Stories of Policy Success and Failure: What works?

Emily Thorson
Syracuse University
eathorson@syr.edu

Sarah Pralle
Syracuse University
sbpralle@syr.edu

Summary

Abstract: This project seeks to answer a question fundamental to citizen engagement around policy issues: what is more motivating, policy successes or policy failures? In this paper, we share the results of a pilot experiment that tests how participants react to stories of past policy successes and failures in education, child health care, and the environment. Specifically, we examine how discourses around success and failure shape (1) political engagement around the issue (including salience and mobilization) and (2) trust that government can address the problem through public policy. We find that exposure to stories of policy success versus stories of policy failure impacts how respondents view government but does appear to affect issue salience and political engagement.

Introduction

If there is one thing the candidates for the 2016 U.S. Republican presidential nomination agreed on, it was that the Affordable Care Act (aka "Obamacare") was a complete failure. The candidates variously declared it a "debacle," a "train wreck," a "destructive and costly" law, "fatally flawed," "heavy handed," and according to Dr. Ben Carson, who went on to serve as former President Trump's Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, "the worst thing to happen to the United States since slavery." Republican elites in Congress at the time largely agreed and voted more than seventy times to repeal or change Obamacare before President Obama left office. Their overwrought opposition to the law may be one reason why most self-identified Republicans in 2015 considered the law to be a failure even though it had largely succeeded in one of its most basic goals, which was to increase the number of insured Americans (Blumenthal and Cohn 2015).

While Republican candidates were bashing the Affordable Care Act (ACA), President Obama urged Democrats in Congress to defend it. In 2017, Obama went down to Capitol Hill to encourage policymakers to "engage in a massive public relations push aimed at capitalizing on the law's more popular provisions," according to one source (Caldwell 2017). Even if the Democrats could not proclaim the program to be a complete success—a claim made difficult by its rocky rollout, among other things—they could remind voters of provisions that were broadly popular with the public and had helped millions of underinsured Americans.

The dueling portrayals of the Affordable Care Act are a reminder that politicians, advocacy organizations, and social movements strategically use narratives about

existing policy when communicating to the media and with the public (Jones and McBeth 2010; McBeth, Jones, Shanahan 2018). While policy narratives take many forms, claims of policy success and failure are important components of these stories (Schram and Soss 2001). Some policy narratives include claims that a policy has worked as intended and has produced positive results. Others emphasize a policy's shortcomings, weaknesses, or unintended consequences, suggesting that major problems remain. Has the Affordable Care Act been a success because it has significantly increased the number of Americans with health insurance? Or has it been a failure because health care costs have continued to rise while millions of Americans remain uninsured? The ambiguity surrounding what constitutes success and failure gives political actors a lot of room for narrative maneuver (Cobb and Ross 1997, Schram and Soss 2001, Stone 1997).

The extent to which political actors will emphasize policy successes or failures depends on their political and policy goals. Legislators seeking reelection will often take credit for popular policies and for a policy's positive effects, particularly if they or their Party helped enact it (Mayhew 1974, Fiorina 1977). If their contribution to a policy's success is less clear, the politician may engage in "position taking" where they repeatedly assert their support for the policy (Mayhew 1974). Either way, they are likely to tout the success of policies they support. Advocacy groups and social movements that want to burnish their reputation as effective policy actors will also claim credit for policy successes on issues they lobbied for or mobilized around. These narratives may solidify member support, help recruit new supporters, and build their organizations. As David Meyer (2006, 202) states, social movements may tell stories of past successes to

influence how people "view future possibilities and, most significantly, their prospective role in making it" (Meyer 2006, 202).

In addition to political goals, politicians, advocacy groups, and social movements pursue goals related to their policies of choice. For the policies that matter to them, they want to raise their salience, motivate citizens to engage with the problems behind the policies, and solidify public support for existing policies. To accomplish these policy-oriented goals, emphasizing the strengths and successes of current policy might still be the optimal strategy, based on the assumption that if the public believes a policy has alleviated an important problem, they will be more willing to support its continuation and expansion. Narratives of success can reassure people that the government is on the right track and that further progress is possible. In other words, these stories can build public momentum for continued change, along with confidence that the government can solve the problem.

If success stories can generate such positive outcomes, why would political actors tell stories of failure for the policies they support? As the agenda setting literature suggests, in a world where issues compete with one another for public and official attention, a powerful way to focus attention on an issue is to stress the shortcomings and weaknesses of existing policy (Kingdon 1984, Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Failed policies suggest the continuation—maybe even the worsening—of public problems, elevating the threat level for those aware of the issue. Stories of failure could therefore raise public alarm, moving the issue higher on the public's agenda, and motivating some people to engage (or re-engage) politically in a way that stories of success cannot. If the public believes that the policy is working—that government is

4

sufficiently addressing a problem—they are apt to disengage with it and shift their attention elsewhere because the problem appears less urgent (Downs 1972, Kingdon 1984).

