Chapter 2

The Limits of Policy Feedback as a Party-Building Tool

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Politicians and political observers 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. Indeed, the notion that public policies generate feedback effects that result in electoral benefits for parties is so commonly held that it has become almost an unstated premise of political thinking. In 2018, for example, President Donald Trump suggested that the GOP tax cut was providing a boost to the Republicans' midterm electoral prospects, tweeting, "Great Pollster John McLaughlin now has the GOP up in the Generic Congressional Ballot. Big gain over last 4 weeks. I guess people are loving the big Tax Cuts given them by the Republicans, the Cuts the Dems want to take away. We need more Republicans!"[1]

Just prior to Trump's inauguration, writers on the left similarly encouraged state-level Democrats to enact policies explicitly "aimed at creating reinforcing feedback loops that will further empower progressive policymaking . . . [and] mobilize beneficiaries to protect the benefits they enjoy."[2] The anticipated party-building effects of such "feedback loops" can also mobilize opponents to block policy enactments. In 1993, Republican strategist William Kristol famously warned that the enactment of Bill Clinton's health care plan would generate feedbacks that would tilt the electoral balance of power in the

Democrats' favor for many years to come: "Its passage in the short run will do nothing to hurt (and everything to help) Democratic electoral prospects in 1996. But the long-term political effects of a successful Clinton health care bill will be even worse—much worse. It will relegitimize middle-class dependence for 'security' on government spending and regulation. It will revive the reputation of the party that spends and regulates, the Democrats, as the generous protector of middle-class interests."[3] The presumed policy-party connection also has deep roots in political science scholarship. Whether the topic has been Civil War pensions, minimum wage increases, voting rights, labor laws, or tax cuts, political scientists have long 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.[4] Scholars of American political development (APD) and policy feedback have further explained 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.[5]

Recent scholarship has pursued this line of inquiry even further, examining how, "if policies do indeed make politics, rational politicians have opportunities to use policies to create a future structure of politics more to their advantage" including "using policy to shape the larger structure of partisan politics."[6] For example, as Sarah Anzia and Terry Moe have shown, the construction of state-level public sector labor laws was widely expected to "advantage the Democratic Party, just as the expansion of private-sector unions had."[7] At the same time, Alexander Hertel-Fernandez has shown that policy feedback can also be deployed "as political weapon, showing how groups and politicians can use legislation as a means of disadvantaging their opponents in durable ways over time."[8] Suzanne Mettler and Mallory SoRelle summarize the mutually reinforcing relationship between policy feedback and party-building as such: "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."[9]

Most existing scholarship in this area, however, has tended to examine policy feedback effects in isolation from other factors that may shape a party's electoral prospects more directly, such as efforts to bolster the party's organizational capacities and enhance its campaign operations. Indeed, upon inspection, the basis for thinking that policies are capable of building durable electoral majorities, or are good substitutes for the more tedious work of organizational party-building, is quite thin.

Our aim here is to sketch out the limits of policy feedback as a party-building tool. We synthesize insights from a diverse range of scholarly perspectives in political science and draw upon historical and contemporary examples to illustrate these limits, paying particular attention to policy developments and party dynamics set in motion under President Barack Obama that have proved constitutive of Trump-era politics. We make three interrelated 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. In the concluding section, we suggest several ways in which the APD approach can be used to help sort out the complex relationship between policy and party-building.

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.[10] Indeed, 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. Policies may indeed 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 à la Medicare are but one of many possible future courses a policy might take. Sometimes, policies fail to take hold in the first place; other times, policies can produce self-undermining dynamics or "negative feedback effects" that cause them to "unravel" over time or be "eroded or reversed."[11] Policy makers may have little ability to influence which of these paths a policy takes, as the nature of policy feedback—whether self-reinforcing, self-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.[12] Political polarization may also

undermine the routine "policy maintenance" that is needed for policies to function in a crowded "policyscape."[13]

Moreover, when policies do manage to resist repeal or erosion, their most important supports may not come from voters. This possibility may be particularly likely for policies lacking visibility or easy traceability to the policy makers who enacted them—a condition that applies to many of the "submerged" policies that make up the contemporary American policy landscape.[14] An example is the charitable deduction, which has been a part of the tax code since 1917 and which has "mobilized charities as powerful stakeholders in the policy's endurance" while generally remaining out of public view.[15] More recently, the politics of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) similarly illustrate how feedback effects can sustain policies without necessarily generating a supportive mass political constituency. Andrew Kelly's work in this volume contrasts the policies of Medicare—which created an "identifiable and cohesive constituency" transcending socioeconomic, racial, and geographic boundaries—with the ACA, which owes its resilience (thus far) to its ability to mobilize hospitals, providers, and insurers.[16]

