

ZIKA VIRUS AND THE ELECTION SEASON

August 2016



HARVARD
T.H. CHAN
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

STAT

INTRODUCTION

The current Zika virus outbreak is occurring in a presidential and congressional election year. Given the important role that infectious disease has played in past elections – such as Ebola in 2014¹ – this new poll of adults in the U.S. by *STAT* and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health examines key issues related to the Zika virus outbreak and the 2016 elections, including:

- Public views of who is to blame for congressional inaction to fund Zika virus response efforts
- Public support for an exception to late-term abortion restrictions when pregnancies are affected by Zika virus
- Public perceptions of which presidential candidate will do a better job handling the Zika virus outbreak

The poll also monitors public concern about the spread of Zika virus, though we note that the poll was conducted prior to the report of cases in Florida likely caused by local mosquitos².

FINDINGS

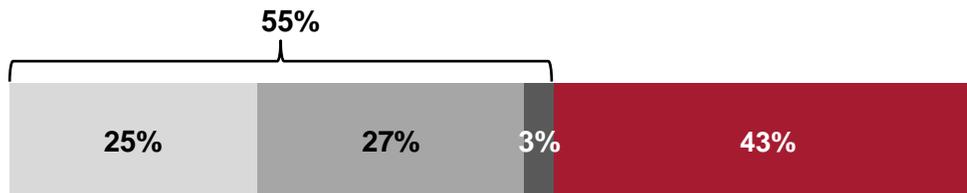
1) Is the general public aware that Congress has not passed legislation to add funding for Zika virus response efforts? Do they perceive this as a problem, and do they see one party as more blameworthy?

In February 2016, President Obama requested approximately \$1.9 billion dollars in emergency funding for Zika virus response efforts. Congress debated related legislation for several months, with Democrats and Republicans unable to agree on the amount of funding, sources from which funds would be drawn, and organizations eligible to receive funds, for example. Ultimately, no bill was passed before members of Congress left for summer recess on July 14.

Less than half the public (44%) are aware that no legislation to add funding for Zika virus response efforts has been passed. Among this group, just over half (55%) say not passing the funding legislation is a problem, including 25% who say it is a “very serious” problem.

FIGURE 1. Percent of adults in the U.S. who are aware that Congress did not pass legislation to add funding for Zika virus response efforts before they left for recess and say it is a very serious problem, a somewhat serious problem, a not too serious problem, or not a problem.

■ Very serious problem ■ Somewhat serious problem ■ Not too serious problem ■ Not a problem

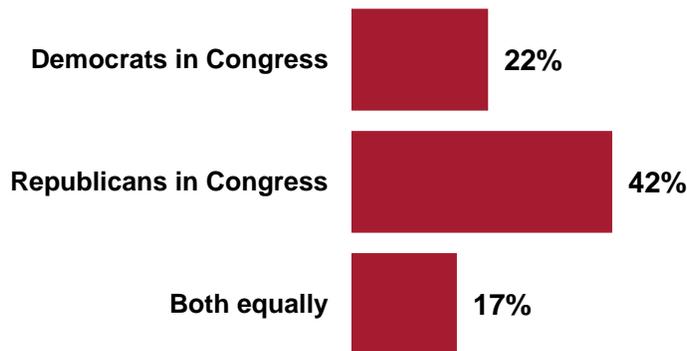


¹ SteelFisher, Gillian K., Robert J. Blendon, and Narayani Lasala-Blanco. "Ebola in the United States — Public Reactions and Implications." *New England Journal of Medicine* 373.9 (2015): 789-91, <http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp1506290>.

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Florida investigation links four recent Zika cases to local mosquito-borne virus transmission", July 29, 2016 <http://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2016/p0729-florida-zika-cases.html>.

Among people who are aware that no funding legislation has been passed, more blame Republicans in Congress than blame Democrats in Congress (42% vs. 22%) with 17% saying both parties in Congress are equally to blame.

FIGURE 2. Percent of adults in the U.S. who are aware that Congress did not pass legislation to add funding for Zika virus response efforts before they left for recess and say each group is most to blame.



In this heavily partisan era, it may not be surprising that the blame runs along party lines. Among this same group of people who know the legislation was not passed, Democrats are far more likely to blame Republicans in Congress than Democrats in Congress (77% vs. 2%), with the reverse being true for Republican respondents (15% blame Republicans in Congress vs. 58% blame Democrats in Congress).

2) If the Zika virus outbreak drives the late-term abortion issue in the elections, will the public support an exception to existing restrictions?

