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Public Opinion on Healthcare Reform Since 2008

America, as a country, has often had a tumultuous battle regarding its healthcare system. Unsuccessful attempts at reform occurred throughout the 1980s and 1990s, with some candidates proposing single-payer systems and others proposing a complete repeal of Medicare and Medicaid. More recently, there have been even more split opinions on healthcare. Those on the left, such as Senator Bernie Sanders, have proposed a universal single-payer, government-run healthcare system. Moderates, such as Secretary Hillary Clinton and President Barack Obama, supported a hybrid government role in the healthcare system and private sector plan. On the opposite end, conservatives have abandoned any government role and doubled down on private sector only policies. This split, and the resulting legislation around it, has caused numerous political battles, with both sides using public opinion data to support their causes, albeit some sides have been better at using that data. What this essay will attempt to explain is how over the past eight years, first under President Obama, and now under President Trump, public opinion has shaped legislation and laws as it relates to our healthcare system. It will walk through the formation, and eventual passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA/Obamacare), its implementation during the Obama Presidency, and the American Healthcare Act (AHCA) under

President Trump.

During the 2008, Presidential Campaign between then Senator Barack Obama and then Senator Hillary Clinton, and Senator John Edwards, healthcare took center stage. Multiple plans emerged from the rubble that was the Bush Presidency and his lack of action on healthcare. The plans, all with varying degree of government intervention, were widely supported during the primaries and general elections, with voters ultimately electing a candidate who proposed radical new healthcare policies. During the campaign, mostly on the Democratic side, then Senator Obama took a much more conservative stance on healthcare than his eventual bill (the “ACA”) would have suggested. He opposed an individual mandate because of polling. As David Axelrod, Obama’s campaign advisor put it, “while [the mandate] resonated with activists on the left, our polling showed that it was deeply unpopular with many voters.” (Axelrod 266) Surprisingly, Senator Clinton had the more liberal policy in that campaign, pushing for that mandate and a public option (when the government basically “sells” people insurance similarly to a private company). Polls conducted by Gallup in 2007 showed that voters were increasingly concerned about healthcare, thus forcing candidates to focus on it. In November 2007, about a year before the 2008 election, 48% liked the privatized system we had at the time, while 41% wanted a new government-run system. This was a stark difference between the presidential election in 2004 where the numbers were 57 and 38 respectively. Furthermore, the Gallup poll showed that 74% of the public said the healthcare system was in a time of crisis or had major problems. (Gallup 2007) Barack Obama, as well as Hillary Clinton, were both able to capitalize on the feelings around healthcare and use that to make it a central point of their campaigns. In 2008, the Democrats used their advantage on healthcare, especially with people seeing the need for change

and the crisis with the current system, to win votes and catapult Barack Obama to the White House. John McCain's stale message of "more of the same" and relying on tactics used by President Bush, did not actively look at public opinion and did not consider the public's vision for change, thus losing support for the plan and his candidacy.

Once Barack Obama got into office due in part to his healthcare plan, but more so due to his overall hope and change message, he had a slew of issues he could have taken up within his first term. Advisors overwhelmingly pushed against choosing healthcare. Axelrod wrote, "in my role as the president's new political advisor... I knew what a perilous mission health reform would be." He also wrote how almost everyone was weary on taking up healthcare first. Rahm Emmanuel, Joe Biden, and nearly the entire Democratic caucus was in opposition to taking it up. Obama, going against polling and advisors, and instead going with his heart, decided to push healthcare. (Axelrod 369-373) The biggest speedbump and harbinger for the rest of his presidency in the President's process to get healthcare passed was the special election to fill Ted Kennedy's Massachusetts Senate seat in 2010. Scott Brown, a Republican running on a strictly anti-ACA message, won the seat thus leaving Democrats with only 59 votes in the Senate, one shy of being able to vote on cloture for the ACA and thus being unable to stop a GOP filibuster. The public opinion surrounding the bill was never good for Obama and the Democrats. The Real Clear Politics polling history shows that on the eve of the special election in Massachusetts, the ACA's approval was underwater by 18 points. ("Public Approval of Health Care Law") This went right into the GOP's message and hurt the Democrats' chance at winning that special election. Furthermore, during the attempt to pass the bill, 34 Democrats in the House were holdouts. (H.R. 3590) As one holdout, Dan Lipinski (D-Ill) put it, "I am concerned that the bill's

