The Social Construction of Policy Success and Failure

Sarah Pralle
Syracuse University
sbpralle@maxwell.syr.edu

Abstract: Policy scholars argue that politics infiltrates all aspects of the policy process, but they have paid little attention to the politics of policy evaluation. This paper develops a model to illustrate how policy actors strategically define public policies as successes and failures. I argue that proponents and opponents of policies attempt to further their own political and policy goals by shaping the public's understanding of whether a particular public program has succeeded or failed. These public evaluations matter because they shape the prospects for policy maintenance and reform; they shape future legislation by setting reasonable parameters for debate; they empower and disempower actors associated with the policy; and they contribute to general appraisals of whether government can solve public problems. The paper suggests that a policy actor's strategic behavior is shaped by three factors: (1) whether they support or oppose the policy; (2) the relative popularity of the policy among the public; and (3) the salience of the policy. The paper is designed to set the stage for empirical research into the social construction of policy success and failure.

Introduction

If there is one thing that the Republican presidential candidates agree on, it is that the Affordable Care Act (aka "Obamacare") is a complete failure. It is a "debacle," a "train wreck," a "destructive and costly" law, "fatally flawed," "heavy handed," and according to Ben Carson "the worst thing to happen to the United States since slavery." Republican elites in Congress largely agree, having voted dozens of times over the last five years to repeal Obamacare. Their overwrought opposition to the law is reflected in the fact that a majority of self-identified Republicans consider the law to be a failure, [1] even though it has largely succeeded in one of its most basic goals, which is to decrease the number of uninsured Americans.

The Republican rhetoric around Obamacare points to an important but understudied aspect of the policy process, namely the social construction of policy success and failure. Policy scholars rightly argue that politics infiltrates all aspects of the policy process, but they have paid less attention to the politics of policy evaluation than to other aspects of the policy process, such as agenda setting, policy change, and policy feedback. This paper develops a model to illustrate how policy actors strategically define public policies as successes and failures. I argue that proponents and opponents of policies attempt to further their own political and policy goals by shaping the public's understanding of whether a particular public program has succeeded or failed. These

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[1] Mark Blumenthal and Jonathan Cohn, "The Surprising Reason so Many People Still Don't Like Obamacare," Huffingon Post, 22 June 2015. Accessed at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/21/obamacare-approval-polls_n_7632070.html.

public evaluations matter for a number of reasons. They may shape the prospects for policy maintenance and reform; affect the design of future policies; empower and disempower actors associated with the policy; and contribute to general appraisals of whether government can solve public problems, among other things. As Sanford Schram and Joe Soss argue, "judgments of policy success and failure are more than just political outcomes; they are also *political forces*."[2]

If judgments of policy success and failure are political forces, then it is important to understand the politics underlying these judgments. In this paper, I argue that political elites face different incentives to construct a policy as a success or failure depending on three key factors: (1) whether they support or oppose the policy; (2) the relative popularity of the policy among the public and key constituencies; and (3) the salience of the policy. These three factors shape whether and how political elites will depict any particular policy as a success or failure (or something in between). My working assumption is that political elites' rhetoric of success and failure matters because they are able to shape the public perception of a policy, which affects subsequent policies and politics.

Throughout the paper, the focus is on "policies with publics" as opposed to "policies without publics."[3] Peter May argues that some policies attract the classic pluralist politics wherein multiple competing groups bring differential resources to a relatively adversarial political space. Other policies—those without publics—attract more technocrats than adversarial interest groups, and exist in more low salience political environments. This

[2] Sanford Schram and Joe Soss, "Success Stories: Welfare Reform, Policy Discourse, and the Politics of Research," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 577 (Sep. 2001): 49-65. Emphasis added.
[3] Peter May, "Reconsidering Policy Design: Policies and Publics," *Journal of Public Policy* 11(2), 1991: 187-206.

latter set of policies may include policies that make up what Suzanne Mettler calls the "submerged state."[4] Submerged state policies include things like tax benefits and government subsidies that are less visible to the general public and which obscure the role of government in delivering social benefits and policy rewards. As Mettler argues, it is difficult to reform these policies (which often shower rewards on the wealthy and powerful) and to get political credit for doing so. While such policies are an important part of the American political landscape, this paper focuses on more visible policies that make the government's role more apparent.

