

**PRESIDENTIAL INFLUENCE ON PARTISANS' OPINIONS**

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Paper prepared for delivery at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association,  
Chicago, April 16-19, 2015.

Presidents invest heavily in leading the public in the hope of leveraging public support to win backing in Congress. Nevertheless, there is overwhelming evidence that presidents rarely move the public in their direction. Most observers view Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton as excellent communicators. Yet pluralities, and often majorities, of the public opposed them on most of their policy initiatives. Moreover, public opinion typically moved away from the positions they favored rather than toward them.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the favorable context of the national trauma resulting from the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the long-term disdain of the public for Saddam Hussein, and the lack of organized opposition, George W. Bush made little headway in moving the public to support the war in Iraq, and once the war was over, the rally resulting from the quick US victory quickly dissipated.<sup>2</sup> Despite his eloquence, Barack Obama could not obtain the public's support for his initiatives that were not already popular. His health care reform lacked majority support even years after it passed, for example.<sup>3</sup>

Even Franklin D. Roosevelt, the president often viewed as the greatest politician of the twentieth century, faced constant frustration in his efforts to move the public to prepare for entry into World War II, and his failure to persuade the public regarding his plan to pack the Supreme Court effectively marked the end of the New Deal.<sup>4</sup> George Washington, who was better positioned than any of his successors to dominate American politics because of the widespread view of his possessing exceptional personal qualities, did not find the public particularly deferential.<sup>5</sup>

Occasionally an experiment finds a positive impact of presidential leadership on the public. Unfortunately, the environment in which the president usually operates differs fundamentally from that found experiments done to date. The president's world is inhabited by

committed, well-organized, and well-funded opponents. Experiments that only offer respondents one view and only seek their immediate reactions to presidential stimuli are simply irrelevant to presidential leadership.<sup>6</sup>

In the much more typical case, intense disagreement among elites generates conflicting messages. John Zaller argues that attitudes on major issues change in response to changes in the intensity of competing streams of political communication. When there is elite consensus, and thus only one set of cues offered to the public, opinion change may be substantial. However, when elite discourse is divided, people respond to the issue according to their predispositions, especially their core partisan and ideological views.<sup>7</sup> Thus, when Paul Sniderman and Sean Theriault offered people competing frames, as in the real world, they adopted positions consistent with their preexisting values.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, when people can choose their sources of information, as they can in everyday life, they are unresponsive to opinion leadership that differs from their preexisting views.<sup>9</sup>

Occasions in which elite commentary is one-sided are rare. Consensual issues tend to be new, with few people having committed themselves to a view about them. Most issues that generate consensual elite discourse arise from external events, such as surprise attacks on the United States such as the terrorist assaults on September 11, 2001, or its allies, such as the invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Thus, the president's greatest chance of influencing public opinion is in a crisis (which attracts the public's attention) in which elites articulate a unified message. At other times, most people are too inattentive or too committed to views to be strongly influenced by elite efforts at persuasion.<sup>10</sup>

If presidents cannot change the public's predispositions, they still may be able to exploit them in their continual quest for support. Perhaps the White House can win the support of those

predisposed to support them—their fellow partisans—by sending signals as to the appropriate stance of a party identifier.

## **Motivated Reasoning**

Motivated reasoning is a central concept in the study of political behavior. It refers to the confirmation bias (seeking out information that confirms prior beliefs), a prior attitude effect (viewing evidence consistent with prior opinions as more compelling than evidence that is inconsistent with them), and the disconfirmation bias (challenging and dismissing evidence inconsistent with prior opinions, regardless of their objective accuracy). Motivated reasoning may distort a person's perception of new information and the conclusions she reaches about it. Most people seek out information confirming their preexisting opinions and ignore or reject arguments contrary to their predispositions. When exposed to competing arguments, they typically accept the confirming ones and dismiss or argue against the opposing ones.<sup>11</sup>

Partisan identification is a primary anchor of political behavior<sup>12</sup> and the basis for much motivated reasoning. Partisan leanings significantly influence perceptions of conditions and policies and interpretations and responses to politics. Partisans display a selective pattern of learning in which they have higher levels of knowledge for facts that confirm their world view and lower levels of knowledge for facts that challenge them.<sup>13</sup> Even the most basic facts are often in contention between adherents of the parties, such as whether inflation, tax rates, or the budget deficit had risen or fallen or whether there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.<sup>14</sup> As Adam Berinsky puts it, “In the battle between facts and partisanship, partisanship always wins.”<sup>15</sup> Partisan bias and the misperceptions it causes are often most prevalent among those who are generally well informed about politics.<sup>16</sup> Political knowledge neither corrects nor mitigates partisan bias in perception of objective conditions. Instead, it enhances it.

The impact of elite discourse is important, as it clarifies where parties stand. Members of the public use the cues of elites to align their partisanship and ideology, usually bringing their issue attitudes in line with the stances of their party's elites.<sup>17</sup> Thus, “when partisan elites debate an issue and the news media cover it, partisan predispositions are activated in the minds of citizens and subsequently constrain their policy preferences.”<sup>18</sup> In times of highly polarized politics, the incentive to be loyal to one's own group and maximize differences with the opposition group is likely to be especially strong.<sup>19</sup>

It is not surprising that research has found that party cues influence opinion.<sup>20</sup> Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus found that polarized environments intensify the impact of party endorsements on opinions, decrease the impact of substantive information, and, ironically, stimulate greater confidence in those—less substantively grounded—opinions. Under conditions of high polarization and when presented with opposing frames, partisans' opinions move only in the direction of the frame endorsed by their party, regardless of strength of the frames.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, increased confidence in their opinions makes people less likely to consider alternative positions and more likely to take action based on their opinions, such as attempting to persuade others.<sup>22</sup>

Signaling does not involve persuasion because it does not encourage people to change their minds by reasoning about an issue. Instead, signaling provides cues to people that serve to short-circuit their reasoning processes, trigger motivated reasoning, and thus shape how they process information provided by different sides, including largely ignoring arguments from the opposition.<sup>23</sup> Some work has found that party cues encourage motivated reasoning to produce arguments supporting the correctness of their party's position.<sup>24</sup> Either way, the signaler is

showing supporters where their predispositions should take them on a particular matter.

Persuasion begins *after* people have expressed their predispositions.

### **Motivated Reasoning and Presidential Signaling**

Individuals interpret a policy, ranging from war to the budget deficit, in light of their opinions concerning the policy's sponsor.<sup>25</sup> The president typically enjoys high levels of approval from his co-partisans—and much lower levels from identifiers with the opposition party. Because the president's credibility mediates his impact as a cue giver,<sup>26</sup> the chief executive is likely to be more credible to those predisposed to support him than to adherents of the opposition party.<sup>27</sup>

Motivated reasoning may provide an opportunity for the president as leader of his party. When the president signals his views on issues, identifiers with his party should be responsive to his signals. These cues help his co-partisans cut through the complexity of policy debates and reach a conclusion. Of course, the strength of a person's partisanship should moderate partisan motivated reasoning.<sup>28</sup>

People must also receive the president's signals and view them as authoritative if they are to be influenced by them. In addition, the impact of presidential signaling should vary with the extent the signals reinforce or challenge party identifiers' existing views or address new issues on which opinion is not yet formed.

As by far the most visible political figure in the country, the president is well-positioned to signal his policy stances. Although the public is not likely to be attuned to the full range of issues with which the president deals, there is ample opportunity for the White House to inform citizens about the broad outlines of the president's positions on the most salient issues. These issues are generally high on the White House's policy agenda.

The president's signals are not only visible but also authoritative. Who can speak with more authority than the chief executive and the leader of his party? The president has no peers, no squabbling colleagues such as one finds in debates in Congress. It is not that the president lacks critics. Far from it. It is that no one else can as credibly claim to speak for the whole nation and present statements in the context of the symbolic trappings of the White House.

