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Dynamics of Public Support for Clinton's
Health Security Act**

Taeku Lee and Mark Schlesinger

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**SIGNALING IN CONTEXT:
ELITE INFLUENCE AND THE DYNAMICS OF PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR
CLINTON'S HEALTH SECURITY ACT**

Taeku Lee

*Robert Wood Johnson Scholars in Health Policy Program, Yale University
Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University*

Mark Schlesinger

School of Medicine, Yale University

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A growing body of research shows the influence of political elites on the public's policy preferences. Yet we know little about the dynamics of elite influence or the cognitive mechanisms through which elite signals are interpreted in "real time"—that is, as public deliberation over a policy initiative actually evolves. In this paper, we present preliminary results from a longer-term project that explores elite influences on the dynamics of public support on policy proposals. Conceptually, we hypothesize how elite influences on mass opinion may change during the course of a policy debate. We pay especial attention to partisanship as a central contextual mediator of elite signals. Empirically, we exploit the unusual circumstances involving the health care reform debate in 1993-94, where debate was salient, elite signals were clear, and opinion polling was abundant. Methodologically, we propose a novel means of examining elite influences in real time. Using pooled data from 53 opinion polls fielded between August 1993 and August 1994, we find substantial evidence that elite signaling shaped public views on President Clinton's Health Security Act. This elite influence is often distinctly partisan in effect. But its influence varies in form, being sometimes informative, sometimes symbolic. And the duration of signaling effects too appears to vary depending on the nature of the signal and the predisposing characteristics of the respondent. We conclude with some thoughts on future directions for research in this area.

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The role of elites in shaping the public’s policy preferences is an enduring concern of political scientists. How citizens make sense of policy debates and the role elites play in informing or manipulating public reasoning holds important implications for how we evaluate the legitimacy, accountability, and stability of democratic decision-making. Despite a wealth of research on this topic, our knowledge of the dynamics and determinants of elite influence remains limited in several respects. In this paper, we propose a novel approach to the study of elite influence which we refer to as the study of *signaling in context*. This approach is committed to theorizing and testing elite influence in the actual contexts in which policies are debated and decided.

Conceptually, the paper advances our understanding of elite signaling by specifying with greater clarity than has past literature the ways in which various characteristics of citizens mediate how signals are perceived or interpreted. Methodologically, the paper develops new ways of modeling the nature and duration of elite influences on public opinion. Empirically, we take advantage of an unusual set of circumstances associated with the health care reform debate in 1993-94. This was a highly salient policy debate that encapsulated several distinct episodes of elite signals, generated by the Clinton Administration, Republican leaders on the Hill, and interest groups with interests at stake in health care reform. What’s more, public opinion on President Clinton’s Health Security Act (hereafter, HSA) was polled during this period on virtually a weekly (and at key moments, almost a daily) basis. By combining these polls, we can construct a dataset sufficiently detailed to track short-term fluctuations in the public’s support for the Health Security Act.

The paper begins by reviewing the literature on public knowledge of policy matters and the role of elite actors and institutions as a source of informational shortcuts. We then specify a set of hypotheses about how predispositions among citizens will mediate the influence of elite signals. These hypotheses are tested in the salient case of health care reform in the first Clinton Administration, which we describe in some detail. Next, we describe our methods for testing for the influence of these signals over public attitudes. Using data from 53 opinion polls fielded between late August, 1993 and early August, 1994, we examine the determinants and dynamics of public support for President Clinton’s health care reform plan in

four stages: (1) a baseline model of sociodemographic, political, and contextual variables and standard explanations of public support for HSA; (2) a model that tests for the influence of twelve prominent events that are likely to have signaled information to the mass public; (3) a model that examines the impact of partisanship on the differential influence of elite signals, in a debate that was highly partisan in nature; and (4) a model that attempts to specify the duration of signal influence over time. These stages present preliminary, yet persuasive evidence of the importance of looking at signaling in context. We conclude by specifying the detailed steps that we anticipate pursuing in future work and speculate on several empirical and normative implications from our results.

PUBLIC OPINION AND ELITE SIGNALING

Walter Lippmann, an early critic of the idea that public opinion should guide the actions of politicians, famously declared that the world of politics is “out of reach, out of sight, out of mind” of the general public (1922, 18). With the onset of survey research, Lippmann’s skepticism appeared to find amply empirical support in the early works of Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues at Columbia University and Philip Converse and his colleagues at the University of Michigan seemed to confirm.¹ Citizens’ views about basic political and policy matters varied over time and across policy domains in ways that seemed inchoate and ideologically incoherent. Thus the apparently unstable, ill-formed, and ill-informed nature of public opinion came to define the research agenda for the next few decades.² Today, the apparent political ignorance of the ordinary citizen is one of the most thoroughly documented and lamented facts about U.S. politics.³ These findings lead some democratic theorists to view the popular foundations of democratic governance as treacherous.⁴ If the public is insufficiently informed about the background facts, specific terms, and likely consequences of policy proposals and electoral alternatives, then it is difficult

¹ Lazarsfeld et al, 1944; Berelson et al, 1954; Campbell et al, 1960; Converse, 1964.

² The list of representative works in this area begin with Converse (1964, 1970) and McGuire (1968, 1969).

³ Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996.

⁴ Neuman, 1986; Habermas, 1988.

to view the public's resulting political judgments as a meaningful expression of what it wants out of government. Equally troubling, such an ill-informed ignorant public is apt to be disquietingly susceptible to manipulation by powerful political elites.⁵

Political scientists have marshalled two lines of defense to salvage a more sanguine view of democratic decision-making.⁶ The first recourse lies in the magic of aggregation. Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro (1992), among others, use this aggregative logic to argue that although individuals may be disquietingly ill-informed about politics, democratic citizens as an aggregate can achieve a remarkably stable level of "collective rationality" about political matters. The basic intuition harks back to Condorcet's "jury theorem" (1785). The Marquis used probability theory to demonstrate that the likelihood of a collection of individuals, under majority rule, arriving at a socially "correct" judgment rises exponentially as the number of the decision-makers increases. The implication is that if groups are reasonably large, individuals need not be Solomonic. They need only fare better than a coin flip for the *group* to achieve collectively optimal decisions.

Preference aggregation, however, is not always so magical. Under minimally democratic conditions for collective decision-making, Kenneth Arrow (1951) shows us that aggregation can be an impossibility because majority preferences among competing proposals can be unstable. Even with Condorcet's unadorned framework, optimistic predictions of collective wisdom can teeter on a knife's edge around the basic parameters of the model, like individuals' propensity to form competent political judgments.⁷ As we have just noted, if some fifty years of opinion research tells us anything, it is that we should be quite wary of what we assume about the judgmental competence of the mass public.

The second recourse to a more sanguine view is that individuals are inattentive not as a result of incompetence or ignorance, but rather as a rational response to the complexities and competing demands of modern life. Far from Aristotle's Athens, politics in the United States is professionalized. Idealized obligations of citizenship are trumped by countervailing demands (at work, at home,

⁵ See, e.g., Ginsberg, 1986; Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000; Lee, forthcoming.

⁶ See, e.g., Bartels, 1996; Althaus, 1998.

⁷ Austen-Smith and Banks, 1996; Feddersen and Pesendorfer, 1998.

from our embedded social ties) on our time, attention, and mental energies. Thus Stanley Feldman and John Zaller, the leading proponents of this view of public opinion, observe that response instability is fundamental to how we make choices and take shortcuts in our daily lives. Poll data simply tell us about how people “answer questions,” not about how they “reveal preferences” about their “true attitudes.”⁸

By this line of reasoning, citizens’ thoroughness of information or constancy of attention ought not be the criteria by which political competence is judged. Rather, the proper criteria ought to be whether or not individuals can draw reasonable inferences and fair judgments about their political affairs *given the level of information and attention they have*. Citizens in a democracy may be capable of adequate political judgments, despite incomplete or unreliable information by exploiting cognitive shortcuts. As Lupia and McCubbins put it

[R]easoned choice requires knowledge, knowledge requires information, and information requires attention. However, reasoned choice need not require either full information or unlimited attention. Instead reasoned choice requires information that generates accurate predictions about the choice (1998, 25).

Such cognitive shortcuts are not merely a convenience, but rather are fundamental to the way we consume and digest political information. Readily available and credible information shortcuts and interpretive filters are what enable us to make headway when faced with “hard” policy alternatives and electoral choices that are heavily technical, wildly uncertain, or means-oriented.⁹

Political scientists have identified a rich variety of contexts in which cognitive shortcuts that help citizens make sense of public affairs about which they are ill-informed.¹⁰ In particular, political elites have long been identified as the source of

⁸ See Feldman (1991), Feldman and Zaller (1992), Zaller (1992), and Feldman (1995).

⁹ Carmines and Stimson (1980) distinguish between issues that are technical, unknown, and means-oriented (like the environment, budgeting) from issues that are non-technical, very familiar, and ends-oriented (like race). Empirical examples of the use of signals when issues are “hard” can be found in Carmines and Kuklinski (1990), Lupia (1994), and in the arena of health care, Cobb and Kuklinski (1997).

¹⁰ See, e.g., McKelvey and Ordeshook, 1986; Ferejohn and Kuklinski, 1990; Popkin, 1991; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, 1991; Lupia, 1992; Schlesinger and Lau, 2000.

such heuristics. Today, the idea that public opinion is fundamentally top-down and elite-driven is virtually orthodoxy among political scientists.¹¹ This elite perspective is quite clearly voiced by Edward Carmines and James Kuklinski, who argue that “[c]ontrary to populist conceptions of political representation, American politics is elite-driven. The division of labor between those whose primary business is governing the nation and those for whom politics is secondary dictates that the former will, under most circumstances, set the agenda, define the parameters of major debates, and bring deliberations to their conclusion ... ‘insiders,’ be they in politics or business, occupy the driver’s seat (1990, 266).” This division of labor between elites and masses, notably, allows us to console our normative loyalties to popular sovereignty with the empirical constraints of an mostly inattentive and ill-informed electorate. Plainly put, the elite view makes minimal demands, only that citizens “take policy cues from ‘insiders,’ specifically, members of Congress ... By simply turning on the evening network news, people can ascertain ‘who is for what,’ a piece of information that is easily digestible and easily recalled (1990, 248).”¹²

Yet the mere fact that citizens can form political judgments with such minimal effort gives us little comfort or joy about democratic decision-making. The fact that ordinary citizens rely on elite cues may be an especially disquieting outcome if political elites are exploiting the mass public’s ignorance and inattention to suit their own private ends. Certainly, at least since Anthony Downs (1957), political scientists have taken it practically axiomatic that elites will act self-interestedly and strategically in competitive political environments.¹³ In fact, some

¹¹ The range of works that adopt an elite perspective on mass opinion is too numerous and wide-ranging to list exhaustively. A representative sample can be found in Brody (1991), Carmines and Stimson (1989), Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (forthcoming), Gerber and Jackson (1993), Iyengar (1991), Neuman (1986), Page and Shapiro (1992), Stimson (1991), Zaller (1992). For a critique of elite opinion theories, see Ginsburg (1986) and Lee (forthcoming).

¹² Carmines and Kuklinski also add that “For the political signaling process to function as we have suggested requires, first, that congressional members have the opportunities, incentives, and resources to act as effective signalers and, second, that citizens use inside information to form policy preferences (1990, 248).”

¹³ For formal treatments of the strategic and interactive dimensions of signaling, see Calvert (1985), McKelvey and Ordeshook (1986), Lupia (1992), and Lupia and McCubbins (1998). In this paper, we remain agnostic between psychologically-oriented and economically-oriented approaches to the study of elite influences on mass information and public opinion

of the most important recent works on public opinion develop this strategic element by explaining informational shortcuts within the rubric of the economic theory of signals.¹⁴ As Arthur Lupia describes this approach,

In a signaling game, a relatively well informed information provider has information that is relevant to a relatively uninformed decision maker. The information provider can attempt to affect the decision maker's behavior by sending a 'signal' about the consequences of the decision maker's actions. The inferences that the decision maker is able to draw from the content of the signal depend on prior beliefs about both the information provider's knowledge and the information provider's incentives for truth telling (Lupia, 1994, 66).