The Politics of Policy Evaluation

Public administration scholars insist that policy evaluation is an "indispensable tool for feedback, learning, and thus improvement."[5] Without some process whereby we evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of a policy after its enactment and implementation, we have little hope of understanding whether (and why) a policy has succeeded or failed to meet its goals. And without this understanding, it is difficult if not impossible to improve policy outcomes. But policy evaluation, like so many other aspects of the policy process, is not necessarily "rational."[6] As Bovens, 'T Hart, and Kuipers put it, "in the real world of politics, it [policy evaluation] is always at risk of degrading into a hollow ritual or a blame

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[4] Suzanne Mettler, *The Submerged State: How Invisible Government Policies Undermine American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[5] Mark Bovens, Paul 'T Hart, and Sanneke Kuipers, "The Politics of Policy Evaluation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Public Policy*, edited by Robert E. Goodin, Michael Moran, and Martin Rein (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press June 2008). See also D. L. Weimer and A. R. Vining, Policy Analysis: Concepts and Practice, 5th edition (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson, 2005).

[6] See Deborah Stone, *Policy Paradox and Political Reason: The Art of Political Decision Making*, 3rd edition (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2011)

game that obstructs rather than enhances the search for better governance."[7] This is

especially true when the evaluation process takes place in relatively public arenas, but it

also holds for less visible and more technocratic venues, as Bovens, 'T Hart, and Kuipers

note:

> Even seemingly routine, institutionalized evaluations of unobtrusive policy
> programs tend to have political edges to them, if only in the more subterraneous
> world of sectoral, highly specialized policy networks. Even in those less
> controversial instances, policy evaluations are entwined with processes of
> accountability and lesson drawing that may have winners and losers… Evaluations
> hold the promise of a reframing of a program's rationale and objectives, a
> recalibration of the mix of policy instruments it relies on, a reorganization of its
> service delivery mechanisms, and yes, a redistribution of money and other pivotal
> resources among the various actors involved in its implementation.[8]

As these scholars make clear, multiple stakeholders have an interest in the outcome

of policy evaluations, and will frame policies in ways that benefit them and hurt their

opponents. Because the determination of whether a policy has succeeded or failed is so

open to interpretation, we should expect the political system to generate a variety of

plausible alternative framings. Put differently, policies can succeed and fail in any number

of ways, and may succeed in some respects while failing in others. This gives policy actors a

lot of leeway when in comes to framing policy outcomes. Indeed, even experts do not agree

on what criteria are the most important and how to best measure outcomes. For example,

Alan McConnell claims that policies can succeed and fail in the three "realms" of processes,

programs, and politics.[9] He also notes that policy success and failure is better

conceptualized as a continuum, and offers five types of success/ failure within this

spectrum: success, resilient success, conflicted success, precarious success, and failure.

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[7] Bovens, 'T Hart, and Kuipers, p. 320
[8] Ibid, p. 323
[9] Allan McConnell, "Policy Success, Policy Failure and Grey Areas In-Between," *Journal of Public Policy* 30 (3), 2010: 345-362.

The question of what constitutes success and failure is a tricky one, and a lengthy

discussion of this issue is outside the scope of this paper. But for present purposes, I agree

with McConnell that there are both objective and subjective dimensions of policy success.

From an objective standpoint, a policy can be considered successful if it achieves the goals

that proponents set out to achieve.[10] But not everyone perceives a policy as successful even

when government has achieved the basic goals set out in it, as the case of Obamacare

makes clear. The public and/or policymakers may not trust that the government is telling

the truth about policy outcomes; they may use different criteria for evaluating the policy;

they may focus on alleged unintended consequences of the policy; or they may object on

more general grounds that government should not be solving the problem, among other

things.

In short and as already noted, the degree to which a policy can be considered a

success or failure is open to interpretation. Moreover, these evaluations shift over time,

with some policies seen as successful at one point in time and a failure at another as new

facts come to light and as political, economic, and social contexts change. For example, it

appears that the U.S. public and politicians from both parties are turning against once

popular policies like "three strikes you're out," as the negative consequences of such

criminal justice policies come to light (namely the high rate of incarceration in the United

States and the social and economic costs associated with it). In short, policy evaluation is an

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[10] McConnell adds to this by saying that a successful policy also "attracts no criticism of any
significance and/or support is virtually universal." McConnell 2010, 351.

on-going process and is best studied as a "moving picture" rather than a snapshot, as policy scholars have recommended for the study of other policy processes as well.[11]

Constructing Policy Success and Failure: Strategic Considerations

If the outcomes of policy evaluation processes matter for subsequent politics and policymaking, then political actors should strategize around how to construct policies for the public and for more specialized audiences. At first glance, we might assume that proponents of a policy will always construct the policy as successful while opponents will construct the policy as a failure. While this simple formulation has intuitive appeal, I argue that it is too simple and does not take into account the key factors of salience and popularity. Put differently, politicians' strategies when it comes to constructing policies as successful, unsuccessful, or somewhere in-between are shaped by whether they support or oppose the policy, the popularity of the policy among the public and key constituencies, and the salience of the policy.

