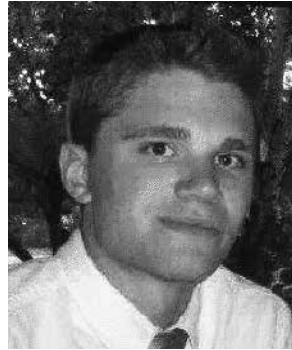


## The Breakdown of Political Warfare: Discovering Catalysts

SPENCER SCHOLES



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**WRITER'S COMMENT:** *On almost every occasion, I dread the idea of a term paper. This is not because I fear the effort required, but because I realize that these assignments mean spending a long time with subjects I usually dislike. However, when Dr. Hill first described this particular task, I was genuinely interested in meeting the challenge he had proposed: use the political theories covered in class to explain changes in public opinion for a real policy. Not only could I examine the practical application of my knowledge, but I could also have the chance to work on a subject that I had already been exploring in my free time. Thus, I knew where I wanted to take my topic, and as I began writing, I simply continued to fit the pieces into my puzzle. In the end, I hoped that my paper would be seen as more than just an essay written by a student, and would instead resemble something that my instructor might encounter in the real world of political science.*

INSTRUCTOR UNAVAILABLE FOR COMMENT

**T**heory is nothing but a guide until synchronized with reality; then it becomes an explanation. While this occurrence is certainly rare, with most theories remaining useful only in the abstract, occasionally there are times when ideas manage to explain the outcomes of real-world events, and these situations demand special attention. In recent political history, the policy debate over The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, colloquially known as Obamacare, could be considered such an event. In fact, by examining the theories created by John Zaller, John Mueller, and Shanto Iyengar, it is possible to explain each of the four major changes in public support for Obamacare between April 2009 and March 2010.

Before diving into an analysis of the four changes in public opinion, though, it is important first to understand the political context in which this bill was proposed. In particular, there are three especially significant circumstances to note. The first is the inauguration of President Barack Obama on January 20, 2009. After winning the election in 2008 by a wide margin, President Obama became the nation's first African American president, marking a unique point in the history of the White House. The election of a Democrat also signaled a distinct continuation of the liberal-leaning political climate, as the Democrats had already taken control of Congress in 2006 and expanded control of the House in 2008.<sup>1</sup> The second notable circumstance includes the global economic recession beginning in late 2008. Although the recession was only in its early stages by 2009, the effects caused by a decline in the housing and stock markets quickly affected the mindset of the United States public. This led to an "overwhelming" focus on the economy, where "the share of Americans saying that strengthening the nation's economy should be a top priority [had] risen from 68% [in 2007] to 85% by [January 2009]."<sup>2</sup> The third piece of context shaping the political landscape, in early 2009, was the increased importance Americans began placing on the issue of health care. Although largely focused on the economy, "the economic pressures facing the average American [seemed] to be increasing, rather than decreasing, the pressure for health care reform," with 62% of adults believing "it [was] more important than ever to take on health care reform" in February 2009.<sup>3</sup> Although this is only a brief list of events from 2009, these three circumstances should help illustrate the origin of, and provide context for, the subsequent debate over Obamacare from 2009 through to early 2010.

Before beginning an examination of the immediate causes behind each of the major swings in public opinion, it is important to look at the distant causes that helped determine where public support began for Obamacare. The survey examined in this analysis was conducted by NBC and the *Wall Street Journal*, and asked eight hundred and five participants, “From what you have heard about Barack Obama’s health care plan, do you think his plan is a good idea or a bad idea?” The initial response, taken from April 23 to April 26, 2009, was that 33% were in favor of the policy and 26% opposed, with 34% still undecided.<sup>4</sup> Thus, even at an early stage in the debate process, over half of the respondents had already formed an opinion on the issue of health care, seeming to indicate that a segment of the population was bound to take sides on this issue from the outset. The theory of distant causes explains that certain political measurements, though usually unrelated to the specific policy at hand, can be used to help reveal the underlying tendencies of these citizens at any given time. Moreover, by taking a look at some of these distant polling measures, it should be possible to explain why citizens were initially in favor of Obamacare by 7% in April 2009.