Abortion access has been an important topic in the 2016 elections, with sharp divisions between the Democratic and Republican party platforms^{3,4}. Cases of Zika virus infection may lead to a debate about late-term abortion in this year's elections because Zika virus is associated with microcephaly, a severe birth defect that includes an abnormally small head and brain damage. Microcephaly is not typically diagnosed until the late second or the third trimester⁵, and in many states, women cannot obtain a legal abortion after 24 weeks unless her life or her health is at risk⁶. We examined public views of this issue through a question in the poll focused on late-term abortion and Zika virus. For comparison, we also asked a question about late-term abortion in general in a separate poll that had no questions about Zika virus.

When asked about late-term abortion in general, less than a quarter of people (23%) believe women should have access to a legal abortion after 24 weeks except in the case of the health or life of the mother, but the public feels differently when it comes to circumstances involving Zika

³ Democratic National Convention Committee. "2016 Democratic Party Platform", July 21, 2016 <https://www.demconvention.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Democratic-Party-Platform-7.21.16-no-lines.pdf>.

⁴ Republican National Committee. "Republican Platform 2016", July 18, 2016 [https://prod-static-ngop-pbl.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/DRAFT_12_FINAL\[1\]-ben_1468872234.pdf](https://prod-static-ngop-pbl.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/DRAFT_12_FINAL[1]-ben_1468872234.pdf).

⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Prenatal Diagnosis of Microcephaly", July 29, 2016 <http://www.cdc.gov/zika/hc-providers/pregnant-women/prenatal-diagnosis-microcephaly.html>.

⁶ Guttmacher Institute. "State Policies on Later Abortions", August 1, 2016 <https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/state-policies-later-abortions>.

virus. A majority of Americans (59%) believe a woman should have access to a legal abortion after 24 weeks if she has been infected with Zika virus and has been told by a health professional that there is a serious possibility the baby would be born with microcephaly.

FIGURE 3. Percent of adults in the U.S. who favor allowing a woman to obtain a legal abortion in each circumstance.



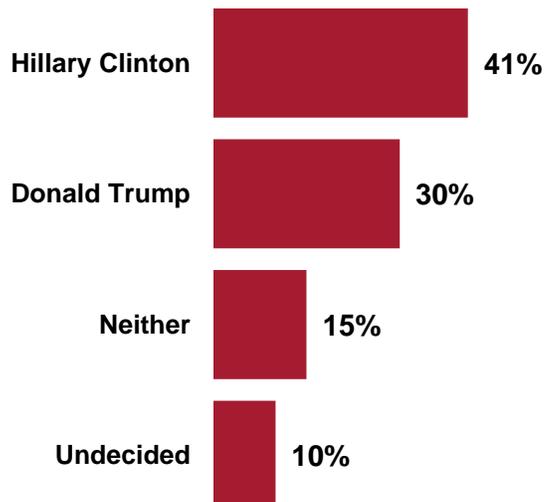
**If a woman is infected with Zika virus and a health professional believes there is a serious possibility that the baby would be born with a severe birth defect that includes an abnormally small head and brain damage*

There is a partisan difference, with 72% of Democrats compared to 48% of Republicans in favor of legal abortion after 24 weeks in the Zika virus scenario. This reflects a substantial rise in support among both parties as compared to views about late-term abortion in general, where 34% of Democrats and only 12% of Republicans support abortion after 24 weeks.

3) Which presidential candidate does the public think would do better in handling the Zika virus outbreak?

At this point in the Zika virus outbreak and in the presidential race, more people believe Hillary Clinton would do a better job as president handling the Zika virus outbreak compared to Donald Trump (41% vs. 30%), with an additional 15% chiming in that neither would do well and 10% undecided.

FIGURE 4. Percent of adults in the U.S. who say each person would do a better job as president of handling the Zika virus outbreak.

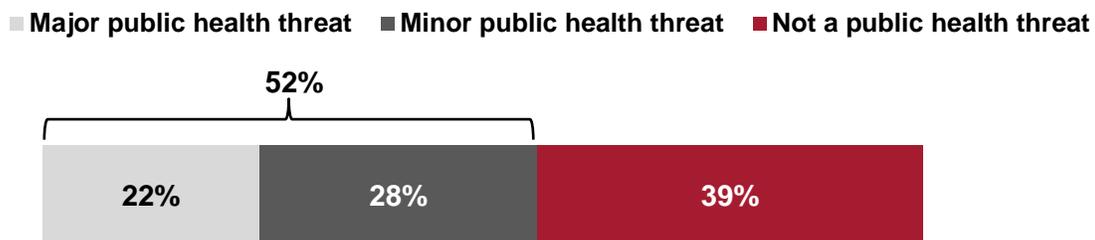


4) How much does the general public consider the Zika virus outbreak to be a health threat and funding priority?