Table 1 summarizes the key strategies that supportive and opposing politicians will pursue. The popularity and salience of policies should be considered as existing on a continuum, but are presented here as discrete characteristics for the purposes of theory development. Even support and opposition to a policy are better viewed as involving a range of positions, including strongly supportive, moderately supportive, moderately opposed, and strongly opposed. Finally, it should be noted that popularity and salience can rise and fall over time, and we should expect politicians' strategies to shift as well.

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[11] See, for example, Paul Pierson, "The Study of Policy Development," *Journal of Policy History* 17 (1), 2005: 34-51.

Table 1: Strategies of constructing policy success and failure

Policy position	Popularity of policy	
	High	**Low**
Support	For high salience issues: • Promote success widely and mention policy frequently • Credit claiming and position taking For low salience issues: • Try to increase salience of issue • Targeted promotion to key constituents and target groups • Defend policy when/if attacked	For high salience issues: • Avoid discussing issue • Talk about improving policy, especially instruments, tools, and implementation • Defend general goals while disassociating oneself with policy enactment and policy itself For low salience issues: • Relative silence with wider public • Promote success with beneficiaries and experts
Oppose	For high salience issues: • Focus on high costs and inefficiency • Critique instruments, tools, and implementation • Bring up unintended consequences • Shift attention to "future failures" For low salience issues: • Highlight perceived failures in specialized forums and policy networks that are less visible to the public • Target key constituencies opposed to policy • Over time, issue "trial balloons" to test whether public is receptive to critiques, especially if there is data to suggest significant policy failure	For high salience issues: • Highlight failure widely and mention policy frequently • Critique fundamental rationales and goals of policy as well as instruments, tools, and outcomes For low salience issues: • Try to increase salience by highlighting policy failures • Push reform in specialized forums and among networks of experts

The Strategies of Supporters

      Politicians, even those who are motivated to pursue policies that serve the general good, are driven in part by re-election concerns.[12] We can assume, then, that their strategies around constructing policies as successes and failures are shaped by these electoral considerations. Politicians who support a popular and highly salient policy are in a relatively easy position when it comes to choosing a strategy that will help with their re-election. In these cases, we should expect politicians to promote the policy with a wide audience, framing the policy's goals as desirable and just. They may highlight their own role (or their Party's role) in enacting and/or supporting the policy so as to claim credit with their constituents. Following Mayhew, if the policy is too complex for them to take credit for (e.g. if it would be hard for constituents to believe that the politician is responsible for the policy and its outcomes), the politician may engage in "position taking" where they repeatedly assert their support for the policy.[13] As a result, the virtues of the policy should be frequently aired in public arenas, generating positive feedback effects in the sense that the popularity and salience of these policies should be reinforced by the politician's attention to the policy and by his or her rhetoric.

      While these dynamics are fairly straightforward, they become less so if the so-called "facts on the ground" undermine the notion that the policy is successful. In such cases, opponents of the policy may attempt to chip away at the popularity of the policy by pointing out that it is not working. In these situations, a supportive politician can still use the policy as an electoral and legislative resource because it of its popularity with the

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[12] David Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).
[13] Ibid.

public. However, supporters may choose to downplay the underlying rationale and goals of the policy and shift attention to non-empirical defenses of the policy, citing things like "tradition" or moral/ethical imperatives. For example, if evidence suggests that capital punishment fails to deter violent crime or that innocent people have been victims of the death penalty, supportive politicians may argue that capital punishment enjoys a long tradition in the United States and that it serves a retributive function. In some cases, the popularity of a policy may become a stand-in for its success. In other words, policy success becomes largely defined as broad support for the policy.

If a policy is not highly salient but is popular, supporters have an incentive to raise the salience of the issue to maximize their electoral and legislative rewards. If that proves difficult, they will talk about the policy to key constituencies more than to the general public, and will target those who benefit from it in particular. We should also expect that these politicians would defend the policy if publicly attacked, given its popularity among constituents. However, if a policy remains popular but is not highly salient with the public, over time the public may fail to recall the underlying rationale for the policy as well as its basic goals. This may make the policy more vulnerable to reform and retrenchment in the future.