We argue that policy actors face a dilemma when choosing whether to emphasize policy successes or failures. While stories of policy failure may grab public attention and raise alarm about a public problem, they might simultaneously *decrease* people's trust in the government as an effective problem-solver. Stories of failure, after all, not only highlight real-world problems, but point to the limits of government actions and capabilities. They imply a causal story in which government policy, meant to solve problems, falls short and may make matters worse if policy leads to unanticipated but harmful side effects (Stone 1997). Given these potential strategic dilemmas, advocacy groups and politicians hoping to increase public engagement around an issue may face a "paradox of urgency," in which emphasizing policy failures increases public alarm and political engagement while simultaneously decreasing public confidence that government can effectively address the problem with policy. Stories of success could present the opposite dilemma. They might enhance trust in the government's ability to solve problems but could lead to greater public complacency and political disengagement.

Stories of policy success and failure, and public reactions to them, matter politically. Evaluations of success and failure may shape the prospects for policy maintenance and durability (Mettler 2016). If policies are framed as failures, or if their successes are not well-known or routinely championed, they are vulnerable to deterioration and retrenchment. Policy opponents may convince the public (and

5

policymakers) that the "failed" policy needs significant reform with the intent of weakening or undermining it. Conversely, if a policy is hailed and understood as a success, it is more likely to become entrenched even in the absence of strong evidence that it is working (Schram and Soss 2001).

Stories of success and failure, as suggested, may also shape public appraisals of the policy, public support for further efforts to solve the problem, and potentially, broader evaluations of whether government is capable and trustworthy. People only occasionally experience policies directly and even so, cannot reliably conclude from their personal experience whether in the aggregate a policy is successful or falls short. They must rely on media accounts, expert opinion, and proclamations of public officials to form a judgment. If the dominant public message is one of continued policy failure in multiple issue areas, we should expect a decline in the public's trust that government can be an effective force for change.

This paper examines how people react to stories of policy success and failure in the areas of clean water, child and maternal health, and K-12 public education. These issues are relatively salient to the public but are not as intensely polarized as some other public issues, including immigration, gun control, and climate change (USC Annenberg 2021). Moreover, the public largely accepts that government has an important role to play in improving water quality, public health, and the education of its citizens, even if they disagree about the extent and nature of that intervention (Brenan 2023, Kennedy, Funk and Tyson 2023). In less polarized contexts and around issues where government involvement is expected, preexisting partisan biases and attitudes toward government are less likely to drown out messages of success and failure.

Literature

We know of no studies that directly test how stories of policy success and failure shape public attitudes and political behavior. However, scholars in political science, risk communication, and political psychology have grappled with similar questions about the attitudinal and behavioral impacts of positive and negative issue messaging. A central concern of this literature is how positive and negative messages about public problems affect people's levels of political efficacy and engagement. These messages are presumed to elicit emotional responses in people, such as fear, anxiety, and hope, which shape the degree to which they pay attention to an issue and personally engage with it.

A growing body of literature examines these questions in the context of global climate change. After years of rather apocalyptic messaging around climate change designed to increase people's sense of urgency about the problem, climate activists worried publicly that gloomy accounts of climate change, like that of David Wallace-Wells in a widely read *New York* magazine article, would overwhelm and paralyze the public (Mann, Hassol, and Toles 2017). Several scholars appeared to confirm these activists' fears by documenting the prevalence of threat-based climate change messages in public discourse and claiming that negativity in climate communications could be counterproductive (Feinberg and Willer 2011; Hart and Feldman 2014; O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole 2009; Skurka, Myrick and Yang 2023).

Many people respond emotionally to stories about the catastrophic impacts of climate change (and other threats) with fear and anxiety. These emotions tend to

increase people's desire for information because they want to reduce uncertainty and increase their sense of control (Brader and Gadarian 2023). By learning more about the threat, they may discover effective ways of responding. In this way, fear and anxiety can heighten attention to a problem because it prompts people to search for more information about problems and solutions. But fear and anxiety can also lead people to avoid and withdraw, particularly when individuals do not have the resources or sense of personal control that would help them effectively counter the perceived threat (Brader and Gadarian 2023; see also Bilandzic, Kalch, and Soentgen 2017).

