

Daniel J. Galvin^{a,*} and Chloe N. Thurston^{a,*}

The Democrats' Misplaced Faith in Policy Feedback

DOI 10.1515/for-2017-0020

Introduction

From Social Security to Medicare, the Civil Rights Act to the Affordable Care Act, Democrats have long treated *policy success* as if it were tantamount to *political success*, assuming that the enactment of significant legislation would create supportive constituencies that would reward the party at the voting booth. President Obama appears to have made the same calculation. Instead of working to strengthen his party organization with an eye toward improving Democrats' electoral prospects across the board, he focused almost exclusively on achieving significant policy accomplishments, assuming that those policy successes would redound to the party's electoral benefit (Galvin 2010, 2016).

His policy-centered approach, however, did not do much to help Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election or down-ballot Democrats during his two terms in the White House. Over that period, Democrats lost control of both houses of Congress (including 63 House seats and 11 Senate seats), 10 governorships, 27 state legislative chambers, and almost 1,000 state legislative seats. At the time of Donald Trump's inauguration, Republicans controlled more legislative seats than at any time since the party's founding, while Democrats enjoyed unified government in only 6 states, their lowest number since the Civil War.

The notion that policies generate feedback effects that bring electoral benefits for parties is so commonly held that it has become almost an unstated premise of political thinking. Voters freely admit the link: in the key Rust Belt states of Ohio and Michigan, for example, voters said they felt they "owed" Obama for his efforts to save GM and Chrysler and planned to "thank" him with their votes in 2012; Obama predictably made the bailout central to his reelection campaign message (Gomez 2012; Zremski 2012). These expectations also have deep roots in political science scholarship. Whether the topic has been Civil War pensions, minimum wage increases, voting rights, or tax cuts, political scientists have long

^aD.J. Galvin and C.N. Thurston: These authors contributed equally to this article.

*Corresponding authors: Daniel J. Galvin and Chloe N. Thurston, Northwestern University, Department of Political Science, 601 University Place, Evanston, IL 60208, USA, e-mail: galvin@northwestern.edu (D.J. Galvin); thurston@northwestern.edu (C.N. Thurston)

assumed that voters express their enthusiasm for the policy benefits they receive by voting for the party they associate most closely with the policy's enactment (Schattschneider 1935; Skocpol 1993a; Bartels 2008).

Sophisticated theories of "policy feedback" have taken a step further to explain how new policies, once implemented, can "create a new kind of politics" by setting in motion self-reinforcing processes that effectively "lock in" policies, bolster their political supports, and alter subsequent political developments (Schattschneider 1935; Lowi 1964; Pierson 1993, 2000; Skocpol 1993b; Mettler 1998; Hacker 2002; Campbell 2003). In their review of policy feedback effects, Mettler and Sorelle (2014) emphasize the party-building upshot of this process: "Policies may foster partisan identities associated with the protection of particular public programs and, in the process, enable parties to mobilize voters who rely on them, thus turning those parties into devoted defenders" (141).

But upon inspection, the intellectual basis for thinking that policies are good vehicles for building electoral majorities – or good substitutes for the more tedious work of organizational party-building – is quite thin. Our aim here is to sketch out, in cursory fashion, why the Democrats' faith in policy feedback is, for the most part, misplaced. We make three arguments: First, policies do not always, or even very often, generate their own political supports. Second, even when they do, there is little reason to think they will cement *partisan* loyalties. Third, and finally, although policy-building and party-building are symbiotic and mutually dependent, they do fundamentally different things.

The Limited Lock-in Effects of Policy Feedback

When Lyndon B. Johnson signed Medicare into law in 1964 in spite of the opposition of the medical community, he wagered that once enacted, senior citizens would mobilize in continued support of the program and cement Medicare's future (Patashnik and Zelizer 2013, 1071–1072). Johnson's gamble paid off. The post-enactment history of Medicare is often hailed as an archetypal example of how powerful feedback processes can ensure that a policy, once enacted, generates its own self-reinforcing dynamics over time. New policies can induce new investments by key stakeholders, incorporate earlier opponents as supportive constituencies, and reconfigure the political terrain in ways that make their reversal unlikely. But as recent scholarship has shown, policies do not automatically or even necessarily create those conditions.

