



## Medicare age drop, adding millions, on hold, but its favor grows among lawmakers

by: [Roy Edroso](#)

Effective Apr 29, 2021

Published May 3, 2021  
Last Reviewed Apr 29, 2021

A number of prominent Democrats, including President Joe Biden, have advocated for a drop in the Medicare eligibility age, a move that would add millions to the program. But since Biden left this proposal out of his April 28 Congressional address, there seems little chance that it will happen this year.

"It faces an uphill battle, but it's not dead, either," says John F. Williams, former Capitol Hill staffer now with law firm Hall, Render, Killian, Heath & Lyman in Washington, D.C.

However, you can expect Democrats to keep endorsing those reforms, which are broadly popular, to entice voters.

Democratic politicians pushed hard for a raft of national health care reforms during the last U.S. election, and when Biden won the presidency and his party maintained its House majority and achieved a split Senate, it was expected that at least some of those reforms would be advanced in legislation. Biden's appointment of reformers to the posts of HHS Secretary and CMS Administrator strengthened the impression ([PBN 3/1/21](#), [4/1/21](#)).

In late March, an apparent compromise between Biden and Senator Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), his chief opponent for the Democratic nomination in 2020 and a more radical Medicare reformer, stirred speculation that Biden and Congress might work quickly to expand eligibility for Medicare.

During the 2020 campaign Sanders, steadfastly endorsed Medicare for All, his signature single payer plan for U.S. health care coverage for all Americans ([PBN 9/18/17](#)). Biden, on the other hand, dismissed Sanders' plan as prohibitively expensive, and even suggested he would veto such a plan were Congress to send it to him as president ([PBN 12/21/20](#)).

### The Biden alternative

Biden's stated preference, in addition to stronger protections for the beleaguered Affordable Care Act (ACA) exchanges, was to allow Americans between the ages of 60 and 64 to "buy in" to Medicare, or to avail a "public option." That option, based on an abandoned feature of the ACA, would allow Americans who are not eligible for Medicare or subsidized exchange plans to choose a government plan that would have the power to set prices as Medicare does and require only limited payment from beneficiaries.

Politically there are upsides and downsides to each approach. Medicare for All consistently polls well; in March 2020, a Morning Consult/Politico poll found 55% voter support for it, and the same percentage held up a year later ([PBN 4/9/20](#)).

But Morning Consult/Politico also found strong opposition to Medicare for All from Republicans (62%), a constituency with a stronger presence in Congress, which would have to pass such a plan, than in the general electorate. The poll also reveals higher acceptance levels overall for a "public option" — 80% of Democrats and 56% of Republicans support it. According to a 2019 Kaiser Family Foundation survey, lowering the Medicare age by itself polls even better.

### Lower age limit gains traction

Until recently, such reforms remained in the realm of the theoretical. On Feb. 23, Senator Michael Bennett (D-Colo.) introduced S. 386, the Medicare-X Choice Act of 2021, which would establish a "coordinated and low-cost health plan, to be known as the Medicare Exchange health plan." Bennett introduced a similar bill in 2017. There has been no action on the bill since its introduction, however, and GovTrack gives it a 4% chance of enactment.

But a brief statement in March from Sanders, now Chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, indicated he was willing to support a Medicare-for-Less-Than-All option.

"We should lower the eligibility age for Medicare from 65 down to 60," Sanders said on March 29. The Wall Street Journal reported Sanders also wanted the newly-expanded Medicare "to cover dental care, hearing aids and eyeglasses, and to pay for those through savings from reduced drug prices for Medicare."

Despite the apparent willingness to lower the Medicare age, there has not been any legislative follow through. On April 25, however, Sanders and 16 Democratic Senators sent an open letter to Biden pushing for the Sanders reforms to be included in the "American Families Plan" legislation Biden was scheduled to propose on April 28 in his Congressional address.

HI ROY

 [My bookmarks](#)

Current Issue

[Click here to read latest issue.](#)

### QUICK LINKS

[click icon to expand](#)

In the letter, the lawmakers cite the coverage expansions that would come of lowering the eligibility age — Medicare could welcome as many as 23 million people if the age is 60; 42 million if it's 55; and 63 million if it goes down to 50. The letter also promoted the new medical benefits as well as "an out-of-pocket spending limit to traditional Medicare, as we have for Medicare Advantage plans and other private insurance plans through the Affordable Care Act."

To pay for this, the Senators proposed that the U.S. "do what every major country on earth does: negotiate with pharmaceutical companies to lower the high price of prescription drugs," according to the letter. "The Congressional Budget Office has estimated that requiring Medicare to negotiate with the pharmaceutical companies could save Medicare at least \$456 billion and increase revenue by at least \$45 billion over the next decade."

A similar letter to Biden from House advocates of the same program, led by Members Joe Neguse (D-Colo.) and Pramila Jayapal (D-Wash.), was sent simultaneously.

Some experts thought the letters might compel Biden to move fast on the reform efforts. However, in an address to Congress on April 28 touting the American Families Plan, Biden referred to the drug pricing change, but not the age drop.

Despite the omission, Democrats "will be happy just keeping these issues top of mind, this week and in the weeks and months ahead," given the popularity of the changes, says Eric Fader of the Day Pitney law firm in New York City.

#### After midterms remains a possibility

Given the closeness of the partisan split in the Senate, it seems unlikely that the Democrats will attempt to lower the Medicare age before the 2022 midterms, when 14 Democratic Senators and 20 Republican Senators will be up for reelection.

"I think we're a bit closer on Medicare at 60 and expansion of specific benefits — not because of the letter from key Senators, but because of the Administration's apparent skill at pressuring major legislation through a tight Senate," says Kevin Grabenstatter, managing director at international consultancy L.E.K. in San Francisco.

But, for the time being, it seems that "President Biden is eager to avoid a controversial health care play putting his many other legislative priorities at risk," Grabenstatter says.

#### Resources

- Morning Consult, "About 7 in 10 Voters Favor a Public Health Insurance Option. Medicare for All Remains Polarizing," March 24: <https://morningconsult.com/2021/03/24/medicare-for-all-public-option-polling/>
- Letter from 17 Senators to President Biden, April 25: [www.sanders.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/Sanders-Medicare-Letter\\_FINAL\\_April-25.pdf](http://www.sanders.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/Sanders-Medicare-Letter_FINAL_April-25.pdf)



BACK TO TOP



#### Part B News

- PBN Current Issue
- PBN User Tools
- PBN Benchmarks
- Ask a PBN Expert
- NPP Report Archive
- Part B News Archive

#### Coding References

- E&M Guidelines
- HCPCS
- CCI Policy Manual
- Fee Schedules
- Medicare Transmittals

#### Policy References

- Medicare Manual
  - 100-01
  - 100-02
  - 100-03
  - 100-04

#### Join our community!



Like us on Facebook

Follow us on Twitter

Join us on LinkedIn



Read and comment on the PBN Editors' Blog



Participate in PBN Discussion Forum



Contact the Part B News Editors

Subscribe | Log In | FAQ | CEUs

Part B Answers

Select Coder



Our Story | Terms of Use & Privacy Policy | © 2021 H3.Group