When Policies Undo Themselves: Self-Undermining Feedback as a Source of Policy Change

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Most studies of policy feedback have focused on processes of self-reinforcement through which programs bolster their own bases of political support and endure or expand over time. This article develops a theoretical framework for identifying feedback mechanisms through which policies can become self-undermining *over time, increasing the likelihood of a major change in policy orientation. We conceptualize and illustrate three types of self-undermining feedback mechanisms that we expect to operate in democratic politics: the emergence of unanticipated losses for mobilized social interests, interactions between strategic elites and loss-averse voters, and expansions of the menu of policy alternatives. We also advance hypotheses about the conditions under which each mechanism is likeliest to unfold. In illuminating endogenous sources of policy change, the analysis builds on efforts by both historically oriented and rationalist scholars to understand how institutions change and seeks to expand political scientists' theoretical toolkit for explaining policy development over time.*

Over the past two decades, the related concepts of policy feedback and path dependence have become central to the study of the politics of public policy (e.g., see Hacker 1998, 2002; Pierson 1993, 1994; Skocpol 1992). These concepts have been used to illuminate the ways in which early policy choices shape the dynamics of policy conflict at later points in time. The analysis of feedback effects has generated persuasive explanations of policy development over time in fields ranging from health care (Hacker 1998) to pensions (Myles and Pierson 2001) to education (Karch 2009). Accounts of policy feedback have emphasized the *self-reinforcing* effects of policies on their own politics: the ways in which policies bolster their own bases of political support, yielding either policy stability or an expansionary dynamic over time.

This article shares the perspective that the feedback effects of past policy choices are a critical influence on downstream policy development. We will argue, however, that a number of commonly operating processes in democratic politics, unfolding at both the elite and mass levels, make it relatively likely that policies will yield consequences that gradually *undermine* their bases of support over time. In theorizing and illustrating what we term *self-undermining feedback effects*, we seek to expand political scientists' theoretical toolkit for explaining policy change.

The systematic explanation of policy change has long posed an important challenge for political analysis. Historical institutionalist (HI) analyses centered around a logic of self-reinforcement and path-dependent development have, quite naturally, had far more success explaining stability than in accounting for change (Thelen 2003). One of the most influential theoretical accounts of policy change—the punctuated equilibrium framework pioneered by Baumgartner and Jones (2002, 2009)—has made important advances by modeling how external shocks reverberate throughout, or are dampened

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Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions, Vol. 28, No. 4, October 2015 (pp. 441–457).
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doi:10.1111/gove.12101

by, a policy subsystem. More broadly, processes of change in politics are quite commonly explained as consequences of exogenous disruptions, such as war, economic development or crisis, or demographic shifts.

This article conceptualizes a set of *endogenous* forces—processes deriving from policy itself—that frequently generate strong pressures, and expand the political opportunities, for policy change. In focusing on the endogenous sources of policy revision, our analysis builds on recent efforts by both historically oriented and rationalist scholars to better understand how institutions change. Historical institutionalists have become increasingly interested in the ways in which political institutions provoke their own sources of opposition among those disadvantaged by them, generating processes of challenge and gradual change over time (Clemens and Schneiberg 2006; Mahoney and Thelen 2009; Streeck and Thelen 2005; Thelen 2004). A parallel game-theoretic literature has suggested that, even where political institutions are "self-enforcing," they may under certain conditions become "self-undermining"—weakening, rather than perpetuating, themselves over time (Greif and Laitin 2004). This article aims to advance this broad line of inquiry by unpacking the causal pathways through which self-undermining forces are likely to raise the likelihood of policy change in democratic political systems.

We conceptualize self-undermining processes of three broad types: the emergence of *unanticipated policy losses* for mobilized social interests, *cognitive* processes arising from interactions between strategic elites and loss-averse voters, and expansions in the *menu of available policy alternatives*. For each feedback mechanism outlined, this article also advances one or more propositions about the conditions under which that mechanism is likely to operate most strongly.

The article's aims are conceptual and hypothesis generating. Throughout the article, we employ case examples to illustrate the broad relevance of the feedback logics that we advance and their potential to generate policy change. We further demonstrate the fruitfulness of analytical attention to self-undermining policy feedback through a brief case study of one of the most striking recent instances of policy change in the world's advanced industrialized democracies: the 2010 health-care reform in the United States. Health policy is an arena characterized by especially strong self-reinforcing effects that have long kept the United States and other rich democracies on highly distinct policy paths (e.g., see Hacker 1998). We argue, however, that the substantial changes embodied in the 2010 reform can only be explained by reference to self-undermining feedback effects that expanded the coalition of actors willing to support reform and diminished the array of forces opposed to it.

The first section of the article focuses on clarifying the concept of a feedback effect as it is used in the political science literature and its relationship to policy stability and policy change. The three sections that follow theorize a set of self-undermining feedback mechanisms and suggest the kinds of conditions most conducive to their operation. The fifth section locates self-undermining feedback effects relative to the common concept of a political "window of opportunity." The sixth section presents our health-care illustration, and the final section underlines further implications of our arguments and suggests directions for future research.

