Does ‘everybody love a winner?’ Lessons from the near death and resurrection of the Affordable Care Act

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Abstract
How do citizens judge legislative success? Prior work – which typically relies on aggregate-level data – finds that the public rewards the president and the parties when they win votes in Congress and punishes them when they lose. This paper takes a different approach. Leveraging the ‘quasi-counterfactual’ of the near death of the 2010 Affordable Care Act (ACA), it uses individual-level survey data to show that voters’ reactions to the bill’s eventual passage depended on their policy attitudes: approval of President Obama and the Democrats went up among those who strongly supported the ACA, and down among those who strongly opposed it.

Introduction
Several major theories of US legislative politics assume that voters reward politicians who succeed in passing their bills. Legislative achievement is said to inform voters’ judgments of congressional parties (e.g., Cox and McCubbins 2005) as well as the president (Cohen 2013). However, there are important theoretical objections to this assertion and limitations to the evidence mustered in support of it.

Hypotheses
- The prevailing view: Voters are more approving of the president and the majority party when Congress passes their bill than when Congress does not.
- An alternative: This effect is greater among voters who support the bill. It may even be negative among bill opponents (Jones 2013).

Literature cited

Research Design and Method
- The ACA “went from healthy, to stricken, to resurrected and bolder during the first three months of 2010” (Jacobs and Skocpol 2010).
- This offers a rare and useful contrast for testing the hypotheses.
- I pooled two Washington Post surveys (Feb. 4-8 and March 23-26) and used the elapsed time to estimate the effect of passage conditional on voters’ opinions of the ACA.
- I also included a battery of socio-demographic controls to shrink the error variance.

Results
- Passage has no net effect on Obama’s job approval. Rather, approval goes up among strong ACA supporters and down among strong ACA opponents.
- Passage has a positive net effect on Obama’s health care approval – driven entirely by strong ACA supporters.
- Passage has no net effect on the chances of voting Democratic. Instead, strong ACA supporters become more likely to vote Democratic and strong ACA opponents become less likely to do so.

Conclusions
- At best, the ACA’s passage triggered a consolidation – rather than a broadening – of popular support for Obama and the Democrats.
- Some empirical caveats:
  - Only a single, ideologically charged bill
  - Reverse causality cannot be ruled out
  - Possible unobserved ‘treatments’ in interval between near death and passage

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What’s next? Experiments!
The forthcoming experiments are meant to:
1. Resolve outstanding issues of causality and generalizability raised here
2. Examine whether common psychological biases undermine the inferences that voters draw from legislative outcomes