Political elites are the information providers who do the signaling and citizens are the relatively uninformed decision makers. Importantly, citizens are not powerless, passive recipients of such strategic elite signaling. Some signals may simply be uninformative. Others may be untrustworthy.¹⁵ Consequently, what we make of elite influence depends critically on how citizens actually *interpret* elite signals.

There is a voluminous research tradition that demonstrates the significance of elite signals as cognitive shortcuts. There are important limitations to this body of work, however. Theoretically, perhaps the most rigorously articulated account of elite influence is John Zaller's *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (1992).¹⁶ Zaller shows quite forcefully that the answers that individuals give to survey questions will vary as a function of one's level of political awareness and one's prior

vis-a-vis information shortcuts and interpretive filters. We do, however, use the term "signal" liberally, given its obviously attractive heuristic properties. For an excellent review of these approaches, see Gilens and Murakawa (forthcoming).

¹⁴ The economic theory of signaling arises in response to George Akerlof's "market for lemons" (1970). Namely, under conditions of adverse selection, potential gains to trade are lost because of asymmetric information and incomplete information. Michael Spence (1973) noted that these gains to trade can still be achieved if sellers of a high quality car could engage in a low cost means of conveying the quality of his automobile (low cost relative to the cost to sellers of low quality cars). Spence generally argued that under conditions where the marginal cost of an activity (e.g., signaling) were lower for sellers of high quality cars, a more optimal equilibrium could be obtained where quality of cars could be perfectly known by the buyers from the level of signalling that sellers engaged in. See Riley (1989), Banks (1991).

¹⁵ For the the growing significance of political trust in American life, see Nye, et al (1997), Warren (1999), and Putnam (2000).

¹⁶ For sustained critiques of Zaller, see Shapiro (1998), Lee (forthcoming).

political predispositions. With respect to elite influence, Zaller shows that the most sizeable opinion shifts occurs in those segments of the public that are likeliest to respond to elite signals (moderately sophisticated citizens). But the evidence is drawn from biennial American National Elections Study panel data that does not specify where and from whom respondents receive their political communications. As Zaller himself notes, “the shift in mass attitudes *roughly coincides* with the shift in elite attitudes (1992, 11, our emphasis)” and that “strictly speaking, one cannot use the results of my modeling to support even a weak argument for elite influence (272).”

Thus the linkage to elites is insufficiently discriminating and the elite bases of mass opinion is more of a theoretical presumption than it is an empirically-established fact. This sort of empirical insufficiency is also characteristic of other works,¹⁷ there is ample research that more directly and discriminatingly link changes in public attitudes to elite actions. These studies – such as Lupia (1994) and Lupia and McCubbins (1988) – generally either construct survey experiments that confront participants with artificial stimuli or exploit natural experiments in which data on public opinion is serendipitously collected to coincide with elite signals.¹⁸ Here the case is much more convincing that elite signaling does in fact inform and persuade subjects. More specifically, these studies find that elite influence will vary depending on the type of signal involved, the type of cognitive processing that occurs, the characteristics of individuals receiving signals, the characteristics of elites transmitting signals, and the relationship between elites signaling and the public interpreting the signals.

Yet experimental and quasi-experimental studies can be far removed from the hurly-burly of the actual political world. The responses of college students in a structured research setting (a typical context of such experiments) is likely to differ considerably, for instance, from those of citizens with greater political sophistication, more experience in assessing public affairs, and greater exposure to an array of

¹⁷ For example, see Carmines and Stimson (1989) and Gerber and Jackson (1993).

¹⁸ For a review of existing literature on elite influence on mass attitudes, see Gilens and Murakawa (forthcoming). See also Chaiken (1980), Eagly and Chaiken (1993), Petty and Cacioppo (1986).

informational sources, ranging from the media to discussions with family or friends. Thus what we know conspicuously less well is how elite influences play out, on net, in the actual circumstances in which real policy alternatives are contested. Put more sharply, experimental studies are limited by the difficulty of calibrating the “signals” in the experiment to match the salience of real-world communications from elites to the general public.

ENRICHING THE SIGNALING MODEL

In this paper, we improve upon these limitations by changing the temporal boundaries of opinion change. Most micro-level accounts of opinion change are constrained in temporal scope by the availability of data. For instance, the most commonly used non-experimental data to study opinion dynamics are panel data, and these surveys capture opinion shifts over arbitrarily defined time periods (e.g., the biennial period of the ANES). Clearly, over the course of such arbitrary periods, individuals are exposed to a dizzying welter of signals transmitted from countervailing sets of elite actors through a proliferation of mass media, and in ways that may contest the strength of elite influences. Note that this is not simply a matter of long or short time horizons, but of *arbitrarily* fixed time periods that presume a particular signal duration and a particular time horizon for public interpretation of elite signals.

We propose to shift the study of opinion dynamics from data-driven time periods to event-driven time periods. Specifically, we propose to exploit the variations in time periods between elite signals and individuals’ responses during the lifecourse of political deliberation on a particular policy alternative as the explicit focus of our analysis. Our approach promises several distinct advantages over data-defined studies of opinion dynamics. For one thing, we are not restricted to choosing particular signals on *a priori*, often data-driven, grounds (which may have the effect of selecting for signals that are likely to inform and persuade). At least in principle, our approach allows us to test the influence of any plausible signaling event. Thus it enables a more discriminating account about which signals succeed (or fail), how they succeed (or fail), and why. In addition, by directly measuring elite cues in real-time, we are better able to establish their influence on

mass opinion in non-experimental contexts, even absent any individual-level data about where individuals receive their information and from whom. This is because we can exploit the actual patterns of political communication and media coverage for a given signaling event. As a result, our methodology allows us to avoid some of the inferential obstacles facing many existing works.

Our first step is to summarize a general framework for political persuasion. Importantly, our innovation is to consider how the dimensions of this general framework are likely to vary as we consider elite influence over the course of public deliberation on a particular policy matter. To preview, the basic story is one of varying uncertainty and attentiveness over time. For instance, the uncertainty over the likely consequences of a policy alternative is likely to be much greater early in the course of public deliberation than later. Moreover, the depth and clarity of deliberation on an issue is unlikely to be constant over time, but crest and ebb with changing tides of public interest and elite focus. The public may simply tire of a debate and elites relentlessly face political opportunity costs and competing demands on their time and focus in other issue domains.

We take as a general framework that political persuasion varies as a function of four factors: signaler, signal, transmission, and receiver characteristics.¹⁹ Signaler characteristics define the *intentions* of elites. When elites convey signals to the public, for instance, they may aim to shift the mean opinion in a particular direction, to alter the intensity of held preferences, or to reframe an issue along a novel issue dimension. Notably, as the now substantial literature on game theory reminds us, the means to that goal may be strategic or sincere.

Signal characteristics define the *information* that is conveyed in elite messages. Zaller (1992, 40-42) distinguishes between “persuasive messages” (those “arguments or images providing a reason for taking a position or point of view”) and “cueing messages” (which “consist of ‘contextual information’ about the ideological or partisan implications of a persuasive message”). Lupia and McCubbins (1998) make an analogous, although not identical, distinction between signals that convey

¹⁹ As our discussion of each of these factors will make obvious, this is a synthesis of multiple levels of analysis – from the strategic interaction of elites in game theory to the nature and dynamics of political communications to signal reception at the level of mass behavior.

knowledge (defined as information that helps individuals accurately predict the consequences of policy alternatives) and signals that convey trust (described as information that helps individuals determine whether the incentives between agent and principal—or messenger and receiver—are compatible). The latter category – contextual information about the intentions of the signaler – is important precisely because elite signals may not always be sincerely conveyed.

Transmission characteristics define how political communications *flow* from elites to the masses. For instance, signals are most likely to inform and persuade when they are clear, precise, salient, and persistent. Signals enjoy clarity when they point the public unambiguously in one particular direction. Conversely, signals are apt to be muddled and muffled when they are simultaneously multivalent and cross-cutting. Signals enjoy precision when they are successfully targeted to particular audiences. Precision is apt to matter simply because the interests and attentiveness of the mass public is generally heterogeneous and segmented. Signals enjoy salience when they are emblazoned in bold print on the front page, rather than hidden in obscure, seldom glanced pages. And signals enjoy persistence when they are broadcast over an extended time horizon.

Lastly, receiver characteristics define how citizens *interpret* elite signals. Zaller’s “Receive-Accept-Sample” model of mass opinion well-illustrates the dynamics of signal interpretation. Zaller distinguishes between two distinct stages in how individuals respond to elite messages: (1) the reception stage, and (2) the acceptance stage.²⁰ The probability of a citizen receiving a signal—that is, noticing that some elite actor has done or said something of interest—depends upon the citizen’s attentiveness to the issue in question. Specifically, the more engaged and attentive an individual is to an issue, the more likely she is to be exposed to, comprehend, and thus receive political communications concerning that issue (1992,

²⁰ The third stage, sampling, refers to the processes by which members of the public draw on their short-term reservoir of considerations on a given issue in order to respond to survey questions. Because this has less direct relevance to our analyses, we focus here on the first two cognitive stages.

42). Conversely, the politically disconnected or unsophisticated are less likely to respond to elite signals, largely because they never notice them in the first place.²¹

The propensity to accept a signal, once it has been received, represents the second stage in the interpretive process. For Zaller, whether or not one adopts a received signal as a relevant consideration for a given issue depends on one's prior predispositions—the values, interests, and experiences that form a reliable basis for accepting or rejecting the political communications to which an individual is exposed (1992, 22). Individuals are able to resist accepting persuasive messages that are inconsistent with one's prior predispositions if they have adequate contextual information to link that message to their predispositions (1992, 45).²² This is one reason why citizens who are strongly partisan and highly attentive exhibit fairly coherent and stable political attitudes over time while the rest of the electorate appears to dance chaotically like a pussywillow caught in a tornado. All else equal, then, signals will have the greatest impact on those citizens who are attentive enough to notice them (i.e., receive the signal) but not so well-informed that they can use available contextual information to reject them as a relevant consideration on an issue (i.e., accept the signal).

Elite Signaling, Partisan Divides, and Empirical Propositions

²¹ This argument is plausible and mostly supported by evidence in Zaller's book and in subsequent research (Zaller, 1994). Nonetheless, the specification of how attentiveness influences reception is somewhat limited. Zaller essentially views attentiveness as an amplifier. Under this view, individuals who are likely to be receptive to signals are likely to be receptive to *all signals*. This rendition excludes the possibility that attentiveness acts as a filter instead. That is, people may be selectively attentive to only certain types of signals, much like the lens on a camera filter blocks certain wavelengths of light. Certainly, there is ample evidence against Lazarsfeld and Berelson's original arguments about selective attention (Lazarsfeld et al, 1944; Berelson et al, 1954; cf. Campbell et al, 1960). However, given the limited time that citizens have for public affairs, the notion of selective attentiveness is at least plausible. In fact, more recent research suggests that selective reception needs to be taken more seriously (e.g., Cohen and Dawson, 1993; Jones, 1994; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995).

²² This acceptance function is pre-cognitive for Zaller, who argues that "[t]his postulate makes no allowance for citizens to think, reason, or deliberate about politics: If citizens are well informed, they react mechanically to political ideas on the basis of external cues about their partisan implications, and if they are too poorly informed to be aware of these cues, they tend to uncritically accept whatever ideas they encounter (1992, 45)."

How are these dimensions of elite influence and political persuasion likely to vary over the course of public deliberation on a policy matter? Everyday politics, to borrow William James' infamous phrase, is a "great blooming, buzzing confusion" and academic scholars are perhaps no better equipped to disentangle the mess than are ordinary citizens. We take two shortcuts of our own in order to clear an analytic path through this blooming, buzzing confusion. First, although we are cognizant of the importance of the chain of influence from elite actions to mass interpretation, we remain largely agnostic on signaler motivations and strategic interactions, at least for this version of the paper. In the present case, we take elite signals on Clinton's Health Security Act either as they appear in mass media coverage or as scholars of health care reform interpret them. Our primary focus is on bridging signal and transmission characteristics to individual-level interpretation of elite signals.