Even policies that are highly visible and traceable may generate feedback effects that erode rather than bolster public support, disempower citizens, or dampen political participation. Studying the consequences of Medicaid concentration for political mobilization, Jamila Michener has found a negative relationship between the presence of high levels of Medicaid users in a county and political participation, including voter turnout and local organizational strength.[17] While Michener finds that the geographic *concentration* of a program's users may in some contexts diminish political participation, others have found that that the *quality* of a citizen's experience with a policy can also influence political participation. Negative experiences with a policy can erode support among its constituents or disempower citizens who interact with that policy, as Joe Soss finds in the context of welfare program design, and as Vesla Weaver and Amy Lerman demonstrate in their work on citizens' experiences with the carceral state.[18] Moreover, irrespective of a policy's visibility, traceability, or experiential effects, it can also simply fail to move public opinion. As Joe Soss and Sanford Schramm's study of welfare reform reveals, even when Democrats employed a deliberate strategy to use welfare reform to move mass opinion toward investment in anti-poverty programs, the effort failed to significantly change public opinion.[19] Taken together, these findings do not bode well for parties wishing to use public policies to cement durable party majorities.

The Obama presidency was marked by many of the features that scholars have pointed to as reducing the likelihood of policy-generated self-reinforcing dynamics, including a partisan context that tended to incentivize opponents to push for designs that make credit-claiming more difficult, and a style of policy delivery that tended to obscure the role of the federal government from its beneficiaries.[20] The economic stimulus package passed 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 Works Progress Administration (WPA). Instead, government funding was directed toward programs that, albeit no less crucial, were less visible and exciting, 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.[21]

One reason the administration pursued these less visible initiatives may simply be that Republican opposition made it difficult to move legislation through Congress that would have allowed for Democratic credit-claiming. Another is that such projects may have been the most financially responsible ways to generate employment, improve infrastructure, and bolster cash-strapped state governments. In either case, the stimulus package clearly did not generate mass policy feedbacks on the 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.[22]

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. Although it is possible that voters will (1) link the policies they like to the party most responsible for enacting those policies, (2) develop strong party attachments as a result, and then (3) 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 them.[23] 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.[24] 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.[25] Moreover, we know that party identification and elite partisan frames powerfully shape how information is processed, including information about public policies.[26] But for more than sixty 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."[27] Real movement is likely only 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.[28] Historically, even major changes in party positioning—such as the Democrats' position on civil rights—produced only very gradual changes in voting patterns.[29] Even in cases in which positive experiences with a policy (such as food stamps) lead 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.[30]

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 percent of respondents agreed that it was "important that a candidate pledge to protect Social Security as a guaranteed, life-long benefit."[31] 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.[32]

Public support in early 2017 for Republican efforts to "repeal and replace" the ACA while preserving its most popular 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. 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 counties that saw the highest increases in enrollment for Obamacare and electoral support for Donald Trump in the 2016 election.[33] Joshua Clinton and Michael Sances have further observed that county-level increases in insurance coverage covaried with increases in political participation in 2014 (in both registration and turnout, up to 3 percentage points), but this participation boost evaporated by 2016, thus failing to generate cumulative electoral gains for the Democratic Party.[34]

Perhaps most revealing of all is Amy Lerman and Katherine McCabe's finding that Republicans who received new health insurance through the ACA were more likely to support the policy, but not necessarily the Democratic Party.[35] As the Republican Party labored to keep its commitment to "repeal and replace" throughout Trump's first year in office, public opinion revealed strong, persistent support for key features of the policy—no insurance

denial for those with preexisting 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.[36]

Policy makers who seek to enact significant new public policies that both endure and advance party-building objectives appear to face a trade-off in the contemporary era: the policies that generate the broadest support often cut across parties and may even undercut efforts at party-building, while the greater the association between the policy and the party, the more vulnerable the policy may be to retrenchment.

The Distinctive Roles of Policies and Parties

Obama's presidency offers a particularly useful illustration of this trade-off. During his eight years in the White House, Obama focused almost exclusively on achieving significant policy accomplishments, assuming that those policy successes would redound to the party's electoral benefit in the long run. From the economic stimulus package to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, the revival of the auto industry to the Affordable Care Act, new immigration policy to the Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, environmental protections to historic treaties, Obama certainly made his mark on national policy. But policy accomplishments are only as durable as their political supports are strong. And Obama, like most modern Democratic presidents, did not do enough to build up those political supports.[37]

Obama's policy-centered approach did not appear to help Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election or boost the prospects of down-ballot Democrats during his two terms in the White House: during that period, Democrats lost control of both houses of Congress (including sixty-two House seats and eleven Senate seats), ten governorships, twenty-seven state legislative chambers, and almost one thousand 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 six states, their lowest number since the Civil War.