Situating the Argument: Alternative Approaches to Feedback Effects

Feedback processes feature prominently in two important literatures in political science: in arguments about punctuated equilibrium (PE) in policy systems and in the HI literatures on public policy. The two literatures' distinct approaches to feedback effects are summarized in Table 1.

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TABLE 1
Alternative Approaches to Policy Feedback

	Punctuated Equilibrium Approach	Historical Institutionalist Approach
Positive feedback	Disturbances quickly reinforced → *policy change*	Long-term self-reinforcing effects → *policy stability or expansion*
Negative feedback	Disturbances quickly counterbalanced → *policy stability*	Long-term self-undermining effects → *policy rollback or reorientation*

Feedback effects play a central role in the PE approach pioneered by Baumgartner and Jones (2002, 2009). Drawing on the logic and terminology of systems analysis, they argue that long periods of policy stability can be explained by pervasive processes of *negative feedback* in politics: mechanisms that "react . . . to counterbalance, rather than reinforce, any changes coming in from the environment" (Baumgartner and Jones 2002, 9). Baumgartner and Jones point, for instance, to countermobilization by interest groups in response to policy moves against their preferences, incrementalism in budgeting, and "thermostatic" tendencies in public opinion. In its account of negative feedback, the PE approach builds on a range of pluralist and public-choice models of politics that have emphasized the equilibrating features of group politics and institutional arrangements (Bendor and Moe 1985). Policy stability is further buttressed by the dominance of policy ideas (or "images") that constricts the range of acceptable debate and that keeps decision making within institutional "venues" that limit participation by those seeking dramatic policy change. Such processes of negative feedback fall into the lower left-hand cell in Table 1.

Policy change, in the PE approach, is generated by a shock to a policy subsystem that is reinforced over time through *positive* feedback: "a self-reinforcing process that accentuates rather than counterbalances a trend" (Baumgartner and Jones 2002). For instance, an initial shift in the balance of influence in a policy domain may get reinforced as actors strategically bandwagon onto those coalitions that are gaining in strength. Likewise, a change in the dominant "image" of a policy can lead to a shift in the venue of decision making that, in turn, allows for further ideational change. In rare moments of strong positive feedback, the result is mutually reinforcing shifts in the mobilization, coalitional choices, and cognitive commitments of citizens, social groups, and public officials, generating an ever-accelerating momentum for policy change. We locate such effects in the top left-hand quadrant of Table 1.

In sum, both the equilibrating and the self-reinforcing responses in a PE framework are relatively quick and largely *strategic*, with actors either mobilizing in response to threat or loss or adjusting to changed probabilities of success.

The HI approach to policy feedback has, in contrast to PE models, focused on mechanisms through which public policies *reshape social and state actors' interests and capacities over long periods of time* in ways that change the prospects for those policies' future maintenance, expansion, or reversal (Skocpol 1992). Pierson's (1993, 1994, 2004) detailed HI account of policy feedback mechanisms focuses squarely on the operation of long-term *positive* feedback effects—located in the upper right-hand cell of Table 1. Pierson identifies slow-moving processes through which policies create social conditions favorable to their own maintenance or expansion. To cite a canonical example from Pierson's (1994) work, the establishment of a contributory pension

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system gradually leads individual workers to build up longer contributory records and accumulate less in private savings in the expectation of receiving generous payouts in retirement. Over time, the program generates social consequences that increase the benefits to key constituencies of maintaining the status quo or expanding the program—and raising the costs of reversal.

As in the PE framework, positive feedback effects in HI explanations are processes of self-reinforcement. However, rather than charting self-reinforcing shifts in a cognitive or strategic balance, HI scholars have examined how policies can reinforce the underlying social foundations of their own political support. While positive feedback in a PE framework culminates in large disruptions to policy arrangements, the socially embedded, longue-durée positive feedback processes in HI accounts usually act to preserve or amplify the current orientation of policy. These may thus best be conceived of as *self-reinforcing* feedback effects[1] in that they strengthen the direction and orientation of status quo policy (see Béland 2010 for a discussion of several specific mechanisms).

Scholars have paid far less attention, however, to ways in which policies might gradually *weaken* their own bases of political support over time—generating socially embedded, longue-durée *self-undermining* feedback effects: effects that would fall into the bottom right-hand quandrant of Table 1. The public policy literature provides several examples of policies that yield consequences that, over the long run, erode their own political viability. Skocpol (1992) has demonstrated how the patronage politics associated with Civil War pensions led to the political demise of that program and to a diminished scope for later social policy development. Patashnik (2008) has shown how major policy changes in the United States—from the 1986 Tax Reform Act to the reform of agricultural subsidies—have become subject to erosion or repeal by actors who bore their costs and fought for their reversal. Häusermann (2010) finds that the adverse social effects of continental European welfare policies generated powerful coalitions for retrenchment (see also Weaver 2010).