Supporters of less popular policies are understandably in a more difficult position. If the issue is highly salient but unpopular with large segments of the public or with powerful constituencies (as in the case of health care), supportive politicians may simply try to avoid talking about it. There is little to be gained by extolling the virtues and success of the policy except perhaps to key beneficiaries. If supporters find the issue impossible to ignore, they may admit that the policy needs improvement, focusing in particular on policy tools,

instruments, and implementation processes. In addition, they may disassociate themselves (and perhaps their Party) with the particular policy even while defending its goals in a vague way (e.g. such as "improving our health care system"). Another strategy is to talk about the positive results of the policy while failing to mention the policy itself. For example, the multiple government bailouts in the midst of the 2008 financial crisis were unpopular, but the results were arguably positive (e.g. the revival of the U.S. auto industry and a rebound in the stock market). Politicians who voted for the unpopular bailouts are unlikely to mention them as glowing examples of government competence, but may mention the positive results without identifying the policy responsible for them. If an issue is unpopular and has low salience, supporters have little incentive to mention the policy with the wider public but may promote the policy and its success with specialized audiences of beneficiaries and policy experts.

The Strategies of Opponents

Opponents of any particular policy seek significant reform and sometimes outright repeal of the policy. A logical strategy is to paint the policy as a complete or partial failure thereby justifying reform and repeal. However, when policies are popular and highly salient with the public this strategy is less viable, even if there is convincing evidence that the policy is failing in some way. Politicians must find a way to criticize the policy and justify reform without alienating the public or powerful constituents, and they have a few options in this regard. First, they can focus on the cost of the policy in hopes that the public values efficiency even for policies that they support and from which they benefit. A focus on costs can be used as a rationale for policy reform, even if the motivation for reform is only

loosely related to cost and the reform would do little to improve efficiency. For example, supporters of criminal justice reform (before the recent public criticism of mass incarceration) often argued that mass incarceration is extremely costly, and used this argument to criticize otherwise popular policies.

A second strategy is to focus criticism on policy instruments, tools, and implementation rather than on the rationale, goal, or outcomes of the policy. Opponents can claim that the policy is failing in a very specific way and claim that they will fix the policy with their proposed reform. A related strategy is to shift the evaluation criteria away from criteria that paint the policy as successful and toward criteria that show it in a more negative light. One version of this is to focus on alleged unintentional and negative consequences of the policy. The message to supporters is that the policy outcomes are not as good as they may think, encouraging them to reevaluate the policy using different criteria.

Another strategy that policy opponents can use is to talk about the future of the policy, arguing that the policy *will fail in the future* even if it is successful now. This seems to be the Republican strategy for justifying changes to popular policies like Social Security and Medicare. Republican critics do not claim the policy is currently failing, but argue that the programs are unsustainable and that future generations of retirees will receive only a portion (or none) of their promised benefits. In this way, critics can talk of a crisis in Social Security and Medicare, even though the policies are currently achieving their goals and could therefore be deemed successful.[14]

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[14] Many observers think that Republican politicians are motivated to reform Social Security and Medicare not because they are concerned about its future viability but because they oppose a generous welfare state on ideological grounds. As such, their preferred reforms

Finally, opponents may resort to arguments that depict reform or repeal as necessary and inevitable because the policy violates some fundamental value or even better, the Constitution. The politician can distance her or himself from unpopular reforms by claiming that the Constitution requires it. In essence, the politician is not arguing that the policy has failed in a conventional sense but is arguing that the policy has failed to pass Constitutional muster, no matter how admirable the goals or how positive the outcomes.

Opponents of popular but low salience issues are in an easier position. Because the public is not paying a lot of attention to the policy or the issues surrounding it, opponents may be able to get away with calling the policy a failure at least to specialized audiences and in some political venues. Over time these attacks on the policy may grow and leak out of the specialized venues where they were first voiced. Opponents may issue "trial balloons" to test whether the public is receptive to the critiques. This seems especially likely in cases where there is strong empirical evidence that the policy is failing in some significant and important way.

Finally, politicians who oppose unpopular and salient policies are in a favorable position. They can widely exclaim that the policy is a failure and expect both electoral and legislative rewards for doing so. Calls for significant reform or even outright repeal should be common, and may include an overhaul of the basic approach and goals of the policy. Empirical evidence that indicates significant policy failure certainly helps bolster the opponents' case, but even when empirical evidence is scant, opposing politicians have an incentive to construct the policy as a failure. In such cases, they may provide few details of

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have less to do with ensuring the programs' long-term viability and more about shrinking the government's role in providing retirement and health care security and shifting responsibility to the private marketplace.

the ways in which the policy has failed, choosing to simply repeat the charge as often as possible. For unpopular and low salience policies, opponents will attempt to raise the salience of the issue so as to gain more electoral and legislative advantages. They may also talk about policy failure among experts of policy networks and in more specialized venues.