Instead, policy feedbacks that generate self-reinforcing dynamics are but one of many possible future courses a policy might take. Sometimes, policies fail

to take hold in the first place; other times, they can produce self-undermining dynamics or “negative feedback effects” that cause them to “unravel” over time or be “eroded or reversed” (Patashnik 2008; Weaver 2010; Campbell 2011; Patashnik and Zelizer 2013; Dagan and Teles 2015; Oberlander and Weaver 2015, 40). Policy makers may have little ability to influence which of these paths a policy takes, as the nature of policy feedback – whether self-reinforcing, -undermining, negative, or eroded, may be shaped by contextual factors. These include the degree of support the policy receives at the outset, the partisan context during enactment and implementation, design features of the policy itself, and administrative challenges that may arise (Pierson 1993; Mayhew 2002; Maltzman and Shipan 2008; Berry, Burden, and Howell 2010; Campbell 2012; Patashnik and Zelizer 2013; Oberlander and Weaver 2015). Political polarization may also undermine the routine “policy maintenance” that is needed for policies to function in a crowded “policyscape” (Mettler 2016).

Even when policies manage to resist repeal or dismantlement, they may fail to activate their own supportive constituencies. It is difficult for constituencies to form, for example, when policies lack visibility or traceability to the government – a condition that applies to many of the “submerged” policies that make up the contemporary American policy landscape (Arnold 1990; Mettler 2011; Morgan and Campbell 2011; but see also Thurston 2015; Thurston Forthcoming). Yet visibility and traceability can undermine support, too. The Affordable Care Act (ACA) was on its surface a highly visible and traceable program, particularly for individuals who gained coverage through it. Somewhat predictably, ACA opinion did become more favorable for those who enrolled in state insurance marketplaces, and more negative for those who did not gain insurance. Yet some of the decline in favorability towards the ACA came among people living in states that had opted out of Medicaid expansion. In those cases, voters may have incorrectly attributed the failure of a highly visible government program to the creators of the program, rather than to the state governments that decided not to implement it Hosek (2016).

Negative experiences with a policy can also erode support among its constituents, as Soss (1999) finds in his work on welfare, and Weaver and Lerman (2010) demonstrate in their work on citizens' experiences with the carceral state. Finally, regardless of visibility or traceability, policies can simply fail to move public opinion. As Soss and Schram's (2007) study of welfare reform reveals, even when Democrats employed a deliberate strategy to use welfare reform to move mass opinion towards investment in anti-poverty programs, the effort failed to significantly change public opinion. Taken together, none of these findings bode well for parties wishing to use public policies to cement durable party majorities.

The particular context of Obama's presidency was marked by many features that scholars have argued reduce the likelihood of policy-generated self-reinforcing dynamics: a partisan context that incentivizes opponents to push for designs that make credit-claiming more difficult and by a style of policy delivery that tends to obscure the role of the federal government from its beneficiaries (Patashnik 2008; Patashnik and Zelizer 2013).

Obama's economic stimulus package in the wake of the Financial Crisis and Great Recession offers a case-in-point. Funds were directed not toward highly visible, hallmark programs that could easily be associated with the federal government in the mold of, say, Hoover Dam, Skyline Drive, or the WPA. Instead, government funding was directed toward less visible and exciting, but certainly no less crucial, ends, including:

helping states avoid drastic cuts in public services and public employees; unemployment benefits, food stamps, and other assistance for victims of the downturn; and tax cuts for 95 percent of American workers. And the money that did flow into public works went more toward fixing stuff that needed fixing – aging pipes, dilapidated train stations... – than building new stuff. In its first year, the stimulus financed 22,000 miles of road improvements, and only 230 miles of new roads (Plotz 2012).

One explanation for this approach may simply be that the opposition party made it difficult to move legislation through Congress that would have allowed for Democratic credit-claiming. Another is that such projects may simply have been the most financially responsible ways to generate employment, improve infrastructure, and bolster cash-strapped state governments.