In these historically oriented accounts, a crucial feature of the processes outlined is that policy choices at t_1 have social consequences that *reshape* actors' preferences or capacities at t_2 in ways that diminish those policies' bases of political support and expand the opposing coalitions. These long-run *self-undermining* policy feedbacks result in changes that run *against* the grain of current policy: rolling back existing programs or otherwise effecting a large shift in the distribution of policy benefits and burdens.

While examples abound, students of the politics of public policy have been slow to systematically theorize the causal mechanisms through which long-run self-undermining policy feedback effects might emerge or the conditions under which those mechanisms are most likely to operate. In the remainder of this article, we seek to lay a theoretical foundation for the study of self-undermining policy feedback. We identify three types of mechanisms through which self-undermining feedback is likely to emerge and to produce pressure for program retrenchment or a major change in policy orientation. We discuss, in turn, mechanisms operating via (1) unanticipated policy losses for powerful groups, (2) interactions between elites and the mass public, and (3) expansions in the menu of policy alternatives.[2] For each mechanism, we also specify one or more conditions under which the mechanism is most likely to operate or that amplify its self-undermining effects. These conditions are summarized in Table 2.

Mechanism 1: Self-Undermining Feedback through Emergent Losses

Claims about self-reinforcing policy feedback are typically premised on a particular understanding of the profile of the costs and benefits of public policies and especially

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TABLE 2
Mechanisms of Self-Undermining Feedback

Mechanism Type	Conditions Favoring Operation of Mechanism
Emergent losses for organized groups	Incoherence and shortsightedness in policy design generated by • Institutional fragmentation of authority • Enactment by actors facing short-run electoral pressures • More socially ambitious policy interventions
Losses in mass cognition	Salience of losses via • Cross-sectional concentration • Temporal concentration
Menu expansion	High opportunities for proliferation, penetration, and testing of new ideas via • Broad diffusion of policy expertise in society • Diffused agenda-setting power and channels of advice • Experimentation in subordinate/culturally proximal units

about the distribution of those costs and benefits over time. The HI perspective has identified a range of processes—network and coordination effects, learning effects, adaptation by actors—that tend to make the policy status quo increasingly and more widely beneficial as time passes. Even those actors who were initially on the losing end of a policy battle may eventually, through these mechanisms, come to profit from the new status quo.

While this logic of increasing returns has substantial explanatory power, there are equally important reasons why policy will often generate mounting losses over time for powerful actors. We focus on the effects of *unanticipated* losses—adverse consequences that were not predicted or taken into account by political actors at the moment of policy enactment. Any costs that *were* initially expected and attended to would presumably already have affected the politics of adoption and generated early opposition to the policy among the prospective "losers." We thus pay particular attention to the way in which policies may have unanticipated adverse outcomes for influential actors who supported (or chose not to oppose) the policy's initial adoption.

Policymaking in a democratic setting may generate unexpected losses for such actors for at least three reasons. First, policy choice is typically a *collective* activity. In most democratic political systems, policymakers must win the assent of multiple actors representing diverse constituencies. The program architectures that emerge from democratic policymaking procedures thus frequently contain substantial complexity and incoherence rather than a single policy logic.

Second, the constraints of compromise operate not just across actors but also over time. Today's enacting coalition rarely gets to start with a blank slate. Given the political and administrative difficulties of abolishing prior arrangements, particularly where veto power is widely dispersed, policy designers must frequently resort to "layering" their preferred policies over long-standing rules and program structures (Hacker 2004; Schickler 2001; Thelen 2003). The result is a tendency toward friction and hard-to-predict interactions across policy choices made by different enacting coalitions at different moments in time (see also Orren and Skowronek 1994). Unintended con-

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sequences will tend to increase over time as layering accumulates and as policy arrangements run up against a changing social and economic context.

Third, even where future consequences are in principle knowable, policymakers in a democracy often have well-known incentives—especially, generated by the electoral process—to place greater weight on short- over longer-term social outcomes (Jacobs 2011; Nordhaus 1975). The result is a time inconsistency in political actors' preferences: An enacting coalition may discount potential long-run policy costs at the moment of program adoption but become deeply troubled by those losses once "the long run" arrives.

In sum, policymaking in a democracy features design by compromise, the gradual accretion of unplanned policy complexity, and frequently foreshortened time horizons. We should expect a common result to be long-run outcomes that are both unexpected and unwanted by members of the policy's original enacting coalition. For example, business organizations in many cases either actively supported the initial creation of contributory social insurance programs, financed largely through payroll taxes, or implicitly acceded to their creation (e.g., Baldwin 1990; Swenson 2002). Employers accepted these programs for several reasons, including the view that strong social protection would help support the high value-added production methods prevalent in continental political economies (e.g., Estevez-Abe, Iversen, and Soskice 2001; Mares 2003). Once established, however, these contributory insurance programs interacted in unforeseen ways both with changes in the social environment (e.g., demographic change and persistently high unemployment) and with layered programmatic revisions, such as increases in benefit levels and cutbacks in the subsidies provided out of the general budget. As a result, the payroll taxes to which employers had originally agreed rose sharply. By the 1990s, employer groups in many continental European countries were at the forefront of efforts to scale back the generosity of programs they had once actively or tacitly supported (Häusermann 2010).