Second, for this version of the paper, we pay especial attention on partisanship as the focal lens through which individuals choose to receive and accept elite signals. Previous works on elite opinion cues like Carmines and Stimson (1989) and Gerber and Jackson (1993) suggest that partisanship is fundamental to how we interpret elite signals. What's more, the present case of Clinton's Health Security Act is one that evokes especially powerful partisan considerations. In terms of individual-level models like Zaller's, it is important to note that we consider partisanship not just as a key determinant of whether we accept a particular message as a relevant consideration. Rather, partisanship is also apt to define how we receive that political message in the first place. Stronger partisans are likelier to be politically engaged, attentive, and hold more fully developed views of the political world (e.g., Converse, 1964; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993).

Keeping these simplifications in mind, how are signals likely to influence public opinion during the course of political deliberation on a particular policy proposal? We assume that at the very onset of most policy reform proposals, there is a very high level of uncertainty within the electorate about the terms of the proposal and its likely consequences. People may know a lot about the general issue that the proposal addresses and they may even know a lot about the field of policy alternatives under consideration, but they are unlikely to know which i's are dotted and which t's are crossed, and what implications to draw from this.

Hypothesis #1: individuals are more likely to respond to elite signals early in the course of public deliberation on a policy alternative than they are in the later stages.

The simple rationale for Hypothesis #1 is that this initial uncertainty over the consequences of a policy alternative is unlikely to hold throughout the course of public deliberation. This is likely to be the case irrespective of intervening individual-level traits, such as attentiveness or sophistication. Of course, attentiveness and sophistication are likely to covary positively with responsiveness to elite signals at any given point of public debate on a policy alternative. To the extent that high attentiveness and intensity of predispositions occur jointly, we should also expect strong partisanship to covary positively with responsiveness to elite signals. This leads us to our next proposition:

Hypothesis #2: strong partisans are more likely to respond to elite signals at the outset of public deliberations regardless of whether the signal is purely persuasive or whether it cues individuals to partisan considerations.

The force behind Hypothesis #1 and #2 is the uncertainty facing citizens at the outset of public deliberation. As the public deliberation evolves, this selective receptivity of strong partisans too is likely to change. As we know from Zaller and Lupia and McCubbins, information is not always useful; sometimes it can be extraneous. Thus once the initial uncertainty over the likely consequences of a policy reform is resolved, additional messages are unlikely to influence highly sophisticated citizens as the debate unfolds. Not so for less sophisticated citizens. A corollary to Hypothesis #2, then is, that strong partisans are less likely to respond to elite signals in later stages of public deliberation than are weak partisans or non-partisans, all else being equal.²³

²³ To be clear, the reason for this is the non-linear interaction between attentiveness and sophistication. Once individuals who are highly attentive and knowledgeable (i.e., strong partisans in this case) have resolved enough uncertainty about a policy debate to choose sides, they are unlikely to find much use for new signals. Individuals who are inattentive and remain so are apt to be impervious to elite signals throughout the lifecourse of a policy debate because the signals are never received. As public deliberation unfolds, then, it is the undefined middle (in terms of attention and sophistication) that are likeliest to respond to new signals. Since we have no strong basis for categorizing the attentiveness and

Public deliberations on a policy alternative may begin to unfold in a particular trajectory, but they are unlikely to stay the course. For instance, when an issue is cast in partisan terms, the signaling may come from Democratic elites or Republican elites; they may result from collaboration or competition; they may occur coterminously or sequentially. Importantly, like acts in a play, public deliberation on a policy proposal is apt to undergo a distinct narrative course. If either party signals a “policy switch” or significantly reframes the partisan casting of the policy alternative in question, then the information environment in which signaling occurs changes. In effect, this reintroduces an element of uncertainty to the debate, and attentiveness and sophistication again come to play.

Hypothesis #3: strong partisans are more likely to respond to elite signals when the direction of partisan cues is switched or reframed.

Simply put, we expect this because strong partisans are most likely to notice this switch in the information environment. In addition to policy reversals and issue framing, the trajectory of public deliberation is also likely to go through lulls in which the public’s interest and levels of information are likely to diminish. Even when the stakes are high, political elites and ordinary citizens alike are faced with competing demands on their time and attention. Thus the resolution of uncertainty in the initial stages of deliberation become “unlearned” through attenuation and disinterest, and we effectively return to a state of incomplete information. Following the same logic of Hypothesis #3, then, strong partisans are also more likely to respond to an elite signal when it follows a discernible lull in public deliberation on a policy proposal.

Of course, during these stages of a policy debate—when elites may switch positions, reframe the deliberation, or take a time-out—we are never likely to be as uncertain about matters as we were at the onset of the debate. Too, some citizens are more likely to be forgetful than others. Recall from Figure One that there are at least three possible effects of signals over time.

sophistication of non-partisans and weak partisans except vis-à-vis strong partisans, we simply postulate that these groups are likelier to respond to elite signals as the deliberation unfolds (again, relative to strong partisans).

Hypothesis #4: strong partisans are likelier to retain signal messages over time than non-partisans and weak partisans.

The rationale for Hypothesis #4 is perhaps self-evident by now. Because strong partisans are more engaged and attentive, they are likelier to hold a particular political message as a relevant consideration over longer durations. They are more likely to follow an issue over long periods of time. They are also more likely to revisit that issue even in the absence of any elite signaling in their everyday political life because they are likelier to be mobilized by local activists and socially connected to like-minded (i.e., strongly partisan) citizens.

Thus far, our hypotheses have focused less on the partisan nature of signals than on the timing of signals (partisan or not) during the course of public deliberation on an issue. This does not mean that partisan cues *per se* are irrelevant.

Hypothesis #5: if an elite cue is partisan, the responsiveness to that cue is likely to divide down partisan lines. This divergence in direction of responsiveness is likely to be stronger among strong partisans.

Note that Hypothesis #5 does not imply a linkage between a specific party and a specific direction of response. For example, our proposition is not that strong Republicans will always respond to partisan cues by becoming more intensely opposed to liberal policy reform. As Downsian models of public choice would predict, the direction of mass response depends on where individuals' policy preferences are vis-a-vis the elite policy positions that are signaled. Rather, our proposition is that when a signal is partisan in nature, Republicans and Democrats will go separate ways in their response. This divergence, moreover, should be stronger among strong Republicans and strong Democrats.

We make no claim that these hypotheses are exhaustive. They comprise a set of expectations that strike us as reasonable and relevant to our task of examining how elite influences bear out when we examine signaling *in context*. Of particular note, these hypotheses about how signaling in context works do not nullify what we might expect about elite influence generally from models such as Zaller's and Lupia and McCubbins's. For instance, Lupia and McCubbins (1998) draw the following

four hypotheses in their work that strike us as eminently plausible in the issue context that we examine: (1) all signals are not equally informative; (2) all signalers are not equally persuasive; (3) signals are not more persuasive because the signaler is more like you; (4) nor are they less persuasive if the signaler is less like you.

Our goal for the remainder of this paper is to specify and implement some empirical tests that will allow us to differentiate among these various models of signal interpretation and these alternative models of how partisanship mediates the ways in which the public responds to elite signals. To do this, we need to find a policy debate that was sufficiently salient to grab the attention of much of the public, sufficiently contentious to induce pollsters to survey public attitudes regularly throughout the course of debate, and sufficiently important to induce elites to devote considerable attention to trying to shape public opinion.

THE CONTEXT: THE CLINTON HEALTH CARE REFORM DEBATE

President Clinton's proposal to reform the nation's health care system, strategically named the Health Security Act, meets these criteria nicely. Health care reform in 1993 and 1994 was an issue that enjoyed tremendous salience in the public's mind and on the political agenda. The secretive manner of by which Clinton's Task Force went about drafting the HSA and its splashy public introduction in September, 1993 meant that, at least initially, there was a "hard" issue for the public to decide upon—there was substantial uncertainty about the terms of HSA and its likely consequences for the costs, coverage, and quality of care for individual health care consumers and for the nation's health care system writ large (Yankelovich, 1995). Because so much was at stake, substantively and politically, the debate over health care reform was characterized by a plethora of elite positioning and attempts to influence mass opinion.

The Basic Narrative of Reform

The Emerging Issue: The prelude to the political struggle over health care reform in 1993-1994 is a bubbling undercurrent of public discontent with the U.S. health care system and a steady upsurge in public support in favor of health care reform. In 1987, about two-thirds of respondents to a Louis Harris poll either felt the need for

“fundamental changes” or to “completely rebuild” the health care system; by 1991, this figure rose to more than over 90 percent (Jacobs, Shapiro, and Schulman, 1993). This dissatisfaction with the U.S. health care system is backed up by an increasing support for greater government spending in health care: the General Social Survey’s data shows a fairly stable proportion of just under 60 percent of the public favoring greater spending on health care from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s; by 1990, this level rises to more than 70 percent (Shapiro and Young, 1989; Jacobs, Shapiro, and Schulman, 1993). And for many, the concern about health care was very personal: almost two in three Americans were concerned about their insurance status in the future (Blendon and Donelan, 1991). To the extent that these aggregate statistics tell us something about the “collective rationality” of the American public, they point clearly to a broad public mandate to do something, and something drastic, to reform the nation’s health care system.

These were not simply the capricious, irrational, or hyperemic fears of a nation held hostage by macroeconomic transformations or media-based fiction. Almost 40 million Americans were uninsured in 1992 and another 40 million Americans were underinsured. In short, almost one in three persons in the United States were either uninsured or underinsured. Globalization, mergers, corporate-downsizing, the 1990-91 recession, among other economic phenomena, all served to raise the insurance risk across blue-collar, white-collar, and managerial employment sectors. Moreover, health care costs took a monstrous (and growing) bite out of the nation’s GDP (\$1 out of every \$7, roughly), with no immediate abatement in sight.

This groundswell for reform was not immediately obvious to legislators within the Beltway, however. The impetus for elite attention on health care reform required a catalyzing event: Harris Wofford’s astonishing victory in 1991 over Richard Thornburgh in a special run-off election for the U.S. Senate (Hacker, 1997). With the election just three months away, the little-known Wofford—a former college president and civil rights activist—remained about 40 percentage points behind the better-known former Pennsylvania governor and former U.S. attorney general. In early August, at a meeting with Wofford, James Carville, Paul Begala, and a select few, Wofford’s pollster, Mike Donilon, presented poll results that suggested that pushing national health care reform might work as a pivotal issue around which to turn the tide of the election. The strategy worked. Wofford, to the

surprise of many, won with a stout 55 percent of the popular vote, and national health care reform, almost overnight, found its place as a key issue in the 1992 presidential election.

Riding this high tide of public sentiment, Bill Clinton pushed health care reform to the front of his proposed policy initiatives. As the election campaigning began in early 1992, health care reform stood alongside the economy and foreign affairs as the third most important policy matter that voters wanted presidential candidates to address in the next Administration (Blendon, Edwards, and Hyam, 1992). Following John Kingdon's account of how policies rise to the political agenda, Theda Skocpol notes that the underlying problems of insuring Americans and keeping the costs of the U.S. health care system in check converged with the uprise of a favored set of policy alternatives and a general sense that the moment had come for political action on the matter (Kingdon, 1984; Skocpol, 1997, 29). Reform plans tended to cluster around three general approaches to reform: market-oriented reforms that aimed at properly incenting health care consumption through incremental reforms; Canadian-style "single payer" plans geared to ensuring universal coverage; hybrid models to induce competition while achieving universal coverage through "play or pay" schemes.²⁴

On November 3rd, 1992, Clinton won his bid for the nation's presidency. By all accounts, the prospects of meaningful health care reform appeared imminent. Days after Clinton's inauguration, Ira Magaziner mapped out a "Work Plan" for health care reform and Hillary Clinton was chosen to head up the President's Task Force on Health Care Reform to considerable public acclamation.²⁵ Any momentum from Clinton's electoral success quickly dissipated, however. The Clinton Administration quickly found itself embroiled in a budget battle and distracted by

²⁴ Bush favored an incremental market-based approach to health care reform. Clinton rejected single payer and incremental approaches and eventually moved away from "play or pay" approach as well, before promoting a hybrid of "managed competition." On September 24, 1992, candidate Clinton spoke to a crowd at Merck Pharmaceuticals in Rahway, New Jersey and framed health care reform as part of a multi-pronged strategy for economic growth, improve education, and aim for changes in the global economy.