more than \$400 billion in Medicare cuts could have ramifications for seniors in my district.” Lipinski’s appeal to a very popular piece of legislation (Medicare) within his party was to overshadow the support for healthcare change. (Lipinski) Despite the Democratic detractors and universal GOP opposition, the bill passed narrowly in both Houses. The holdouts to this bill, however, say a lot more about public opinion surrounding the ACA. When Obama was talking to then Majority Leader Harry Reid about why so many were scared about the ACA, Reid simply responded with “they’re scared because these are the best jobs they’ve ever had and they want to keep them.” (Axelrod 381) This shows how they knew the ACA would be a career killer. The Democrats were aware of the negativity of the bill. They ignored all the data, and their own suspicions to pass an unpopular bill. The ramifications of this choice would be seen just months later in November of 2010.

There is no other way to put it: healthcare killed the Democrats in 2010. That year, Democrats saw 64 House seats switch parties. This was the largest shift since 1948. (Bash & Castillo) Simply, when it comes down to it, Democrats lost because of the ACA. Town halls throughout 2009 and 2010 saw hundreds of protestors, almost exclusively over the ACA. (Isenstadt) Polls on the eve of the midterm showed the ACA was still underwater by about 20 points. (“Public Approval of Health Care Law”) President Obama’s approval was less underwater, at about 4 points. (“Obama Job Approval”) This spelled disaster for the Democrats, and as a result, using all that polling information, the GOP was able to decimate the Democrats. 219 of them had voted for an extremely unpopular piece of legislation, 256 of them were members of a party with a leader who was not popular. It is no wonder why 64 seats flipped. In the case of the 2010 midterms, fury over healthcare manifested itself into a beast, sweeping the

elections. The sweep was for the fact that public opinion was completely against the Democrats. The GOP knew it and used it to pummel the Democrats.

After the 2010 midterms, the Democrats lost the House, but the ACA had still passed and was law. The law had to be carried out. Between 2010 and 2016, the ACA took hold and the administration, specifically the HHS secretary, had the responsibility of implementing the law. The main part that required the government to step in was the rollout of the Federal and State exchanges. However, the government fumbled the rollout of the main site, www.healthcare.gov. Less than 1% of people attempting to sign up that first week were successful in signing up for a plan due to technical glitches and a host of other problems. (Ford) The rollout was instantly pounced on by nearly every Republican, renewing calls for the ACA to be repealed. Because of all of this, Kathleen Sebelius, the Health and Human Services Secretary, resigned from office. She had failed to mitigate the collapse of [healthcare.gov](http://www.healthcare.gov) and wound up having a staggeringly low approval rating of 19%. (“Poll Results: Kathleen Sebelius”) Furthermore, the failed rollout of the site had profound impacts on President Obama. Not only did this website fail, but it coincided with a government shutdown. This all caused President Obama’s approvals to drop, with disapprovals rising to above 50%. The combination of a still unpopular bill, unpopular HHS Secretary, unpopular President, and a strong GOP majority in the house spelled even more disaster for the President’s agenda. The GOP capitalized on this commotion, taking control of the Senate in 2014. Public opinion consistently turned against President Obama and the Democrats because of the GOP’s continual opposition to his signature policy. Between 2010 and 2016, the House voted to repeal the ACA more than 50 times, signaling that they would continue to oppose this law going into the 2016 elections. They consistently campaigned on repeal and replace

across the country because of the unpopularity of the bill. (Berenson)