Existing opinions about the issues on which the president signals his views should also influence the public's responsiveness to White House signals. The president's signals can be consistent with the opinions or predispositions typically held by identifiers with his party, contrary to those opinions, or on new issues on which most citizens have yet to develop opinions. Figure 1 portrays these situations.

### **Insert Figure 1**

The two unshaded cells represent the typical condition in which the president's stances are consistent with those of his fellow partisans and opposed to the views of opposition party identifiers. The blue-shaded cells indicate the less common circumstance in which the public has not developed specific views or general predispositions regarding an issue. The cells shaded in green indicate instances in which the views of the White House and identifiers with the president's party are not congruent or when the president takes stands that are consistent with the views of opposition party identifiers. As a result, partisans of both parties may be cross-pressured.

In this paper I focus on the president sending his co-partisans signals to reinforce their predispositions regarding White House policy initiatives. In other work, I analyze (1) the president exploiting existing favorable opinion and on leading on the unusual instances in which there is no opinion on an issue; and (2) the president leading his co-partisans in cross-pressured

situations and channeling of cross-pressured opposition party identifiers to reconsider their party identification.

## **Reinforcement**

Preaching to the converted has limited potential to change opinions and is not what most political commentators have in mind when they advocate that the White House employ the bully pulpit. Nevertheless, the audience for much presidential rhetoric is those who already agree with the White House. When presidents take stands with which their co-partisans already agree, they reinforce those views. When Barack Obama proposed to expand health care, maintain food stamp payments, or combat climate change, he was acting consistently with the views of most Democrats. He did not need to convince them that they should change their views.

Reinforcement is important in politics. Perhaps the most important function of a coalition builder, in an election or in dealing with a legislature, is consolidating her core supporters. Maintaining preexisting support or activating those predisposed to back him can be crucial to a president's success. Important policies usually face substantial opposition. Often opponents are virulent in their criticism. Presidents quite naturally believe they must engage in a permanent campaign just to maintain the status quo. Such efforts may require reassuring supporters as to one's fundamental principles, strengthening their resolve to persist in a political battle, or encouraging them to become more active on behalf of a candidacy or policy proposal.

Reinforcement by definition does not change opinions. Those whose views the president reinforces already agree with the White House. Thus it is difficult to identify an impact of reinforcement when it occurs. Nevertheless, if the opinions of opposition party identifiers and Independents turns increasingly against a president's policy, and those of his co-partisans—those whose views have been reinforced—do not, we may conclude that this steadfastness is evidence

of reinforcement. Similarly, reinforcement might explain co-partisans increasing their support in the face of opposition party attacks while other groups hold fast in their opposition.

Although White House signaling may attract the support of the president's co-partisans, signaling is a two-edged sword. We have seen that individuals interpret policies in light of their opinions concerning the policy's sponsor and that the president is not likely to enjoy high level of approval from identifiers with the opposition party. Motivated reasoning should encourage those predisposed to oppose the president also to oppose his policies.

For policies that are long-established and at the core of differences among the parties, signaling should have little negative effect. Partisans are already sorted into the appropriate camps. For issues on which opinion is not well established, signals from the White House may move identifiers with the opposition party to oppose the president's policies. One of the ironies of polarized politics is that proposals such as a mandate for health insurance or a cap-and-trade proposal to limit greenhouse gases once proposed by one party become anathema to it when they are adopted by the president of another party.

The contribution of signaling to increasing overall public support for the president's policies depends also on the size of the two groups of partisan identifiers. If those identifying with the president's party compose a larger group than those identifying with the opposition, the White House may receive a net benefit from signaling. However, if the reverse is true, the president is likely to be worse off as a result of signaling. In other words, signaling might actually *decrease* the nation's support for an initiative.

## **Health Care Reform**

The turbulent history of the Affordable Health Care Act (ACA), the signature policy of the Obama presidency, provides an opportunity to examine public opinion about an issue over an

extended period of time. The battle to pass the ACA heated up in mid-2009 and lasted through March 2010 when the House voted for final passage. At that time it was the least popular major piece of legislation when passed in at least a century. Moreover, conflict continued as individual states made decisions whether to expand coverage in their Medicaid programs. After taking control of the House in 2011, Republicans repeatedly voted to repeal all or parts of the act. On July 30, 2012, the Supreme Court weighed in with a split decision upholding the constitutionality of the individual mandate provision of the law in *National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius*. The disastrous rollout of the website for enrollments in health care exchanges in the fall of 2013 kept the issue in the public eye and extended the controversy into 2014, when Republicans made it an issue in the midterm elections.

The Kaiser Family Foundation has conducted tracking polls in most months since Congress passed the ACA. Table 1 presents the public's favorability toward the law since April 2010. The questions make no reference to any person or party associated with health care reform.

### **Insert Table 1**

At a glance, we see that overall public opinion on the ACA is quite stable. In 2013-2014, for example, overall favorable opinion ranged only from 33 to 39 percent. This consistency can more easily be seen in Figure 2, which displays the data in Table 2 in graphic form. For all groups, there are occasional anomalies in the time series, but most of the variance is well within the error range of comparing the results of two polls. The standard deviations for Republicans and Independents is only 4 percentage points. Democrats' standard deviation was 6 percentage points, 50 percent greater than the other groups. An indicator that the Democrats may be

responding to a unique influence is that Democratic support correlates ( $r$ ) with Republican support only at .11.

### **Insert Figure 2**

It is also readily apparent that, in general, support for the law was low. Only in July 2010 did even half the public hold a favorable view of the ACA. Republican identifiers formed negative evaluations early and never changed their views. Sometimes their support dipped into the single digits. Only twice since 2010 have even one-fifth of Republicans viewed the law favorably. Typically their support was below 15 percent, and they averaged only 13 percent support. Independents displayed higher levels of support, but in general their support remained in the mid-30s, averaging 36 percent. Reflecting deep partisan divisions of opinion, only Democrats viewed the law favorably, averaging 65 percent approval. Even here, more than a third of the president's co-partisans typically did not support the law.

What should we conclude about the impact of presidential signaling? Focusing on the period between August 2013 and July 2014 is useful in exploring this question and in illustrating the difficulties of isolating the impact of signaling. This period included the rollout of individual enrollment in health insurance through the federal government's health exchange. Preceding the rollout, there was a great deal of publicity extolling the benefits of health care reform as the government encouraged people to enroll. Then the White House went into a defensive mode as the Web site malfunctioned, frustrating potential enrollees and providing the media and Republicans endless stories of governmental failure. House Republicans were quick to schedule hearings, generating yet additional negative headlines.

On December 3, 2013, after two months of intense coverage of the botched HealthCare.gov rollout, the president hosted a White House event launching a three-week

coordinated campaign to refocus the public on the Affordable Care Act's benefits. The White House took the lead in emphasizing a different benefit each day until the December 23 enrollment deadline for January 1 coverage. For example, on December 4, the White House and Democratic allies focused on how Americans were paying less for preventative care under Obamacare. The next day they highlighted that people with preexisting conditions could no longer be charged more or denied coverage. The day after that, they emphasized the slowing growth in health care costs. The daily message was amplified through press events and social media by Democratic members of Congress, the Democratic National Committee, congressional campaign committees, and advocacy organizations.<sup>29</sup>

Republicans, of course, engaged in active opposition to the White House. Near the end of November 2013, a memo distributed to House Republicans provided talking points and marching orders regarding Obamacare: "Because of Obamacare, I Lost My Insurance"; "Obamacare Increases Health Care Costs"; "The Exchanges May Not Be Secure, Putting Personal Information at Risk"; "Continue Collecting Constituent Stories." This document was part of an increasingly organized Republican attack on the Affordable Care Act. Republican strategists said that over the next several months they intended to keep Democrats on their heels through a multilayered, sequenced assault. The idea was to gather stories of people affected by the health care law—through social media, letters from constituents, or meetings during visits back home—and use them to open a line of attack, keep it going until it entered the public discourse and forced a response, then quickly pivot to the next topic.<sup>30</sup>

Not only did Republicans in Congress continually try to repeal the president's signature policy, but the ACA also faced the most lopsided negative political ad onslaught in history. From March 23, 2010 through late-April 2014, Kantar Media CMAG tracked \$445 million in

total estimated broadcast and national cable TV ad spending about the law. The organization found a negative-to-positive ratio of more than \$15 to \$1, or \$418 million to \$27 million.<sup>31</sup>

There was plenty of signaling going on, most of it not helpful to the White House. Did the president's efforts to reinforce Democratic opinion matter? Did Democrats hold steadfast or even increase their support for the ACA in the face of the onslaught of Republican criticism?