Discussion

Many organizations and institutions evaluate public policies in the United States, including the U.S. Government Accountability Office, individual government agencies, think tanks, consulting firms, University researchers, non-profits and interest groups, to name a few. As Bovens, 'T Hart, and Kuipers note, "Some of these evaluations are discreet and for direct use by policy makers; others occur in a blaze of publicity and are for public consumption and political use."[15] The public may hear about these evaluations through the media, advocacy materials, and through other avenues. One of these avenues, I argue, is through political elites such as politicians, Party leaders, and those running for public office. Put differently, the public "learns" about the success and failure of public policies in part through what political elites have to say about them.[16] The elite and the public's beliefs

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[15] Bovens, 'T Hart, and Kuipers, p. 320.

[16] Some people have direct experience with public policies and these experiences can shape their understanding of whether the policy is a success or failure. But it is difficult to arrive at a general evaluation of public policies even when one has direct experience with it. As Schram and Soss (2001, 50) argue, to arrive at a judgment of policy success or failure "we must rely heavily on what media stories, public officials, and experts report about general states of affairs. Such reports serve to establish the success or failure of government policy as an authentic fact for the public." It is important to note as well that for many policies, large segments of the public have little to no experience with them. This is especially true for foreign policy but also includes a large proportion of domestic policies, many of which are directed a specific target populations.

about whether a policy has succeeded or failed are important, I argue, because they can shape subsequent politics and policy.

Sanford Schram and Joe Soss examine these kinds of political effects in their study of welfare reform in the United States.[17] In the wake of welfare reform in the mid-1990s, the majority of public officials and the media constructed TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) as a policy success. The authors show that welfare reformers successfully advanced a set of criteria on which the policy should be judged, and then evaluated the reform positively based on these limited criteria. More specifically, welfare reform was judged a success because it led to declining caseloads and rising employment among so-called "leavers" of the welfare program. However, these evaluation criteria obscured more progressive ways of judging the policy, such as poverty alleviation and reductions in inequality. On these dimensions, TANF looked more like a failure than a success. Schram and Soss conclude that judgments of success and failure are important for a number of reasons:

> "Beliefs about which policies are known failures and which have been shown to succeed set the parameters for reasonable debate over the shape of future legislation. Reputations for developing successful ideas confer authority, giving some advocates greater access and influence in the legislative process. Public officials who are able to claim credit for policy success hold a political resource that bestows advantages in both electoral and legislative contests."[18]

Political elites' evaluation strategies matter because of these potential policy feedback effects.[19] And the various strategies outlined in Table 1 and discussed above have implications for the amount and kind of feedback effects we can expect. When a policy is

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[17] Schram and Soss 2001.

[18] Ibid, p. 62.

[19] See Suzanne Mettler and Mallory SoRelle, "Policy Feedback Theory," Chapter 5 in Paul Sabatier and Christopher Weible, eds. *Theories of the Policy Process*, 3rd edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2014).

very popular and salient with the public, we should expect that much of the public discourse around the policy reinforces an image of policy success, whether or not empirical evidence supports such claims. This should increase the durability of the policy and could even shape how policymakers approach similar problems. And, because politicians are reminding the public and constituents of the policy's success, the popularity of the policy should remain high. As an issue decreases in salience though, politicians have less incentive to remind the public that the policy has been successful, and public evaluations of the policy made fade from view, making the policy more vulnerable to policy retrenchment and reform. For example, the national parks program in the United States is a popular and successful government program ("America's best idea"). The program has preserved some of the most unique and scenic landscapes across the country, millions of Americans visit the national parks each year,[20] and a recent poll by the National Parks Conservation Association shows strong public support for the parks across the political spectrum.[21] At the same time, this issue is not particularly salient with the public. The lack of salience may help explain the park's budgetary shortfalls, as a growing number of visitors stretch the Park Service's resources, and as it puts off expensive maintenance projects while Congress fails to adequately fund the agency.[22]

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[20] Attendance has been rising in recent years, with a record number of over 307 miollion visitors in 2015. *National Park Service*, "Frequently Asked Questions," accessed at http://www.nps.gov/aboutus/faqs.htm