²⁵ Behind the scenes: Alain Enthoven for managed competition and employer mandates and John Garamendi (Insurance Commissioner of California), Walter Zelman (also ICC), and Paul Starr (Princeton) for health purchasing alliances.

the controversy it had fomented over its policy on gays in the military. The planning, scheduled to take three to four months, wound up taking nine months. The Task Force did not arrive at its plan until the fall of 1993. What's more, the central theme of the plan—namely, to achieve universal coverage through employer mandates, with government oversight over competing health care plans through “health alliances”—sounded simple enough, but the Health Security Act was the product of a 630 person staff and resulted in a 1,342 page document.

In the end, Clinton's Health Security Act suffered an undignified demise. Figure Two shows the diminished public support for HSA in no uncertain terms. While public support surpassed 70 percent of the nation shortly after President Clinton introduced his reform plan before Congress in September, 1993, it dropped to below 40 percent by the following summer. In Paul Starr's words, “[t]he Republicans enjoyed a double triumph, killing reform and then watching jurors [in the November election] find the President guilty. It was the political equivalent of the perfect crime (from Johnson and Broder, 1997, p. 602).” The demise of Clinton's HSA is a political whodunit that has already inspired a half dozen book-length accounts, and is sure to lead to more. What is already well-established in one of such account by Jacobs and Shapiro (1995, 2000) is that public opinion is not the villain, but perhaps the weapon.

Jacobs and Shapiro plainly declare that “it is simply not the case that public opinion has dictated policy. Rather, information and discussion among elites have largely shaped public opinion, and polling has been the handmaiden of this process (1995, p. 413).” Individuals are not passive containers of political attitudes that opinion polls tap into, but very often the target of elite efforts to craft public opinion. In fact, Jacobs and Shapiro argue that “[t]he fundamental political mistake committed by Bill Clinton and his aides was in grossly overestimating the capacity of a president to ‘win’ public opinion and to use public support as a leverage to overcome known political obstacles (2000, p. 115).” For the present, we take the broad strokes of Jacobs and Shapiro's contention as a given in this paper. That is, our aim is not to explain the decline in public support for HSA shown in Figure Two. Rather, our aim is to examine the influence of elite signals in this decline, controlling for the underlying determinants of support for health care reform.

The Role of Partisanship in the Health Care Debate: In the early stages of deliberation over health care reform, the issue was framed in almost exclusively bi-partisan terms. Many Republicans in Congress were convinced that popular pressures for political action made it politically infeasible to directly oppose health care reform. “Senate Minority Leader Bob Dole and other Republican leaders agreed that explicitly setting out to ‘blow up the bridges and watch the trains wreck’ would paint the party as obstructionist with centrist Americans and cost it dearly in the 1994 and 1996 elections.” (Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000, p.121). When the President introduced his plan to the nation at the end of September, opposition from all but the most right-wing elements of the party was markedly muted. When Hilary Clinton testified at a series of Congressional hearings in early October, “the praise was bipartisan” (Johnson and Broder, 1996, p.184).

However, as the fall progressed, the debate over health care reform began to assume increasingly partisan tones. Most striking were the statements of Bob Michel, the notably soft-spoken Minority Leader in the House, who followed the Clintons to the podium of a press conference in late October and unexpectedly attacked the Health Security Act in harsh terms. But it was not simply the case that criticism of the plan itself was growing harsher. Republicans began to sense that there was more at stake, for both the reputations of the parties and their claims to providing leadership for the country. By November 1993, the Project for the Republican future, headed by William Kristol, had identified health care as a key battle ground for the party, and sought to rally Republican politicians to take a common stand opposing any substantial health care reform.

In late 1993, insurgent antigovernment Republicans realized that their ideological fortunes within their own party, as well as the Republican interest in weakening the Democrats as a prelude to winning control of Congress and the presidency, could be splendidly served by first demonizing and then totally defeating the Clinton plan, along with any compromise devised by congressional Democratic leaders (Skocpol, 1997, pp.144-45).

In short, over a three month span an issue that had been portrayed to the public as involving a bi-partisan mandate was increasingly cast in terms of partisan competition. Although Democrats (including the Clintons) sought initially to

preserve a bi-partisan momentum for reform, by the spring of 1994 they had joined in the process of painting the conflict as increasingly partisan and ideological. The tone and intent of these elite messages is clear. What remains to be seen is how the American public perceived this shift in framing, how partisan identification mediated this perception, and what sort of cleavages in public opinion emerged as a result.

Elite Signals During the Reform Debate

During a period of intensive and extensive elite efforts to manipulate public opinion, it is challenging to identify a specific set of candidate signals. In this version of the paper, we use several book-length and special issue journal treatments on Clinton's attempt to reform health care as secondary sources to identify the following twelve primary signals²⁶:

1. September 6-11²⁷: Press leaks on Labor Day suggest that HSA might ask for big cuts in Medicare. In early September, Ira Magaziner and his staff had drafted a version of the Clinton plan. After a meeting with the House Ways and Means Health Subcommittee, a copy of this draft was sent from Hillary Clinton to Pete Stark. As Haynes Johnson and David Broder note, "[i]n the ways of Washington, that supposedly secret copy of the plan spread like wildfire (1997, 168)." By September 11th, early stories describing the details of Clinton's proposed plan ran in both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Robert Pear, the *New York Times* correspondent began his front page story thus: "After seven months of secret deliberations, President Clinton has settled on a bold plan to guarantee health insurance for all Americans while vastly expanding Federal power to control private spending on medical care."²⁸

²⁶ Hacker, 1997; Johnson and Broder, 1997; Skocpol, 1997; Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000; *Journal of Health Politics, Policy, and Law*, 1995.

²⁷ In cases where signaling events span several days, we identify the mid-point as the signal date.

²⁸ *New York Times*, "Clinton's Health Plan: Clinton Offering Health Plan with Guarantee of Coverage and Curb on Private Spending," September 11, 1993.

2. September 22: President Clinton formally presents the Health Security Act before a Joint Session of Congress. Clinton declares that “Our health care system takes 35 percent more of our income than any other country, insures fewer people, requires more Americans to pay more and more for less and less, and gives them fewer choices. There is no excuse for that kind of system and it’s time to fix it (from Skocpol, 1997, p. 1).” As Haynes Johnson and David Broder: “the first wave of reactions—in the polls and in the comments from congressional leaders of both parties—was so favorable that a mood of euphoria enveloped the White House (1997, 169).”
3. September 29-October 1: Hillary Clinton holds a series of five televised Congressional hearings on HSA. Johnson and Broder note that “Most members of Congress, in that male-dominated bastion of political power, were almost obsequious—many women thought patronizing—in their praise (1997, p. 183).” News coverage of the First Lady’s testimony was equally unequivocal: the *New York Times* declared that “Hillary Rodham Clinton dazzled five Congressional committees last week, advocating health care legislation in the most impressive testimony on as complete a program as anyone could remember, and raising hopes that an issue that had stymied Congress for 50 years was now near solution (1997, p. 187).” At the same time, however, the American Medical Association urges physicians to oppose the key elements of Clinton’s health plan. As Dr. Lonnie Bristow, chair of the AMA put it with metaphoric flourish, “While we agree with [Clinton’s] general diagnosis, we disagree with some of this treatment decisions. He’s prescribing some pretty stiff, new and untried medicine. We are worried that no one really knows what the side effects are going to be.”²⁹
4. October 11-13: Republican congressional leaders go negative. Newt Gingrich describes HSA on *Meet the Press* as a “monstrosity” and “big government” and Dick Armey writes a letter in the *Wall Street Journal* that unveils the Republican Party’s “flow chart” of the Clinton plan and claims it “would create 59 new federal programs or bureaucracies, expand 20 others, impose

²⁹ *New York Times*, “Clinton’s Health Plan: A.M.A. Rebels Over Health Plan in Major Challenge to President,” September 30, 1993.

79 new federal mandates and make major changes in the tax code ... the Clinton plan is a bureaucratic nightmare.”³⁰

5. October 27: The full text of the Health Security Act is released. This is followed by a strong negative Republican response from Bob Michel, who argued that Clinton’s plan would launch the U.S. “on an uncharted course of government-run medicine.” Johnson and Broder note that Michel’s speech was “as clear a signal as possible that House Republicans were now willing to mount a strong public attack on the Clinton plan (1997, 192).”
6. December 2: William Kristol, former chief aide to Vice President Dan Quayle circulates a confidential memo among the Republican leadership to take an “aggressive and uncompromising counterstrategy” to kill HSA in early December. Kristol argues that Republicans should “convey the message that mandate health alliances and government price controls will destroy the character, quality, and inventiveness of American medical care.”³¹ The themes in Kristol’s memo are picked up in mid-December as Newt Gingrich describes HSA as “socialism” and Dole declares that “there is no health care crisis.”
7. January 25: President Clinton’s State of the Union Address pushes universal coverage moreso than details about HSA. Clinton vows to veto any legislation that does not guarantee coverage for all citizens. Senator Dole’s response argues again that “[o]ur country has health care problems but not a health care crisis and uses the infamous “Spaghetti chart” to warn viewers about “a massive overdose of government control.”³²
8. February 3-5: the Business Roundtables comes out in early February against HSA and in favor of Tennessee Representative Jim Cooper’s more incrementalist approach. This is followed by the Chamber of Commerce’s

³⁰ Skocpol, 1997, p. 143-144

³¹ Skocpol, 1997, p. 145.

³² Johnson and Broder, 1997, p.270. Johnson and Broder write that the spaghetti chart “depicted a bewildering array of new government agencies and programs. Incomprehensible arrows and boxes bore labels of government bureaucratic acronyms run amok: PWBA, NGFSFHP, NQMP, CHBI, NLPP, NHDAC, PTAC, RAAC ... Sprinkled throughout the chart were other words designed to trigger negative public reactions: taxes, regulation, drug-pricing scheme (1997, 271).”

- public declaration against the HSA and employer mandates, despite earlier apparent posturing to the contrary.³³ On February 5th, the National Association of Manufacturers comes out against HSA. Shortly after this, on February 9th, the Congressional Budget Office's report comes out: although it initially calculated that HSA would increase health care costs, that estimate was revised as likely to decrease health care costs. Also counts health alliances as part of government.
9. February 16-23: The Clinton Administration undertakes "staged nationally televised health care events" to try to play up the benefits of Clinton's reform plan for the elderly and thus convince the AARP to endorse HSA. In a Feb. 23rd meeting, the AARP leadership decline to do so, but notes that Clinton's proposal is the "strongest and most realistic blueprint to date for achieving our goals"³⁴ As one member of the AARP board described her ambivalence, "Our members are confused about what is in the various health care plans. As people learn about the proposals, they are apprehensive and nervous."³⁵
 10. May 30: Memorial Day Republican retreat in which Senator Dole and Republican leadership reject any possibility of compromise on health care reform. As Johnson and Broder put it, "[s]ensing that big victories lay ahead in November 1994, congressional Republican leaders in effect accepted the Gingrich-Armey-Kristol formula for all-out opposition (1997, p. 163)."
 11. June 14: after meeting with President Clinton, Senators Daniel Moynihan and Bob Packwood hold a press conference to announce the effective demise of health care reform. As Packwood bluntly puts it, "[a]t the moment all plans are dead ... [t]here's not a majority for any plan in the Senate Finance

³³ Johnson and Broder note that Republicans in Congress used editorials in the *Wall Street Journal*, radio talk shows, and various other means to pressure Chamber of Commerce executives to oppose Clinton's plan.

³⁴ Skocpol, 1997, p.93. The media's framing of this result, however, was much less ambiguous, as in the *New York Times*' headline declaring that "Clinton Fails to Get Endorsement of Elderly Group on Health Plan."

³⁵ *New York Times*, "Clinton Fails to Get Endorsement of Elderly Group on Health Plan," February 25, 1994.

Committee.”³⁶ President Clinton, in response, signals a clear willingness to compromise on employer-mandated benefits.

12. July 21: the American Medical Association, the American Association of Retired Persons, and the AFL-CIO unite in a coalition to run ads endorsing universal coverage under an employer-based system. The coalition of 56 member organizations had previously declared on June 22nd their opposition to any compromise on an employer-based system.