Complicating analysis of this question is the plethora of highly visible issues on the governmental and media agenda during this same period. For example, the civil war in Syria reached a peak of attention in the last half of September 2013. Then, the battle over the budget caused the federal government to shutdown on October 1, the same day HealthCare.gov opened to the public. This highly salient conflict continued until October 17. The dilemma of isolating the impact of efforts to lead the public is omnipresent. The best we can do is maintain our sensitivity to alternative explanations and not over interpret findings.

Examining the data in Table 1, we find that Independent opinion hardly changed at all during the period, except for a small decline in January. Republican opinion also was stable, although there was a slight decline into single digit support in the three months after the rollout, no doubt reflecting the negative news about the government's performance, reinforcing negative views. All the public relations efforts of both sides did little to change opinion among these groups.

On the other hand, Democratic opinion was much more volatile. Support nosedived in November, declining by 15 percentage points. It then nearly regained its October level in December, declining again for the next two months and then increasing yet again over the spring. Democrats were not as stable in their opinions as the other partisan groups, but they were resilient. This resilience of Democratic opinion may be a product of presidential reinforcement.

It is unlikely the rebound of support for the ACA would have been as impressive if the White House had not countered the Republican assault on it.

Those who lean toward the president's party should be less supportive of the president than identifiers with the party and be less resolute in their support for his policies. Conversely, opposition party leaners should show higher support and less steadfast opposition than identifiers with the opposition party. Table 2 shows the percent of Independents leaning Democrat and Independents leaning Republican holding favorable opinions of the ACA. The results are from the same polls as the results in Table 1, except that the time series does not begin until August 2010 and data are not available in December 2010 and August 2011.

### **Insert Table 2**

The data for Democratic leaners show roughly the same pattern as we found for Democrats in Table 1. As we expected, Democratic leaners offer lower support for the ACA than do Democrats, averaging 59 percent favorability (in contrast to the 66 percent favorability of Democratic identifiers). However, Democratic leaners displayed less variance in their support, with a standard deviation of 5 percentage points (Democratic identifiers had a standard deviation of 6 percentage points). At this point, it is not possible to determine whether these leaners were less supportive and less responsive to the president than Democratic identifiers because of diminished partisan motivated reasoning because of their more tenuous association with the Democratic party or whether they identified less strongly with the party because they had more qualms about its policies in the first place.

Republican leaners averaged 14 percent favorability, only 1 percentage point higher than Republican identifiers. Their standard deviation was 3 percentage points, as opposed to 4 for Republican identifiers. Thus, the Republican leaners did differ from Republican identifiers in

the ways we theorized, but the differences were very small. In essence, anyone identifying in any way with Republicans steadfastly opposed the president's signature policy.

The RAND Health Reform Opinion Study is unique in that it followed the same group of respondents, beginning in the fall of 2013. It covered more than 5,500 individuals, and one fourth were surveyed each week of each month. Each individual was contacted once per month. This method allows us to observe the evolution of opinion over time.

Figure 3 shows the favorability of various partisan groups toward the ACA for the period between the fall of 2013 and May 2014. Overall opinion tracked closely with that found in the Kaiser Family Foundation surveys. Support for the ACA was generally low, and opinion was relatively stable, despite the turmoil of the period.

### **Insert Figure 3**

Table 3 shows the results of comparing the favorability toward the ACA of each panel with its views in the survey one month earlier. The overall pattern is one of stability, with most opinion changes three percentage points or less. Only once (December 22) did overall support change as much as 4 percentage points. Republican opinion changed by 5 percentage points on January 15, but then lost 4 percentage points a month later.

### **Insert Table 3**

Lacking partisan moorings, Independent opinion was more volatile. Much of this instability appears to be the result of sampling error, however. For example, favorability increased by 9 percentage points on February 8 but fell by 12 points on March 8. Similarly, the November 15 reading was unusually low, so the large December 15 increase simply moved favorability among Independents back to its typical level. Otherwise, Independent opinion varied in a narrow range.

Democratic opinion also showed some variance, but, again, most of seems to be the result of sampling error. The December 15 change was large but the favorability was unusually low on November 15, and most of the increase was gone by January 15. Similarly, the December 22 increase was in comparison to an unusually low November 22 reading.

To this point, we have found that Democratic opinion, the opinion that should be most responsive to the White House's signaling, was not steadfast in support of the ACA, but it was resilient. Democrats did decrease their support for the law in the face of the debacle of the Web site rollout, but they quickly snapped back into support.

We have to be cautious in attributing Democratic resilience to the president's actions. We can confidently stipulate that the White House sent clear signals of its support for the ACA, of course, but we have no way to know what poll respondents actually heard. Moreover, we cannot employ controls as we would in a less complex analysis. For example, the rollout of HealthCare.gov was, in effect, a constant, especially when we look at opinion in 2014.

In addition, we are not simply looking for a one-time statistically significant increase in approval. (In comparing aggregate survey results of two samples of the size employed by most of the polling firms cited in this volume, differences between the results must be about 6 percentage points before there is a 95 percent chance that the differences are not the result of sampling error. Differences in the results for subgroups of the samples, such as Democrats or Republicans, must be larger to reach the 95 percent confidence level.) Instead, our theorizing alerts us to look for stability or resilience in the face of partisan opposition as well as possible increases in support for the president's initiatives.

On balance, our theorizing about the impact of motivated reasoning provides a basis for concluding that presidential reinforcement contributed to Democrats' resilience in their support

for the ACA in the face of opposition party attacks while other groups held fast in their opposition.

The Pew Research Center also polled the public's views of the ACA regularly since its passage (although there are significant gaps in the time series). Its questions, unlike the questions asked by the Kaiser and RAND studies, explicitly mentioned the president's name. The results appear in Table 4 and show results for Republicans and Independents similar to those found in the Kaiser Family Foundation and RAND studies. Support is low and stable.

#### **Insert Table 4**

The results for Democrats show higher levels of support than found in the Kaiser and RAND polls, however, perhaps because the president's name provided an important signal as to the appropriate opinion. When primed with the president's name, Democrats slowly increased their support for the ACA until it was reliably in the 70s by 2012. The change was not dramatic, but it was statistically significant and helped counter the steady stream of attacks on the policy.

Such findings of sustained and even increasing support are what we would expect if signaling co-partisans reinforced their support for the president's initiatives. It is important to note that the increase in Democratic support occurred despite the disastrous rollout of the individual enrollment website in October 2013. Indeed, Democratic opinion seemed to be immune to the bad news when the president's name was in the question.

### **George W. Bush and Social Security Reform**

The George W. Bush White House began the president's second term as it began his first—by launching an extensive public relations effort, in this case to convince the public to support the president's reform of Social Security. Even before the inauguration, the White House announced plans to reactivate Bush's reelection campaign's network of donors and

activists to build pressure on lawmakers to allow workers to invest part of their Social Security taxes in the stock market. As Treasury Secretary John W. Snow put it, the “scope and scale goes way beyond anything we have done.”<sup>32</sup> The same architects of Bush’s political victories would be masterminding the new campaign, principally political strategists Karl Rove at the White House and Ken Mehlman, who was the Bush-Cheney campaign manager, at the Republican National Committee.

