

Introduction to Special Issue: Critical Essays on Health Care Reform

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When the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) was passed in March of 2010, it felt very monumental. The mainstream press had provided almost twenty-four-hour coverage leading up to the vote. Indeed, during the week of passage, almost half of all news coverage—including print, online, network TV, cable TV, and radio—was devoted to the bill.¹

But it didn't just feel monumental; most political analysts, whether fans of the reform or not, agreed that a major political event had occurred. Many also agreed that a significant policy reform had passed, but debate quickly emerged as to whether this was a policy reform worthy of praise or derision. Indeed, as we all witnessed through the 2010 midterm campaigns and now after the elections, the debate that started before passage continued right on after its passage. Sadly, most Americans have yet to learn what is actually in the ACA. During the week of dramatic coverage, only 22 percent of media stories on the reform (again, including all sources) focused on what was actually in the bill and how the law might change the health delivery system, affect access to care, and control costs. The remainder of stories, nearly 80 percent, covered the horserace: how

1. Conveying a sense of the magnitude of this media attention, the Pew Research Center reports that “the last time a story received this much coverage in one week was in March of 2009,” when media outlets were responding to “outrage over the bonuses at insurance giant AIG.” For details, see the Pew Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism index of news coverage for March 22–28, 2010, “Health Care Reform Sweeps Capital and the Media” www.journalism.org/index_report/pej_news_coverage_index_march_2228_2010.

will the ACA ultimately be good or bad for Republicans and Democrats? I have no evidence regarding how this media coverage has impacted public opinion on the ACA, but it leads me to wonder why Americans would like a bill that evidently has more to do with politicians—and their reelection possibilities—than with their own ability to get affordable health care when they need it?

The intent of this special issue is to provide a space both to make sense of the political craziness surrounding the bill and to understand better what is actually in the ACA. Covering the politics of reform and its policy significance while allowing for a wide range of viewpoints in a single issue necessitated shorter essays than we ordinarily publish in *JHPPL*.² Authors were instructed to write a relatively short critique of the ACA; they were given liberty to use their expertise and unique perspective to weigh in on the importance and significance of this massive reform, with an eye toward helping us to make sense of its broader meaning. Readers wanting a fuller, more detailed account of the story are encouraged to look further into the author's work. Think of this issue as an introduction to ideas—oftentimes these authors reference a well-researched book they've written or several full-length articles that stand behind the argument presented in the essay.

We begin by putting the passage of the ACA within a larger historical context to understand how this reform follows logically from our past and yet may also represent a critical departure. We then attempt to understand why and how this bill passed. What was different about the situation in 2010 that made passage of reform possible after a century of failed efforts—or at least since our last major reform, the passage of Medicare and Medicaid in 1965? New conceptual frameworks are offered, and essays that focus on the significance of particular factors, such as the Democratic Coalition and the Blue Dog Democrats, the role of interest groups, the public option idea as a reform solution, and the ever-lasting significance of federalism.

We then turn to more substantive aspects of the ACA and offer several critiques and varied viewpoints on how well particular policies—insurance regulation, cost control, expanded coverage, quality improvement, delivery reforms, to name just a few—will be able to offer meaningful change for the American people. Many essays also consider how the political

2. However, this is not the first time we have published a large volume of shorter essays on an important topic. See past *JHPPL* special issues on Clinton's failure to pass health care reform, published in 1995, and on the managed care backlash that occurred in the mid-1990s, published in 1999—both when Mark Peterson was editor.

dynamics of various policies will work for or against implementation and effectiveness.

These essays open up a plethora of questions for seasoned scholars to ponder. More important, though, I hope they open avenues for citizens and students to begin discussing the direction our health care system should take. Together, these essays show us how much is at stake and why it is so very important for citizens to actively engage—to get beyond the sound bites and labels and to grapple with the meaning of reform, not just for themselves but for their communities and the nation as a whole.