Our claim is not simply that policymaking is messy or that policy ventures can go awry. Rather, we wish to highlight two specific implications. First, as the layered complexity of a policy regime increases and as outcomes recede beyond policymakers' original time horizons and capacities for prediction, the likelihood of adverse social outcomes mounts. Second, public policies will sometimes work out badly *for actors with substantial political resources*, and thus a capacity to apply effective pressure for policy change.

Importantly, the logic outlined here also suggests particular *conditions* under which policy should be more or less likely to generate self-undermining policy feedback. We expect that the emergent lossesmechanism will operate more powerfully to the extent that (1) initial policy enactment depended on a compromise across a large number of actors, and any revisions must be layered on (e.g., in institutional settings in which policymaking authority is widely dispersed); (2) policy was designed by actors facing strong near-term electoral pressures rather than those insulated from such pressures (e.g., elected officials in a competitive context rather than career bureaucrats or parties in a dominant electoral position); or (3) the policy in question involved an ambitious task of social engineering characterized by high causal complexity rather than a well-understood, incremental intervention.

Mechanism 2: Policy Losses in Mass Cognition

The likelihood of policy change in response to a costly status quo depends not only on the formation of group coalitions, but also on the presence of change-permitting *electoral* coalitions. Even where strong organized coalitions for policy change have been

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formed, elected officials may hesitate to enact reform if they fear punishment from voters who value the status quo. We might expect the electoral risks to be especially great when citizens have developed high material stakes in current arrangements that would be manifestly threatened by policy change (Pierson 1994). Over the last decade, scholars have increasingly given systematic attention to the ways in which policies can shape mass attitudes and behaviors, largely focusing on effects that *reinforce* the current policy regime (e.g., Campbell 2003, 2012; Mettler and Soss 2004; Svallfors 2010).

We focus here on mechanisms through which policies can undermine their own support base in the mass public by creating conditions under which voters can be persuaded of the need for or acceptability of major policy change. Our discussion draws on three cognitive dynamics commonly identified in the literatures on mass policy attitudes: negativity bias in perception and judgment, framing effects, and the effects of informational salience.

Negativity Bias

Numerous studies in psychology and political behavior have documented a negativity bias in information processing: people's tendency to attend more closely to, recall more readily, and weigh more heavily negative or threatening information than positive information (e.g., Lau 1985; Soroka 2006). Related to this bias is a well-known human aversion to losses relative to the status quo as compared to the prospect of equivalent gains (Tversky and Kahneman 1991). As political analysts have pointed out, these twin biases have important implications for citizens' policy attitudes: In particular, citizens are often thought to be more sensitive to policy losses than to policy gains (Pierson 1994; Weaver 1986). Arguments about self-reinforcing feedback often draw strength from an application of these cognitive mechanisms. Pierson (1994) argues, for instance, that the negativity bias impedes program retrenchment: While program cutbacks promise gains for taxpayers, they impose losses on beneficiaries—and the latter will weigh more heavily in constituents' minds than the former.

This logic, however, offers too narrow an understanding of the potential effects of these cognitive biases on policy development. If loss aversion makes voters protective of what they have, this need not imply a defense of status quo policy. The reason is that in a changing environment, stability in policy does not imply stability in social *outcomes*. For instance, in most OECD countries, simply maintaining pension benefits in the context of aging populations has required large increases in payroll tax burdens over the last 30 years. Where current policy makes citizens progressively worse off over time, voters will become increasingly susceptible to arguments that policy change is in fact the loss-avoiding policy option.

Framing Effects

The mere existence of losses guarantees neither that citizens will notice those losses nor that they will attribute those losses to current policy. It is well known that most voters are largely inattentive to matters of politics and policy (Converse 1964; Zaller 1992). More broadly, it is not often that the average citizen assesses information about policy outcomes to draw a clear and stable verdict on existing policy arrangements. Citizens' policy attitudes are, rather, frequently given shape by the particular manner in which issues are presented to them—in particular by the efforts of politicians and other political elites to frame issues in particular ways (Chong and Druckman 2007; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997).

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The potential operation of powerful framing effects—the capacity of elites to raise the prominence of certain issue dimensions and implications over others—is highly significant for self-undermining feedback effects. It means that voters need not themselves arrive at the opinion that the status quo must go: Elites can make the case for change *for* them. Politicians and group leaders who seek policy change can be expected to frame arguments that strategically exploit voters' negativity biases: by portraying current policy as a loss-imposing arrangement and their preferred reform as a loss-avoiding alternative.

Informational Conditions

Framing, of course, can cut two ways: While those opposed to current policy have incentives to frame it as a disaster, actors who favor existing arrangements will counterframe the status quo as the safer option. Under what conditions can elites credibly depict the status quo as a loss-avoiding arrangement, translating adverse social outcomes into self-undermining policy feedback? Here, we expect the informational environment to be critical. In particular, for elite advocates of policy change to credibly exploit voters' negativity biases, information about current adverse policy outcomes must take a form that voters are likely to *attend* to. Elite arguments for policy change, in other words, will be most successful where losses are *salient* to citizens.

