



# How Policymakers Can Craft Measures That Endure and Build Political Power

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## About the Author

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# INTRODUCTION

As the United States grapples with ongoing social, health, and economic crises, policymakers are considering—and enacting—major changes to all levels of government. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this includes bolstering existing programs, like unemployment insurance, and creating new initiatives, like grants and loans for small businesses and a new paid sick leave benefit. And in the wake of mass protests around police violence, policymakers are considering reforms to public safety funding and practices. If these programs work as hoped, they may have profound economic and social consequences. But less remarked upon are the ways that these policies could have significant *political* effects as well, changing the relationship that Americans, social movements, grassroots organizations, and private-sector businesses have with government and creating new opportunities for future policymaking.

Indeed, public policies can fundamentally change politics in ways that reverberate through future elections and policy debates. Political scientists call these “policy feedback loops,” or cases where initial changes in public policy produce further changes in politics with implications for later policymaking.<sup>1</sup> Some policymakers have explicitly set out to use policy in this way, as when Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker decided that one of his first priorities would be defeating the state’s public sector unions, a longtime conservative foe. Although Badger state Republicans argued that cutbacks to union rights were necessary on budget grounds, it was clear that the legislation was politically motivated. As one conservative advocacy group promoting the reforms explained, Wisconsin’s union cutbacks would “deal a major blow to the Left’s ability to control government” and “clear pathways towards passage of...other [conservative, free-market] initiatives.”<sup>2</sup> The union reforms worked as intended, and Wisconsin public-sector unions have lost considerable political and financial strength since 2011, opening the door to further conservative legislative victories given a weaker labor opposition.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Hacker and Pierson 2019; Mettler 2011; Mettler and Soss 2004; Pierson 1993; Skocpol 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Pilkington 2018; see also Hertel-Fernandez 2019, chapters 1 and 6.

<sup>3</sup> Hertel-Fernandez 2019, chapter 6.

While progressive advocates generally understand the role of policy feedback loops in policy design—especially given recent, brazen conservative moves to maximize clout by breaking up labor unions, restricting access to the ballot box, and aggressive gerrymandering—a number of allied policymakers continue to see tensions between what constitutes good economic policy and what constitutes good politics.<sup>4</sup> Policies should be driven by economics first and foremost, so the argument goes, not by politics. This brief argues that good policy design requires taking policy feedbacks into account. Doing so yields policies that are more likely to be effective, to endure over time, to open up further possibilities for progressive policymaking in the future, and to build political power and voice for historically marginalized communities.

Consider the New Deal example of Social Security.<sup>5</sup> In the depths of the Great Depression, policy experts and populist movements pushed the Roosevelt administration to adopt an immediate universal old-age relief program, funded by redistributive general taxes. Yet that is not what Roosevelt and the Democratic Congress did in the Social Security Act. Instead, New Dealers created an old-age insurance system, with benefits scaled to workers' wages and funded through earmarked payroll contributions. Moreover, the original legislation called for contributions to begin two years after the bill was signed in law while benefits were not slated to be paid out until seven years later. And instead of handing responsibility for Social Security to existing government departments, the Roosevelt administration created a brand-new agency to operate the program.

The New Dealers' decisions were grounded in a shrewd understanding of the politics of social programs. By basing the program on insurance principles, FDR shielded Social Security from conservative charges that it was welfare. By funding the program through earmarked payroll contributions, Social Security created a powerful sense among workers that they were entitled to benefits upon retirement. And by ensuring that Social Security was housed in a well-funded, expert

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<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Bhargava 2020; Hacker and Pierson 2019; Rahman 2020; Sitaraman 2019; Wong 2020.

<sup>5</sup> For more details, see Jacobs 2011; Skocpol 1992, 1995.

agency, the Roosevelt administration laid the groundwork for a competently-run bureaucracy that could defend the program in Congress and in the public.<sup>6</sup>

Together, these features of Social Security created a powerful new base of politically active senior citizens, bureaucrats, and interest groups, like the AARP and labor unions, which have lobbied for expanding benefits over time.<sup>7</sup> Those political supports have also protected Social Security against repeated tries to dismantle or privatize benefits.<sup>8</sup> And the program built citizen confidence in the power of the public sector and especially the value of social insurance that enabled further expansions of government, including Medicare.