These signals are quite diverse in type and timing. The Labor Day leak and the release of the full text of the HSA are perhaps more informative signals than they are ideological or symbolic. By contrast, other signaling events like Hillary Clinton’s testimony on the Hill or the attack by Republican leaders in November 1994 are perhaps more ideological. Also, some signals come from within the Beltway and others from outside it (e.g., the opposition of the Business Roundtable, Chamber of Commerce, and National Association of Manufacturers; the late coalition of the AMA, AARP, and the AFL-CIO). The timing of these twelve signals relative to the time series on public support for Clinton’s HSA is shown in Figure One.

To be sure, our attempts to identify the most salient elite signals are clearly not exhaustive. For instance, we exclude the Health Insurance Association of America’s series of “Harry and Louise” television advertisements, despite their likely influence on public support for HSA (see Johnson and Broder, 1996; Capella and Jamieson, 1997; West, Heith, and Goodwin, 1996).³⁷ An attractive alternative

³⁶ Johnson and Broder, 1997, p. 380.

³⁷ The ads shows an archetypal American couple “Harry and Louise” exchanging their anxieties about whether the Clinton plan would constrain their choices over health care providers and lead to a government-run health care system. These ads inoculated the public early on with the refrain, “There has to be a better way.” The difficulty with using the Harry and Louise ads as elite signals is in defining their signal dates with any precision: the evidence to date suggests that the first wave of ads aired in early September, 1993, the second wave in the spring of 1994, and then the final wave in the third week of June, 1994. One could also argue that, vis-a-vis public opinion, there was a literal fourth wave of influence for these ads in March, 1994, when the Clintons brought the media’s and the public’s attention back to the ads by making a mock White House video of the ads with Bill playing Harry and Hillary playing Louise. This video is shown to the Gridiron Club (organization of Washington, DC news reporters) and subsequently released to TV networks, thus giving the ads even more prominence.

method of identifying a set of signals might have been to conduct content analysis of media coverage on Clinton's health care reform plan, and let the distribution of media coverage define the set of elite signals we consider. This would more directly link elite actions to citizens' response by including the dynamics and distribution of political communications to the relationship. As Figure Two shows, even if we restrict ourselves to a count of *The New York Times* frontpage articles on Clinton's plan, the candidate signals that emerge from this approach overlaps somewhat, but not entirely with the set of signals we examine in this preliminary analysis. We return to this limitation at the conclusion of this paper.³⁸

In order to assess their expected impact on public attitudes, we need to consider further the nature of these signals. More specifically, we need to assess the extent to which the signals were cast in partisan terms. As hypothesized earlier, some individuals are more likely to respond to partisan cues than others, depending on when the partisan cueing occurs during the course of public deliberation. Moreover, citizens' response to elite signals are more likely to diverge in partisan directions when the nature of the message itself is partisan. While the partisan, bi-partisan, or non-partisan nature of the signals we examine are open to debate, we identify five signals as especially likely to be partisan.

During the fall of 1993, three signals had strong partisan tones: (1) the initial efforts by right-wing Republicans (Armey and Gingrich) to discredit the Health Security Act in mid-October, (2) the supposedly bi-partisan press conference in late October following the release of the full text of HSA in which Michel adopted a hostile response to the Clinton's initiative, and (3) publicity around Kristol's "attack memo" in early December. In 1994, there are two distinctly partisan signals. The first involved the President's State of the Union Address. Although draped in a facade of bi-partisan language, the speech itself was a direct challenge to Republicans in Congress. The Republican reply was even more confrontational, clearly drawing party lines around the notion of health care reform. The second

³⁸ Other candidates for influential signals we do not consider include the *Readers' Digest* March, 1994 issue, which ran a feature article with the headline "Your Risk Under Clinton's Health Plan"; grassroots movements against HSA by Ralph Reed's Christian Coalition and by the HIAA; or the AAPR's advertisements in November of 1993 which urges reform on long-term care and prescription drug benefits, but is misinterpreted as an attack on HSA.

partisan signal was associated with the Republican Party’s Memorial Day retreat. In modeling the responses of the public to these signals, one would expect to find increasingly large differences associated with partisanship. How these same signals were interpreted by citizens without strong partisan identification will prove an interesting aspect of our empirical analysis.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The data we use to explain the variation in public support for HSA are a pooled set of 53 opinion surveys asked over an eleven month period between the end of August, 1993 and late-July, 1994. These polls capture a time period ranging from just before President Clinton introduced his Health Security Act in September, 1993 to the summer of 1994 when HSA effectively met its demise. The Roper Center’s POLL database identifies 61 opinion polls during this time period in which respondents are asked whether or not they supported President Clinton’s health care plan, and the 53 polls we use comprise the surveys within this set that ask a fairly comprehensive, consistently worded set of control variables over time.³⁹ The surveys were conducted by seven different polling firms: Gallup (14 polls mostly for the Gallup/CNN News/*USA Today* poll), Chilton Research Services (8 polls for ABC News and the *Washington Post*), Los Angeles Times (4 polls for the *Los Angeles Times*), Princeton’s Survey Research Center (4 polls for the Time Mirror Center), Hart-Teeter Research (7 polls for NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*), Yankelovich (12 polls for *Time*/CNN), and Louis Harris (5 polls for Harris Polls).⁴⁰

³⁹ The 53 polls, more precisely, represent almost all the opinion surveys archived at the Roper Center. Eight polls archived at Roper were excluded from our pooled time-series either because several key demographic and political control variables were not asked or because the datafiles were not readable. On an issue where so much was at stake for so many well-funded political actors, there is likely to have been a significant number of private polls, but these were not sought.

⁴⁰ A notable exclusion from our pooled dataset are three polls by the Torrance Group and Mellman, Lazarus, and Lake (for *US News and World Report*). Also, the analyses presented in this paper do not include the four polls by Princeton Survey Research, but our findings presented at the Aspen meeting will include the full set of 53 pooled surveys.

The dependent variable we examine throughout this paper is popular support for Clinton’s Health Security Act.⁴¹ We examine the influence of elite signals controlling first for a very limited set of sociodemographic and political controls. Specifically, we examine age, family income, educational level, gender, race (for African Americans and Latinos), and region of the country among the sociodemographic factors; among political factors, we examine partisanship and ideological position (liberal to conservative). These variables have been shown to covary with support for an active government role in health care, so we expect them to matter for public assessments of HSA (Schlesinger and Lee, 1993).

Since there is a fair degree of inconsistency across polls and polling firms, the measurement of these variables across polls is not identical. For this version of our paper, we control for these measurement problems in two ways. First, we use standardized coding to control for differences in response scales. Most of our sociodemographic and political variables are converted to a 0-1 scale (retaining the variation within each measure). Age, education, and family income are reduced to a common categorical scale.

Second, we attempt to control for design effects by incorporating several contextual measures. Clearly, the 53 surveys we use were not designed with the present study in mind. As a result, it is an understatement to note that there is considerable variation across datasets. To at least partially offset the noise introduced by design differences, our analyses also control for five possible contextual effects. First, we include dummy variables for the seven different polling firms in our pooled dataset.⁴² Next, we note whether or not the dependent variable precedes or follows a question on Clinton’s overall performance (presidential approval), questions that evaluate partisan politics (which party is doing a better job of handling national problems, likely vote in Congressional elections), or questions evaluating the health care system and the respondent’s personal health risk

⁴¹ In later analyses, we also intend to examine the intensity of support for Clinton’s Health Security Act (in surveys in which support is measured in more categories than simple support or opposition) as well as the certainty of support (by examining the determinants of indifference to HSA).

⁴² For a similar analysis that pools data from multiple polling organizations, see Voss, Gelman, and King (1995).

(insurance status, cost, quality). Each of these question contexts may “prime” respondents to evaluate HSA in terms they might not otherwise consider—that is, vis-à-vis general evaluations of Clinton, general partisan considerations, and general assessments of the nation’s health care system. Finally, to control for respondent fatigue and the possibility of additional unspecified context effects embedded in a survey, we also identify the overall position of the dependent variable in the order of questions in the survey instrument.

Note that we do not control for variations in question wording. Question wording is almost always implicated as a prime suspect for contextual effects across surveys, but in this case, there is remarkably little variation to speak of. Specifically, individuals are always asked “do you favor or oppose President Clinton’s health care program?” or “do you favor or oppose President Clinton’s health care plan?” The only variation comes in the prelude to this wording. This prelude comes in the following seven forms: (1) “Based on everything you have seen, read, or heard”; (2) “From everything you have heard or read”; (3) “From what you have heard or read”; (4) “From what you know of it”; (5) “In general”; (6) “Generally speaking”; and (7) “Overall.” There is no *a priori* basis for anticipating variations in support for HSA based on these variations in wording. And, as we shall see, the statistically significant differences we do find between polling firms do not correspond in any meaningful way to these differences in wording. To take just one example, respondents polled by the firm Hart and Teeter, which words their question “From what you have heard or read” turn out to be significantly more likely to oppose HSA than respondents polled by Gallup, which words their question “From everything you have heard or read.”

Another thorny measurement issue is how best to specify the elite signals. Assuming for the moment that individuals do in fact respond to elite signals, this response may be characterized by any number of functional forms. Response to signals may not be uniform and universal, but may vary by attributes of the elites transmitting the signals, the institutions mediating the signals, the individuals receiving the signals, and the signals themselves. In the absence of any decisive *a priori* rationale in favor of a particular specification we begin, at least initially, with a linear specification of signal-response, where individual observations are measures by the linear temporal distance (in days) from our identified list of signals. For

example, by this method, an individual polled about HSA six days after a particular signaling event (say, President Clinton’s State of the Union message) should be only half as responsive to the cue than an individual polled three days after that event.

We present our analyses in four stages. In the first stage, we estimate a logistic regression model predicting the correlates of support for the Health Security Act, based on the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, their political beliefs, and the battery of variables capturing design effects. This first stage regression is intended to provide some sense that the aggregated data set is behaving in the manner that one would expect, a non-trivial question when one is pooling data across a variety of different instruments and question formats.

We follow the baseline model with three regression specifications designed to capture different aspects of elite influence over public opinion. In the first of these signaling models, we focus on the impact on aggregate public opinion. The key question to which this specification speaks is this: to what extent were elite signals associated with observable changes in the average level of public support for the Health Security Act? The second specification disaggregates the signaling response variables based on the reported intensity of partisan affiliation for individual respondents. Using this model, we can explore whether (a) strong partisans (arguably more politically aware) are more responsive to elite signals in general (controlling for other proxies for political awareness, such as the respondent’s educational attainment), (b) partisan respondents are more responsive to *partisan signals*, either before or after the conversion of the health reform debate into a frame defined by party competition, and (c) either partisan signals or differential partisan responses to signals are associated with growing cleavages in response to the Clinton reform proposals among the general public. The final specification attempts to provide some preliminary estimates of the durational effects of signals. Because of the complexities of measuring these effects, we will estimate a simplified model that focuses on a smaller number of elite signals. The goal with this model is to develop some sense of which of the three models of signal interpretation presented in Figure One are more consistent with the patterns that we actually observe in changing public attitudes.

RESULTS

The Baseline Model

Table One shows the baseline model that specifies the influence of our limited set of sociodemographic and political control variables on public support for HSA. Most of these measures predict support for HSA in unsurprising ways: respondents from the Northeast appear more strongly supportive of Clinton's plan, while Southerners appear more resistant. Women and better educated respondents are moderately more supportive, while African Americans and Latinos are considerably more supportive. Table One also shows that this is an extremely partisan and ideological issue. Partisanship is by far the largest influence on of public support for HSA. Strong Democrats are, controlling for other factors, more than nine times more favorable towards HSA than are strong Republicans. Ideology is the next largest influence on public support. This is a bit more unexpected, since (at least as far back as Converse) ideology seldom plays a critical role in public opinion. That said, more recently, scholars have suggested that politics in the U.S. has grown increasingly polarized and ideologically charged (King, 1999). Clearly, in this case, ideology may be tapping into important dimensions of public deliberations over health care reform, such as the role of government in ensuring universal health care coverage or the argument that HSA would represent bureaucratic waste and government intrusiveness.

