James A. Morone, “Presidents and Health Reform: From Franklin D. Roosevelt to Barack Obama”

Daniel Prinz

September 25, 2015


• the 2010 health reforms have a 75-year history starting with President Franklin Roosevelt

• article looks at while most previous presidents failed and President Obama succeeded in passing national health reform

• there are many political challenges ahead in the implementation of the ACA

• Roosevelt wanted to implement health reform using a popular appeal but died just before the end of WWII

• President Truman and subsequent presidents all wanted some measure of health reform

• before President Obama, only President Johnson succeeded in enacting major new programs

• the Affordable Care Act (2010) is a historic achievement comparably to the Social Security Act (1935) and the Civil Rights Act (1964)

Have Passion

• health reform runs into special interest, big money, and popular anxiety

• presidents need to be deeply invested and passionate about reform

• need to persist through political and possibly economic crises

• need for unfaltering commitment
Act With Speed

- political capital evaporates quickly and health reform likely leads to losing votes in the short term, so presidents need to act fast after their election
- by the second year of an administration, people are obsessed with the midterms and the president’s party usually loses seats in the midterms
- fatal mistake of Clinton administration: only got reform bill to Congress in the administration’s second year
- President Obama urged speed at every point in the process and set deadlines for Congress

Master The Congressional Process

- the Congressional process is long and complicated
- in the House, three committees produced two different bills
- Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi put the two bills together into one and after long negotiations with various groups managed to pass it 220 against 215 on November 7, 2009
- Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid negotiated the bill with individual senators to get 60 votes to prevent a filibuster passing a bill on December 24, 2009
- Congress appears quite dysfunctional: despite voters supporting national health reform for a long time, Congress has not produced it
- Obama administration managed to keep disagreeing Democrats in line
- Obama managed to lay out broad, clear principles for reform but did not go into too much detail

Go Public

- Democrats sometimes lost control of public debate
- vocal conservative and Tea Party opposition
- the administration struggled for public attention and lost out to the opposition on some points because of public perceptions
- on the other hand, there was some support from corporate stakeholders for the reform
- Massachusetts election (Republican Scott Brown elected in special election after Democrat Ted Kennedy’s death) almost derailed health reform
• Obama became more eloquent after the Massachusetts special election, used emotional stories to argue for his reform plan

Get Your Philosophy Straight
• health reform taps issues outside health policy, including philosophical debates
• related to immigration, welfare, the role of government, abortion, religion, race
• successful presidents have addressed these questions
• during the campaign, Obama challenged Reagan’s dominating individualist approach but lost touch with his social message after the election

Don’t Get Bogged Down in Details
• presidents need to stay above the policy debates and should define the big picture, frame the national debate, and manage the congressional process
• the Obama White House stayed away from most particular policy debates, only occasionally announcing the President’s particular views on some issues
• when Obama was active, he was managing the political process

What Next?
• the ACA is a historical achievement
• great hurdles lie ahead
• implementation almost as challenging as passing
• implementation politics: largely outside media spotlight, without dramatic votes and tight schedules
• reform passed without any Republican votes, Democrats have the responsibility if it becomes unpopular or unworkable
• the government now owns the problem of healthcare for most of the population
• the risk for Republican is that if they stymie implementation they might look stubborn
• because Republicans also need to address healthcare problems, they also needed to propose their reforms
• Nixon plan frontrunner to Clinton plan, counterplan during Clinton administration is similar to Obama plan

• Reagan and Bush implemented the largest Medicare expansions

• key question: after the political debates in Congress, can we have an efficient implementation process?