To be sure, the original Social Security legislation incorporated significant gender and racial exclusions. These exclusions shut many non-White Americans and women out of Social Security benefits for decades, entrenching racial and gender disparities in wealth and economic security.<sup>9</sup> And the program still retains important limits: for instance, it penalizes Americans who leave the workforce to care for family members.<sup>10</sup> But the longevity of the program, deeply tied to its initial design, gave policymakers the opportunity to expand Social Security's coverage and generosity—along with other U.S. social programs—in future years. Beyond these political payoffs, the design of Social Security enabled a more effective social program: old-age benefits for retirees are straightforward to access and administer. Most older Americans have a good understanding of how the program works, ensuring very high rates of participation and take-up.<sup>11</sup> Good policy feedback design yielded good policy.

How can elected officials and advocacy groups use policy design to build enduring, progressive programs? This brief lays out a framework for answering that question. I summarize lessons from

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<sup>6</sup> Derthick 1979.

<sup>7</sup> Campbell 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Hacker 2002; Pierson 1994.

<sup>9</sup> Katznelson 2005.

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. O'Leary 2012.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g.: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/social-security/policy-basics-top-ten-facts-about-social-security>

decades of policymaking and research on successful and unsuccessful policy feedback loops, spelling out when policies are most likely to create such effects. The first section of the paper describes the different ways that policy creates feedback loops. The second section outlines the benefits of attending to policy feedback loops as a means of strengthening the political viability and effectiveness of public programs and U.S. democracy. The final section recommends a set of policy changes to help elected officials in a new presidential administration harness feedback loops to achieve progressive policy ends.

## The Architecture of Policy Feedback Loops

Policy feedback loops reshape politics in three ways. Policies can shift the *political views or actions of the mass public*—for instance, as Social Security did in creating the expectation that workers are earning their benefits with payroll contributions or in giving senior citizens financial resources to get involved in politics. Similarly, policies can *change the capacities of government agencies*, as FDR did in building up a competent and well-financed Social Security Administration capable of defending the program from cutbacks. Finally, policies can also help *interest groups, movements, and businesses gain material or political clout*: it was possible for the AARP to target senior citizens as potential members because they shared a common interest in protecting Social Security; similarly, labor unions have come to have a strong stake in the program's future.

Feedback loops often unfold whether policymakers intend them to or not. As a result, failing to account for feedback loops in the design of public policies does not mean that such loops will be absent. Instead, it means that policymakers will not have an opportunity to direct their effects. This section explores the different ways policies create strong feedback loops so that policymakers can be attentive to the levers at their disposal.

While all three kinds of loops are essential for policymakers to consider, those involving organized interest groups, social movements, and private-sector businesses are especially important because

organized groups help to drive feedback loops in the mass public and in government. As we will see, organized interests can help individuals connect their experiences with government to their political actions and bolster the efforts of government bureaucrats.

Organized interest feedback loops are also important because major change in U.S. policy typically requires political organization.<sup>12</sup> Public opinion on its own rarely moves policy. Feedback loops involving changes to organized interests thus create enduring changes to the political terrain in ways that the first two kinds of feedbacks do not. To continue with the example of Social Security, while supportive public opinion and government bureaucrats helped to protect the program from cutbacks, it was organized interests—like the AARP and especially labor unions—that ultimately played a decisive role in scuttling major retrenchment efforts, like the Social Security privatization drive under President George W. Bush.<sup>13</sup>

Organized interest feedback loops are especially relevant to boost the political and economic power of marginalized groups—like Black and Brown people, women, LGBTQ+, and low-wage workers. For people who are pushing for policies that challenge the political and economic status quo, political organization is essential. Unlike wealthy individuals or business leaders who can count on outsized economic resources, connections, and political clout, historically marginalized people derive their strength from numbers—channeled through social movements, grassroots organizations, and advocacy groups.<sup>14</sup> We have seen the power of such large-scale movements in the recent—and unprecedented—mobilization of Americans against police violence. Accordingly, progressive policymakers ought to pay particular attention to the ways they can create feedback loops involving organized groups representing the interests of disadvantaged communities and build such groups directly into the policymaking process.

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<sup>12</sup> Grossmann 2014; Hacker and Pierson 2014.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Galston 2007; Greenhouse 2005a, 2005b.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Offe and Wiesenthal 1980.

In the sections that follow, I summarize policy design features most likely to foster feedback loops that build sustainable and effective policies, expand opportunities for further progressive reform, and build political power for historically excluded communities. I begin with feedback loops in the mass public, move to those involving government agencies, and conclude with loops involving organized interests.

### **For feedback loops involving the mass public...**

- *...a policy's costs, benefits, and origins should be visible, traceable, and meaningful for recipients.*

For public policies to register in the mass public, they need to be tied to individuals' lived experiences. Americans may not perceive government action, let alone credit it with affecting their own lives or relate it to their political views and actions. Policies are more likely to register in the public when benefits are larger and more meaningful. Meager or one-off benefits will be less likely to register with individuals and change their political outlook than more substantial changes in individuals' material circumstances, especially those that recur over time.