Several conditions shape salience at the mass level. We focus here on the *concentration* of policy losses.[3] Policy losses may become concentrated in at least two senses: cross-sectionally and temporally. Losses that have a heavy per capita burden or incidence on well-defined and tightly networked groups are likely to draw those groups' attention—and to draw their members into coalitions for policy change (Arnold 1990; Pierson 1994; Wilson 1980).

Connection to higher education reform

Second, the costs of existing policy may become concentrated *in time*. Large adverse policy outcomes may persist unnoticed as long as their impacts take the form of a "slow drip" of policy losses. Those same policy failures, however, tend to draw substantial public attention when they erupt into dramatic-focusing events, such as transportation disasters, industrial accidents, or company bankruptcies (Baumgartner and Jones 2009; Birkland 1998; Kingdon 1984).

Focusing events have played a key role in prior studies of policy change; indeed, these crises generate some of the "punctuations" in Baumgartner and Jones's (2009) account of policy dynamics. In a PE framework, focusing events are typically treated as exogenous shocks to a policy regime or subsystem. We note, however, that focusing events frequently have a strong endogenous component: They are often *consequences* of deficiencies in the policy regime itself. The Three Mile Island accident, for instance—a key event in disrupting U.S. nuclear energy policy (Baumgartner and Jones 2009)—can be understood in part as a self-undermining effect of prior policy decisions to encourage the spread of atomic energy and to regulate it lightly.

The central point is that some adverse policy consequences are focused on particular groups and moments in time, while others are dispersed or incrementally imposed. Change-seeking elites will be better positioned to frame the status quo as a loss-imposing arrangement—and to craft electoral coalitions for policy change—when policy information is structured in particular ways: when losses are cross-sectionally or temporally concentrated, making them vivid and visible to the average citizen.

Mechanism 3: Expanding Menus of Alternatives

In HI analysis, policy feedback has been conceived of as a process that progressively *narrows* the range of options available to decision makers. As Pierson (2004) puts it,

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"once actors have ventured far down a particular path, they may find it very difficult to reverse course. Political alternatives that were once quite plausible become irretrievably lost" (10–11). Formerly conceivable options become less technically and politically feasible, and even cognitively available, over time.

The set of imaginable alternatives, however, is subject to expansion as well as contraction. Over time, new policy instruments are conceived of, technological change makes new tools available, and ideas from other jurisdictions enter the debate. And a key driver of policy-ideational development is the set of perceived social consequences of existing policy. Where status quo policy is perceived to generate adverse social outcomes, politicians, bureaucrats, and policy experts become more likely to undertake a search for new alternatives to address those problems. Thus, the policy menu is not forever narrowing: Negative policy consequences often provoke efforts to *expand* the range of available and workable alternatives. In the environmental sphere, for example, U.S. regulators in the 1970s seeking to improve air quality without choking off growth plucked proposals from the economics literature for tradable permit schemes that promised, via market mechanisms, to reap pollution abatement at the lowest possible cost (Baumol and Oates 1971).

These searches for new alternatives often do more than simply add options to the menu. They can also *expand the political coalitions* for policy change, and diminish those opposing it, by altering the social and political costs of change. Leveraging market mechanisms, for instance, the U.S. sulfur dioxide trading scheme was able to generate large improvements in air and water quality in the Great Lakes region at considerably *lower* economic cost than would have been associated with options previously on the policy menu. As a result, opposition to SO_2 controls considerably weakened (Ellerman 2003). New policy options can also expand the electoral opportunities for policy change by obscuring politicians' *responsibility* for any costs of reform. In the field of old-age security, several European governments—eager to contain costs but wary of the electoral risks of direct cutbacks—have turned to the politically safer innovation of "notional-defined contribution" pensions. This novel reform option automatically pegs long-term benefit cuts to future economic and demographic conditions, thus masking both the size of retrenchment and current politicians' responsibility for it (Brooks and Weaver 2005).

Self-undermining menu effects are likely to be more common under some institutional conditions than others. First, expansions of the policy menu are particularly likely to emerge in political settings in which policy expertise is broadly diffused in society rather than concentrated in a small, cohesive elite. In the United States, for instance, "losing" groups have ready access to an especially diverse ecosystem of academic and think-tank experts. Second, while ideas may proliferate in society, those menu options must *penetrate* state institutions to significantly shape the prospects for policy change. As Weir (1989) has demonstrated, state institutions vary considerably in their porousness to new ideas. We expect menu expansion to be more likely where policymaking routines disperse agenda-setting power widely and where multiple channels of advice exist, and less likely where policy institutions are characterized by centralized agenda setting and hierarchical flows of information.

Third, new policy notions are more likely to expand the menu of plausible alternatives when they have been demonstrated to be credible. Among the best demonstrations of credibility is a successful adoption by other, closely related jurisdictions, such as culturally similar or subordinate units within the same polity (see, e.g., Volden 2006). In the United States in the mid-1990s, for instance, the implementation and perceived effectiveness of welfare-reform measures in a number of states lent those approaches considerable credibility in the national debate (Weaver 2000). In

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contrast, policy experiments across the Atlantic have contributed far less to the expansion of policy menus in the United States as American policy actors have tended to view European experience as far less germane to their own domestic context.