Mehlman declared that he would use the campaign apparatus—from a national database of 7.5 million e-mail activists, 1.6 million volunteers, and hundreds of thousands of neighborhood precinct captains—to build congressional support for Bush’s plans, starting with Social Security. “There are a lot of tools we used in the ’04 campaign, from regional media to research to rapid response to having surrogates on television,” he said. “That whole effort will be focused on the legislative agenda.”<sup>33</sup> In addition to their own efforts, White House and RNC officials worked closely with the same outside groups that helped Bush win reelection in 2004, especially Progress for America.

White House allies also launched a market-research project to determine how to sell the plan in the most comprehensible and appealing way, and Republican marketing and public relations gurus built teams of consultants to promote it. The campaign used Bush’s campaign-honed techniques of mass repetition, sticking closely to the script, and using the politics of fear to build support—contending that a Social Security financial crisis was imminent. There were campaign-style events to win support and precision targeting of districts where lawmakers could face reelection difficulties. The White House also used hard-hitting television ads to discredit its opponents and build support for the president’s plan.<sup>34</sup>

In his February 2, 2005, State of the Union message, President Bush proposed that Congress make Social Security “a better deal” for younger workers by establishing provisions for voluntary personal retirement accounts. These would work by allowing everyone younger than 55 to divert as much as 4 percent of their income subject to Social Security taxation into individual accounts. The president argued that this money would grow over time at a greater rate than anything the current system could deliver. In addition, these workers would be able to pass along the money that accumulated in their personal accounts to their children or grandchildren. The money would be theirs “and the government can never take it away.”

Democrats immediately pointed out that private accounts (as they insisted on calling them) would actually make Social Security’s financial problems worse in the short run, because the government would have to borrow additional trillions of dollars to compensate for funds diverted from the Social Security trust fund into these accounts. Many critics also emphasized the risks of the president’s plan, questioning the reliability of net gains from personal account investments. In addition, they challenged the view that low-income persons would be able to risk not purchasing an annuity—and losing their ability to pass on their accounts in the process. More broadly, Bush’s opponents expressed concern that privatizing a portion of Social Security would diminish the social insurance aspect of it in which the public collectively supported seniors’ retirement income.

Throughout the winter and early spring of 2005, the president never said what steps he favored to put the Social Security system on a sound financial footing in order to solve the solvency problem. Instead, he maintained that it was up to Congress to offer proposals. Democrats refused to come to the bargaining table without specifics from the administration. Finally, on April 28, the president held a primetime press conference in which he continued to

press for private accounts but also added a proposal that would cut Social Security spending by reducing increases for upper and middle-income workers.

The Pew Research Center found that the president's association with a plan to limit the growth of Social Security benefits appeared to undermine support for the concept. Pew split its large sample and, as Table 5 shows, by a 53 percent to 36 percent margin most Americans said they would support limiting the growth of benefits for wealthy and middle income retirees, while keeping the current system intact for lower income people. This was a considerably higher figure than the 38 percent level of support Gallup found about two weeks earlier.<sup>35</sup> However, the public's support was significantly lower when Pew explicitly associated the proposal with Bush. When the phrase "George W. Bush has proposed . . ." preceded the idea, the public was divided (45 percent in favor, 43 percent opposed).

#### **Insert Table 5 here**

Equally striking were the responses of different partisan groups. Without any mention of Bush, the proposal was slightly more popular among Democrats than among Republicans (54 percent to 47 percent). When pollsters attributed the proposal to Bush, however, Republican support increased 15 percentage points to 62 percent while Democratic support dropped 20 points to 34 percent. Support among Independents for limiting future benefit growth for wealthy and middle-income retirees dropped 12 percentage points, from 55 percent to 43 percent, when the poll question attributed the proposal to the president.<sup>36</sup>

In this case, we see both the positive and negative reactions to presidential signaling. Republicans seem to have used the president's signal as a cue that the president's proposal was consistent with their policy predispositions. Democrats, on the other hand, used Bush as a cue

that they should oppose a policy associated with him. Given increased partisan polarization, this is a topic that requires further exploration.

### **Kiss of Death?**

We have hypothesized that partisan motivated reasoning should be a two-edged sword, encouraging opposition party identifiers to maintain or increase their opposition to the president's policies. We saw in the case of support for the Affordable Care Act that Republican opposition was both stable and overwhelmingly negative. In such circumstances, it is difficult to determine the relative contributions of motivated reasoning and ideological preference. We have also seen that in the more mixed situation of Republican George W. Bush's Social Security reform proposal, association with the president served as a powerful negative signal to Democrats.<sup>37</sup>

There is other work that has found that association with the president can be the kiss of death. Jeffrey Mondak found that in a nonrandom set of comparisons between questions providing the cue of the president's position and those that did not, the public offered less support for the president's policies 41 percent of the time.<sup>38</sup> In an early experiment, Lee and Carol Sigelman asked sample groups whether they supported two proposals, a domestic policy proposal dealing with welfare and a proposal dealing with foreign aid. One of the groups was told that President Carter, who was low in the polls at the time, supported the proposals, while the president was not mentioned to the other group. The authors found that attaching the president's name to either proposal not only failed to increase support for it, but actually had a negative effect because those who disapproved of Carter reacted very strongly against proposals they thought were his.<sup>39</sup>

At least in some circumstances, then, presidential signals weaken support for their policies. In both the examples cited in the previous paragraph and the examples that follow, we lack the data

to determine exactly who is reacting negatively to White House signaling. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to conclude that it is opposition party identifiers who are moving in the negative direction.

### **Ronald Reagan and the MX Missile**

In October 1981, Ronald Reagan unveiled his plan for a major national defense strategic modernization program, including adding the 10-warhead MX missile to the U.S. arsenal. The MX missile was politically controversial because many considered it a destabilizing first-strike weapon. The White House scrapped the original plan to shuttle MX missiles on an extensive rail network in the western United States in response to strong bipartisan opposition, and in November 1982, the Reagan administration proposed deployment of 100 MX missiles in fixed silos. However, Reagan's revised MX deployment plan was unpopular in Congress, so the president responded by appointing a commission on U.S. strategic nuclear forces, led by Lt. Gen. Brent Scowcroft. In April 1983, the commission endorsed MX deployment.

The president needed congressional backing for the new weapons system, and he needed public supported to obtain it. However, for most of his second and third years in office (1982-1983), Ronald Reagan did not enjoy high public approval ratings. Table 6 shows public support for the MX missile during November 1982 through September 1983. Reagan's approval during this period ranged from 37 to 47 percent. The questions are organized as three sets, and the results for the first question in each appears in bold. Those questions contain Reagan's name and thus can serve as a cue to respondents.

#### **Insert Table 6**

Comparing the responses within each set of questions, we find that in each case the public provided somewhat *lower* support for the missile when Reagan was present as cue giver.

Identification with the president may not have been the kiss of death, but it did not help him expand public support for his proposal.

### **Ronald Reagan and Aid to the Contras**

Perhaps Reagan would serve as a more effective cue for the public when he was higher in its esteem. In the spring of 1986, the president enjoyed high approval ratings of 63 percent in March and 62 percent in April. The Iran-Contra scandal would not break until after the November midterm elections. Thus, conditions should have favored the impact of Reagan as a cue giver.

One of Reagan's highest priorities was stopping the spread of communism in Central America. At the core of his policy response to this threat was an effort to undermine the "Sandinista" government of Nicaragua through support of the opposition Contras. Reagan required congressional support to obtain aid for the Contras, and he made substantial efforts to mobilize the public behind his program of support for the Contras. Yet he consistently failed.<sup>40</sup>

As he lamented in his memoirs,

Time and again, I would speak on television, to a joint session of Congress, or to other audiences about the problems in Central America, and I would hope that the outcome would be an outpouring of support from Americans who would apply the same kind of heat on Congress that helped pass the economic recovery package.