One of the most recognizable distant causes in the United States today is the President’s approval rating. Taken by numerous polling agencies on an almost constant basis, this measurement illustrates, in general, how American citizens view the President and his policies. In April 2009, during the same survey in which participants favored The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act by 7%, over 61% of respondents approved of the job Barack Obama was doing as President, and 30% disapproved.<sup>4</sup> Although this would seem to suggest that a much larger percentage of people should have favored of his health care plan, Presidential Approval is only one of the many distant causes used to reveal underlying predispositions. Some other particularly useful measures include party identification, direction of the country polling, and congressional job approval. In the same NBC/*Wall Street Journal* survey that measured support for Obamacare, 41% of respondents considered themselves to be Democrats and 29% considered themselves Republicans.<sup>4</sup> Real Clear Politics, a well-known polling agency that averages the results of other agencies, measured the other two distant causes during this same time period in early 2009. The outcome of their calculations was that people believed the country was on the wrong track by a margin of 8%, and they disapproved of the job Congress was doing by

an even wider margin of 25%.<sup>5,6</sup> Overall, a majority of respondents approved of Obama, and more people claimed to be Democrats than Republicans. Although both of these polling numbers work in favor of a higher favorability for Obamacare, the wide margin of disapproval for Congress and the belief that the nation as a whole was heading down the wrong track help explain why approval for the health care policy held only a slim positive margin in April 2009.

While distant indicators may help illustrate where public opinion begins for a policy, to determine why changes occur later in the debate process, it is necessary to examine some of the more immediate causes. When discussing the debate over Obamacare, the theory of elite discourse, proposed by John Zaller, certainly plays a role. This theory states that, in general, people develop their opinions by gathering information and using their predispositions to come to some conclusion on an issue.<sup>7</sup> More specifically, though, Zaller claims that the majority of information people use actually originates from the political elites, or “persons who devote themselves full time to some aspect of politics or public affairs.”<sup>7</sup> As a result, public opinion would tend to reflect changes in elite discourse, as citizens across the country gather new information from these elites through sources such as the news media. On the other hand, Zaller also claims that most people are relatively uninformed about politics, where the majority “pays just enough attention to public affairs to learn something about it.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, it would seem unlikely that so many people could be influenced by something to which they are mostly inattentive. However, this lack of attention is why Zaller believes his theory is effective. Since most citizens are only considered to be moderately aware, he claims that they are “most susceptible to influence” because they only “pay enough attention to be exposed...[and] lack the resources to resist.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, whenever they hear information about a policy, “members of the public tend to follow the elites sharing their general ideological or partisan predisposition, with the most politically attentive mirroring most sharply the ideological divisions among the elite.”<sup>7</sup>

Although there were few divisive discussions when the Obamacare debate began, political elites started approaching contentious ground in the summer of 2009. In fact, one of the first major discussions between elites centered on a comparison of Obama’s proposed health care bill to that of the Canadian single-payer system. In June alone, three notable

news sources, the *Wall Street Journal*, Real Clear Politics, and the Cato Institute, each published an article in which they discussed the potential similarities, or lack-there-of, between the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act and the Canadian health care policies. On the ideologically conservative side, the *Wall Street Journal* published a headline that read “Canada’s ObamaCare Precedent,” in which they criticize Democrats for moving towards the longer waiting times and decreased survival rates experienced by Canadians.<sup>8</sup> On the other side, statistics provided by Real Clear Politics seem to suggest that people were simply confused about health care in the abstract, stating that “polls show that the same majority of Americans who rate their own health care positively join the critics when questioned about the ‘quality of the system’ as an abstract whole.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, sides were quickly drawn as conservatives attacked, and liberals defended, the similarities between these two systems.

