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U.S. healthcare reform and policy feedback: Some fancy subtitle

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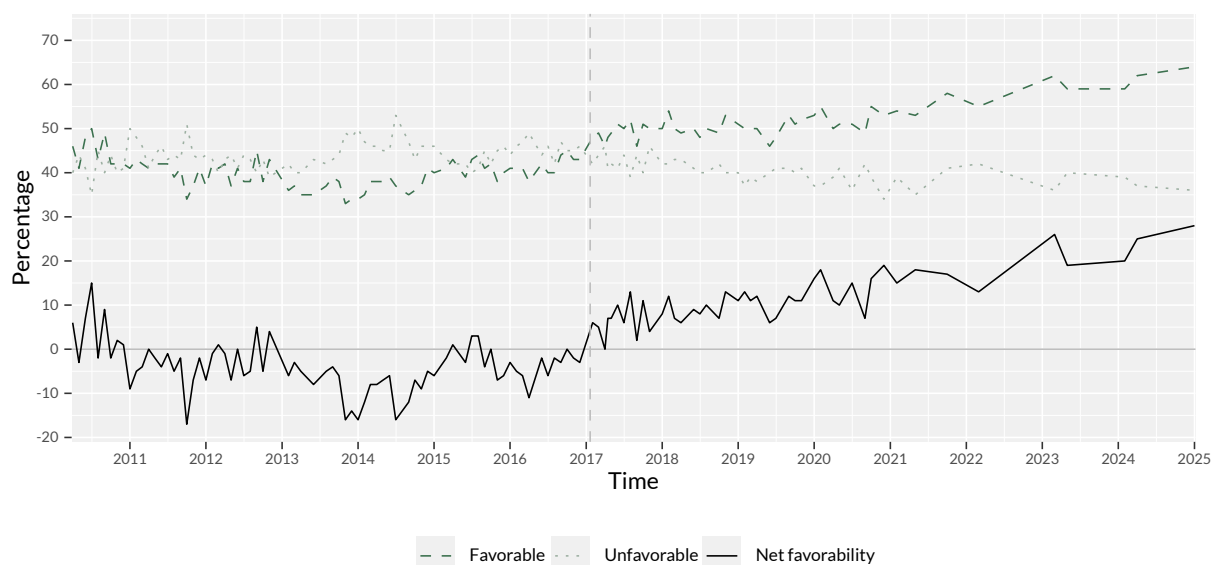
Abstract

Placeholder

Keywords: healthcare, policy feedback

Introduction

When (then candidate) Donald Trump was asked in his, first and only, presidential debate with Democratic opponent Kamala Harris what his plans for healthcare reform were, his response that he had “concepts of plan” (Trump, 2024) rekindled some discourse as to the future of American healthcare and potential reforms in that sector. Ever since it was passed, Republican lawmakers, in conjunction with candidate and president Trump, have at times alternately advocated for – and attempted – repealing President Barack Obama’s signature healthcare reform, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (abbreviated as ACA, commonly also referred to as “Obamacare”), outright, or making major modifications to the law (Armour et al., 2024). However, neither a repeal or a major modification ever came to pass, despite Republicans gaining control of the White House and both Houses of Congress following the 2016 general election (Federal Election Commission, 2017). Three Republican Senators voted to *not* repeal Obamacare, Senator John McCain, as was highly publicized at the time, voting no via thumbs-down on the Senate floor, less than two days after receiving surgery for brain cancer (Davis & Montanaro, 2017). Beyond any individual-level intuitions for this specific legislative outcome, this suggests the question *why were Republicans unable to repeal or reform the ACA?* One explanation might be public response – in the time since its passage, the ACA’s popularity has somewhat transformed, from being viewed rather controversially in the beginning, to now (early 2025) enjoying its largest net positive favorability ever (see Figure 1):



As Busemeyer et al. (2019) have noted, already during Trump’s first term, this leads credence

to the idea that policy feedback follows a *thermostatic* (Wlezien, 1995), or negative, pattern, wherein (proposed) policy change in any kind of direction is *counterbalanced* by the public's response. In this view, *policy stability* is the consequence of negative feedback. This implies that Republicans haven't been At the same time, Busemeyer et al. (2019) also point out that this same empirical artefact may support a Historical Institutional interpretation. In contrast to the thermostat view, Historical Institutionalists propose that policies, once adopted, create support for themselves, i.e. *positive feedback* (see e.g. Pierson, 1993; Pierson, 2000). This post-Trump development in U.S. healthcare politics motivates **Busemeyer2019**<empty citation> to streamline the concept of policy-feedback in general for all kinds of policies.

Sticking with healthcare policy, however, pre-Trump, the more germane empirical puzzle related to why healthcare reform happened in 2010 and not before. Jacobs and Weaver (2014) argue that, unlike in the thermostatic view, negative feedback drove *policy change* in 2010, rather than policy stability. More specifically, they develop an extension to Historical Institutionalism that incorporates a notion of negative feedback as a driver of policy change, where Historical Institutionalism usually emphasizes explaining long-term policy stability due to positive feedback.

In this paper, I will first discuss Jacobs and Weaver's 2014 theoretical conception of negative feedback effects, and their case study, in which they employ their theory to explain why healthcare reform was passed in the US in 2010, but not in the 1990s, the previous high-profile attempt to do so on the Federal level.

Theoretical argument

Jacobs and Weaver (2014) aim to add to the literature on long-term policy dynamics by more closely examining the role of feedback effects, specifically as they relate to policy change. On a broad level, explaining policy dynamics may broadly be divided into two paradigms: (1) explaining *change* and (2) explaining *stability*. Policy change and stability are, of course, two sides of the same medallion, but the way different theories emphasize one over the other will impact their explanatory power when applied to any given empirical phenomenon.

Jacobs and Weaver's 2014 argument

Discussion

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