Many infectious disease experts and leading health agencies have reported that the spread of Zika virus is a serious public health threat⁷. At the time of this poll, however – with approximately 1,650 cases in the mainland U.S.⁸ and no transmission from local mosquitoes – a relatively small share of the American public held this view.

About half (52%) said that the spread of Zika virus is a public health threat in the U.S., with under a quarter (22%) saying it is a “major” public health threat. About the same fraction (24%) said they are concerned that they or their family members will get sick from Zika virus in the next 12 months.

FIGURE 5. Percent of adults in the U.S. who said the spread of Zika virus is a major public health threat in the U.S., a minor public health threat in the U.S., or not a public health threat in the U.S.



Given these underlying views of the threat, it may not be surprising that about a quarter of the public (26%) say funding Zika virus response efforts should be “a top priority” for the federal government’s health spending, though an additional 49% do say it should be “important but not a top priority”.

CONCLUSION

To the degree that the Zika virus outbreak is raised as an issue in the next months of the election season, people who are aware that Congress did not pass funding legislation are more likely to blame Republicans than Democrats. At this point in the race and outbreak, more people overall think Hillary Clinton would do a better job handling the Zika virus outbreak. If the issue of availability of abortion for pregnant women infected with Zika virus becomes prominent during this election period, the public is likely to be accepting of a Zika virus-related exception for abortion after 24 weeks.

⁷ Tavernise, Sabrina. "Officials Preparing for Zika Virus to Spread in the U.S." *The New York Times*, June 10, 2016 <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/11/health/zika-virus-outbreak-united-states.html>.

⁸ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Florida investigation links four recent Zika cases to local mosquito-borne virus transmission", July 29, 2016 <http://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2016/p0729-florida-zika-cases.html>.

METHODOLOGY

The results are based on polling conducted by *STAT* and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Representatives of the two organizations worked closely to develop the survey questionnaire and analyze the results of the poll. *STAT* and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health paid for the survey and related expenses.

The project team was led by Gillian SteelFisher, Research Scientist and Deputy Director of the Harvard Opinion Research Program at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Robert J. Blendon, Sc.D., Richard L. Menschel Professor of Health Policy and Political Analysis at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, and Gideon Gil, Managing Editor, Enterprise and Partnerships of *STAT*. The Harvard research team also included Hannah Caporello and William Lodge.

Interviews were conducted with a nationally representative sample of 1,016 randomly selected adults, ages 18 and older, via telephone (including cell phones and landlines) by SSRS of Media, Pennsylvania. The interviewing period was July 20 - 24, 2016. The question about views of abortion after 24 weeks in general was asked of a separate sample of 1,010 adults July 13 - 17, 2016. The data from each poll were weighted to reflect the demographics of the national adult population as described by the U.S. Census.

When interpreting these findings, one should recognize that all surveys are subject to sampling error. Results may differ from what would be obtained if the whole U.S. adult population had been interviewed. The margin of error for each poll is ± 3.62 percentage points.

Possible sources of non-sampling error include non-response bias, as well as question wording and ordering effects. Non-response in telephone surveys produces some known biases in survey-derived estimates because participation tends to vary for different subgroups of the population. To compensate for these known biases and for variations in probability of selection within and across households, sample data are weighted by household size, cell phone/landline use and demographics (sex, age, race/ethnicity, education, and region) to reflect the true population. Other techniques, including random-digit dialing, replicate subsamples, and systematic respondent selection within households, are used to ensure that the sample is representative.

STAT/Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health Poll

The study was conducted for The Harvard School of Public Health via telephone by SSRS, an independent research company. Interviews were conducted from July 20 - 24, 2016 among a sample of 1,016 total respondents. The margin of error for total respondents is +/- 3.62% at the 95% confidence level. Two questions were asked of a randomly selected half of the sample. The margins of error for respondents in Half Samples A and B are +/- 5.04% and +/- 5.21%, respectively, at the 95% confidence level.

As you may or may not know, in 2015, an outbreak of Zika virus began in Brazil, other countries in South and Central America, and the Caribbean. There are now some cases inside the United States. The following questions are about Zika virus.

ST-01. Are you concerned that you or someone in your immediate family may get sick from Zika virus during the next 12 months, or aren't you concerned about that?

	Yes, concerned	No, not concerned	Don't know (Vol.)	Refused (Vol.)
7/24/16	24	75	1	--

ST-01/ST-02 Combo Table Total Respondents

	7/24/16
Yes, concerned may get sick from Zika virus during the next 12 months	24
Very concerned	9
Somewhat concerned	13
Not very concerned	2
Don't know (Vol.)	*
Refused (Vol.)	--
No, not concerned	75
Don't know (Vol.)	1
Refused (Vol.)	--

Note: "Vol" indicates a response was volunteered, rather than read out. Responses of "Don't know" or "refused" are not necessarily shown if <5%.