Much of the research on positive and negative climate messaging focuses on the question of political efficacy. Emphasizing the catastrophic impacts of climate change can result in feelings of helplessness and inefficacy (O'Neill and Nicholson-Cole 2009), particularly when no viable solutions are presented (Skurka, Myrick and Yang 2023). Positive, hopeful messages, on the other hand, may lead to increased political efficacy and engagement. As Hornsey and Fielding (2016, 27) explain, "knowing that the tide is turning with regard to carbon emissions should increase people's perceptions that climate change is reversible; that individual and collective efforts can make a difference." Indeed, scholars of collective action and social movement mobilization have long held that before joining a collective action effort, "people must collectively define their situations as unjust *and subject to change* through group action" (McAdam 1982, 51. Emphasis added. See also Klandermans 1984, McAdam 1982, Meyer 2007).

However, research on climate communications raises questions about the link between hopeful messages of progress and people's willingness to engage with problems and mobilize around solutions. Smith and Leiserowitz (2014) found that hope

is modestly predictive of support for climate mitigation, but that worry is a more powerful predictor of supportive attitudes. Feldman and Hart (2016) tested four climate efficacy messages, including a "response efficacy" condition that stressed the effectiveness of proposed climate solutions, finding that these messages increased feelings of hope in respondents, although the effects varied by political ideology. In one experiment, Hornsey and Fielding (2016) offered participants an optimistic, pessimistic, or neutral message about the rate of progress in reducing climate emissions and found that the optimistic message failed to increase people's political engagement. Instead, the hopeful scenario reduced people's sense of threat, thereby decreasing their perceived need to act on climate change. Given the somewhat mixed results from this literature, more research is needed to fully understand how positive and negative narratives shape people's emotions, perceptions of issue urgency, and levels of political engagement (Chapman, Lickel and Markowitz 2017).

Another set of literature examines how people's perceptions of government competency shape attitudes and behavior. Shepherd and Kay (2014) draw on theories of system justification to examine whether confidence in the government's capacity to address problems leads to public disengagement from issues. System justification theory predicts people have a psychological need to believe that their system can handle large-scale problems like crises and disasters. The authors find that subjects who read stories of government competence in handling economic and environmental disasters showed lower levels of political engagement than those who read about government incompetence (Shepherd and Kay 2014). This points to a potential dilemma in that narratives emphasizing government competence could decrease public attention

and mobilization around an issue, but stories that offer no hope could have a similarly negative effect on political engagement.

Our work is distinct from these studies in that we are testing how people respond to stories of existing public policies, framed as either successful in meeting important goals, or as unsuccessful. We expect narratives of success will increase people's trust in government to solve the problem, while narratives of failure should decrease trust. We are less certain about how these narratives shape issue saliency and willingness to act on the issue. Stories of success could decrease people's perception of issue urgency, since they should be reassured by the government's ability to handle the problem and make real progress toward meeting the policy's goals. Stories of failure, in contrast, could raise the urgency of the issue and motivate people to act in ways that would help mitigate the problem. But these stories of failure might also lead to feelings of helplessness, causing people to disengage from the issue.

Design

This paper describes the results of a pilot study designed to test the effect of positive versus negative policy narratives on a range of attitudes. The primary goal of the pilot was to test whether the treatment successfully manipulated the independent variable of interest: perception of policy success versus failure (Mutz 2021). In addition, the pilot serves as a preliminary investigation of our main research questions: how the tone of policy narratives affect trust in government and perceptions of issue urgency.

The pilot test used a sample of 398 participants, recruited via the survey vendor Lucid. While Lucid is an opt-in convenience sample, it uses purposive sampling to

ensure participants are similar to the U.S. population on a number of relevant dimensions. Our sample consists of 40% self-identified Democrats, 38% Republicans, and 23% Independent or other. Demographics (age, race, education, gender, income, party identification) were either provided by Lucid or collected prior to treatment. In addition, participants indicated their overall political interest and trust in government, to be used as covariates.

Participants were randomly assigned into one of two conditions (positive narrative or negative narrative) and three issue areas (child health, education, or the environment). We chose three separate issue areas to increase treatment generalizability and confidence that any observed effects were not an artifact of the issue area chosen.

Prior to reading the news articles that comprised the treatment, respondents were asked how interested they would be in "a 'Policy Review' feature which describes a government policy, discusses how the policy has affected American lives, and evaluates whether the policy has succeeded or failed." Seventy percent of respondents said they strongly or somewhat supported their preferred news outlet including such a feature, and only 7% indicated that they would strongly or somewhat oppose it.