But the polls usually found that large numbers of Americans cared little or not at all about what happened in Central America—in fact, a surprisingly large proportion didn't even know where Nicaragua and El Salvador were located—and, among those who did care, too few cared enough about a Communist penetration of the Americas to apply the kind of pressure I needed on Congress.<sup>41</sup>

The problem of which Reagan spoke is reflected in Table 7, which shows public support for aid to the Contras over a one month period in March and April 1986. We must be cautious in our analysis because of the small size of some of the polls (making comparisons of subgroups unreliable). Nevertheless, the data do not indicate much impact of the Reagan cue. There is a modest difference in the two polls on March 25, but similar questions invoking Reagan's name on March 6 and March 16 elicited levels of support *lower* than for the March 25 question that did not include the Reagan cue. Similarly, the two questions asking respondents about their support for "\$100 million" in aid (March 20-24 and April 5-8) have a difference of only 2 percentage points in support and opposition despite the Reagan cue in the first question.

**Insert Table 7**

### **Barack Obama and Health Care Reform**

Much closer to the present, in September 2013 CNBC asked half the respondents to a national poll if they supported "Obamacare" and the other half if they supported the "Affordable Care Act" (ACA). Those asked about "Obamacare" were more likely to express opinions, both positive and negative, than those asked about the ACA (Table 8).<sup>42</sup> The president's name provided a heuristic that helped those on both sides reach an opinion. As we would expect, those with high disapproval rates of the president were more negative on Obamacare than ACA. On the other hand, those more likely to support the president were also more positive about Obamacare. Tellingly, in the absence of the signal about the president's position, many more people expressed no opinion. More important from the standpoint of the president, the impact of signaling with his name proved to be a wash. Admirers moved toward support and opponents moved toward opposition.

**Insert Table 8**

Unfortunately, the CNBC poll had a modest sample, with just over 400 respondents in each half. Gallup remedied this problem two months later when it conducted a large survey experiment to test the impact of mentioning Obama's name in a question on the ACA. Gallup read the same basic question to four randomly selected groups of the Gallup Daily tracking sample each night in the November 4-17, 2013 period, but with four different descriptions of the law. A total of 1,725 to 1,885 respondents received each version of the question.

The results of this experimental test show that the healthcare law descriptions made a difference in the responses (Table 9). Only mentioning the Affordable Care Act yielded the highest support (45 percent), while only mentioning "Obamacare" resulted in the lowest support (38 percent). Support for the law when using the other labels, including the president's name, fell in between, at 41 percent. Again, the signal of the president's name was not useful in increasing support for his most significant policy.

#### **Insert Table 9**

### **Barack Obama and Immigration Reform**

The debate over immigration reform during the second Obama term is also instructive regarding signaling. Republican antipathy for Obama was so great that he had to avoid proposing his own immigration bill, because doing so made it more difficult for Republican members of Congress to support it. Because Republicans in Congress come from solidly Republican states or districts, it is easier for them to support an immigration bill that has broad-based support in the business and farming communities (and that also happens to be supported by Obama and the Democratic leadership) than to back a bill so popularly identified with the other side.

After outlining in a general fashion what he wanted in an immigration bill, the president adopted a hands-off approach to designing the legislation, deferring to negotiations among a bipartisan group of senators known as the Gang of Eight. He adopted this strategy soon after his inauguration, as he was preparing to introduce his own bill during a January 29, visit to Las Vegas. Several Democratic senators among the Gang of Eight members told the White House the group was close to reaching consensus on a bill and asked Obama to hold off on announcing his own plan in order to avoid disrupting the talks. Obama agreed.<sup>43</sup>

The imperative of avoiding a Republican backlash only increased when the House took up the issue. Thus, in July the White House released reports and videos that argued the economic benefits of an immigration overhaul but that used neither the president's image nor his voice.<sup>44</sup>

Senate Democrats feared that an Obama bill would scare off Republicans like Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, who had presidential ambitions. Indeed, Rubio's office once issued a statement to deny that he was discussing immigration policy "with anyone in the White House," even as it criticized the president for not consulting Republicans. Indeed, Republican antipathy put the president in a Catch 22 bind. If he stayed aloof from legislative action, Republicans and others accused him of a lack of leadership. If he got involved, they complained that they cannot support any bill so closely identified with him without risking the contempt of conservative voters.<sup>45</sup>

The president recognized the problem he faced.

I cannot force Republicans to embrace those common-sense solutions. . . .

Ultimately, they, themselves, are going to have to say, we want to do the right thing. . . . And I think there are members certainly in the Senate right now, and I

suspect members in the House as well, who understand that deep down. But they're worried about their politics. It's tough. Their base thinks that compromise with me is somehow a betrayal.<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, Senator Patty Murray had to keep the White House at arm's length as she negotiated a budget deal with House Republican Paul Ryan. As she put it, the president's voice in the room would have made it more difficult to reach agreement.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

Typically, a significant percentage of the public (although often not a majority) supports the president's policies. We should not conclude that such responses are the result of presidential persuasion, however. Presidents find it difficult or impossible to *change* opinion. Nevertheless, the White House may benefit from a built-in set of supporters who are predisposed to support them—their fellow partisans. Ignoring predispositions is a fatal logical flaw in analyzing presidential leadership and obscures the actual dynamics of leadership.

Because the core of presidential leadership is facilitating coalitions of the willing, it is important to understand how the White House can maintain or increase support for its initiatives by sending signals to its potential supporters. Determining the impact of signaling is difficult because of the confounding effects of other influences on public opinion, including the fact that many partisan supporters simply support the substance of the policies the president advocates. Nevertheless, it is important that we investigate signaling as rigorously as possible.

Motivated reasoning encourages co-partisans to follow the president's lead. At least in some instances, the president's association with a policy is an especially powerful signal to those predisposed to support his initiatives. Moreover, by reinforcing his partisans' predispositions,

presidents can counter opposition party attacks and discourage his supporters from abandoning him. In addition, co-partisans appear to be resilient in returning to support after periods of bad news.

It is important not to exaggerate the significance of signaling. Many of the president's co-partisans may still oppose his initiatives, as we saw in Democrat opposition to the Affordable Care Act and Republican opposition to George W. Bush's Social Security reform proposals. As with other tools of presidential leadership, signaling is at the margins of coalition building.

In addition, reinforcement is a two-edged sword. There is a substantial percentage of the public predisposed to oppose the president. Motivated reasoning encourages such people to oppose his policies, and we have seen evidence that association with the president can lower support for his initiatives, at least among those inclined to oppose him.