Table One is also notable because our contextual variables show some interesting, and not always expected, results. While not central to the task at hand, Table One shows that being cued to think on partisan issues and about the health care system can play a significant influence in framing the public's views on President Clinton's plan for health care reform.⁴³ And it is perhaps reassuring

⁴³ When cued to think about the health care system, individuals appear less supportive of HSA. This particular relationship appears counterintuitive, since we know that Americans during this debate took a generally dim view of the U.S. health care system, and we might expect such a dim view to evoke greater support of any legislative efforts to reform it. One plausible explanation, however, may simply be being asked about the health care system cues respondents to negative associations about Clinton's plan. If this is the case, we might expect that this contextual effect to heighten over time. Indeed, when we control for possible time trends in this contextual effect, we find that health care system framing alone predicts greater support for HSA, but that this frame over time leads to diminished support.

that—once the contextual influences of being asked about President Clinton, the partisan dimensions of politics, and the health care system are controlled for—question placement (simply being asked about HSA earlier or later in a survey) does not appear to significantly sway one’s views.⁴⁴ Lastly on Table One, respondents’ willingness to support HSA clearly vary by polling form.⁴⁵

In addition, Table One includes variables that test for three prevailing wisdoms about what ultimately felled Clinton’s plan for health care reform. The first such prevailing wisdom, most often attributed to Clinton’s pollster Stan Greenberg, is that loss of support among the elderly early on (in the fall of 1993) played a key role in moving public sentiment against HSA. In *Boomerang*, Theda Skocpol writes that “by the turn of 1993-94, older citizens were markedly less supportive of the Clinton plan than the general population, and their overall support declined more than any other group between September 1993 and April 1994 (1997, p. 93). At least at first blush, there appears to be something to this. Figure 4 compares the pattern of support over time among the elderly (65 years of age or older) with overall support for HSA (as three year moving averages) and shows that, although there are various moments at which the elderly are indistinguishable from the general public, the elderly do appear quite discernibly less supportive of HSA.

The second prevailing wisdom is that Clinton’s health care reform plan became torpedoed by self-interest from citizens and the partisan and ideological polarization in elite discourse on health care reform. Jacobs and Shapiro (1995, 2000), for example, argue that the unusually polarized partisan and ideological

Interestingly, specified thus, being asked to generally evaluate Clinton’s performance as president leads respondents to disfavor HSA.

⁴⁴ In almost all the polls examined, general approval of Clinton is asked before support on Clinton’s health care reform proposal is asked. While there are obviously many possible renditions of this relationship, one is that in those rare surveys that did not prime respondents to Clinton HSA found more support than in the typical poll that primed anti-Clinton respondents.

⁴⁵ Notably, one likely explanation for these inter-firm variation can be ruled out: namely, differences in question wording. All firms ask basically the identical question (“do you favor or oppose President Clinton’s plan for health care reform?”) with the exception of different lead-ins: “[f]rom what you know of it” for Chilton, “[f]rom everything you have heard” for Gallup, “[o]verall” for Harris, “[f]rom what you have heard or read of it” for Hart-Teeter, “[g]enerally speaking for the *Los Angeles Times*, and “[i]n general” for Yankelovich. There is

conflict over health reform—publicized by the press—drove the mass public to reverse gears from national interest to self-interest on the Clinton plan.⁴⁶ The time series of support for HSA among strong Democrats and strong Republicans in Figure Three shows a fairly steady partisan divide throughout the entire eleven month course of debate on HSA. The time series of support for HSA among extreme liberals and extreme conservatives bear out the prevailing wisdom of polarization, albeit indirectly. Figure 5 shows that while extreme liberals and extreme conservatives are between 30-40 percentage points apart on HSA in September, 1993, they fall about 60 percentage points apart by late July, 1994.

To be sure, the measures used in Table One to capture these explanations are too imprecise to put too much stock into. Importantly, these results do not discriminate between Jacobs and Shapiro’s account of a shift from national to self-interest and narrower alternatives that identify either : (1) self-interest, unmediated by press coverage or elite manipulation, drove public preferences and elite response; (2) economic cycles that pushed and pulled public support for Clinton’s health care program; (3) a general ideological shift against Clinton that militated against public support for health care.⁴⁷ On the ideological polarization (or “thermostat thesis”), Jacobs and Shapiro argue that the causal order may well be reverse: “Americans’ reaction against health reform and the highly partisan debate over it drove the general ideological shift in public rather than the other way around (2000, 299).”

Table One shows some support for these prevailing wisdoms about the decline of support for HSA. In addition to the sociodemographic, political, and

no easily apparent pattern between these differences in question wording and the firm-specific influences on support for HSA.

⁴⁶ The basic pattern Jacobs and Shapiro describe is one of high levels of national concern in the health care debate in 1992 and 1993, followed by high levels of concern with personal interest in 1994. The mechanism here is one of media coverage in the context of parallel publics. Thus from 1991 to 1993, they argue that the media successfully framed health care as an issue of national concern, followed by more critical and polarized coverage of the health care reform debate in 1994. Jacobs and Shapiro also suggest that neither the Clinton administration nor legislators pandered to public opinion in the formulation of policy during the health care debate. Political ideology, personal preferences, and crude strategic calculations were the engines behind the shape of policy proposals. Public opinion, rather than being the instigator, was the target.

contextual variables examined in Table One, we now include interaction terms that measure the time trends of the influence of age, income, extreme ideology, and strong partisanship on support for HSA. The elderly are somewhat likelier to oppose Clinton’s plan for health care reform, but controlling for this time trend among seniors does not wash away the general influence of age on support for HSA. Economic self-interest—whether measured among individuals in the lowest, middle, or highest income category—seems not to matter, but both measures of polarization (ideological and partisan) show interesting effects. With ideology, respondents who are very liberal grow even more supportive of HSA over time and those who are very conservative grow even more opposed to HSA over time. With partisanship, the effect is asymmetric. In the specification shown in Table One, the suggestion is that strong Republicans are actually more likely to support Clinton’s health care reform plan over time. This perhaps counterintuitive relationship, it turns out, is driven by the changing relationship among other partisan categories: weak partisans and political Independents, in particular, are much likelier to oppose HSA over time.

Elite Signaling and Changes in Public Support for HSA

In Table Two we begin to see the effect of signals. To reiterate, individuals’ responsiveness to signals here are measured by the linear temporal distance between the day of a signaling event and the day respondents are interviewed. The first observation from Table Two is that not all signals—assuming we have correctly identified a list of prominent elite signals on health care reform—matter. Despite the prominence of the President Clinton’s State of the Union speech in popular accounts of health care reform, this pivotal address appears (in this initial specification) not to influence support for HSA. We shall see, however, that in this case, the absence of an effect is due to the partisan divides in signaling during moments like the State of the Union address: Clinton seizes on the opportunity to send forth supportive signals, but Senator Dole too uses his allotted rebuttal to signal the public on health care reform.

⁴⁷ On the economy, Jacobs and Shapiro note that “[w]hile the economy did not drive public opinion, it no doubt encouraged or depressed trends that arose from media reports on policy debates (2000, 297).”

Second, consistent with Hypothesis #1, most of the significant elite signaling appears to occur early on in public debates over HSA. President Clinton's rousing speech to a joint session of Congress that introduced his plan boosts public support considerably, but subsequent events—Hillary Clinton's testimony on Capitol Hill, a negative campaign against HSA by Republican leaders, William Kristol's "attack memo" all draw away from that support. In fact, after Clinton's introductory speech, there is no other elite signal (that we examine) which appears to increase public support for Clinton's health care reform plan.

A third finding in Table Two worth noting is that although we have glibly used the term "elite signaling": not all opinion cues are in the control of elites and not all elite cues influence public views the way that political elites may intend. Perhaps the most striking instance of this is the effect of Hillary Clinton's visit to the Hill. Despite the effusive praise of the First Lady's masterful *tete-a-tete* with Republican leaders on the Hill, the public—controlling for a host of other factors—responds negatively. In a prime example of symbolism trumping substance, Johnson and Broder note that

"Hillary on the Hill became one of those events charged with political symbolism, and unforeseen consequences. It was dramatic. It was triumphant. But its very success also triggered new and intense activity among opponents who saw in this formidable First Lady a foe whose defeat would require their most determined efforts. It also triggered new and largely unexpressed concerns about the role and power of this young woman, neither elected nor confirmed to a public position, especially one so consequential, at a time when feminism remained a controversial issue in American life (1997, 182)."

Another example comes in late February, as the Clinton Administration stages several televised events designed to push public sentiments closer to the Clinton plan and pressure a public endorsement from the AARP. The staged events appear not to shift public views closer to Clinton. Rather, the AARP's subsequent refusal to make any public endorsements appears to push the public even further away from HSA. Lastly, although the influence of the signal is not significant, the Labor Day leak of the yet unfinished Clinton report is a great example of how signals are not always polished, market-tested products, but sometimes, occur through unexpected, strategic disclosures of private information.

The Mediating Role for Partisanship

As we noted, the influence of elite signals may be dampened, exaggerated, or confounded by failing to differentiate their reception across a heterogeneous mass public. To the extent that partisanship has been recurrently shown to be a decisive filter through which individuals screen information and judgments about which signal sources to trust, we ought to expect our list of signals to vary by the party affiliation of respondents. Table Three shows results for the same set of variables in Table Two, but with the addition of interaction terms for each signal with strong partisanship. The results are quite striking.

When we differentiate between the impact of elite signals on strong partisans from the impact of the same cues to non-partisans and weak partisans, several key events (according to the secondary sources we draw upon) that previously appeared not to influence public views now appear quite significant. The Labor Day leak of an early draft of the Clinton plan, the negative turn of Republican leaders on HSA, the release of the full text of HSA, and the State of the Union message, and later events like the Republican leaders' rejection of compromise on health care reform, the moderate Senators' press conference on HSA, and the supportive coalition of the AMA, AARP, and AFL-CIO now look like important (if momentary) influences on support for Clinton's health care reform plan.

Importantly, the pattern of these strong partisanship effects is consistent with our expectations. Specifically, under conditions of greatest uncertainty at the onset of public deliberation (the Labor Day leak), strong partisans are responsive while weak and non-partisans are not (Hypothesis #2). Weak and non-partisans, as we posited, are more likely to respond to ensuing signals (e.g., Clinton's September 22nd address to Congress).

Perhaps equally striking, however, is that in about half the cases (permitting somewhat relaxed criteria for statistical significance), the reception to elite cues by strong Democrats and strong Republicans runs in opposite directions. With the exception of Senators' Moynihan and Packwood's press conference that effectively rendered HSA's eulogy, all the signals that now appear significant affect strong

partisans in divergent ways.⁴⁸ Consistent with Hypothesis #5, what seems to matter is divergence and not a particular direction of divergence. In half of the cases (the November, 1993 Republican attack on HSA, the May, 1994 Republican rejection of compromise, the July, 1994 coalition of advocates of health care reform) this divergence leads strong Democrats to be even more favorable towards HSA (and strong Republicans to be even more opposed to it). However, in the remaining half of the cases (the Labor Day leak, the release of the full text of the HSA, and State of the Union address), the elite cues appear to dampen support among strong Democrats and opposition among strong Republicans.

Moreover, the results from Table Three are consistent with our expectations of how individuals will be differentially responsive during the later stages of public deliberation on an issue. Specifically, as soon as the elite signaling takes a partisan turn (Republican leaders going on the attack in early October), strong partisans are again responsive while weak and non-partisans are not (Hypothesis #3). This is a tricky step to take, but we can also interpret citizens' responses to the ensuing partisan signals (Robert Michel's attack following the release of the text of HSA, William Kristol's "white paper" attack memo, Clinton's State of the Union address) as consistent with our expectations that response among weak and non-partisans will lag behind response from strong partisans. That is, our expectations hold if the apparent upturn in support for HSA among strong Republicans actually reflects a strong downturn in support among weak and non-partisans.⁴⁹

In addition, strong partisans also appear more likely to respond to elite signals after a lull in the debate. Figure Two shows two discernible decrescendos in public deliberation on HSA: the period between the Clinton Administration's failed attempt to solicit public support for HSA from the AARP in late February and the Memorial Day Republican rejection of any compromise on HSA; the period between this Memorial Day signal and the public declaration of support from the coalition of

⁴⁸ In these cases, then what appears to make the signals appear insignificant is that the influence of signals on strong Republicans and Democrats cancel each other out. In the case of Senators Moynihan and Packwood's declaration that health care reform is dead, the results appear to show that the influence of this event on strong partisans cancel out with the influence on weak partisans and non-partisans.