Then, all respondents were asked to read a brief news article. The full text of the treatments is available in the Appendix. Each article, ostensibly from the *USA Today,* was framed as a "Policy Review" that described a specific existing policy and then evaluated its effectiveness. The "positive narrative" articles cited studies indicating the policy's success, while the "negative narrative" articles did the opposite. The tone was reinforced with imagery: the positive narratives included a "Success" stamp

superimposed over an image of Congress, while the negative narratives had a "Failure" stamp over the same image.

After reading the article, all respondents were asked how interesting they found the article, what it was about (an attention check), whether it succeeded or failed (five-point scale), four questions asking about their trust in the government to address the issue area, and three questions measuring how urgent/important they felt the issue to be. Finally, they were asked how likely they would be to become involved (e.g. donate, volunteer, sign up for emails) in a non-government organization working in the issue area.

Results

In total, 90% of respondents correctly identified what policy was being discussed in the article, suggesting that most participants paid close attention to the article. The treatment was successful at manipulating perceptions of policy success versus failure: those in the "negative" condition rated the policy a 2.1 on a five-point scale, while those in the "positive" condition rated it a 3.8, $t(404)=18.5$, $p<.001$.

Three out of the four questions tapping trust in government formed a weakly reliable index ($\alpha = .61$) and so were combined to form a 1-5 scale (M=2.9) (results are consistent when the items are analyzed independently). Table 1 shows the average level of trust in government to handle the specific issue, by issue area.

Table 1. Trust in government to handle the issue, by tone

	Health	Education	Environment

Positive	3.1 (.13)	3.2 (.11)	3.3 (.10)
Negative	2.8 (.08)	2.5 (.09)	2.7 (.08)

For each issue area, those assigned to read the positive article have greater trust in government to handle the issue than those assigned to the negative article.

Table 2 shows the results for the three topics combined, with level of education, overall government trust (measured pre-treatment), and party identification as covariates (note that the results are similar if covariates are omitted).

Table 2. Effect of tone on trust in government to handle issue

	Trust in govt to handle issue
Tone: Negative	-.45***
	(.068)
Education	-.024
	(.043)
Overall trust in government	.37***
	(.034)
Republican	.002
	(.091)
Democrat	.229**
	(.093)
Constant	2.23***
	(.138)
Observations	401
R-squared	.354

Standard errors are in parentheses

*** p<.01, ** p<.05, * p<.1

Reading an article about a policy failure (i.e. negative tone) substantially decreases trust in government to address the issue. In terms of the covariates included in the analysis,

overall trust in government and Democratic party identification are positively associated with the belief that the government is capable of handling the particular issue.

The three questions tapping perceived importance of the issue formed a reliable index (α=.85) and so were combined into a single measure. There was no difference between the three issues in terms of overall importance (M=4.0 for all three issues). In addition, tone had no impact on perceived importance: people perceived the issue as equally important regardless of whether they read a positive or negative story.

In total, respondents indicated how likely they would be (not at all, somewhat, very) to engage in five different activities in support of a non-profit group working in the issue area to which they were assigned. These were combined to form an additive index (0-15, M=3). People were more interested in becoming involved with the environmental organization (M=3.4) than with the children's health organization (M=2.9) or the educational organization (M=2.9). The tone of the article (positive versus negative) had no effect on willingness to get involved with the organization.

Discussion and Conclusion

In 2015, Princeton economist and NYT columnist Paul Krugman lamented the fact that congressional Republicans continued to criticize the Affordable Care Act (ACA) even in the face of growing evidence that the policy was a success (Krugman 2015). Krugman also noted how large portions of the public seemed unaware of the policy's success, citing polls showing that only 5 percent of the public was aware that the ACA was costing less than expected while 42 percent thought it was costing more. The positive experience of millions of Americans who received health insurance under the

ACA has had "little effect on public perceptions," he claimed. "Obamacare isn't perfect, but it has dramatically improved the lives of millions. Someone should tell the voters" (Krugman 2015, A19). Krugman implies that stories of success are politically important and might be *more* important than people's direct experience with the policy. Setting aside the question of how personal experience with public programs shape attitudes and behaviors, most people do not experience policies directly. Instead, they rely on stories, pushed by politicians, advocacy groups, social movements, and the media, to understand the role of policies in solving societal problems.

While stories of success and failure are fundamental parts of policy narratives, few studies directly test how people react to them. We were interested in whether and how these stories shaped respondents' sense of issue urgency, political engagement, and trust in government. Our results suggest that these stories have significant effects on people's attitudes toward government. Stories of successful policies led to increased trust in the government's ability to handle the problem, while stories of failed policies resulted in less trust. This was true across a range of issues, and among respondents across the political spectrum. While these findings may not be surprising, they have important implications for democracy. If, as we suspect, the public is exposed to more stories of policy failure than success, then negative views of government may be exacerbated by a relative lack of exposure to policy success stories.