Windows of Political Opportunity

Self-undermining feedback effects, operating over extended periods of time, can expand the interest group and electoral coalitions pushing to roll back or substantially reorient current programs while diminishing the ranks of those seeking to defend the status quo. We do not contend, however, that feedback effects are *sufficient* to produce policy change. While self-undermining feedback can increase the political strain on the status quo, the prospects for policy change depend on an interaction between feedback effects and the structure of institutional opportunities for policy enactment.

In particular, we should expect that the losers' prospects for achieving policy change will increase as the number of veto points—opportunities for the winners to block change—falls (Immergut 1992). The balance of partisan control matters as well: Those constituencies seeking change will have a greater likelihood of success when their partisan allies control the legislature and/or the executive. Thus, for a given policy coalition, windows of opportunity will open and close over time within a given institutional setting (Kingdon 1984).

This kinda assumes that that's exogenous ... but it's not

While institutional arguments can identify *opportunities* for change, however, an analysis of self-undermining feedback effects provides an account of *preferences*—explaining why groups seek policy change when they do. Moreover, thinking jointly about long-run feedback effects and windows of institutional opportunity provides a temporally distinct account of policy change from that offered by the PE model. In both accounts, policy change may be enacted relatively quickly after a burst of governmental attention and apparently rapid shifts in the structure of coalitions. Distinct from PE theorists, however, we argue that those quick visible shifts, made possible by the opening of windows of institutional opportunity, are frequently driven by much longer-term processes that have reshaped the underlying distribution of interests and policy preferences among elites and the mass public.

Self-Undermining Feedback and Health-Care Reform

The evolution of the postwar U.S. health insurance system—and, in particular, the success of major reform in 2010—illustrates many of the analytical points made in this article. Most historical analyses of U.S. health politics have focused on self-reinforcing effects that have held the status quo in place. These include the fears of those Americans with health insurance that an increased government role would make them worse off; politically powerful organized stakeholders, including insurers and physicians; and tight fiscal constraints (Hacker 1998; Skocpol 1996).

The Affordable Care and Patient Protection Act (ACA) of 2010 does not represent wholesale policy reversal or a shift in policy paradigms. Indeed, the ACA preserved many central features of the postwar model (Hacker 2010; Starr 2011). However, the Obama reform represents a substantial rewriting of rules and reallocation of benefits and burdens that merits explanation. The act greatly increased the state's role in paying for health care for those without employer-provided coverage—expanding Medicaid and Medicare and introducing generous insurance subsidies for lower-income Americans. Equally important, the ACA would regulate market activity in unprecedented ways. For the first time, private insurance companies would be banned from routine

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underwriting practices such as denying coverage for preexisting conditions and charging higher premiums to patients at higher medical risk, while all individuals would be required to have insurance. Also, the new law included a host of provisions designed to "bend the cost curve," including changes to the ways in which providers are paid.

Thus, a central puzzle of the recent welfare state politics is how the United States achieved a significant change in a policy and institutional context characterized by powerful long-term self-reinforcing feedback effects. An important part of the answer, we argue, lies in the self-undermining feedback effects that had been unfolding for several decades within the U.S. health-care system.

Self-undermining feedback was not a novel feature of American health politics in 2009. Indeed, self-undermining feedbacks were already on prominent display during the Clinton reform effort of 1993–1994. Health-care reform would never have been President Clinton's central domestic policy initiative were it not for features of the status quo—including sharply rising costs and shrinking coverage (Hacker 1998; Starr 2011)—that had been imposing mounting losses on employers, providers, and ordinary citizens since at least the early 1970s. Moreover, the failure of the 1993–1994 effort largely reflected the severity of the institutional obstacles to change (Steinmo and Watts 1995). Broad societal pressure for reform, fueled by the costliness of the status quo, ran up against a veto-riddled policymaking environment that gave outsized advantages to those (relatively narrow) groups that stood to lose. As we discuss further, the window of institutional opportunity opened considerably wider in 2009. And critically, as we detail hereafter, self-undermining feedback dynamics had grown much stronger over the 1990s and 2000s, generating conditions more conducive to overcoming still-prodigious institutional hurdles to reform.

Our aim in this section is not to present a new empirical account of the politics of Obama-era health reform but briefly to demonstrate how a theoretical account of self-undermining feedback can make sense of many of the facts at hand and offer a compelling explanation of policy change. The discussion is organized according to the three feedback mechanisms that we have theorized.

Emergent Costs

Alongside powerful self-sustaining effects noted by other scholars, the postwar U.S. health-care system delivered major and mounting losses to influential political actors for decades. In large part, these losses emerged because the public–private patchwork of health financing in the United States was "layered" on by shifting policymaking coalitions across multiple points in time (Hacker 1998, 2002). The resulting multiplicity of public and private payers and complex institutional relationships in the system hobbled the efforts of any one body to control costs. This fragmented system of financing led total health expenditures to rise far higher than in any other country, generating increasing adverse consequences for both well-resourced, well-organized stakeholders and the general public.