In addition to the overall magnitude of policy changes, another relevant distinction for feedback loops is whether government action is "submerged."<sup>15</sup> Direct, public provision of benefits is more likely to be recognized by individuals as government action as compared to more indirect forms of benefits, like tax credits or programs offered through businesses or non-profits. A striking survey fielded by political scientist Suzanne Mettler revealed that over two-thirds of Americans who had used a tax-preferred savings account for their child's education did not think they had used a government social program. Overall, "submerged" programs—especially those administered through the tax code—were less likely to register feedback effects than those delivered directly through government.<sup>16</sup> Decisions to submerge program design are often

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<sup>15</sup> Mettler 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Mettler 2011.



deliberate: championed by liberals hoping to reduce opposition to public programs and supported by conservatives wanting to minimize the size of government and the credit public programs receive.<sup>17</sup>

Another layer of complexity comes from programs split between different levels of government, like Medicaid or unemployment insurance. These programs often have separate names and brandings, sometimes even within the same state. That can make it hard for individuals to recognize that they are benefitting from national legislation, like the Affordable Care Act in the case of state-by-state Medicaid expansion or unemployment insurance benefits during recessions.<sup>18</sup> Having a single name or identity for social programs could thus help Americans to credit their experiences to government more easily.<sup>19</sup>

- *...trusted and accurate sources of information about the program are critical.*

As spelled out above, thoughtful policy design can help citizens accurately perceive the costs, benefits, and origins of public programs. But policymakers also need to be mindful of the broader sources of information that citizens are using to learn about public programs. The most powerful feedback loops in the mass public build on trusted channels of communication.<sup>20</sup>

President Franklin Roosevelt grasped this intuitively during the New Deal, stamping “Works Progress Administration” branding on relief efforts. So too does President Donald Trump, who insisted on signing stimulus checks and sending guidelines to all American households affixed with his name during the COVID-19 crisis. Of course, this kind of connection work can—and should—be done by civil society groups too. But the more that it can be done directly, especially

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<sup>17</sup> Mettler 2011.

<sup>18</sup> See especially Grogan and Park 2017.

<sup>19</sup> See also Mettler 2019, 42.

<sup>20</sup> On the failure of such channels recently, see especially Galvin and Thurston 2017.

through trusted or broadly-recognized agencies and officials, the more likely it will be to register with the public—and the more likely individuals are to credit government.

One striking example comes from the Social Security Administration, which began providing mailed statements describing the program and its benefits to citizens starting in 1999. Research later showed that these statements improved Americans' knowledge of how the program worked. The statements also led recipients to express greater confidence in Social Security as a program.<sup>21</sup> The lesson is that easily accessible information from trusted sources can increase individuals' understanding of, and confidence in, government institutions.

Closely related, policymakers and political advocates ought to be attuned to how the public will learn about a policy if not through the government itself. Obama-era health reform offers a cautionary example. One reason why the Affordable Care Act (ACA) may have remained unpopular in the early—but critical—years of its implementation was that local TV news coverage about the program tended to prioritize stories about partisan conflict instead of key policy details.<sup>22</sup> Given that local TV remains a major way most Americans get their news, this tilted coverage of the ACA had a very wide audience.<sup>23</sup> Policymakers should therefore plan carefully for how they can reach all or most citizens potentially affected by a government program, working closely with reporters and other civil society organizations that will be trusted by different segments of society.

- *...policy design and implementation must actively convey respect towards beneficiaries or other target groups.*

Apart from the ease with which individuals can recognize policy changes and connect them to their own lives is the question of what messages or lessons policies convey to their beneficiaries—

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<sup>21</sup> Cook, Jacobs, and Kim 2010; but see Barnes et al. 2018 on the limits of this kind of information in changing attitudes.

<sup>22</sup> Gollust et al. 2017.

<sup>23</sup> See e.g. The Media Insight Project 2014.

and to the mass public.<sup>24</sup> Government programs can convey or affirm stigmatizing identities to citizens. Programs narrowly targeted to already-stigmatized groups tend to perpetuate social stigma and result in less politically-sustainable policies with weaker uptake.<sup>25</sup>

Equally important are the procedures involved in applying for, and receiving government benefits. How straightforward are application procedures, and in particular, what kinds of burdens do these procedures impose on recipients?<sup>26</sup> What kind of assumptions are embedded in application procedures about potential beneficiaries? Are the claims made on government viewed as suspect and in need of intrusive verification—for instance, through extensive checks of individuals' households, employment status or job search effort, or lifestyles (like drug tests)? Do beneficiaries have a voice and role in program administration and implementation? And above all, what are the messages that recipients receive from program administrators about their place in government and society?