[21] Ninety-five percent of survey respondents in the poll said that they want the federal government to protect the parks and secure their enjoyment for the future. National Parks Conservation Association, "New Poll of Likely Voters Finds Unity in Public Support for National Parks," accessed at https://www.npca.org/articles/693-new-poll-of-likely-voters-finds-unity-in-public-support-for-national-parks

[22] See National Public Radio, "National Parks Have A Long To-Do List But Can't Cover The Repair Costs," March 8, 2016, accessed at

The example of the national parks program raises the question of time. Over time, individual politicians have fewer incentives to extoll the virtues of policies because their connection to the policies is remote or non-existent. Policies of the past, even successful and popular ones, do not offer the same kind of credit claiming and position taking opportunities as more recent ones. For example, the Fair Labor Standards Act, enacted in 1938 during the Great Depression, establishes minimum wages, overtime pay, and restricts child labor, among other things. And yet, few politicians talk about the success of this policy in terms of improving the working conditions of average Americans. Indeed, some politicians and many advocacy groups claim that a key provision of the policy—the minimum wage—is a failure because it has not increased in many years. While we should not be surprised that politicians do not talk about the success of an almost 80-year old policy, it does point to a potential bias over time; the public may grow increasingly unaware of successful government policies as politicians fail to bring them up because they provide few if any electoral and legislative rewards. The result may be that the public and policymakers underappreciate many good policy ideas and successful government programs.

The same result can occur when policies are unpopular with the public even though the policy has been successful in terms of meeting the goals it set out to achieve. In such cases, opponents of the policy have every incentive to construct the policy as a failure, while supporters have few incentives to defend it. This situation describes the public rhetoric and debate over Obamacare in the years since it has been enacted and

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http://www.npr.org/2016/03/08/466461595/national-parks-have-a-long-to-do-list-but-cant-cover-the-repair-costs

implemented. While the Democratic candidates for President, Hillary Clinton and Bernie

Sanders, are talking about Obamacare and defending it, we can point to other cases where

supporters have been fairly silent on the issue and have let opponents set the terms of

debate. Or, alternatively, supporters may point to successful health policy outcomes

associated with Obamacare without mentioning the policy itself. In these cases, the public

fails to connect positive outcomes to the policy.[23]

The reverse is possible when policies are popular with the public or key

constituencies but have failed to meet some of their basic goals or have negative

unintended consequences. In these cases opponents are careful about criticizing the policy

because of fear of electoral or legislative backlash. As a result, the problems and failures

with the policy may get scant public attention (particularly if the policy is not highly

salient) and the policies can endure even in the midst of significant evidence of policy

failure. The federal government's policies toward Cuba and criminal justice policies

resulting in mass incarceration are two examples (although in both cases, politicians and

the public have been paying more attention to their failures recently).

Conclusion

In an Op-Ed column in the *New York Times* last March, Princeton economist and

NYT's columnist Paul Krugman lamented the fact that Republicans continued to launch

false accusations about Obamacare even in the face of evidence suggesting the policy was

successful.[24] Krugman also noted how large portions of the public seemed to be unaware of

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[23] See Sean Miskell, "Submerging the State: The Politics of Medicaid Expansion," Unpublished paper.
[24] Paul Krugman, "Imaginary Health Care Horrors," *New York Times*, March 30, 2015: A19.

the policy's success, citing polls showing that only 5 percent of the public was aware that Obamacare is costing less than expected while 42 percent thought it was costing more. The positive experience of millions of Americans who have received health insurance under Obamacare has had "little effect on public perceptions," he claimed. "Obamacare isn't perfect," Krugman admits, "but it has dramatically improved the lives of millions. Someone should tell the voters."[25]

This paper has attempted to explain why politicians may or may not "tell the voters" about the success or failure of a public policy. As Krugman's column suggests, politicians' public evaluations of success and failure matter: they help shape the public's perceptions of a policy, for one thing. Moreover, these evaluations help determine what policy ideas and approaches are deemed successful and therefore can set the legitimate boundaries for future discussions of policies. Successful policies empower those who crafted and supported them, while failed policies can disempower their creators and supporters. And in the aggregate, whether the public thinks that government can achieve the goals it set out for itself may shape their level of trust in government over time along with their willingness to give it the authority to solve important public problems.

Empirical research is needed to gauge whether my model can help us understand strategies of social construction around policy success and failure. Conducting empirical research around a set of policies is therefore the next step for this research project.

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[25] Ibid.