More surprisingly, we did not find evidence that stories of success and failure differentially shaped people's sense of issue importance and willingness to engage politically. It may be the case that reminding people about an issue, such as clean water and public education, is enough to raise its importance, rendering the tonal differences

in the stories insignificant. In our full experiment, where we will include a control condition/ group, we might see differences between the control group and treatment groups on stated issue importance (with the control group expressing lower levels of issue importance compared to the treatment groups).

The null results related to respondents' willingness to support non-profit groups working on clean air, child health, and public education might be due to confusion about the relationship between the organizations and government policies and outcomes. Respondents were not provided relevant information about the organizations' advocacy around the specific policies covered in the stories. We expect that using alternative measures of political engagement and mobilization might yield significant differences among the three treatment groups.

While including a control group may alter our findings, our results from the pilot study suggest that reading stories of policy success does not significantly *decrease* issue saliency or political engagement. This has important implications for those who worry that emphasizing progress is counterproductive because people will feel less urgency to address the problem when exposed to stories of success. Our initial results suggest this concern may be unwarranted.

Appendix: Main Elements of Pilot Instrument

Story pretest

govtrust In your opinion, how often can you trust the federal government in Washington to do what is right?

o Always (1)
o Most of the time (2)
o About half the time (3)
o Some of the time (4)
o Never (5)

news In general, how closely do you follow what's going on in the news these days?

o Very closely (1)
o Somewhat closely (2)
o Not closely at all (3)

attention1 Social media is a popular place to get news and information.

No matter what platforms you use, please check only the *first* and *last* answers from the list of social media platforms below. This helps us ensure you are reading the questions carefully.

☐ YouTube (1)
☐ TikTok (2)
☐ Reddit (3)
☐ Facebook (4)
☐ Instagram (5)
☐ X (formerly Twitter) (6)

Next, you will answer a few questions about the news.

newspref These days, some people say the news should spend more time covering conflicts between Democrats and Republicans.

Others say that the news should spend more time covering how government policies affect American lives.

Which statement comes closest to your view?

o The news should spend more time covering conflicts between Democrats and Republicans. (1)
o The news should spend more time covering how government policies affect American lives. (2)
o Don't know/not sure (3)

feature Some news organizations have started including a "Policy Review" feature where they describe a government policy, discuss how the policy has affected American lives, and evaluate whether the policy has succeeded or failed.

Would you support or oppose seeing this "Policy Review" feature where you get your news?

o   Strongly oppose (1)
o   Somewhat oppose (2)
o   Neither support nor oppose (3)
o   Somewhat support (4)
o   Strongly support (5)

intro Next, you will read a recent example of "Policy Review" news coverage from the *USA Today*.

   Before proceeding, please confirm that you are able to read and pay attention to this brief news story. You will be asked questions about it afterwards.

o   Yes, I am able to pay attention to the news story. (1)
o   No, I am not able to pay attention to this news story. (2)

health_positive
Policy Review: Home visit program enacted by Congress succeeds in helping children thrive

   The first few years of a child's life are essential to their long-term health and well-being. When a child is born into poverty or is exposed to other stressors early in life, they are more likely to have childhood health problems and even end up in jail later in life. For this reason, programs that help at-risk families provide a nurturing, healthy environment for young children are important for laying a foundation for future success. In 2010, Congress enacted the Education Begins at Home Act, that provides funding for trained nurses, social workers, and early childhood specialists to support new and expectant mothers in one-on-one meetings in their homes.

   Families across the country are benefiting from these home visiting programs.   When nurses partner with new parents, the incidence of child abuse, infant deaths, and emergency room visits for preventable injuries drops significantly.   Research also indicates that these programs can improve parenting skills, strengthen the bond between mother and child, reduce delinquency, and promote self-sufficiency. In one major study of the policy, children who participated in one of these programs were less likely to be involved in crimes and be arrested when they were

teenagers and young adults. This federal program has directly led to lasting change for our country's children.