⁴⁹ This is a proposition that we will examine more explicitly in future versions of this paper.

the AARP, the AFL-CIO, and the AMA in late July. In both cases, strong partisans are more responsive to elite signals after these lulls.

Two further observations from Table Three merit some explicit discussion. First, that the sources of signals do not always control how they are received by the public. The Clinton Administration may have intended the public release of the text of the Health Security Act to draw a widespread positive response, but it appears instead to have a differential impact, with only strong Republicans drawing closer to the Clinton plan. Second, the Labor Day leak is perhaps the purest case of an informative signal among those we examine: we might think that these signals cue individuals to the likely terms and consequences of HSA, as opposed to which values are affirmed by the HSA (or violated by it) and which actors stand behind the HSA (or against it).

There is much more to discuss in Table Three than space permits. Hillary Clinton's testimony on behalf of HSA on the Hill and William Kristol's "attack memo," for example, only affects strong Republicans, and weakens their opposition to HSA.⁵⁰ And, glancing over the results as a whole, Table Three presents some compelling evidence of the failures of the Clinton Administration to garner public support for HSA. With the exception of President Clinton's extraordinary speech on September 22nd, 1993, no other elite signal works unambiguously to Clinton's favor. What's more, Jacobs and Shapiro note that

One of the most striking features of the White House's reaction to Clinton's speech was its presumption that favorable public opinion and congressional positions in September 1993 represented fixed commitments rather than initial positions that would change. Missing at the top of the White House's chain of command was a serious appreciation of the possibility that the president's effective unveiling of his proposal, the media's glowing reports and the vague congressional reassurances were the high-water mark and might not be sustained as reform opponents launched their own crafted presentations (2000, p. 134-35).

⁵⁰ In the case of Kristol's memo, it is important to remember that Kristol did not intend his strategy to anchor the support of intense partisans, but rather to moor in non-partisans or weak partisans. This strategy, as Johnson and Broder (1997) and Skocpol (1997) have observed, appears to pay off handsomely in the November 1994 elections.

More generally, the results from Table Three illustrates the importance of disaggregating the reception and influence of elite signals. In some cases, this may be revealing if only to disconfirm prevailing wisdoms about the outcome of efforts to reform health care in 1993-1994. In analysis not shown, for example, the elderly do not appear to respond to elite cues any differently than do respondents in other age groups.⁵¹

Measuring the Duration of Signaling Effects

Our results, conspicuous as they are, are severely limited by the linear specification of signaling effects. In Table Four, we take a roughly-hewn cut at specifying the functional form of signal duration. By making time periods an explicit object of inquiry, we can distinguish between competing accounts of how individuals respond to signals over time, rather than presuming a particular view of this process. In particular, we hypothesize at least three plausible alternative models for how repeated elite signals can be expected to influence public attitudes. In the “permanent” model, the impact of each signal is treated as durable and independent of all other signals. By this account, a signal’s power vis-à-vis its impact on public thinking depends only on the intrinsic properties of the signal itself (e.g., its informational content, the perceived trustworthiness of the elites in question).

In the second, “transitory” model, the impact of elite signals fade over time as they become less proximate. In this model, a signal moves public opinion much as a breeze moves the limbs of a tree – opinion is temporarily swayed, but not permanently transformed (in the absence of repeated exposures to the signal or to comparable elite messages).⁵² According to this view of elite influence, the impact of the signal is a function of both the properties of the signal and its proximity to the

⁵¹ The two possible exceptions are Clinton’s introduction of his plan in September, 1993 and the Republican leadership’s rejection of compromise on health care reform in May, 1994. As we noted before, however, this absence of a significant effect does not reject the prevailing wisdom about the impact of the elderly with any authority, for we may simply have omitted the most salient signals that the elderly responded to (e.g., the AARP’s November, 1993 ads or the “Harry and Louise” ads).

⁵² To carry the metaphor through, a hurricane-force windgust may uproot the tree and permanently displace it, but we would all recognize this kind of signal as the exception rather than the rule.

time at which public opinion is polled. This account is perhaps consistent with Zaller's RAS model.⁵³

In the third, "cumulative" model, signals have a durable but diminishing effect. That is, the long-term effects of a particular signal depend on the cumulative exposure of the public to previous messages relevant to this issue. All else equal, at early stages in the issue-attention cycle, signals tend to be most potent because public perceptions are still ill-formed and malleable. By this account, as the issue evolves over time the public's assessments are likely to crystallize and become less malleable to external influences. Consequently, even if later signals are equally strong (e.g., are equivalent in informational content) to early signals, they will be less potent in terms of shifting public opinion. This third model is most consistent with "learning" models of opinion formation and most consistent with more recent interpretations of signaling in the political science literature.

It may be help to illustrate the distinctive patterns of opinion change that would be associated with these three alternative dynamics. We do so in Figure Six. In constructing this figure, we assume that citizens are exposed to repeated elite messages favoring some policy. The messages appear at regular intervals (every three weeks); they have equal informational content and persuasive appeal. On the vertical axis, we plot the levels of public support for the policy that one would expect to observed for each of the models. Notice that while under all three models signals can be said to have influenced public opinion, their cumulative impact is strikingly different. Notice also that while public attitudes are in some sense "unstable" in all three models, the extent and implications of this instability are quite different. Just to be clear, Figure Six is merely meant to illustrate differences, not convey reality. All the signaling in Figure Six nudges public opinion conveniently in just one direction. In reality, of course, democratic politics in the United States is an

⁵³ Zaller's "accessibility axiom" argues that "the more recently a consideration has been called to mind or thought about, the less time it takes to retrieve that consideration or related considerations from memory and bring them to the top of the head for use" (1992, p.48). Zaller's understanding of public opinion, as measured on polls, is that it fundamentally comes "off the top of the head" a somewhat anatomically inelegant way of suggesting that most citizens are doing little more than parroting back to interviewers the ideas that they've heard expressed by elites.

adversarial pursuit, and elite campaigns to win over public opinion are heavily contested with a surfeit of signals that nudge in all possible directions.

As noted earlier, individuals' reception of and response to signals are examined using dummy variables over six chunks of time: up to two weeks before the signaling events; zero to three days after the signal; four to seven days after the signal; and two to four weeks after the signal. Also, the availability of poll dates (relative to signal dates) does not permit us to examine all twelve signals. In fact, we are able to test only five candidate signaling events: President Clinton's September 22nd, 1993 speech, the October release of HSA's full text, the State of the Union address, the February, 1994 rejection of HSA by three key business groups, and the July, 1994 coalition of advocates for employer mandates and universal coverage. Because Table Three makes a strong case that some elite signals are sharply divided along partisan lines (and not accounting for this divide can lead to illusory statistical relationships), we model the interactive relationship (between elite signals and strong partisanship) for the five signals as well.

The results, shown in Table Four, suggest that signals durations vary markedly in their functional forms. Consistent with Hypothesis #4, this divergence in signal duration appears to be a function of one's political attachments and awareness. Specifically, for individuals who do not report strong partisan attachments, signals appear to diminish in their influence rather quickly, while for strong Democrats and Republicans signals either persist in their influence or magnify in their influence over time. This point shown in a striking fashion in Figures Seven and Eight. Figure Seven charts the odds ratios for each signaling event examined for weak partisans and non-partisans; Figure Eight charts these odds ratios for strong Democrats and strong Republicans.

As Figure Seven shows, for weak partisans and non-partisans, signal durations seldom extend beyond the first week. This is clearly the case with Clinton's September, 1993 speech, the response to the release of the text of HSA, and the response to the public support of the AARP/AFL-CIO/AMA coalition. By contrast, the duration of strong partisans to elite signals looks very different. For one thing, the response of strong Democrats and Republicans to signals like the release of the HSA text and the AARP/AFL-CIO/AMA coalition statement appears to grow stronger over time, even several weeks after the signaling event. In addition,

in some cases, the effect of elite signals on strong partisans is targeted to a particular political party. Strong Republicans thus appear especially responsive to Clinton's speech to Congress while strong Democrats appear especially responsive to Clinton's State of the Union address.

There are three stories embedded in the shape of these duration effects. The first is that individuals appear to be short-term accumulators of elite influences. While we cannot make any strong claims to this end, the results from Table Five and Figures Seven and Eight appear to affirm what John Zaller and others have shown. Namely, that an individual's susceptibility to elite signaling depends on what's "on the top of one's head" at any given moment in time and that opinion cues that are out of sight, are out of mind. The one important caveat from our analysis, however, is that signal durations are not all equal in their evanescence.

Related to this, the second implicit story is one we have discussed before: the responsiveness of a particular individual to a particular signal depends in large measure on the micro-level predispositions and individual attributes that the individual brings to a particular context. In this paper, we have focused in large measure on partisanship as a central anchor of individuals' responsiveness to elite signaling. Age, or generational differences, are another possible anchor that we have examined, although with less successful results. And we might well conceive of other candidates such as ideology or measures of political awareness like educational attainment.

The final implicit story is that there is a Newtonian element to elite influence: for every signal in the political arena, there is a commensurate and opposite counter-signal. The net effect of signals, by this account, is the resultant vector of all elite efforts to signal and persuade. This effect is well-summarized by Jacobs and Shapiro, who note that

The result of the competition to 'win' public opinion is that orchestrated presentations by presidents and legislators provoke reactions and counterreactions. Clinton's masterful speech in September, 1993 generated immediate replies by his political opponents ... In the days and weeks following the president's speech, journalists, members of Congress, interest groups and others countered Clinton's message with what became a familiar incantation of the faults with Clinton's health reform effort—too much big

government, an unwieldy and secretive task force, and overly ambitious policy objectives (2000, p. 47).⁵⁴

SUMMARY DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

We began this paper by considering whether the well-established constraints on the American electorate's interest and knowledge on political affairs poses a problem for democratic governance. On its face, Clinton's failed attempt to legislate health care reform appears to confirm a pessimist's view on the matter: despite the public's overwhelming desire for government to do something about the nation's health care system and despite the public's overwhelming public support for Clinton's Health Security Act, no legislative action ensued. Our results offer ambiguous judgments about this central matter. At the most general level, the findings in this paper affirm the broad themes about how public opinion works found in existing information-based, elite-driven accounts. Signals do appear to elicit a response. The degree and direction of that response is often powerfully mediated by individuals' pre-existing institutional and ideological attachments and prior levels of political awareness. The resultant is that elite influence is often a contested terrain of signals and counter-signals, and elite influences appear largely limited to short-term processes of opinion dynamics. Thus the dynamics of signaling in context is perhaps described by V.O. Key more than four decades ago, who argued that

[T]he electorate behaves about as rationally and responsibly as we should expect, given the clarity of the alternatives presented to it and the character of the information available to it ... Even the most discriminating popular judgment can reflect only ambiguity, uncertainty, or even foolishness if those are the qualities of the input into the echo chamber (1966, 7).

What we make of these dynamics, vis-à-vis democratic governance, ultimately depend on how enduring signaling effects are and on whether the electorate is using

⁵⁴ These two embedded interpretations should, albeit with strong precautions, give us some solace about the threat of elite exploitation and manipulation of public opinion. So long as elites' efforts to craft public opinion tend not to have a lasting effect on one's policy views (or more stringently, one's political predispositions), and so long as such efforts do not go unopposed without contrarian, oppositional efforts to craft public opinion.

elite cues to guide them through the murky waters of policy debates or whether elites are exploiting the electorate's uncertainty to moor their preferences onto policy alternatives they might otherwise oppose. Our findings point a central problem with the signaling literature, namely, incomplete theoretical specification. Elite signals are most commonly studied as the public's response to a single cue at a specific point in time. In this specification, the only meaningful variance in signal effects are when they are perceived and what they convey to individuals about the likely effects of choices or the trustworthiness of the signaler. We have shown, however, that in the untidy world of politics, signals do not always work in such a linear, clear-cut manner. Rather than a beacon from a lighthouse that brings a ship to moor, signals may simply flicker and vanish like a cacophony of fireflies on a midsummer's night.