When it came to the 2016 elections, healthcare once again took radical new directions. The Republican candidates were overwhelmingly in unison in supporting a full repeal of the ACA. The Democrats, however, continued a spirited debate over the future of healthcare in America. Hillary Clinton proposed an extended version of the ACA, keeping much of the policies President Obama put in while fixing it to get to universal coverage. ("Hillary on Health Care") On the other hand, Senator Bernie Sanders went far left on his healthcare plan. As an open Democratic Socialist, he proposed a national single-payer healthcare system, where there are no private insurance companies. ("Medicare for All: Leaving No One Behind") Sanders dubbed his plan "Medicare for All" because of the popularity of the Medicare legislation. His naming of the bill helped gain support for the plan beyond the support one would expect from calling it "single-payer." Public opinion polling during the primaries shows that Sanders' plan was the most popular one. With the rising premiums during the ACA period, people overwhelmingly began to move to the left on the issue with many wanting to see a Canadian or British style healthcare system rather than going back to pre-ACA times like the Republicans proposed. ("Majority in U.S. Support Idea of Fed-Funded Healthcare System") Furthermore, during the campaign, healthcare became one of the defining issues for the left again. Sanders was able to use that popular support for single payer to paint Clinton in a certain light during the primary. He leveraged his more popular stance on healthcare to attack her for being too close to PhRMA (Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America) and for not being a "progressive." Clinton did build on the popularity of the ACA but given prevailing sentiment, endorsing a single-payer plan could not have hurt her even among the general public. It stands

that at the time of the election, both the ACA and single-payer plans were extremely popular among the mass public, so it is perplexing that Donald Trump won on a strong repeal and replace the ACA message. The opinion polling showed that voters trusted Clinton more on the economy, on healthcare and on domestic issues in general. (Alonzo-Zaldivar) Clinton attempted to leverage that healthcare argument through focusing on the ACA in the final days of the campaign. In the end, the support for the ACA was not strong enough to overcome opposition messaging from the GOP and Trump's other messaging.

It is well known that Donald Trump was sworn into office in January of 2017. With that came a new era of healthcare policy from the Executive Branch. Between 2008 and 2016, Barack Obama saw the vision for strong government involvement in the healthcare sector, with lots of regulations and a public marketplace to buy healthcare. With President Trump, that all changed. His campaign promise was to repeal and replace the ACA and ultimately implement a system that would provide lower costs, more coverage, and more choices to consumers. This is a bit of a surprising change for the now President. In the past, Donald Trump had supported a single-payer Canadian style system. (Greenberg) In 2000 he said, "the Canadian [healthcare] plan also helps Canadians live longer and healthier than America," and "we need, as a nation, to reexamine the single-payer plan, as many individual states are doing." However, his current policy is a complete 180-degree flip from his stance in 2000. He currently supports a bill known as the American Healthcare Act (AHCA). This bill, meant to be that famous "repeal and replace" version of the ACA, wound up never even being called for a vote due to Speaker Ryan and President Trump's inability to rally support for the bill.

First, it must be acknowledged that no Democrat was ever going to support the AHCA.

Right from the get go, Democrats campaigned in 2016 on the platform that the ACA be kept and fixed. What Trump and Ryan had to do was unify the GOP so that the bill could get the majority in the House at a minimum. They ultimately failed to do that because they attempted to go against public opinion data. As of mid-March, the ACA had approval ratings over 50% while Trump and Ryan had approval ratings of around 40% and 30% respectively. ("Paul Ryan Favorable Rating") Not only did this spell disaster for any piece of legislation the duo tried to pass, but spelled special trouble when it came to repealing a popular piece of legislation that has been in place for several years. Beyond that, the GOP rollout strategy for this bill was nowhere near as coordinated as it was for the Democrats and the ACA. The bill was made in secret backrooms, outside of the view of the public. This was a common criticism of the ACA by the GOP. The bill was also shown to the public for the first time through Sen. Rand Paul, who basically had to barge his way into a room with reporters to see the bill. As Rich Lowry of the National Review put it, "the bill had one of the worst rollouts of any major piece of legislation in memory." (qtd. in Alberta) The bill was always going to be hard to pass based on polls, but the rollout gave Democrats all the ammunition they needed. First off, the behind-door meetings played into the narrative that the GOP was writing this bill as a massive tax cut and giveaway to the wealthy. The GOP was unable to offer a counterargument against that. The Democrats argued that the bill would not lower costs or premiums, or provide more coverage. The Congressional Budget Office report released hours before a scheduled vote showed that the Democrats were right. Over 10 years, 24 million Americans would lose their insurance, thus taking away the talking point of expanded coverage. It also did not help that this number wound up plastered on every TV channel for an entire news cycle. The GOP argued that the exchanges