---

health_negative

Policy Review: Home visit program enacted by Congress fails to help children thrive

The first few years of a child's life are essential to their long-term health and well-being. When a child is born into poverty or is exposed to other stressors early, they are more likely to have childhood health problems and even end up in jail later in life. For this reason, experts have tried to craft programs that help at-risk families provide a nurturing, healthy environment for young children and lay a foundation for future success. In 2010, Congress enacted the Education Begins at Home Act, that provides funding for trained nurses, social workers, and early childhood specialists to support new and expectant mothers in one-on-one meetings in their homes.   Unfortunately, these programs have largely failed to make a meaningful difference in families' lives.   When nurses partner with new parents, it has little impact on either the children or mothers' health.   Research also indicates that these programs do not reduce maternal smoking behavior, increase breastfeeding, or systematically prevent accidents. In one major study of the policy, children enrolled in the program as infants performed no better in school years later   This federal program has failed to work for our country's children.

education_positive

Policy Review: The No Child Left Behind Act helped America's children   When Congress passed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2002, concern about the quality of American public education was high. Students in the United States were falling behind their international peers in math, science, and reading, threatening the country's economic competitiveness. Moreover, achievement gaps between different racial and ethnic groups within the United States were stubbornly persistent and growing. The NCLB sought to solve these problems through more federal oversight of public education, with the goal of holding schools accountable and ensuring that all students make steady progress in the areas of math and reading.   No Child Left Behind made a positive difference in many of America's schools. It helped schools across the country identify students who were struggling by requiring them to collect performance data and to make the information public.   In addition, the law encouraged school administrators to develop new programs to improve the performance of students who might otherwise have fallen through the cracks. Soon after the law was enacted, student test scores jumped higher, and progress increased steadily for several years. Research indicates that NCLB was especially successful in improving fourth grade and eighth grade math scores for students from low-income families and other marginalized groups.   The educational gains from the NCLB were real, and the law brought the country a step closer to achieving educational equality.

education_negative

Policy Review: The No Child Left Behind Act failed America's children

When Congress passed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2002, concern about the quality of American public education was high. Students in the United States were falling behind their international peers in math, science, and reading, threatening the country's economic competitiveness. Moreover, achievement gaps between different racial and ethnic groups within the United States were stubbornly persistent and growing. The NCLB sought to solve these problems through more federal oversight of public education, with the goal of holding schools accountable and ensuring that all students make steady progress in the areas of math and reading.

Unfortunately, No Child Left Behind did not improve America's schools. The law punished schools that failed to meet arbitrary and unfair testing scores and forced them to make changes they could not pay for and whose value was questionable. In addition, the singular focus on standardized testing robbed many high-poverty schools of programs that enrich children and lead to better overall educational outcomes. Some schools cut recess to clear more time for test preparation, despite an abundance of research that shows exercise improves learning. The NCLB did not close achievement gaps and may even have made things worse for those it was designed to help.

enviro_positive
Policy Review: U.S. clean water policy is a success story

Fifty years ago, the waterways of the United States were in trouble. An estimated two-thirds of rivers, lakes, and coastal waters had become so toxic they were unsafe for fishing and swimming. The Cuyahoga River in Ohio, covered in oil slicks, routinely burst into flames. Industrial runoff, synthetic chemicals, and sewage in the nation's water bodies eventually made their way into local drinking water supplies, posing a direct threat to people's health.

Congress responded by regulating polluters, investing in wastewater infrastructure, and imposing national drinking water standards. As a result, water quality across the country rapidly improved, and today most major water bodies in the country are safe for fishing, swimming, and other recreational uses. In the Cuyahoga River, some 60 species of fish swim where the river once caught on fire. New York Harbor regularly hosts swimming events, something that would have been unthinkable before the nation enacted the Clean Water Act. Thanks to the Safe Drinking Water Act, Americans now enjoy some of the cleanest drinking water in the world. The nation's clean water laws have worked, and we are better off for it.

enviro_negative
Policy Review: U.S. clean water policy is a failure

Fifty years ago, the waterways of the United States were in trouble. An estimated two- thirds of rivers, lakes, and coastal waters had become so toxic they were unsafe for fishing and swimming. Industrial runoff, synthetic chemicals, and sewage in the nation's waterbodies

eventually made their way into local drinking water supplies, posing a direct threat to people's health. The 1972 Clean Water Act and the 1974 Safe Drinking Water Act were meant to solve these problems by ensuring "fishable, swimmable" water across the U.S. and by regulating contaminants in drinking water.

Today, despite decades of regulation and billions of dollars spent on water infrastructure improvements, serious problems remain.   About half of the nation's lakes and rivers are still too polluted for swimming, fishing, or drinking.   Agricultural and urban runoff pose huge problems for the nation's waterways, threatening livelihoods, ecosystems, and people's health. Meanwhile, the vast majority of chemicals used within the United States are completely unregulated, exposing millions of Americans to known and unknown risks when they ingest contaminated drinking water.   Unfortunately, the nation's clean water laws have failed to deliver on their promises.

interesting How interesting was the story you just read?

o   Not interesting at all (1)
o   Slightly interesting (2)
o   Moderately interesting (3)
o   Very interesting (4)
o   Extremely interesting (5)

attention2 What policies do you remember being mentioned in the article you read? Please check all that apply.