It is no coincidence that opponents of welfare programs tend to favor narrowly-targeted policies with heavily restrictive application and screening procedures. As public policy scholars Pamela Herd and Donald Moynihan explain, these design choices are intended to erect deliberate psychological and practical barriers to reduce those programs' reach.<sup>27</sup> Such strategies have long been cast in racialized terms as well, with opponents of racial equality advocating punitive means-tested programs for benefits or services aimed primarily at Black and brown communities while granting White Americans access to more straightforward, work-based benefits or even universal policies when white people have a substantial stake in the benefit or service.<sup>28</sup>

Take, for example, means-tested, direct-aid programs like cash welfare. The administrative hurdles that beneficiaries of such programs must overcome and the government's own rhetoric

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<sup>24</sup> Schneider and Ingram 1993.

<sup>25</sup> See e.g. Skocpol 1995.

<sup>26</sup> Herd and Moynihan 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Herd and Moynihan 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Katznelson 2005; Lieberman 2001.

tend to dampen individuals' interest and participation in politics. So too has the explicit—and often deliberate—association of the program with negative racial stereotypes.<sup>29</sup> This leaves the program without defenders in the wider public or among beneficiaries themselves. Indeed, research indicates that receipt of cash welfare benefits reduces the likelihood that Americans will participate in politics and civic life because it teaches beneficiaries that they do not have a legitimate voice in government.<sup>30</sup> It should come as no surprise, then, that cash welfare benefits have greatly eroded over time without a strong political constituency of support.<sup>31</sup>

Alternatively, other policies—like Social Security—can convey messages that their beneficiaries are worthy citizens whose voices matter.<sup>32</sup> Policies are more likely to mobilize beneficiaries and attract support in the mass public that sustains them over time when they convey positive messages about their recipients. For instance, passage of the G.I. Bill after World War II provided valuable new social and economic opportunities for returning veterans to join the middle class with subsidized home or small business loans and assistance in earning further education. On a more fundamental level, the supports offered by the G.I. programs conveyed positive messages and identities about the veterans that used them. These mechanisms drove higher levels of veteran political and civic participation and increased faith in government among G.I. Bill recipients.<sup>33</sup>

But the G.I. Bill also offers a cautionary tale as well in the ways that its racially exclusionary design entrenched social and economic inequalities between White and Black returning veterans—with downstream political consequences.<sup>34</sup> To be sure, many Black veterans were able to take advantage of the G.I. Bill's education and training supports.<sup>35</sup> Still, Black service members were excluded from many of the same educational opportunities afforded to White veterans—especially when it came

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<sup>29</sup> Gilens 1999; Wilson 1990.

<sup>30</sup> Bruch, Ferree, and Soss 2010; Campbell 2003; Soss 1999.

<sup>31</sup> Edin and Shaefer 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Mettler and Soss 2004; Soss 1999.

<sup>33</sup> Mettler 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Katznelson 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Mettler 2005, 55.

to higher education.<sup>36</sup> Even more significant inequalities emerged with the G.I. Bill's home, business, and farm loans. Financial assistance was ostensibly color-blind. But because the Bill funneled support through banks employing discriminatory lending practices, Black people were all but excluded from receiving such opportunities. Together, these exclusions helped drive massive Black-White gaps in homeownership, business ownership, and wealth, which in turn may have dampened Black political participation.<sup>37</sup>

Two important lessons emerge from this discussion. First, universal programs tend to build stronger political interest and voice among their beneficiaries than do heavily targeted or means-tested benefits. Yet this does not mean that targeted programs can never produce feedback loops in the mass public. Careful policy design can still encourage greater political mobilization even among recipients of targeted social benefits, and those targeted to poorer Americans. Scholars have shown that participation in Head Start—a national program aimed at advancing the development of low-income children—increases civic interest and engagement among poor parents, helping them to develop skills they might deploy in politics.<sup>38</sup> Although the program is means-tested, like cash welfare, Head Start prioritizes parent participation in program administration and adopts a much less punitive and paternalistic approach to its beneficiaries. As a result, Head Start nurtures identities and skills relevant to deeper civic engagement. If policymakers must create targeted programs, they should do so in ways that maximize beneficiary involvement and promote positive social identities.

The second lesson is the reverse of the first: while universal or widely-available programs tend to build stronger political support than targeted programs, some programs—like Social Security and the G.I. Bill—can still have important exclusionary effects if they are embedded in discriminatory social structures. Feedback loop design therefore cannot neglect the broader context in which

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<sup>36</sup> Mettler 2005, 56; Katznelson 2005, 136-7.