In spite of this division, the public did show a trend in their reaction to the elite discourse. After nearly a month of comparing Obamacare to Canadian health care, disapproval increased by sixteen percent to 42%, and “no opinion” decreased by fifty percent. Approval, on the other hand, remained steady at around 36%, an increase of only three percent from April.<sup>4</sup> In accordance with Zaller’s theory, it appears as though individuals with a more conservative ideological viewpoint, who had not yet developed an opinion of the policy in the earlier part of 2009, sided with their political elites during this discourse, developing a negative view of Obamacare in June and July. This helps explain why disapproval increased substantially at the same time “no opinion” decreased by half. The maintained support, however, is likely due to the largely defensive role played by many of the ideologically liberal elites. For example, while sources like the Cato Institute openly attacked Obamacare, saying that it would be “a tremendous and fundamental mistake,” the other side published almost no positive comparisons of the two systems, at most claiming that the conservative elites were “falsely equating Obamacare with the Canadian single-payer system.”<sup>10,11</sup>

Another theory associated with changes in public support is the rally ‘round the flag effect, defined by political scientist John Mueller. According to this theory, the “rally effect is the sudden and substantial increase in public approval of the president that occurs in response to certain kinds of dramatic international events.”<sup>12</sup> One of the most recent occurrences for the United States was the set of terrorist attacks

on September 11, 2001. In fact, “of all the recorded rally effects, it is the largest,” according to the American Political Science Association, by three accounts.<sup>12</sup> First, presidential approval for George W. Bush increased by more than 50% immediately following the terrorist strike. Second, this significant increase gave President Bush the highest recorded approval of any president thus far in American history. The third account, however, is how this effect comes in to play for the Obamacare debate. Not only was the effect noticeably large, but it also “lasted longer than any in the history of polling.”<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that President Obama experienced the same levels of increased approval during the debate over health care. Rather, setting aside the general normalization of approval after the initial events, presidential approval has shown a slight increase around the 11th of September each year.<sup>13</sup> In consonance with the rally theory, this implies that every year following the terrorist attacks, citizens across the country remember the dramatic events and once again show a temporary “patriotism in supporting presidential actions.”<sup>12</sup> This does in fact correspond with polling from September of 2009. Less than a week after the 11th, public approval for Obamacare increased to 39%, its highest level throughout the entire debating process. Disapproval decreased by a percentage point, down to 41%, and “no opinion” decreased another two percent to 15%. Although a number of other events were happening during this time, the proximity of these changes to the 11th, and the subsequent decrease in approval shortly thereafter, seem to indicate that the rally effect was the primary cause behind the changes in public opinion for Obamacare in September 2009.

As the debate over the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act progressed towards the end of 2009, public opinion again began to show signs of a change, but this time at the hands of Shanto Iyengar’s priming theory. According to Iyengar, the news media has the powerful ability to set the agenda for the public, placing certain topics at the height of their awareness based on how heavily those topics are covered in daily news.<sup>14</sup> Although this is similar to how the elite discourse theory depends on news agencies, there is a key distinction in the focus of each of these theories. While elite discourse relies upon a narrow debate regarding some aspect of a specific policy, the priming effect occurs when the news focuses on a much broader subject area, usually involving the President or nation as a whole.<sup>14</sup> Thus, where the discourse in June and July concentrated on the similarities of Obamacare to Canadian health care, in December of

2009, the news primed their audience by focusing on the overall weak state of the economy. With respect to Iyengar's theory, this would cause the public to view any major policies of the time through the lens of a bad economy. As a general result, Iyengar claims that framing things this "way rather than in a logically equivalent alternative way can radically alter" how the public views a given policy.<sup>14</sup> Thus, "by providing glimpses of some aspects of national life while neglecting others, television news helps define the standards that viewers apply" towards the most pressing issues of the time.<sup>14</sup>

