expansion voluntary.

[DEBATE CLUB: Is Medicaid Expansion Good for the States?]

Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Sylvia Mathews Burwell reminded the National Association of Medicaid Directors on Tuesday during an annual fall conference that states could choose to expand Medicaid at any time, and that they also reserved the right to change their minds.

Avalere Health, a strategic advisory services firm, has estimated that nearly 2.3 million people have been left uninsured because Medicaid hasn't been expanded in Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Maine and Wisconsin. Republican governors who have been opposed to Medicaid expansion won their races in each of those states last night.

GOP governors and state lawmakers say expanding Medicaid is too expensive and would strain state governments' already lean budgets.

"State budgets are so tight that any incremental cost can be very significant," says Elizabeth Carpenter, director of the health care reform practice at Avalere Health. "State budgets are real, and every day governors and Medicaid directors are making very tough choices about where and how to spend their money."

She went on to say that some proponents of the law look at the economic benefits of the expansion over time, including a possible increase in productivity that would come with having a healthier workforce.

Though the federal government would pay for Medicaid coverage under the Affordable Care Act at this time, by 2020 it is slated to reduce matching funds to 90 percent of the cost of the program – which many governors say would be too strenuous on their already tight budgets.

[READ: Percentage of Uninsured Americans Now Lowest on Record]

The District of Columbia and 27 states have accepted Medicaid expansion so far. The majority of governors who have moved to expand Medicaid are Democrats, but there are a few exceptions, including in Iowa, Michigan and Nevada.

The results from Tuesday night's elections show that either voters did not hear the messages of reform from candidates, or that they simply didn't agree. They also could have been focusing on issues of national security or the economy, or their vote could have reflected a general dissatisfaction with the White House and the Democratic Party.

Gubernatorial candidates who were for the expansion were open throughout their campaigns about their intentions. Democrat Charlie Crist of Florida, who lost to Republican incumbent Rick Scott, made Medicaid expansion a central message of his campaign, saying he would move immediately on implementation if elected. Crist said he would go so far as to bypass the legislature with an executive order to gain coverage for as many as 1 million Floridians. Even Scott said he would consider expansion, but only after first looking at whether it would cost Florida taxpayers too much.

Stefanie Nadeau, director of MaineCare Services, tells U.S. News Maine had not expanded Medicaid because the state was focusing its efforts on helping people with intellectual disabilities, and that it was committed to fixing shortages at skilled nursing facilities.

"We believe those are the most vulnerable citizens," she says, adding that there was a waiting list for care for people with intellectual disabilities. Those populations would not be covered under the Medicaid expansion plan, she points out.

In Wisconsin, Republican Gov. Scott Walker, considered by many to be a potential 2016 presidential candidate, has said his state will not make a move on expansion. His opponent, Democrat Mary Burke, attacked him for this right after she announced her intention to run, saying she would accept federal funds for the program. She ultimately lost the election.

Pennsylvania's Tom Corbett was the only Republican governor voted out of office Tuesday, although Alaska's Sean Parnell appears set to be ousted. Corbett had recently been granted a Medicaid waiver for the state, but Tom Wolf's victory in Pennsylvania could mean a more traditional expansion may be under consideration instead.

Some Republican candidates for governor had vowed to overturn Medicaid expansions already in place in their states. That would be difficult to do, however. "It's hard to take people's benefits away from them once you have given them," Carpenter says.

Instead, newly elected governors may choose an alternate path.

[ALSO: Republican Midterm Dominance Extends to Governor's Races]

Illinois Gov.-elect Bruce Rauner, a Republican, has said he would not have backed expansion, but has no plans to repeal his state's move to do so. He has said, however, he would try to reform the program, a sentiment echoed by GOP Gov.-elect Charlie Baker in Massachusetts.

In Arkansas, where a privately run Medicaid option was implemented, Republican Gov.-elect Asa Hutchinson has said he would examine the plan and possibly implement limits to cut tax dollars going toward the program, which currently covers 200,000 citizens.

Other states, such as Michigan and Arizona, are taking a different approach by working with the federal government to come up with their own Medicaid plans. Utah, Tennessee and Wyoming are considering similar measures.

Georgia Republican Gov. Nathan Deal, who was re-elected Tuesday, expressed throughout his campaign that he does not support Medicaid expansion, though he did create a study group to examine the details of Medicaid reform. His opponent, Jason Carter, wanted to implement an alternative to Medicaid similar to the program in Arkansas, though that would have needed approval from a predominantly Republican legislature. In response, some safety net providers are stepping up to offer coverage to low-income Georgians.

There are portions of the Affordable Care Act that individuals seem to like, such as not being turned away from an insurance company because of a pre-existing condition, or parents having the option of continuing to cover adult children until the age of 26. Citizens in states where Medicaid has expanded say they are happy with the coverage, though others have said the increased coverage has not improved access to care.

In delivering health care narratives to voters, Republicans focused on government dysfunction by pointing to the tumultuous rollouts of state and federal exchanges, where consumers were supposed to be shopping for and buying health insurance, but where many came out frustrated.

Dr. Ashish Jha, a professor at the Harvard School of Public Health, tweeted Tuesday that he projects not much more expansion will be seen.

At the federal level, Sen. Mitch McConnell – likely to be the next Senate majority leader – has vowed to work to repeal Obamacare, or at least portions of it. In the days leading up to the elections, however, he cautioned doing so would be difficult because the party would butt heads with the president, who would have veto power over any attempts to repeal the law.

"Obamacare was a huge legislative mistake," McConnell, R-Ky., said Wednesday. "We'll be discussing how to go forward on this issue."