<sup>37</sup> See: e.g. <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/breaking-down-black-white-homeownership-gap>; on homeownership and participation, see e.g. Hall and Yoder 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Bruch, Ferree, and Soss 2010.

policies operate. Planning for policy feedback loops thus means considering the interaction between *both* formal policy design *and* social and economic context and addressing the ways that disadvantaged communities might experience the policy in their daily lives. Progressive feedback loops should not be considered to be a success if they are built on the exclusion of such disadvantaged communities from a policy's coverage.

### **For feedback loops involving government agencies or officials...**

- *...government agencies must have the capacity necessary to successfully implement the program, including financial resources, talent, and political clout.*

Battles over the enactment of major legislation tend to receive substantial attention from politicians, journalists, interest groups, and citizens. Much less attention, however, is directed to the lengthier (and often more obscure) process of implementation. Yet choices at this stage determine a policy's ultimate impact, including whether or not a policy actually goes into effect.<sup>39</sup> As a result, questions of implementation are central to feedback loop planning. Here, relevant scholarship suggests that policies are most likely to spur feedback loops when the agencies responsible for administering the policy have sufficient resources and capacity.

At a basic level, policies can provide greater or fewer resources to public agencies for implementation. Those decisions can determine both the quality of public services and the possibilities for later government action. As the failed rollout of the Healthcare.gov health insurance marketplace demonstrated so vividly during the Obama administration, directing insufficient resources to the implementation of public programs can undermine the effectiveness of those initiatives. But they can also increase public skepticism towards later government action: polling revealed a decline in public support for the Affordable Care Act after the Healthcare.gov fiasco.<sup>40</sup> Reduced capacity of public agencies forecloses later political

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<sup>39</sup> See e.g. Patashnik 2008; Patashnik 2019.

<sup>40</sup> See e.g. Corman and Levin 2016.

possibilities, too, as we are discovering in the response to the COVID-19 crisis. Years of underfunding and understaffing of state unemployment insurance agencies has meant that they are poorly positioned to administer widespread relief, which in turn has greatly limited the possibilities for using unemployment insurance as macroeconomic stimulus.<sup>41</sup>

Adequate capacity for government agencies starts with financial resources. This is an especially important consideration in the current era of budget standoffs. Strategies that avoid possibilities for partisan gamesmanship will be especially helpful as policymakers consider how to ensure adequate program support over time. This could include creating alternative funding streams for agencies. The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, for instance, receives funding from the Federal Reserve, rather than Congress, partially reducing the possibility that unfriendly lawmakers can undermine the agency's activities. Alternative strategies could tie agency funding to other priorities that are less likely to be opposed, bundling implementation monies with other must-pass items. And still other strategies might include alternative funding sources that rely on dedicated taxes or charges, rather than general revenue, as in the case of Social Security's payroll taxes.

Sufficient capacity also means human resources: policymakers and agency heads should ensure that the divisions tasked with implementing policies have the opportunity to recruit and retain talented individuals. Especially important is the recruitment of agency staff who are sufficiently independent of the entities they may be regulating so as to prevent capture—either financial or cultural.<sup>42</sup>

And sufficient capacity entails political resources: policies that entrench themselves over time build up links with civil society and grant agencies greater political leverage within government. The Small Business Office of Advocacy offers a striking example of both mechanisms for the political right. It has become a powerful way that conservative business interests have secured a

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<sup>41</sup> Emsellem and Evermore 2020.

<sup>42</sup> See e.g. Hauser and Segal 2020; Kwak 2014.

supportive venue within the federal government to block regulation.<sup>43</sup> Housed within the Small Business Administration, the Office can lobby against any and all federal regulations seen as unfriendly to small business. Far from granting a political voice to small businesses, however, the priorities of the Office more often align with large companies and trade associations in weakening labor, health, safety, or consumer protection rules. (In fact, the Office frequently works with business groups representing larger companies, not mom and pop small firms.<sup>44</sup>) The Office uses government resources to draft regulatory comments and file briefs in litigation against unfriendly regulations—and federal rules compel other government agencies to take the Office’s views into consideration. No other stakeholders can count on a similar lobby within government to represent and advance their interests.