☐ No Child Left Behind (1)
☐ The Clean Water Act (2)
☐ The Education Begins at Home Act (3)
☐ The American Rescue Plan (4)

success You just read about ${e://Field/policy}, a policy enacted by Congress. We'd like to know *your* thoughts on that policy.

First, how would you describe ${e://Field/policy}?

o   Completely a failure (1)
o   Mostly a failure (2)
o   Partially a success and partially a failure (3)
o   Mostly a success (4)

o   Completely a success (5)

govhandle In general, how satisfied are you with how the U.S. government is currently handling the issue of ${e://Field/issue}?

o   Extremely dissatisfied (16)
o   Somewhat dissatisfied (17)
o   Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (18)
o   Somewhat satisfied (19)
o   Extremely satisfied (20)

importance Please tell us about your level of concern with the issue of ${e://Field/issue} in the U.S.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
${e://Field/capissue} is a big problem in the U.S. right now. (1)	o	o	o	o	o
I am personally very concerned about ${e://Field/issue} . (2)	o	o	o	o	o
It is urgent to address the issue of ${e://Field/issue} . (3)	o	o	o	o	o

govtrust Next, please give your opinion about the government's role in addressing ${e://Field/issue} in the U.S.

Do you agree or agree with the following statements?

23

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)
The government can be trusted to handle ${e://Field/issue}. (govtrust_6)	o	o	o	o	o
The issue of ${e://Field/issue} is best handled by individuals, not by governments. (govtrust_7)	o	o	o	o	o
It is possible to design effective government policy to address the issue of ${e://Field/issue}. (govtrust_8)	o	o	o	o	o

familiar Before reading the *USA Today* article, how familiar were you with ${e://Field/policy}?

o Not familiar at all (1)
o Slightly familiar (2)
o Moderately familiar (3)
o Very familiar (4)
o Extremely familiar (5)

donate_health The following non-profit group is actively working to improve children's health.

How likely would you be to do the following?

	Not at all likely (1)	Somewhat likely (2)	Very likely (3)
Follow this group on social media (1)	o	o	o
Subscribe to this group's emails (2)	o	o	o
Donate to this group (3)	o	o	o
Attend this group's local meetings online or in person (4)	o	o	o
Receive postal mail from this group (5)	o	o	o

donate_educ The following non-profit group is actively working to improve education in the U.S.

How likely would you be to do the following?

	Not at all likely (1)	Somewhat likely (2)	Very likely (3)
Follow this group on social media (1)	o	o	o
Subscribe to this group's emails (2)	o	o	o
Donate to this group (3)	o	o	o
Attend this group's local meetings online or in person (4)	o	o	o
Receive postal mail from this group (5)	o	o	o

donate_enviro The following non-profit group is actively working to improve the environment in the U.S.

How likely would you be to do the following?

	Not at all likely (1)	Somewhat likely (2)	Very likely (3)
Follow this group on social media (1)	o	o	o
Subscribe to this group's emails (2)	o	o	o
Donate to this group (3)	o	o	o
Attend this group's local meetings online or in person (4)	o	o	o
Receive postal mail from this group (5)	o	o	o

References

Baumgartner, F. R., & Jones, B. D. (1993). Agendas and Instability in American Politics. University of Chicago Press.

Bilandzic, H., Kalch, A., & Soentgen, J. (2017). Effects of Goal Framing and Emotions on Perceived Threat and Willingness to Sacrifice for Climate Change. *Science Communication*, 39(4), 466-491. https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547017718553 Mark

Blumenthal, M. and Cohn, J. (2015). The Surprising Reason so Many People Still Don't Like Obamacare, *Huffington Post*, 22 June. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/21/obamacare-approval-polls_n_7632070.html.

Brader, T. and Gadarian, S. H. (2023). Emotion and Political Psychology in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology, 3rd Edition*, Leonie Huddy, David Sears, Jack Levy, and Jennifer Jerit editors. p. 191-247.

Brenan, M. (2023). Majority in U.S. Still Say Government Should Ensure Healthcare, *Gallup*, 23 January. https://news.gallup.com/poll/468401/majority-say-gov-ensure-healthcare.aspx

Caldwell, L.A. (2017). President Obama Rallies Democrats to Defend Affordable Care Act. NBC News, 4 January. https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/president-obama-rallies-congressional-democrats-defend-affordable-care-act-n703226

Chapman, D.A., Lickel, B. & Markowitz, E.M. (2017). Reassessing Emotion in Climate Change Communication. *Nature Climate Change* **7**, 850–852. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-017-0021-9

Cobb, R. W. and Ross, M. H. (1997). Cultural Strategies of Agenda Denial. University Press of Kansas.