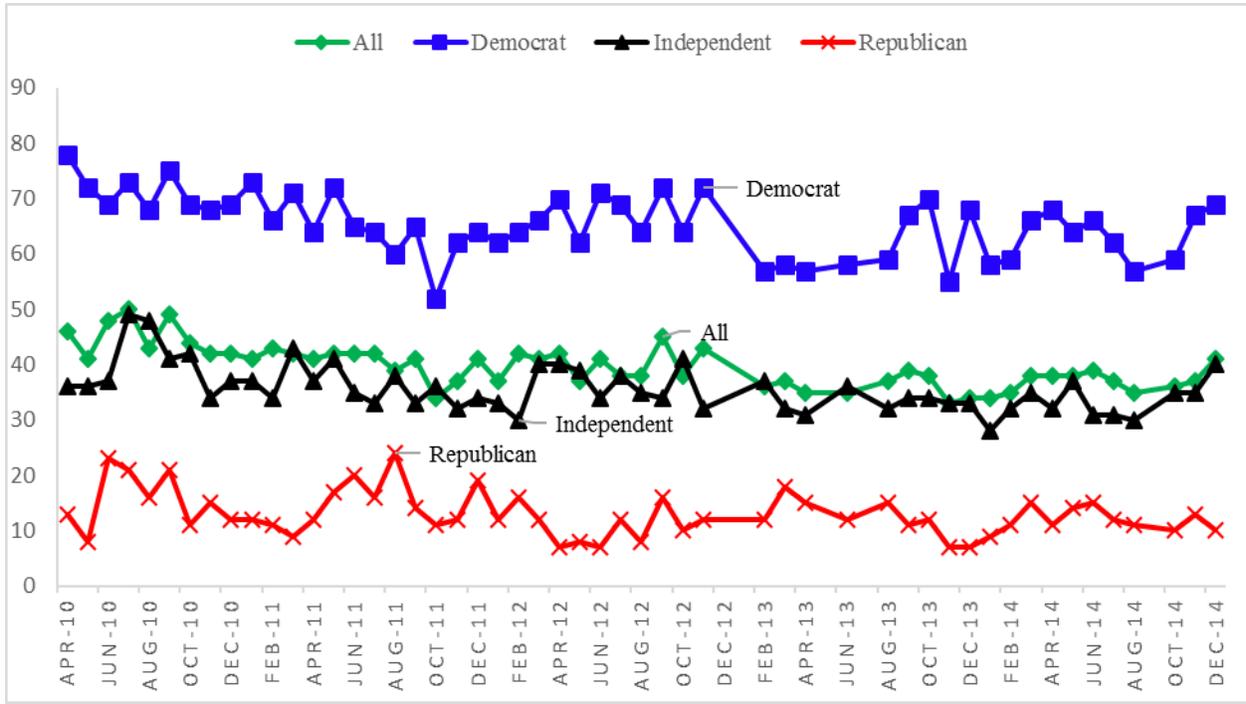
**Figure 1**  
**Consistency of President's Stance with Partisans'**

<u>Partisans' Opinion in Relation to President's Stance</u>			
<b>Co-partisans</b>	Support	Oppose	No Opinion
<b>Opposition</b>	Support	Oppose	No Opinion

Green shaded cells indicate cross-pressured public

Blue shaded cells indicate the public has not formed opinions on an issue

**Figure 2**  
**Support for Affordable Care Act**



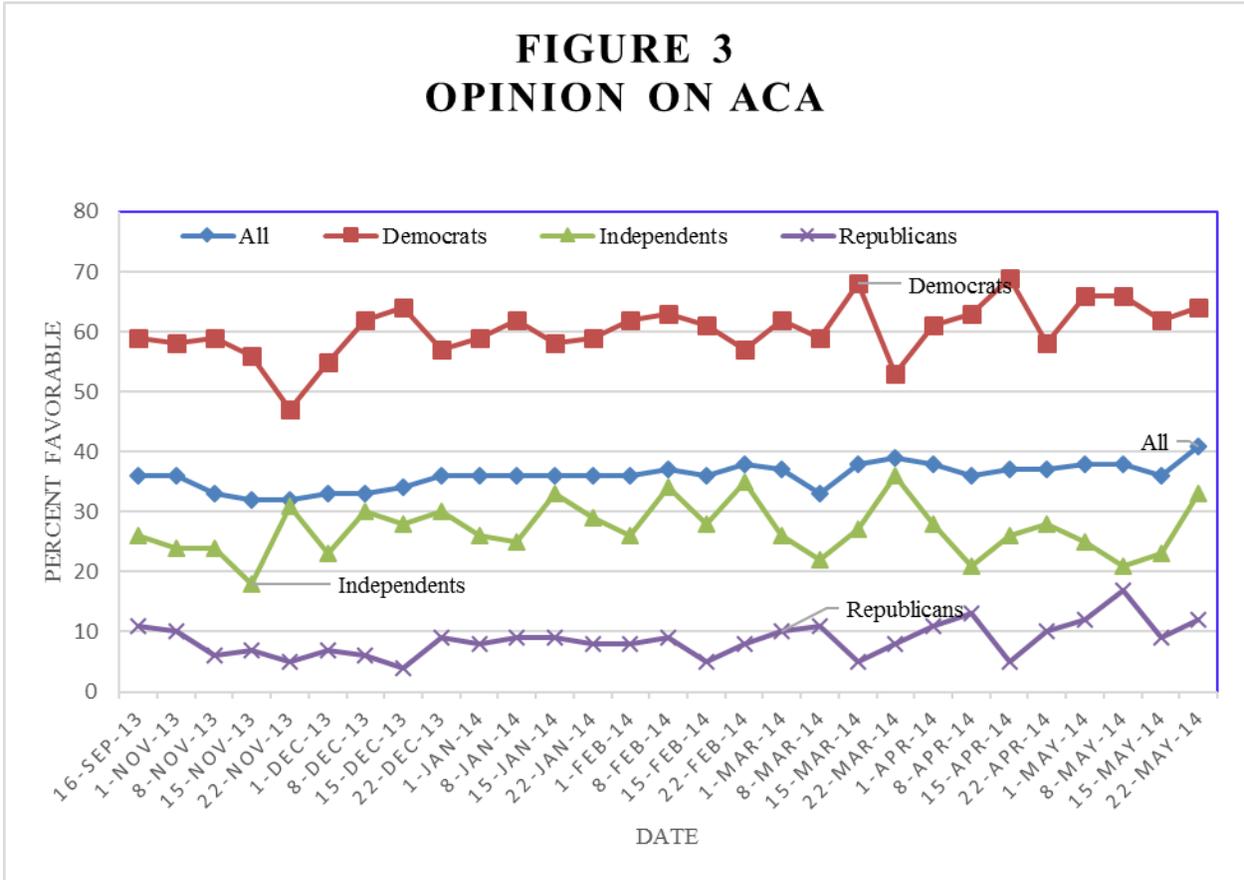
Source: Kaiser Family Foundation

*Questions:*

“As you may know, a health reform bill was signed into law in 2010. Given what you know about the health reform law, do you have a generally favorable or generally unfavorable opinion of it?” [Options rotated]

2010: “As you may know, a new health reform bill was signed into law earlier this year. Given what you know about the new health reform law, do you have a generally favorable or generally unfavorable opinion of it?”

**FIGURE 3  
OPINION ON ACA**



Source: RAND Health Reform Opinion Study.

Question: “As you may know, a health reform bill (the Affordable Care Act or Obamacare) will take effect in 2014. Given what you know about the reform law, do you have a generally favorable or unfavorable opinion of it?”

**Table 1**  
**Support for the Affordable Care Act**

<u>Poll Date</u>	<u>% Favorable</u>			
	<u>All</u>	<u>Democrat</u>	<u>Independent</u>	<u>Republican</u>
April 9-14, 2010	46	78	36	13
May 11-16, 2010	41	72	36	8
June 17-22, 2010	48	69	37	23
July 8-13, 2010	50	73	49	21
August 16-22, 2010	43	68	48	16
September 14-19, 2010	49	75	41	21
October 5-10, 2010	44	69	42	11
November 3-6, 2010	42	68	34	15
December 1-6, 2010	42	69	37	12
January 4-14, 2011	41	73	37	12
February 8-13, 2011	43	66	34	11
March 8-13, 2011	42	71	43	9
April 7-12, 2011	41	64	37	12
May 12-17, 2011	42	72	41	17
June 9-14, 2011	42	65	35	20
July 13-18, 2011	42	64	33	16
August 10-15, 2011	39	60	38	24
September 7-12, 2011	41	65	33	14
October 13-18, 2011	34	52	36	11
November 10-15, 2011	37	62	32	12
December 8-13, 2011	41	64	34	19
January 12-17, 2012	37	62	33	12
February 13-19, 2012	42	64	30	16
February 29-March 5, 2012	41	66	40	12
April 4-10, 2012	42	70	40	7
May 8-14, 2012	37	62	39	8
June 28-30, 2012	41	71	34	7
July 17-23, 2012	38	69	38	12
August 7-12, 2012	38	64	35	8
September 13-19, 2012	45	72	34	16
October 18-23, 2012	38	64	41	10
November 7-10, 2012	43	72	32	12
February 14-19, 2013	36	57	37	12
March 5-10, 2013	37	58	32	18
April 15-20, 2013	35	57	31	15
June 4-9, 2013	35	58	36	12