In a similar vein, the regulatory review process within the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs tends to privilege private-sector businesses by relying on companies for projections of likely regulatory burdens.<sup>45</sup> Yet industry representatives have every incentive to overstate costs and uncertainty in an effort to undermine regulations. This builds in an important check on regulatory activity favoring business directly into the policymaking process. Both the Small Business Administration and Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs examples suggest parallel ways that a progressive administration could build stronger civil society linkages to counterbalance corporate influence, for instance, by creating workers or consumer advocates within the regulatory process or by requiring regulatory input from a broader array of stakeholders.<sup>46</sup>

In cases where policymakers are unable to insulate a program or its relevant agency from legislative or executive opponents, building a strong base of civil society support can help ensure its entrenchment. Sometimes this can be as straightforward as where government agencies are

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<sup>43</sup> Block 2019.

<sup>44</sup> Shapiro and Goodwin 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Tucker and Nayak 2020, 17.

<sup>46</sup> Tucker and Nayak 2020.



physically located. One historical reason for the Federal Reserve’s power has been the fact that its geographically dispersed structure of regional banks “hardwired political support for the Fed in communities far from Wall Street and Washington”—support it could leverage during efforts to strip it of control.<sup>47</sup>

Another potential model comes from the Department of Education’s “School Ambassador Fellowship” program, which invites “outstanding teachers, principals, and other school leaders, like school counselors and librarians” to contribute their expertise to the department’s work while learning more themselves about federal education policy.<sup>48</sup> These kinds of programs help tie local communities across the country to the work of federal agencies, building support for the agency while also informing better policy design. Programs like these also have the potential to construct pipelines into public service that can expand the talent that agencies draw from in the future.<sup>49</sup>

### **Lastly, for feedback loops involving organized interests...**

- *...policymakers should marshal the resources and energy of organized groups to bolster the administration of policies, defend those policies over time, and build the political voice of historically disadvantaged communities.*

The final—and most important—set of considerations describes how policies can foster the creation or expansion of organized interest groups that support a policy’s administration, defend the policy over time, and empower historically marginalized groups. As we have seen, organized interest feedback loops are crucial because they underpin the other two types of feedback processes. They are also essential because organized actors—like businesses, civic organizations,

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<sup>47</sup> Binder and Spindel 2017, 81.

<sup>48</sup> <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/schoolfellowship/programoverview.html>. I thank Raj Nayak for this very helpful suggestion.

<sup>49</sup> For other examples, see e.g. Carpenter 2001.

and social movements—are much more important and influential in American politics than the mass public or individual Americans are on their own.<sup>50</sup> This is especially true for groups challenging the current political, economic, and social status quo.

How should policymakers build supportive organized interest groups through feedback loops? The crucial step for policymakers is to identify opportunities to support civic organizations that can buttress a policy's implementation and survival—especially if those organizations incorporate and amplify the political voices of historically marginalized groups. The key question is thus: Do policies make it easier for civic organizations invested in a policy's success to attract and organize members, collect donations or dues, and participate in politics?

The best example of such legislative “hooks” for organizing is labor law. By creating a legally-recognized set of organizing and collective bargaining rights, state and federal labor law enabled the growth of the labor movement, which in turn underpinned the expansion and enforcement of a variety of other workplace rights and protections.<sup>51</sup> Labor unions have also been one of the most successful mass movement organizations representing the interests of less-affluent Americans, including racial and ethnic minorities, in politics.<sup>52</sup>

In a similar vein, policymakers should be asking how they can use policy to support existing civic organizations or create new ones where organizations do not exist. Such support could be direct, by funding organizations or creating opportunities for citizens to easily contribute to groups. New York City, for instance, has created opportunities for fast-food workers to deduct contributions from their paychecks to qualified non-profit organizations. Those organizations will help enforce labor standards and push for stronger workplace protections in the fast-food

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<sup>50</sup> Hacker and Pierson 2010, 2019.

<sup>51</sup> On policy “hooks and levers”, see e.g. Andrias and Sachs Forthcoming; Rahman and Gilman 2019. On the effects of labor law on union organization, see e.g. Feigenbaum, Hertel-Fernandez, and Williamson 2019; Flavin and Hartney 2015.

<sup>52</sup> See e.g.: Lichtenstein 2002.

sector.<sup>53</sup> For another example, consider Illinois' "Citizen Utility Board." In 1983, the Illinois General Assembly created a Citizens Utility Board intended to represent the interests of utility customers in the policymaking process. Funded by dues contributions, the Board is permitted to recruit members by piggybacking on other state mailings.<sup>54</sup> Both of these cases involve creative mechanisms for supporting new civic organizations involved in the implementation of labor policy (in New York) and energy policy (in Illinois). Both policies also grant organized political representation to previously unorganized constituencies facing powerful economic opponents: low-wage, fast-food workers facing national restaurant chains (in New York) and ordinary households up against massive power utilities (in Illinois).