Large employers, for instance, found their profits squeezed by rising health insurance premiums for their workers: Since 1999, the cost to the typical employer of providing health coverage had skyrocketed by more than 50% (Claxton and Damico 2011). State budgets, meanwhile, strained under the weight of growing Medicaid costs. In response, both employers and governments sought to contain costs by reducing coverage and squeezing providers. Firms also increasingly drove their employees into managed care, which was widely perceived as reducing choice and resulting in denial of care (Thorpe 1999). Employment-based coverage declined sharply in the 2000s, and the number of Americans without insurance coverage grew from 10% to 12% of the

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population in the 1970s to 16.7% by 2009 (Starr 2011). Even for workers who retained coverage, the proportion who faced the major financial risk of *under*insurance rose steeply during the 2000s (Schoen et al. 2011). In this densely interconnected system, moreover, losses imposed on individuals quickly translated into losses for well-organized actors: Governments and hospitals, for example, were increasingly saddled with the burden of providing services to individuals lacking insurance while doctors' incomes were falling (Hacker 2010; Seabury 2012).

The postwar policy regime thus came to impose large, unforeseen, and growing losses on well-organized, influential winners of past health policy battles. To a substantial extent, the enactment of major reform in 2010 was made possible by coalitional shifts that were decades in the making. Among the most important of these shifts was the decision by major health-care provider groups, many large employers, and a newly unified labor movement either to join the push for reform or not to actively oppose it (Hacker 2009, 2010). One consequence—and a sharp contrast to 1993–1994—was a decisive advertising advantage for the reformers who outspent their opponents by more than five to one in the crucial summer months of 2009 (Seelye 2009).

Mass Cognition

Increasingly salient losses also expanded the *electoral* coalition permissive of reform. Overall levels of public support for the 2010 ACA were never high. Yet public opinion toward health-care reform was, in several respects, sufficiently favorable to make enactment under a Democratic president and Democratic-controlled Congress feasible. First, large majorities of Americans had long viewed the American health-care system as poorly functioning and favored major policy changes (Blendon et al. 2008). Second, health reform ranked near the top of voters' priorities for reform in the 2008 election (Blendon et al. 2008). Third, when described, most of the main *provisions* of the ACA were highly popular. Fourth, the ACA as a whole remained popular with Democratic voters—those whose electoral support the president and members of the congressional majority most depended upon (Starr 2011).

If we then ask *why* public opinion was permissive of reform, an analysis of self-undermining feedback yields much of the answer. In both the Clinton and Obama rounds of health-care reform, politicians and interest groups offered conflicting framings of the nature of the policy problem, of what was to blame for policy failures, and of the likely consequences of policy alternatives. However, the increasingly visible losses and risks of the status quo, described previously, combined with hard economic times, substantially buttressed the framing efforts of reform advocates in the late 2000s. As workers' premiums and out-of-pocket medical costs rose and employers withdrew coverage, even those who liked their current health coverage were at increasing risk of losing it. Rates of inadequate coverage were also now high among the middle class. The 2008 financial crisis and recession were focusing events that further dramatized the risk of job loss—and, in turn, the loss of health insurance—for many Americans (Hacker 2009).

Thus, in framing proreform messages, Democratic leaders were now better able to harness voters' loss aversion to depict reform as *protection* against harms that were likely to emerge under the status quo. The increasing visibility of material costs of the status quo lent enhanced credibility to President Obama's warning, in his 2009 speech to Congress, of the dire consequences of inaction:

> Everyone in this room knows what will happen if we do nothing. Our deficit will grow. More families will go bankrupt. More businesses will close. More Americans will lose their coverage when they are sick and need it most. And more will die as a result. We know these things to be true.[4]

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Framing opportunities generated by salient negative information helped tap into Americans' deep uneasiness about the status quo, creating legislative conditions just hospitable enough for Democratic leaders to hold their caucuses together on key congressional votes.

Menu Effects

The high social costs of the status quo led to a decades-long search for new reform alternatives that could address coverage gaps and skyrocketing costs while overcoming strong opposition from entrenched interests as well as public resistance to new taxes. Leading up to President Clinton's failed reform attempt, these new policy options included the employer mandate and managed competition (Skocpol 1996), which offered the political advantages of avoiding visible tax hikes and preserving a central financing role for private insurers.