August 13-19, 2013	37	59	32	15
September 12-18, 2013	39	67	34	11
October 17-23, 2013	38	70	34	12
November 13-18, 2013	33	55	33	7
December 10-15, 2013	34	68	33	7
January 14-21, 2014	34	58	28	9
February 11-17, 2014	35	59	32	11
March 11-17, 2014	38	66	35	15
April 15-21, 2014	38	68	32	11
May 13-19, 2014	38	64	37	14
June 12-18, 2014	39	66	31	15
July 15-21, 2014	37	62	31	12
August 25-September 2, 2014	35	57	30	11
October 8-14, 2014	36	59	35	10
November 5-13, 2014	37	67	35	13
December 2-9, 2014	41	69	40	10
January 15-21, 2015	40	64	38	11

*Source:* Kaiser Family Foundation

*Questions:*

“As you may know, a health reform bill was signed into law in 2010. Given what you know about the health reform law, do you have a generally favorable or generally unfavorable opinion of it?” [Options rotated]

2010: “As you may know, a new health reform bill was signed into law earlier this year. Given what you know about the new health reform law, do you have a generally favorable or generally unfavorable opinion of it?”

**Table 2**  
**Partisan Leaners Support for Health Care Plan**

<b>Poll Date</b>	<b>% Favorable</b>	
	<b><u>Leaning Democrat</u></b>	<b><u>Leaning Republican</u></b>
August 16-22, 2010	66	12
September 14-19, 2010	64	18
October 5-10, 2010	60	16
November 3-6, 2010	66	18
January 4-14, 2011	61	19
February 8-13, 2011	64	17
March 8-13, 2011	61	17
April 7-12, 2011	65	15
May 12-17, 2011	56	15
June 9-14, 2011	60	13
July 13-18, 2011	53	14
September 7-12, 2011	65	11
October 13-18, 2011	59	13
November 10-15, 2011	56	12
December 8-13, 2011	59	11
January 12-17, 2012	59	8
February 13-19, 2012	62	21
February 29-March 5, 2012	62	20
April 4-10, 2012	67	15
May 8-14, 2012	58	9
June 28-30, 2012	67	9
July 17-23, 2012	64	8
August 7-12, 2012	55	17
September 13-19, 2012	68	13
October 18-23, 2012	55	17
November 7-10, 2012	62	10
February 14-19, 2013	59	13
March 5-10, 2013	54	7
April 15-20, 2013	56	14
June 4-9, 2013	58	16
August 13-19, 2013	68	11
September 12-18, 2013	61	15
October 17-23, 2013	59	10
November 13-18, 2013	49	13
December 10-15, 2013	49	12
January 14-21, 2014	53	16

February 11-17, 2014	57	12
March 11-17, 2014	52	14
April 15-21, 2014	59	17
May 13-19, 2014	61	16
June 12-18, 2014	54	16
July 15-21, 2014	57	11
August 25-September 2, 2014	51	19
October 8-14, 2014	51	16
November 5-13, 2014	55	18
December 2-9, 2014	61	15
January 15-21, 2015	55	15

*Source:* Kaiser Family Foundation

*Questions:*

2010: “As you may know, a new health reform bill was signed into law earlier this year. Given what you know about the new health reform law, do you have a generally favorable or generally unfavorable opinion of it?”

2011-2015: “As you may know, a health reform bill was signed into law in 2010. Given what you know about the health reform law, do you have a generally favorable or generally unfavorable opinion of it?” [Options rotated]

**Table 3**  
**Opinion Movement on ACA**

<b>Beginning Poll Date</b>	<b>Percentage Point Change from Previous Month in Favorability to ACA</b>			
	<b><u>All</u><sup>1</sup></b>	<b><u>Democrats</u></b>	<b><u>Independents</u></b>	<b><u>Republicans</u></b>
December 1, 2013	-3	-3	-1	-3
December 8, 2013	0	3	-1	0
December 15, 2013	2	8	10	-3
December 22, 2013	4	10	-1	4
January 1, 2014	3	4	3	1
January 8, 2014	3	0	-5	3
January 15, 2014	2	-6	5	5
January 22, 2014	0	2	-1	-1
February 1, 2014	0	3	0	0
February 8, 2014	1	1	9	0
February 15, 2014	0	3	-5	-4
February 22, 2014	2	-2	6	0
March 1, 2014	1	0	0	2
March 8, 2014	-3	-4	-12	2
March 15, 2014	2	7	-1	0
March 22, 2014	1	-4	1	0
April 1, 2014	1	-1	2	1
April 8, 2014	3	1	-1	2
April 15, 2014	-1	1	-1	0
April 22, 2014	-2	5	-8	2
May 1, 2014	0	5	-3	1
May 8, 2014	2	5	0	4
May 15, 2014	-1	-7	-3	4
May 22, 2014	4	6	5	2

*Source:* RAND Health Reform Opinion Study

*Question:* “As you may know, a health reform bill (the Affordable Care Act or Obamacare) will take effect in 2014. Given what you know about the reform law, do you have a generally favorable or unfavorable opinion of it?”

<sup>1</sup> Each line represents the change for the panel group from one month earlier.

**Table 4**  
**Partisan Support for Health Care Plan**

<u>Poll Date</u>	<u>% Favor/Approve</u>		
	<u>Republican</u>	<u>Democrat</u>	<u>Independent</u>
July 22-26, 2009	12	61	34
August 20-27, 2009	13	64	37
September 10-15, 2009	17	68	37
September 30-October 4, 2009	14	59	26
November 12-15, 2009	15	61	33
December 9-13, 2009	11	59	32
January 6-10, 2010	12	63	34
February 3-9, 2010	14	65	33
March 10-14, 2010	11	64	32
April 1-5, 2010	11	71	36
July 8-11, 2010	10	65	30
September 9-12, 2010	11	69	34
January 5-9, 2011	15	69	38
March 7-11, 2012	11	76	44
April 4-15, 2012	9	74	36
June 7-17, 2012	13	73	36
June 28-July 9, 2012	12	80	43
September 4-8, 2013	11	75	36
October 9-13, 2013	8	75	35
December 3-8, 2013	9	73	34
February 27-March 16, 2014	8	72	37
April 3-6, 2014	10	73	34
April 23-27, 2014	10	73	39
September 2-9, 2014	11	72	41
October 15-20, 2014	10	74	
November 6-9, 2014	10	78	42
February 18-22, 2015	11	78	39

*Source:* Pew Research Center for the People and the Press Poll

*Question:* “As of right now, do you generally favor or generally oppose the health care proposals being discussed in Congress?”

*Question for April 2010:* “Do you approve or disapprove of the health care legislation passed by Barack Obama and Congress last month?”

*Question for July and September 2010:* “Do you approve or disapprove of the health care legislation passed by Barack Obama and Congress in March?”

*Question for January 2011:* “Do you approve or disapprove of the health care legislation passed by Barack Obama and Congress last year?”

*Question for February 2011-2012:* “Do you approve or disapprove of the health care legislation passed by Barack Obama and Congress in 2010?”

*Question for 2013-2015:* Do you approve or disapprove of the health care law passed by Barack Obama and Congress in 2010?