Policy support for civic organizations can be indirect as well. By formally or informally drawing on civic organization input and participation in the policymaking process, government officials can raise the profile of groups and help them to attract attention, membership, and revenue. In turn, those groups have an opportunity to hold policymakers accountable to their constituencies and introduce new ideas into the policy process. The Reagan-era Department of Justice (DOJ) provides an excellent example of this kind of feedback loop.<sup>55</sup> Led by Attorney General Edwin Meese, Reagan DOJ appointees relied on close collaborations with outside political organizations (especially the Federalist Society) to set and implement policy. This expanded the reach of the DOJ and in turn made participation in conservative legal organizations like the Federalist Society more appealing, further strengthening those groups' membership and revenue and the administration's agenda. In a similar vein, the George W. Bush administration took steps to support many religious charities and faith organizations: by broadening their access to federal grants and elevating their work through the public platform of the White House and federal agencies.<sup>56</sup> This both helped the Bush administration achieve particular social policy objectives—

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<sup>53</sup> Miller 2017.

<sup>54</sup> See e.g.: <https://www.citizensutilityboard.org/funding/>.

<sup>55</sup> Teles 2009.

<sup>56</sup> See e.g. Carlson-Thies 2009.

like faith-based approaches to poverty reduction, marriage, and drug abuse—while also providing financial and organizational support to allied faith-based organizations.

The lesson from this discussion is that policies are most likely to endure and be effective to the extent that they can count on organized allies. In turn, policymakers should maximize the number of “hooks” that policies produce for directly or indirectly supporting civic organizations. This is especially crucial for fostering organization of historically disadvantaged constituencies.

- *...policymakers should maximize opportunities to convert, coopt, or deactivate powerful organized opponents, particularly business opponents.*

The last lesson for feedback loop planning involves opposition to progressive policy reform. In many cases, progressive advocacy groups and elected officials are seeking policy changes that challenge powerful political and economic interests—above all, incumbent private-sector businesses. In cases like these, policymakers need to be mindful of what happens to political opponents after a bill is signed into law or a regulation goes into effect. If political opponents are left unchecked, the danger is that they will return to weaken—or even eliminate—the policy post-enactment.<sup>57</sup>

One striking example involves the 1986 Tax Reform Act, often celebrated as a landmark public-interest reform that made the tax code fairer and more efficient. Yet because the legislation did nothing to change the underlying political power or economic interests of businesses that had been lobbying for narrow loopholes, tax policy gradually devolved in the ensuing years, returning to a more complex, less efficient, and less fair tangle of provisions.<sup>58</sup>

To save policies from a similar fate, progressive lawmakers and advocacy groups need to think carefully about how feedback loops will shape the landscape of opponents, post-enactment or

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<sup>57</sup> Patashnik 2008.

<sup>58</sup> Patashnik 2008, chapter 1.

implementation. One strategy is to create countervailing organizations capable of checking the power of political and economic opponents. Here, the previous section offers a guide: if policies can create or boost the power of supportive allies, they can keep opponents at bay. Again, labor unions provide a clear example: the surge of union organization after the passage of the National Labor Relations Act in 1935 helped to create a new political and economic force that could—at least for a time—keep businesses from fully rolling back the law. But as labor power has waned, businesses have had an easier time retrenching federal and state union rights—and workplace standards have fallen as well.<sup>59</sup>

Another strategy is to identify feedback loops that can convert policy opponents into supporters—or at least push opponents toward a more neutral stance. This is most straightforward when elected officials are dealing with corporate opponents. To convert or coopt business opposition, policymakers can design programs that change the profit, revenue and production strategies of private-sector businesses—for instance, by creating new business opportunities, foreclosing other opportunities, setting limits on certain activities, or spreading new strategies for business practices. To the extent that policies can introduce incentives for businesses to restructure their strategies around a policy, it can increase those firms' investments in the policy's survival and expansion over time.<sup>60</sup>

This is in part the story of Social Security: as many private-sector firms became accustomed to working with the new social insurance program and building it into the retirement plans companies were increasingly offering to employees, corporate opposition to the program waned.<sup>61</sup> This was also the logic behind the design of the Affordable Care Act, which sought to create expanded business opportunities for health insurers in exchange for new regulations. Yet the ACA's feedback effects on insurers were muted, in large part because of the weak development of

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<sup>59</sup> See e.g. Weil 2014.

<sup>60</sup> Pierson 2004.

<sup>61</sup> Hacker 2002.

state insurance marketplaces. Low enrollment and bungled administration weakened health insurers' incentives to defend the legislation against repeal.<sup>62</sup> In this way, weak administrative supports (as we saw above) undermined possibilities for organized interest feedback loops.