Although the economy tends to be a distant indicator when it comes to public opinion of a policy, in the end of 2009, the news media focused heavily on rising unemployment numbers and the weak state of the economy, leading to a public primed for disapproval. For example, one of the headlines run by *The New York Times* in November read "U.S. Unemployment Rate Rises to 10.2%, Highest in 26 Years."<sup>15</sup> These numbers were supported by reports from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which calculated unemployment for October, November, and December to be around 10% each month.<sup>16</sup> Not only were numerous other agencies reporting similarly negative economic news, but the public seemed to be responding to this repeated focus on the economy. In fact, a CNN poll in November of 2009 showed that 82% of Americans were saying that the economic conditions in the United States were poor, one of the highest percentages recorded that year.<sup>17</sup> Although this extensive priming seemed to detract from the health care debate, the topic quickly resurfaced in December when the Senate passed the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, providing an opportunity for the public to rate their approval for the policy with their newly primed economic lenses. In accordance with Iyengar's theory, public opinion experienced its third major change since the start of the debate, as approval dropped seven points down to 32% and disapproval increased six points to 47%.<sup>4</sup> Thus, by focusing on the particularly difficult economic experiences of the time, citizens seemed to project their disapproval for the economy onto President Obama's health care bill. This change came as no surprise, as CNN polling from earlier that month found that people were increasingly blaming the Democrats for their economic hardships.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, with the combination of priming and a refreshed awareness of Obamacare, Iyengar's theory assists in explaining why the public shifted their approval for the health care measure towards the end of 2009.

In the final months of debate over the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, public opinion experienced a fourth major change, occurring only weeks after a highly publicized meeting for elite discourse. In the Health Care Summit of 2010, President Obama organized a televised meeting between key Republicans and Democrats to “set the stage for a final push to get the stalled legislation through Congress.”<sup>18</sup> With hopes of “swaying public opinion on the unpopular legislation,” which in December of 2009 saw a fifteen point margin of disapproval, Obama made numerous attempts to compromise with Republicans on some of the more controversial topics in the bill.<sup>18</sup> However, the majority of Republican elites at the meeting proved to be inexorable, and with the vast majority of viewers coming from the conservative-leaning Fox News Channel, Republican disapproval was unlikely to change.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, Obama and the Democrats had one main point to convey at the meeting: with a long recess scheduled by the House at the end of March, and midterm elections coming in November, “it [was] now or never” for health care in February of 2010.<sup>20</sup> After both sides of elites expressed their views, the public was given a chance to again re-assess their own positions regarding Obamacare. As a result, public opinion did in fact change only two weeks after the summit, with approval increasing by four points to 36%.<sup>4</sup> Although disapproval remained at 47%, Obama seemed to be able to influence people to a degree. Thus, in accordance with John Zaller’s theory, by summarizing their elite views into a succinctly urgent message for the public, Obama and the Democrats were able to increase approval for the health care bill and eventually pass the legislation on March 23, 2010.

For any given situation, there are often numerous people trying to explain what is happening and why. This is particularly true in a society that is abundant with news media and social networking, where a seemingly endless stream of individuals attempts to voice its opinions for an ever-increasing audience. However, there are always some people with ideas that manage to shine through this vast background of noise due to the clarity and strength of their ideas. Whether that means explaining how the views of elites influence the masses, how the rallying of a spirited nation can uplift their approval, or how the news media can become a powerful tool by priming its uniquely susceptible audience, some ideas simply stand out for their ability to provide comprehensive understanding. For the recent debate over health care, the theories provided by Zaller,



Mueller, and Iyengar each help clarify some of the more distinct changes in public opinion for Obama's policy. More importantly, they illustrate one of the special instances in which theory can surpass its role as a guide and move towards the state of becoming an explanation of reality. When achieved, theory accomplishes its ultimate goal.

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