

Can the Government Require Health Coverage?



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A demonstrator outside the Supreme Court in Washington this week

This is the VOA Special English Economics Report.

The highest court in the United States is considering the constitutionality of the new health care law. The Supreme Court heard three days of arguments this week over the question of what is called the individual mandate. It is part of the Affordable Care Act, which Congress passed and President Obama signed into law two years ago.

The individual mandate requires all Americans to buy health insurance by twenty fourteen or face a fine. Twenty-six states and a group representing small businesses say the law is unconstitutional.

If the law takes effect, about thirty million Americans not currently covered will have to join the health insurance system. Supporters say this will reduce health care costs for all Americans. For opponents, the question is whether the federal government has the right to tell people what they can or cannot do. During arguments, Justice Antonin Scalia put the question this way.

ANTONIN SCALIA: "The federal government is not supposed to be a government that has all powers, that it is supposed to be a government of limited powers and

that is what all this questioning is about. What is left? If the government can do this, what else can it not do?"

The Obama administration says the law has already helped millions of Americans. It says over two million young people have remained on their parents' health insurance plans since September twenty ten. Before then, many young people lost health coverage after they left home or reached a certain age.

Health care costs are growing at a rate that many experts say cannot be supported. The Council of Economic Advisers advises the president on economic issues. It warns that, at the current growth rate, health care spending will be responsible for thirty-four percent of the economy by twenty forty. Currently, health care is almost one fifth of the economy.

That is a big problem for the federal government. It pays for Medicare, health insurance for older adults, and Medicaid, the program for poor people. And as the population ages, more people will depend on these programs.

During the arguments this week, Justice Stephen Breyer noted the issue's importance.

STEPHEN BREYER: "It shows there is a national problem and it shows there is a national problem that involves money, cost and insurance."

The high court is expected to rule on the individual mandate in June. But the effects of the ruling are expected to influence health care policy for years to come.

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