Though perhaps good policy, its aftermath reveals the limits of the stimulus package in generating mass policy feedbacks on a scale needed to benefit the Democratic Party. A year after the passage of the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act, a Pew survey found that almost two-thirds of respondents did not believe that the \$787 billion package created jobs; even among Democrats, only 51 percent thought it had contributed to job creation (Barr 2010).

The Challenges of Cementing New Partisan Loyalties

Even when policies do happen to generate supportive constituencies, there is little reason to think they will generate *partisan* loyalties and “lock in” reliable electoral constituencies for the party's majority-building purposes. While it is possible that voters will: (a) link the policies they like to the party most responsi-

ble for enacting those policies, (b) develop strong party attachments as a result, and then (c) translate those new party attachments into reliable voting behavior, existing research suggests that each step in that three-step process poses formidable obstacles.

The first step – linking favored policies to parties – requires, first and foremost, that voters are able to identify the policy effects at stake. But as a long and venerable tradition of political science scholarship has shown, most citizens have a very limited understanding of how policies operate, many are not aware of policy benefits they receive, and few are able to identify which party is responsible for it (Converse 1964; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Zaller 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Mettler 2011). Some citizens, to be sure, will be able to appreciate policy effects and associate them with a party, and certain conditions will be more conducive to making this connection than others—for example, when the issues are salient, elite cues are strong, and partisan frames are well constructed (Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Kuklinski et al. 2000; Lau and Redlawsk 2001; Druckman 2004; Chong and Druckman 2007). But given the multiple cognitive steps citizens must take within a competitive, polarized political environment, their ability to durably link policy benefits to support for a particular party is likely to be limited.

More often, causation will run in the opposite direction – rather than develop strong party attachments as a result of favored policy benefits, citizens' policy views will be shaped by their partisanship. We know, for example, that citizens engage in “motivated reasoning,” meaning they tend to accept information that aligns with their existing beliefs and disregard information that does not (Kunda 1990; Taber and Lodge 2006; Achen and Bartels 2016). Moreover, we know that party identification and elite partisan frames powerfully shape how information is processed, including information about public policies (Green et al. 2002; Gaines et al. 2007; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Kriner and Reeves 2014). Indeed, for over 60 years, political science has confirmed that party attachments tend to be sticky and slow to change, and that “only an event of extraordinary intensity can arouse any significant part of the electorate to the point that established political loyalties are shaken” (Campbell et al. 1960, 151). Real movement is only likely if there is a shock during a time in which an individual is particularly vulnerable (e.g., developments during the teenage and early college years). Most policies are unlikely to rise to this level of intensity. Thus, most scholarship would suggest that the second step – the development of strong party attachments as a result of newly favored policies – faces steep hurdles.

But the third step may be the trickiest of all. Even in those rare circumstances in which voters understand and favor new policies, link those policies to a particular party, and develop new, durable party attachments as a result, it is

another thing altogether to expect reliable *voting* for that party (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Historically, even major changes in party positioning – such as the Democrats’ position on civil rights – produced only very gradual changes in voting patterns (Schickler 2016). Even in cases where positive experiences with a policy (such as food stamps) leads to greater political participation and indirect electoral gains for the party, there is scant evidence of a causal pathway running from policy mobilization to party conversion and loyal voting (Kogan 2016).

There can be little doubt that under some circumstances, policies can generate supportive new constituencies. But even in those cases, support is more likely to be for the continuation of the policy than for the political party most responsible for its creation. Consider Social Security, one of the best-known examples of a public policy that produced an entrenched constituency ready to mobilize against any threats to their benefits. In a 2010 poll of AARP members, 95% of respondents agreed that it was “important that a candidate pledge to protect Social Security as a guaranteed, life-long benefit” (Ferguson, Molyneux, and Campbell 2010). Yet rather than translating into Democratic gains, support for Social Security has been strong among senior citizens regardless of party. Policy longevity, at least in this case, would appear to be linked to the generation of cross-partisan support for the program.