Downs A. (1972). Up and Down with Ecology: The Issue-attention Cycle. *Public Interest* 28:38.

Feinberg, M., & Willer, R. (2011). Apocalypse Soon?: Dire Messages Reduce Belief in Global Warming by Contradicting Just-World Beliefs. *Psychological Science*, 22(1), 34-38. https://doi-org.libezproxy2.syr.edu/10.1177/0956797610391911

Feldman, L. & Hart, P.S. (2016). Using Political Efficacy Messages to Increase Climate Activism. *Science Communication* 38:1, 99-127.

Fiorina. M. (1977). Congress: Keystone of the Washington Establishment. Yale University Press.

Hart, P. S., & Feldman, L. (2014). Threat Without Efficacy? Climate Change on U.S. Network News. *Science Communication*, 36(3), 325-351. https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547013520239

Hornsey, M.J. and Fielding, K.S. (2016). A Cautionary Note about Messages of Hope: Focusing on progress in reducing carbon emissions weakens mitigation motivation. *Global Environmental Change*, 39, 26-34.

Jones, M.D. & McBeth, M.K. (2010). A Narrative Policy Framework: Clear Enough to Be Wrong? *Policy Studies Journal*, 38: 329-353. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0072.2010.00364.x

Kennedy, B. Funk, C. & Tyson, A. (2023). "Majorities of Americans Say Too Little Is Being Done on Key Areas of Environmental Protection." Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2023/06/28/3-majorities-of-americans-say-too-little-is-being-done-on-key-areas-of-environmental-protection/

Kingdon, J. (1984). Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies. New York: Longman.

Klandermans, Bert. Mobilization and Participation: Social-Psychological Expansions of Resource Mobilization Theory. *American Sociological Review* 49, no. 5 (1984): 583–600. https://doi.org/10.2307/2095417.

Krugman, P. (2015). Imaginary Health Care Horrors, *New York Times*, March 30, A19.

Caldwell, L.A. (2017). President Obama Rallies Democrats to Defend Affordable Care Act, NBC News, 4 January. https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/president-obama-rallies-congressional-democrats-defend-affordable-care-act-n703226

Mann, M., Hassol S.J., and Toles, T. (2017). Doomsday scenarios are as harmful as climate change denial, *The Washington Post*, July 12.

Mayhew, D. (1974). Congress: The Electoral Connection. New Haven: Yale University Press.

McAdam, D. (1982). Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Meyer, D.S. (2006). Claiming Credit: Stories of Movement Influence as Outcomes. *Mobilization* 11 (3), 201.

Mettler S. The Policyscape and the Challenges of Contemporary Politics to Policy Maintenance. *Perspectives on Politics*. 2016;14(2):369-390. doi:10.1017/S1537592716000074

Mutz, D. C. 2021. Improving Experimental Treatments in Political Science. In *Advances in Experimental Political Science*, eds. Green, D. P. and Druckman, J. N., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 219-38.

O'Neill, S., & Nicholson-Cole, S. (2009). Fear Won't Do It: Promoting Positive Engagement With Climate Change Through Visual and Iconic Representations. *Science Communication*, 30(3), 355-379. https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547008329201

Schram, S. F., & Soss, J. (2001). Success Stories: Welfare Reform, Policy Discourse, and the Politics of Research. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 577(1), 49-65. https://doi.org/10.1177/000271620157700105

Shanahan, E.A., Jones, M.D, McBeth, M.O. and Radaelli, C.M. (2018). "The Narrative Policy Framework." In *Theories of the Policy Process*, *4th edition*, eds. Weible, C. M. and Sabatier, P. A. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Shepherd, S. & Kay, A.C. (2014). When Government Confidence Undermines Public Involvement in Modern Disasters. *Social Cognition* 32 (3), 206-16.

Skurka, C., Myrick, J.G. & Yang, Y. Fanning the flames or burning out? Testing competing hypotheses about repeated exposure to threatening climate change messages. *Climatic Change* **176**, 52 (2023). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-023-03539-8

Smith, N., & Leiserowitz, A. (2014). The Role of Emotion in Global Warming Policy Support and Opposition. *Risk Analysis: An International Journal*, *34*(5), 937–948.

Stone, D. (1997). Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making. W.W. Norton and Co.

USC Annenberg (2021). Political Divide Remains Critically High and Immigration Is Most Divisive Issue. https://today.usc.edu/inaugural-usc-polarization-index-reveals-political-divide-remains-critically-high-and-immigration-is-most-divisive-issue/