(Asked of total Half Sample A respondents; n=525)

ST-03. Do you think that the spread of Zika virus is a public health threat in the U.S., or not?

	Yes, it is a public health threat	No, it is NOT a public health threat	Don't know (Vol.)	Refused (Vol.)
7/24/16	52	39	9	1

ST-03/ST-04 Combo Table

Total Half Sample A respondents; n=525

	7/24/16
Zika virus is a public health threat in the U.S.	52
Major public health threat	22
Minor public health threat	28
Don't know (Vol.)	1
Refused (Vol.)	*
Zika virus is NOT a public health threat in the U.S.	39
Don't know (Vol.)	9
Refused (Vol.)	1

(Asked of total Half Sample B respondents; n=491)

ST-05. In terms of the federal government's health spending, do you think funding Zika virus response efforts should be (READ LIST)?

	A top priority	Important but not a top priority	Not that important	Don't know (Vol.)	Refused (Vol.)
7/24/16	26	49	20	4	1

ST-06. Recently, Congress has been debating legislation to add funding for Zika virus response efforts. As far as you know, did Congress pass this legislation before they left for recess, or not?

	Yes, they passed it	No, they did NOT pass it	Don't know/Unsure (Vol.)	Refused (Vol.)
7/24/16	6	44	49	1

(Phrase in parentheses included for respondents who said Congress passed this legislation or said Don't know/Unsure or Refused in ST-06)

ST-07. (Though many people have not yet heard, Congress did not pass legislation to add funding for Zika virus response efforts before they left for recess.) In your view, is this a problem or not?

	Yes, it is a problem	No, it is NOT a problem	Don't know (Vol.)	Refused (Vol.)
7/24/16	51	42	7	*

ST-07/ST-08 Combo Table
Total Respondents

	7/24/16
Congress not passing legislation to add funding for Zika virus response efforts is a problem	51
A very serious problem	20
A somewhat serious problem	26
A not too serious problem	3
Don't know (Vol.)	*
Refused (Vol.)	*
Congress not passing legislation to add funding for Zika virus response efforts is NOT a problem	42
Don't know (Vol.)	7
Refused (Vol.)	*

ST-09. Who do you think is most to blame for Congress not yet passing any legislation to fund Zika virus response efforts?

	Democrats in Congress	Republicans in Congress	Both equally (Vol.)	Neither (Vol.)	Don't know (Vol.)	Refused (Vol.)
7/24/16	16	34	18	6	24	3

ST-10. Who do you think would do a better job as president of handling the Zika virus outbreak?

	Donald Trump	Hillary Clinton	Both equally (Vol.)	Neither (Vol.)	Don't know (Vol.)	Refused (Vol.)
7/24/16	30	41	1	15	10	2

I'd now like to ask you about an issue in the news related to Zika virus and abortion laws in the U.S.

ST-11. As you may know, if a woman is pregnant and gets infected with Zika virus, the baby could be born with a severe birth defect that includes an abnormally small head and brain damage. In many circumstances, health professionals may not be able to diagnose this birth defect until at least 24 weeks of pregnancy, which is between 5 and 6 months.

In many states a woman cannot obtain a legal abortion after 24 weeks unless her life or her health is at risk. Some people think a woman should be able to obtain a legal abortion after 24 weeks if she is infected with Zika virus and a health professional believes there is a serious possibility that the baby would be born with this severe birth defect. Other people do not think a woman should be able to obtain a legal abortion in these circumstances.

Do you favor or oppose allowing a woman to obtain a legal abortion after 24 weeks of pregnancy if she is infected with Zika virus and a health professional believes there is a serious possibility that the baby would be born with this severe birth defect that includes an abnormally small head and brain damage?

	Favor	Oppose	Depends (Vol.)	Unsure (Vol.)	Refused (Vol.)
7/26/16	59	28	3	7	3

From A Separate Poll – One Week Earlier

The study was conducted for The Harvard School of Public Health via telephone by SSRS, an independent research company. Interviews were conducted from **July 13 - 17, 2016** among a sample of **1,010 total respondents**. The margin of error for total respondents is +/- 3.62% at the 95% confidence level.

I'd now like to ask you about an issue in the news related to abortion laws in the U.S.

AB-01. In many states a woman cannot obtain a legal abortion after 24 weeks of pregnancy, which is between 5 and 6 months, unless her life or her health is at risk. Some people think a woman should be able to obtain a legal abortion after 24 weeks, and other people do not. Do you favor or oppose allowing a woman to obtain a legal abortion after 24 weeks of pregnancy?

	Favor	Oppose	Depends (Vol.)	Unsure (Vol.)	Refused (Vol.)
7/17/16	23	61	6	6	3