Public support in early 2017 for Republican efforts to “repeal and replace” the ACA while preserving certain core features also puts this distinction in sharp relief, as it occurred immediately after the electoral repudiation of the party most responsible for the ACA’s enactment (Kirzinger, Wu, and Brodie 2017). The first clue that voters had not made a partisan connection between the policy features they liked and the Democratic Party was the positive correlation between geographical areas with the highest increases in enrollment for Obamacare and electoral support for Donald Trump in the 2016 election (Kliff 2016; Ravitz 2017). Even more revealing is Lerman and McCabe’s (2017) recent finding that Republicans who received new health insurance through the ACA were more likely to support the policy, but not necessarily the Democratic Party. Finally, as the Republican Party labored to keep its commitment to “repeal and replace” throughout the early months of 2017, public opinion revealed strong, persistent support for key features of the policy – no insurance denial for those with pre-existing conditions, keeping children on their parents’ health insurance until age 26 – but respondents did not seem to care which party took credit for their protection (Shepard 2017).

Policymakers who seek to enact significant new public policies that both endure and advance party-building objectives appear to face a tradeoff in the contemporary era: the policies that generate the broadest support often cut

across parties and undercut efforts at party-building; while the greater the association between the policy and the party, the more vulnerable the policy is to retrenchment.

The Distinctive Roles of Policies and Parties

Very late in his term – too late, as it turned out – Obama acknowledged that policy could not, by itself, produce electoral benefits, generate loyalty to the Democratic Party, or stave off dismantlement by opponents. Attention must *also* be paid to bottom-up organizational party building, he told former aide David Axelrod:

Look, the Affordable Care Act benefits a huge number of Trump voters. There are a lot of folks in places like West Virginia or Kentucky who didn't vote for Hillary, didn't vote for me, but are being helped by this... The problem is, is that we're not there on the ground communicating not only the dry policy aspects of this, but that we care about these communities... Part of what we have to do to rebuild is to be there and – and that means organizing, that means caring about state parties, it means caring about local races, state boards or school boards and city councils and state legislative races and not thinking that somehow, just a great set of progressive policies that we present to *The New York Times* editorial board will win the day (CNN 2017).

To put it somewhat differently, if policies generated their own political supports, there would be no need for party organization. But as Obama regretfully observed, many recipients of ACA benefits did not develop a *partisan connection* between the policy benefits they favored and the Democratic Party. This left the Democrats weakened electorally and the ACA vulnerable to significant revision or repeal under a Republican administration. Party organization was therefore still needed, both to promote policy accomplishments and to build the electoral majorities necessary to preserve and protect those same policies in later rounds.

This, after all, is what parties do. To promote and protect a set of policies desired by key allied groups and constituents, parties seek to build legislative majorities and fill key elective offices across the decentralized federal system (Epstein 1986; Aldrich 1995). But parties do not perform these “functions” automatically – they require significant investments of resources, time, and attention from their leaders (Galvin 2012). Party organizations must be *built* and *maintained* if they are to help candidates win elections and promote and protect policies. “It’s not rocket science,” retiring Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid said recently. “It doesn’t take a lot of brain power to figure out what needs to be done...take a few states every election cycle, maybe three maybe four, and help them develop the infrastructure for good state party organization” (Hellmann 2016). Attractive

public policies, of course, can serve as powerful rallying cries in the building of party organization and provide useful incentives for collective action among party activists, groups, and voting constituencies (Aldrich 1995; Bawn et al. 2012). But while *policies* and *parties* are symbiotic and mutually dependent, they operate on different dimensions and do fundamentally different things.

Facing recriminations from many corners of the Democratic Party, Obama acknowledged at the end of his presidency that he was so preoccupied with the policy challenges stemming from the Great Recession that he was not able to pay as much attention to building his party organization as he (in retrospect) should have. “Partly because my docket was really full here, so I couldn’t be both chief organizer of the Democratic Party and function as Commander-in-Chief and President of the United States. We did not begin what I think needs to happen over the long haul, and that is rebuild the Democratic Party at the ground level” (ABC News 2017). To be fair, Obama did make a handful of organizational party-building moves in his second term (Galvin 2016). Not enough, though, to prevent the decimation of his party’s electoral standing or equip it to resist the rollback of much of his policy legacy under Trump. Which only serves to illustrate our main point: policies do not create their own political supports. That’s what parties are for.

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