set up would be unaffected, but the CBO report also said that was false. ("American Health Care Act") Any attempt by the GOP to focus their messaging on their central message of lower costs, better care, and more coverage simply lacked any facts, and the Democrats used media, the CBO Report, and polls, such as Trump and Ryan's approval and the ACA approval, to counter the GOP at every step of the AHCA fight.

What the future holds for healthcare is anyone's guess. As previously mentioned, the support for single-payer is growing with every election cycle. Back in 2009, Senator Bernie Sanders introduced the American Health Security Act of 2009. It remained stalled and had zero cosponsors. (Sanders) In 2017, a similar piece of legislation in the House called the Expanded & Improved Medicare For All Act has 108 cosponsors, albeit all of them Democrats. Regardless, it shows how the party has begun to adapt this more progressive stance on healthcare. Furthermore, another Sanders bill, the Affordable and Safe Prescription Drug Importation Act, which would allow for the importation of drugs, has 22 Democratic co-sponsors in the Senate. ("S. 469: Affordable and Safe Prescription Drug Importation Act.") His bill from 2015, and its equivalent in the House, only garnered 19 cosponsors between the two Houses, with only one coming from the Senate. ("H.R. 3513 (114th): Prescription Drug Affordability Act of 2015.") ("S. 2023 (114th): Prescription Drug Affordability Act of 2015.") What this indicates going forward for the American healthcare system is still unclear, but it shows a coalition forming on the American left. For a while, the Democratic Party had been skeptical of single-payer and government intervention into the market, but with the ACA and its current popularity, and to some extent the success of Senator Sanders' primary campaign on the issue, the Democrats believe that they can continue to advocate for liberal policies without fear of electoral repercussions. The signs all

point to one thing: more socialized medicine. It is unlikely given public opinion and the recent failures, including the AHCA and the “revised” AHCA, which continues to lose support, that healthcare in America will move anywhere other than single-payer and socialized medicine. It is gaining support on the left rapidly and broad coalitions of progressive and moderate grassroots Democrats are coming around to the issue. There are high hopes for single payer in the near future, as this time around, politicians are responding to popular demand, and not the other way around.

From the beginning of the 2008 campaign to now, healthcare has taken quite the route. Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama fought it out in the primaries over the individual mandate, which eventually became law. During the general election, Obama used polling and public opinion to gain support for his liberal bill and used his strong Democratic majority to pass the ACA despite its underwater approvals. The GOP then stepped in, using their own polls and unpopularity of Democrats to sweep the House in 2010, therefore ending, for all practical purposes, President Obama’s healthcare agenda. During the 2016 race, Bernie and Hillary kept moving to the left along with public opinion, in which majorities supported single-payer. In the end, it all culminated in an attempt to repeal the ACA that failed because of the GOP’s inability to use polling data and understand their weaknesses. Throughout the whole process, both sides have used polls to their benefit, ignored them to their peril, and paid the consequences. We now have a flawed system with serious tweaks needed to function well. But given the current state of

affairs, any healthcare reform going forward is sure to bring contentious and spirited debates to Washington and to the kitchen table.

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