**Table 5**  
**Public Support for Social Security Indexing**

<u>Question Wording</u>	<u>%</u>			
	<u>All</u>	<u>Republicans</u>	<u>Democrats</u>	<u>Independents</u>
<b>Described without Bush's Name<sup>1</sup></b>				
Favor	53	47	54	55
Oppose	36	41	37	36
Don't know	11	12	9	9
<b>Described as Bush's Proposal<sup>2</sup></b>				
Favor	45	62	34	43
Oppose	43	27	57	47
Don't know	12	11	9	10
<b>Change in Support</b>	-8	+15	-20	-12

*Source:* Pew Research Center for the People and the Press poll, May 11–15, 2005.

*Questions:*

<sup>1</sup> “One proposal for dealing with Social Security’s financial situation is to keep the system as it is now for lower income retirees, but limit the growth of future benefits for wealthy and middle income retirees. Would you favor or oppose this proposal?”

<sup>2</sup> “George W. Bush has proposed dealing with Social Security’s financial situation by keeping the system as it is now for lower income retirees, but limiting the growth of future benefits for wealthy and middle income retirees. Would you favor or oppose this proposal?”

**Table 6**  
**Public Support for MX Missile, 1982-1983**

<u>Poll Date</u>	<u>% Favor</u>	<u>% Oppose</u>	<u>% Don't Know</u>
<b>November 23-28, 1982<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>35</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>7</b>
January 18-22, 1983 <sup>2</sup>	38	51	10
<b>June 1-5, 1983<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>41</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>6</b>
June 15-19, 1983 <sup>2</sup>	46	44	10
<b>September 9-14, 1983<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>50</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>5</b>
September 22-26, 1983 <sup>2</sup>	51	39	10

Rows in **bold** indicate questions specifically referencing Reagan.

*Sources and Questions*

<sup>1</sup>Harris: "President Reagan has now proposed going ahead with building the MX missile system, which would be designed to allow the U.S. to retaliate with atomic weapons against an enemy who attacked the U.S. with atomic weapons. The Reagan Administration says the MX system is necessary to make our atomic weapons capability equal to that of the Russians. Opponents of the MX missile system argue that it will cost much more than the Administration says, and probably won't even work effectively. All in all, do you favor or oppose going ahead with the building of the MX missile system proposed by the Reagan Administration?"

<sup>2</sup> ABC/*Washington Post*: "Do you think the U.S. should build the MX missile or not?" [Asked of those who had heard or read of the MX missile proposal. 88% in January 1983; 85% in June 1983; and 83% in September 1983.]

<sup>3</sup>Harris: "President Reagan has proposed going ahead with building the MX missile system, which would be designed to allow the U.S. to retaliate with land-based nuclear weapons against an enemy who attacked the U.S. with nuclear weapons. The Reagan Administration claims that the MX system is necessary to make our nuclear weapons equal to that of the Russians and that by having the MX, the U.S. can better negotiate a nuclear weapons agreement with the Russians. Opponents of the MX missile system argue that it will cost much more than the Administration says and won't even work effectively. All in all, do you favor or oppose going ahead with the building of the MX missile system proposed by the Reagan Administration?"

**Table 7**  
**Public Support for Aid to the Contras, 1985-1986**

<u>Poll Date</u>	<u>Poll N</u>	<u>% Support Aid</u>	<u>% Oppose Aid</u>	<u>% Don't Know</u>
<b>March 6, 1986<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>543</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>March 16, 1986<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>511</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>March 20-24, 1986<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>1,148</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>March 25, 1986<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>530</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>5</b>
March 25, 1986 <sup>4</sup>	606	37	44	19
April 5-8, 1986 <sup>5</sup>	1,254	33	62	5
April 5-8, 1986 <sup>6</sup>	1,254	39	54	7

Rows in **bold** indicate questions specifically referencing Reagan.

*Questions and Sources:*

<sup>1</sup> ABC News: "President Reagan is asking Congress for new military aid for the Nicaraguan rebels known as the 'Contras'. Do you agree or disagree with Reagan that Congress should approve that money?"

<sup>2</sup> ABC News: "The House of Representatives has refused Reagan's request for 100 million dollars in military and other aid to the contra rebels in Nicaragua. Do you approve or disapprove of that action by the House?" [Because the question asks respondents whether they approve of the House's negative action, a response of "approve" means opposing aid to the Contras. Thus, we have reversed the results to make them consistent with the portrayal of the results from the other questions.]

<sup>3</sup> ABC News: "As you may know, President Reagan has asked Congress for new military aid for the Nicaraguan rebels known as the 'Contras'. Do you agree or disagree with Reagan that Congress should approve that money?"

<sup>4</sup> *USA Today*: "Do you favor or oppose military aid to the Contras fighting the Sandinista government in Nicaragua?"

<sup>5</sup> Harris: "Do you favor or oppose the U.S. sending \$100 million in military and non-military aid to the Contra rebels in Nicaragua?"

<sup>6</sup> Harris: "Do you favor or oppose the U.S. sending just \$30 million in non-military aid to the Contra rebels in Nicaragua?"

**Table 8**  
**Obama Effect on Support of Affordable Care Act**

<u>Question Wording</u>	<u>% Positive</u>	<u>% Neutral</u>	<u>% Negative</u>	<u>% Don't Know</u>
Obamacare <sup>1</sup>	29	13	46	12
Affordable Care Act <sup>2</sup>	22	11	37	30

*Source:* CNBC poll, September 16-19, 2013, conducted by Hart Research/Public Opinion Strategies.

*Questions:*

<sup>1</sup> “What are your feelings toward Obamacare? Do you feel very positive, somewhat positive, neutral, somewhat negative, very negative, or do you not know enough to say?” [asked of one-half the sample]

<sup>2</sup> What are your feelings toward the Affordable Care Act? Do you feel very positive, somewhat positive, neutral, somewhat negative, very negative, or do you not know enough to say?” [asked of one-half the sample]

**Table 9**  
**Obama Effect on Support of Affordable Care Act**

<u>Question Wording</u>	<u>% Approve</u>	<u>% Disapprove</u>	<u>% No Opinion</u>
ACA, no mention of Obama <sup>1</sup>	45	49	6
Mention Obama and ACA <sup>2</sup>	41	54	5
No Mention of Obama or ACA <sup>3</sup>	41	52	7
Obamacare, no mention of ACA <sup>4</sup>	38	54	7

*Source:* Gallup Daily Tracking polls, November 4-17, 2013.

*Questions:* “Next, we’d like to ask you about the Affordable Care Act, the 2010 law that restructured the U.S. health care system. Do you generally approve or disapprove of . . . “

<sup>1</sup> “the Affordable Care Act?”

<sup>2</sup> “the Affordable Care Act, signed into law by President Obama that restructured the U.S. health care system?”

<sup>3</sup> “the healthcare law?”

<sup>4</sup> “Obamacare?”

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> George C. Edwards III, *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> George C. Edwards III, *Governing by Campaigning: The Politics of the Bush Presidency* 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> George C. Edwards III, *Overreach: Leadership in the Obama Presidency* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> George C. Edwards III, *The Strategic President: Persuasion and Opportunity in Presidential Leadership* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Edwards, *On Deaf Ears*.

<sup>5</sup> See Edwards, *On Deaf Ears*, chap. 5.

<sup>6</sup> A good example is Kent Tedin, Brandon Rottinghaus, and Harrell Rodgers, “When the President Goes Public: The Consequences of Communication Mode for Opinion Change across Issue Types and Groups,” *Political Research Quarterly* 64 (September 2011): 506-519.

<sup>7</sup> John R. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 99, chap. 9. See also Adam J. Berinsky, “Assuming the Costs of War: Events, Elites, and American Public Support for Military Conflict,” *Journal of Politics* 69 (November 2007): 975-997; and John R. Zaller, “Elite Leadership of Mass Opinion: New Evidence from the Gulf War,” in W. Lance Bennett and David L. Paletz, eds., *Taken by Storm: The Media, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Gulf War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 186-209.

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