In the 2009–2010 episode, one of the most consequential new options on the menu was the "individual mandate." The individual mandate was developed to avoid the collapse of the insurance market once insurers were prohibited from discriminating based on medical risk. Combined with subsidies for lower-income households, the mandate would prevent healthier individuals from dropping out of the market and prevent premiums from spiraling upward. In *political* terms, the individual mandate helped dramatically soften the insurance industry's opposition to reform by guaranteeing the sector millions of new customers, thus offsetting the costs associated with tighter regulation of underwriting practices (Starr 2011). The mandate, moreover, had advanced from abstract proposal to successful policy experiment with its implementation in Massachusetts in 2006. By substantially changing the distribution of reform's costs and benefits, this newly credible policy option, a product of a long-term search for and experimentation with new ideas triggered by dire policy consequences, largely removed a powerful organized interest from the coalition of mobilized opponents.[5]

Political Opportunity

Passage of the ACA would have been impossible without the opening of a substantial window of political opportunity. The multiple veto points in the U.S. policymaking process—within Congress and between branches of government, including the need for a legislative supermajority in the Senate to avoid a filibuster—make it relatively easy for strong organized interests to block change from the status quo. In this context, the Obama administration was able to win enactment only because a relatively unified Democratic Party enjoyed both a majority in the House of Representatives and a fleeting filibuster-proof Senate majority in 2009, supplemented by artful procedural tactics when that supermajority evaporated.

While a rare alignment of partisan forces was a necessary condition for reform, however, we emphasize that that partisan alignment was far from *sufficient* to generate policy change. If an institutional account of reform can illuminate the opportunities for change, only an analysis of self-undermining feedback effects can explain how interest group and electoral coalitions arose that were broad enough to enact change in such a forbidding institutional environment.

The case of U.S. health reform also helps to sharpen the difference between a PE approach to policy change and one grounded in self-undermining policy feedback. While reform in some sense "happened" quickly and coincided with a shift in the balance of political authority, the broad political preconditions for policy change were a long time in the making. The process contained recognizable elements of the kind of

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change-accelerating feedback effects predicted by the PE model (e.g., bandwagoning by interest groups), but the underlying pressures and incentives for reform did not spring from a sudden perturbation that quickly reshaped policy images, coalitions, and menus. Rather, they emerged from a set of long-term feedback mechanisms that gradually reshaped the group and electoral coalitional possibilities paired with a short-term weakening of veto points that opened a window of political opportunity.

Conclusion

Against a tendency to associate policy feedback with self-reinforcing effects, we have argued that there are large analytical payoffs to thinking carefully about the ways in which policies may yield consequences that gradually undermine their own bases of support. Our claim goes well beyond the common dictum that public policies create losers: We have theorized a set of specific mechanisms through which adverse policy consequences can bring mobilized groups and large segments of the electorate to support or accept a major change in policy orientation. Our aim in advancing and illustrating these arguments has been one of theory building: to propose hypotheses that scholars may seek to employ in explaining policy outcomes or to test systematically against other cases of policy development.

The arguments advanced here are complementary both to HI arguments about positive feedback and to PE approaches. In relation to HI analyses, we see no contradiction in expecting *both* self-undermining and self-reinforcing feedback processes to be common in politics. In fact, both processes will frequently flow simultaneously from the same set of policies. Thinking about the simultaneous operation of positive and negative feedback dynamics is likely to yield important insights into policy development. Where policy reform occurs, self-undermining effects may explain *why* change emerged; self-reinforcing effects, meanwhile, will often offer a compelling account of why reform takes the specific *form* that it does. One can understand the ACA—a layering of significant new rules, costs, and benefits atop existing market and program structures—as a consequence of the concurrent operation of self-reinforcing and self-undermining dynamics. Moreover, even when reform efforts fall victim to path-dependent dynamics (as did Clinton's health initiative), long-term self-undermining policy effects can explain why reform is likely to return to the policy agenda again and again.

There is also substantial scope for integrating the analysis of self-undermining feedback effects with PE understandings of change. Long-term self-undermining effects often supply the "disturbance," such as a policy-induced focusing event, that sets shorter-term feedback processes in motion. A PE line of analysis, in turn, can be crucial in helping explain when and where self-undermining pressures will generate sufficient political momentum to produce policy change.

More broadly, we wish to underline the importance of thinking about feedback effects in *conditional* terms. We have proposed institutional and policy-structural conditions under which we expect self-undermining mechanisms to operate. We see the development of conditional claims about feedback effects as critical to explaining policy development over time. Forces generated endogenously by policies interact with features of the institutional and organizational context to generate pressures on governments to either maintain or revise existing arrangements. Arrangements that are self-reinforcing under some circumstances can be self-undermining under others (Greif and Laitin 2004). Further progress in systematically explaining patterns of policy stability and change will turn on the formulation and testing of propositions, such as those advanced here, about the conditions under which policy losses and gains

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get translated into effective political coalitions for policy change or defense of the status quo.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank Daniel Béland, Pepper Culpepper, Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, Kathleen Thelen, and the journal's anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on previous versions of this paper. Alex Hemingway provided excellent research assistance.

Notes

1. We borrow the terms "self-reinforcing" and "self-undermining" from Greif and Laitin (2004).
2. These three mechanisms can be roughly classified within Pierson's (1993) original typology as incentive effects, informational effects for mass publics, and learning effects, respectively.
3. See also Soss and Schram (2007).
4. Barack Obama, Speech to U.S. Congress, September 9, 2009.
5. The "Big Five" insurers ultimately contributed to the fight against the reform, though the main insurer association did not (Starr 2011). Notably, this switch occurred because the individual mandate got watered down, underlining the importance of new policy alternatives for coalitional alignments.

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