To the extent that signal effects appear not to endure, this may be reasonably good grounds for optimism, since it suggests that elites may effectively move public opinion to their ends, but that these effects do not last. In the end, the public may be too busy with other affairs to be affected by elites in any meaningful way. Yet even if we concede that elite signaling flickers rather than shines, there is a distinct bias to the flickering. Thus an alternative view is that our results present a picture of politics—and the role of public opinion within it—as a constant struggle to, as E.E. Schattschneider put it, “mobilize bias” through institutional means. By this account, the outcome of elite signaling is not measured in the enduring or ephemeral effect of any one signal, but rather in the resultant vector of signaling effects over the course of elite deliberation on a policy matter. In the case of health care reform, this resultant vector leads to a steady, decisive downturn in public support for the Health Security Act between the fall of 1993 and the summer of 1994.

Ultimately, however, these speculations are merely that. What remains to make a stronger case for this kind of account of mass opinion is a clearer distinction between potential signaling effects and a closer examination of the dynamics of elite signaling in the context of a specific policy reform initiative. In terms of model specification, we are less able to strongly link our findings to our expectations at present because we have chosen to interact elite signals only with strong partisanship. In future analyses, we will also examine the responsiveness to signals among weak and non-partisans to say something more definitive. In addition, as suggested earlier, while our method of examining elite influence permits us to take a

catholic approach to specifying which signals are likely to matter, the particular signals we have chosen are up for debate. Importantly, we might have resorted to a more data-driven means of specifying key signals—namely, by conducting content analysis of media coverage and allowing the peaks of coverage to define the timing and intensity of signals. This is a sufficiently attractive alternative that we hope to present some findings using this approach in time for our Aspen convening.

Lastly, we have presented preliminary analyses that suffer from several methodological limitations that we also hope to correct in time for our Aspen convening. First, we have presented a welter of statistical analyses in a manner that is not of immediate substantive import and without taking account of the uncertainty of our parameter estimates. Second, our pooled time series data suffer from a significant amount of missing data due to various forms of non-response and questions that were not asked across surveys. As Gary King and his colleagues have shown, the problem of missing data can sometimes be worse than misspecifying our model, and there are available statistical means of imputing such missing data. We intend to use statistical simulation to correct for these shortcomings. A third, final limitation is both substantive and methodological: thus far, we have made a strong case that elite signals matter, *given the signals that we chosen*. An important null hypothesis to test for is that randomly assigned signal dates might also turn out to be statistically significant. Once again, we intend on using statistical simulation to test for this potentially incriminating outcome.

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TABLE ONE. SUPPORT FOR HSA: BASELINE MODEL

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	Odds-Ratio
East	.223	.033***	1.250
South	-.088	.031***	0.916
West	.004	.033	1.004
Age	-.049	.007***	0.953
Education	.038	.011***	1.039
Family Income	-.097	.013***	0.908
Female	.068	.023***	1.070
African American	.717	.048***	2.048
Hispanic	.388	.055***	1.475
Date	-.993	.059***	0.371
Democrat	2.530	.059***	12.850
Liberalism	1.191	.111***	3.299
Context: Clinton Q	-.065	.067	0.937
Context: Partisan Q	.085	.034***	1.089
Context: System Q	-.125	.034***	0.883
Context: Q Placement	.070	.076	1.073
Firm: Chilton	-.177	.036***	0.838
Firm: Harris	.498	.043***	1.645
Firm: Hart-Teeter	-.391	.045***	0.672
Firm: LA Times	.088	.047*	1.092
Firm: Yankelovich	-.329	.039***	0.719
Age x Date	-.127	.064*	0.883
Low Income x Date	.018	.059	1.017
Very Liberal x Date	.250	.081***	1.284
Very Conserv x Date	-.308	.081***	0.730
Strong Dem x Date	-.103	.058*	0.902
Strong Rep x Date	.349	.063***	1.418
Constant	-.973	.116	
Number of Cases			40571
Log likelihood			-22707.5
Pseudo R-squared			0.191

TABLE TWO. SUPPORT FOR HSA AND ELITE SIGNALING

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>Odds-Ratio</i>
BASELINE MODEL VARIABLES NOT SHOWN			
Labor Day leak	-.110	.124	0.896
Bill Clinton speech	.434	.072***	1.543
Hillary Clinton on Hill	-.245	.107**	0.783
Republicans go negative	-.234	.133*	0.791
Full text released	-.176	.092*	0.839
Kristol memo	-.400	.125***	0.670
State of the Union	.106	.084	1.111
Business opposition	-.086	.154	0.918
Administration stages events	-.205	.075***	0.815
Republicans reject compromise	.041	.145	1.041
Moderate Senators eulogize	.078	.115	1.081
AARP/AFL-CIO/AMA coalition	-.068	.068	0.934
Constant	-.983	.154	
Number of Cases			40571
Log likelihood			-22652.2
Pseudo R-squared			0.193

TABLE THREE. SUPPORT FOR HSA AND PARTISAN DIVIDES

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>Odds-Ratio</i>
BASELINE MODEL VARIABLES NOT SHOWN			
Democrat	3.259	.076***	26.033
Strong Democrat x Date	-.557	.075***	0.573
Strong Republican x Date	.719	.080***	2.052
Labor Day leak	-.234	.158	0.791
Labor Day x Strong Dem	-.618	.195***	0.539
Labor Day x Strong Rep	.986	.190***	2.681
Bill Clinton speech	.392	.101***	1.479
Clinton speech x Strong Dem	.045	.153	1.045
Clinton speech x Strong Rep	.112	.138	1.119
Hillary Clinton on Hill	-.403	.152***	0.668
Hillary on Hill x Strong Dem	-.085	.230	0.918
Hillary on Hill x Strong Rep	.470	.193**	1.600
Republicans go negative	-.169	.157	0.844
Repubs go neg x Strong Dem	1.302	.373***	3.678
Repubs go neg x Strong Rep	-1.383	.342***	0.251
Full text released	-.302	.115***	0.739
Full text x Strong Dem	-.867	.183***	0.420
Full text x Strong Rep	1.250	.173***	3.490
Kristol memo	-.679	.162***	0.507
Kristol memo x Strong Dem	-.327	.232	0.721
Kristol memo x Strong Rep	1.229	.219***	3.419
State of the Union	.007	.120	1.007
State x Strong Dem	-.341	.169**	0.711
State x Strong Rep	.646	.163***	1.908
Business opposition	-.196	.229	0.821
Business x Strong Dem	.475	.321	1.608
Business x Strong Rep	-.101	.371	0.904
Administration stages events	-.220	.108**	0.802
Staged events x Strong Dem	-.259	.163	0.772
Staged events x Strong Rep	.329	.181*	1.390
Republicans reject compromise	.014	.164	1.014
Repubs reject x Strong Dem	.755	.370**	2.128
Repubs reject x Strong Rep	-1.108	.482**	0.330
Moderate Senators eulogize	.379	.160**	1.461
Mods eulogize x Strong Dem	-.490	.277*	0.613
Mods eulogize x Strong Rep	-.465	.343	0.628
AARP/AFL-CIO/AMA pro-coalition	-.140	.092	0.869
Pro-coalition x Strong Dem	.459	.138***	1.583
Pro-coalition x Strong Rep	-.252	.156*	0.777
Constant	-1.355	.158	
Number of Cases			40571
Log likelihood			-22523.5
Pseudo R-squared			0.198

TABLE FOUR. SUPPORT FOR HSA AND SIGNAL DURATION

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	Odds-Ratio
BASELINE MODEL VARIABLES NOT SHOWN			
Democrat	3.316	.087***	27.536
Strong Dem x Date	-.584	.086***	0.558
Strong Rep x Date	.782	.090***	2.187
Clinton speech: 2 wks pre	-.076	.127	0.926
Clinton speech: 0-3 days post	.438	.124***	1.549
Clinton speech: 4-7 days post	.256	.141*	1.292
Clinton speech: 2-4 wks post	.117	.126	1.124
Clinton speech: 2 wks pre SDEM	-.506	.143***	0.603
Clinton speech: 0-3 days post SDEM	-.191	.147	0.826
Clinton speech: 4-7 days post SDEM	-.384	.214*	0.681
Clinton speech: 2-4 wks post SDEM	-.251	.193	0.778
Clinton speech: 2 wks pre SREP	.767	.143***	2.153
Clinton speech: 0-3 days post SREP	.456	.128***	1.577
Clinton speech: 4-7 days post SREP	.551	.193***	1.735
Clinton speech: 2-4 wks post SREP	.587	.158***	1.798
HSA full text: 2 wks pre	-.095	.107	0.909
HSA full text: 0-3 days post	-.377	.132***	0.684
HSA full text: 4-7 days post	-.192	.151	0.825
HSA full text: 2-4 wks post	-.048	.095	1.049
HSA full text: 2 wks pre SDEM	.389	.255	1.475
HSA full text: 0-3 days post SDEM	-.143	.161	0.867
HSA full text: 4-7 days post SDEM	-.185	.201	0.831
HSA full text: 2-4 wks post SDEM	-.499	.108***	0.607
HSA full text: 2 wks pre SREP	-.277	.220	0.758
HSA full text: 0-3 days post SREP	.443	.166***	1.557
HSA full text: 4-7 days post SREP	.525	.201***	1.867
HSA full text: 2-4 wks post SREP	.513	.103***	1.846
State of the Union: 2 wks pre	-.077	.076	0.926
State of the Union: 0-3 days post	-.294	.215	0.745
State of the Union: 4-7 days post	-.085	.244	0.919
State of the Union: 2-4 wks post	-.264	.186	0.768
State/Union: 2 wks pre SDEM	.190	.118	1.210
State/Union: 0-3 days post SDEM	.868	.322***	2.383
State/Union: 4-7 days post SDEM	.114	.350	1.121
State/Union: 2-4 wks post SDEM	.751	.267***	2.119
State/Union: 2 wks pre SREP	-.077	.118	0.926
State/Union: 0-3 days post SREP	.149	.316	1.160
State/Union: 4-7 days post SREP	.182	.348	1.199
State/Union: 2-4 wks post SREP	.127	.266	1.135
Business attack: 2 wks pre	.333	.132***	1.396
Business attack: 0-3 days post	----	----	-----
Business attack: 4-7 days post	.096	.265	1.100
Business attack: 2-4 wks post	-.129	.071	0.879

Business attack: 2 wks pre SDEM	-.966	.203***	0.380
Business attack: 0-3 days post SDEM	----	----	-----
Business attack: 4-7 days post SDEM	-.355	.378	0.700
Business attack: 2-4 wks post SDEM	-.142	.103	0.867
Business attack: 2 wks pre SREP	.369	.211*	1.446
Business attack: 0-3 days post SREP	----	----	-----
Business attack: 4-7 days post SREP	-.137	.422	0.872
Business attack: 2-4 wks post SREP	.200	.112*	1.221
<hr/>			
AARP/AFL-CIO/AMA ally: 2 wks pre	-.146	.094	0.864
AARP/AFL-CIO/AMA ally: 0-3 d-post	-.362	.116***	0.696
AARP/AFL-CIO/AMA ally: 4-7 d-post	-.128	.120	0.879
AARP/AFL-CIO/AMA ally: 2-4 w-post	-.092	.193	0.912
AMA/AARP/AFL-CIO: 2 wks pre SDEM	.108	.119	1.114
AMA/AARP/AFL-CIO: 0-3 d-post SDEM	.327	.166**	1.387
AMA/AARP/AFL-CIO: 4-7 d-post SDEM	.407	.181**	1.502
AMA/AARP/AFL-CIO: 2-4 w-post SDEM	.517	.265*	1.677
AMA/AARP/AFL-CIO: 2 wks pre SREP	-.181	.130	0.834
AMA/AARP/AFL-CIO: 0-3 d-post SREP	-.316	.199	0.729
AMA/AARP/AFL-CIO: 4-7 d-post SREP	-.109	.193	0.897
AMA/AARP/AFL-CIO: 2-4 w-post SREP	-.625	.294**	0.535
<hr/>			
Constant	-1.350	.172	
Number of Cases			40571
Log likelihood			11117.8
Pseudo R-squared			.198
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Figure 1. Elite Signals and Public Support for HSA

Figure 2. *New York Times* Front Page Stories

Figure 3. Strong Partisanship and Support for HSA

Figure 4. The Elderly and Support for HSA (Moving Average)

Figure 5. Ideological Polarization and Support for HSA

Figure 6. Three Models of Signal Duration

Figure 7 Support for HSA and Signal Duration

Figure 8 Signal Durations and Partisan Divides over HSA