Predictably, the early Trump presidency was defined by the swift use of unilateral actions, executive branch directives, and legislation to undo much of what Obama had accomplished. In the waning days of his presidency, Obama acknowledged that policy could not, by itself, produce electoral benefits, generate loyalty to the Democratic Party, or stave off the dismantlement

of his legacy 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.[38]

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, recipients of ACA benefits did not develop a *partisan connection* between the policy benefits they favored and the Democratic Party. This lack of connection 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.[39] But parties do not perform these "functions" automatically—they require significant investments of resources, time, and attention from their leaders.[40] 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."[41]

Attractive public policies, of course, can serve as powerful rallying cries in the building of party organization, providing useful incentives for collective action among party activists, groups, and voting constituencies.[42] Indeed,

there is little doubt that "policy position-taking" is integral to the party-building project, and that for the purposes of winning elections, where politicians *stand* is often far more important than what they (or their policies) actually *do*.[43] 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 should have:

> Partly because my docket was really full here, . . . 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.[44]

To be fair, Obama did make a handful of organizational party-building moves in his second term—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.[45] This example serves to illustrate our main point: Policies do not create their own political supports. That's what parties are for.

Scrutinizing the Presumed Connection

Why, then, if policy feedback is such a poor party-building tool, do politicians so often seem drawn to the idea of using policy to expand their parties? The prospect has allured even conservative Republicans. George W. Bush and Karl Rove, for example, sought to use major policies to engineer a partisan realignment in the early 2000s: the Medicare Modernization Act of 2003, for instance, was expected to cement the loyalty of senior citizens and help build a "permanent Republican majority."[46] More recently, Senator Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina) noted that if Republicans enacted Trump's tax cut plan it would mean "the difference between succeeding as a party and failing. . . . It's the difference between having a majority in 2018 or losing it."[47]

Perhaps political actors are simply unaware of the many perils and pitfalls along the road from policy enactment to the building of partisan

majorities. Or perhaps hope just springs eternal. But it is also possible that political actors have drawn a mistaken lesson from history. The Democrats' electoral and policy successes in the period from the 1930s through the 1960s are so often conflated in composite historical concepts like "the New Deal Order" and the "Democratic Political Order" that it hardly seems surprising that politicians see a connection between policy accomplishments and the construction of durable partisan majorities.[48]

But that connection, we would argue, is likely more apparent than real. At least, far more scrutiny is needed to flesh out what is causing what, and when the dynamics might be expected to vary. At present, it is not even clear in which direction the causal arrows point. Were the Democrats' electoral successes in the post–New Deal period really a function of policy feedback effects? Through what mechanisms? How much of a contribution did policy-generated supports make to the party's electoral prospects, relative to other factors?

Or might there have been a third factor that produced *both* policy feedbacks and electoral successes? For example, as Eric Schickler has shown, key constituency and group bases of the Democratic Party—specifically "CIO unionists, African Americans, Jews, and other urban liberals"—were instrumental in both the formation of Democratic majorities and in the passage of major civil-rights laws.[49] But as the organizing capacities of these groups withered after the 1970s, most notably in labor unions, the competitive standing of the Democratic Party weakened, and key policies became more vulnerable to retrenchment, layering, and drift. Was the ostensible relationship between policy feedbacks and the Democrats' electoral success more a function of group-level processes, or was this relationship contingent on context-specific factors?

And what of the simplest explanation—that causation actually runs in the opposite direction? When one considers the effects of the "Reagan Revolution" on civil-rights enforcement in the 1980s, the partial privatization of Medicare under unified Republican government in the 2000s, or the gutting of the Voting Rights Act by the conservative majority on the Supreme Court in *Shelby County v. Holder*, it seems easier to argue that the durability of the Democrats' key policies depended more on the Democrats' continued electoral success than vice versa.[50]

Although policies clearly have effects on parties, we think those effects are likely to be more indirect and instrumental than direct and causal. Taking policy *stands* and making policy *promises*, for example, is undoubtedly

integral to winning elections, and fashioning attractive policy agendas for the party to promote is surely an essential part of building partisan majorities. Being "for" tax cuts and "against" big government likely helped Republicans swell their numbers of elected officials in recent decades, and promising to protect social insurance programs and defend voting rights likely helped Democrats win elections. But on balance, we do not think the *effects* of policies, once enacted, are likely to offer politicians much electoral benefit. As David Mayhew put it, "I remain convinced that politicians often get rewarded for taking positions rather than achieving effects."[51]

Admittedly, our pessimistic view of the party-building potential of policy feedback raises more questions than it answers. But we are hopeful that greater attention to causal mechanisms, historical conjunctures, and configurative explanations—all common themes for scholars steeped in the scholarly traditions of American political development—will yield more precise understandings of this commonly assumed relationship.

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Chapter 2

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Chapter 3

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