Approaches built on cooptation, especially of private-sector companies, need to be addressed cautiously. Policymakers ought to ensure that the need to address political opposition does not overly undermine or constrain the ambition of their efforts. Nevertheless, even the most progressive reforms will often necessitate some cooptation of key opponents, especially businesses. Today, the United Kingdom's public health care system—the National Health Service—remains the envy of many U.S. progressives. But when queried about how he was able to pass such a sweeping reform, the architect of the British health care system explained he bought off his main political opponents: medical providers. To do so, he “stuffed their mouths with gold.”<sup>63</sup>

When the scope of a policy rules out opportunities for coopting opponents, policymakers might consider making those opponents less politically powerful. One effective strategy is to fragment or divide political opponents that once held common interests. Often, economic incentives can be a key lever. Breaking up over-sized financial institutions along functional lines could have these kinds of economic and political feedback loops. Such a reform could force banks that now have shared economic interests onto opposing sides of policy debates, thus fragmenting their political power and balancing the playing field between supporters and opponents of tighter financial regulation.<sup>64</sup>

The Affordable Care Act offers another, largely successful example of a divide-and-conquer approach to policy feedback loops. Many Republican state politicians and powerful conservative interest groups were prepared to wage an all-out war against implementation of the law, including the state-by-state expansion of Medicaid to cover previously uninsured poor adults. But

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<sup>62</sup> Hacker and Pierson 2018, 564.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Hacker 2018.

<sup>64</sup> Sitaraman 2019, 143.

the generous terms of federal support for health care providers was too much for industry leaders to pass up. Many medical providers lobbied their local and state chambers of commerce to push GOP politicians for expansion, breaking a traditional alliance between business groups and conservative activists.<sup>65</sup> These providers and their pressure on Republican governors also played a key role in the last-minute rescue of the Affordable Care Act from repeal under the Trump administration.<sup>66</sup>

Lastly, in still other cases, policymakers can consider putting certain private-sector firms out of business altogether. State-level climate policy offers several successful cases of these mechanisms.<sup>67</sup> When designed effectively, state-level renewable energy requirements can seed the growth of new renewable energy providers and reorient existing firms towards cleaner energy technologies. Those companies, in turn, lobby for the expansion of renewable energy policies and defend them against cutbacks. Renewable energy laws also place market pressure on firms that do not switch to cleaner technologies—and can even help to put them out of business. Proposals for universal health insurance that build on a strong voluntary “public option” rely on a similar logic.<sup>68</sup> By introducing the choice of a well-run, affordable government health insurance plan, progressive reformers hope to create an incentive for an increasing share of Americans to opt into public coverage. Doing so will put market pressure on private insurers, eventually driving some out of business and thus reducing the economic and political power of that industry.

Policymakers should not take the decision to put market pressure on particular firms or sectors lightly. This kind of market-making (and market-breaking) behavior carries significant consequences for wages, employment, and economic growth. But nor should policymakers shy away from using these tools. Even when it *fails* to act, the government is setting the terms of private-sector markets. The failure of the federal government to price or regulate carbon

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<sup>65</sup> Hertel-Fernandez, Skocpol, and Lynch 2016.

<sup>66</sup> Beland, Rocco, and Wadden 2018; Castele 2017.

<sup>67</sup> Stokes 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Hacker 2018

emissions, for instance, is just as much of a policy decision—with implications for prices, supply, and demand—as an active choice to support renewable energy production. Progressive reformers and elected officials should therefore think carefully about how these choices of “marketcraft” can build political and economic power—or undermine it.<sup>69</sup>

## Policy Feedback Loops Strengthen Economic and Political Democracy

By stimulating greater political participation, policy feedback loops offer an important tool to empower groups of Americans who have been historically marginalized from government—ethnic and racial minorities, women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and working-class Americans. Progressive policymakers should therefore create feedback loops with an eye to *broadening political and economic equality*. The most relevant constituencies for policymakers to consider will vary across policies and the group in question, but the standard should remain the same: **Do policy feedback loops build political power in ways that deepen political and economic democracy?**

Given the importance of feedback loops involving organized interests, policymakers should direct particular attention to the question of whether they are making it easier for previously marginalized or under-represented groups to build enduring and powerful political organizations. As one thought experiment, consider what might have happened if the ACA had seeded a new membership-based political organization like the AARP—but for health insurance enrollees—or had supported existing grassroots advocacy groups targeting these communities.<sup>70</sup> Such organizations might have been able to lobby the federal government to protect health benefits from repeal and push states to fully implement the law’s provisions. They would have also been able to mobilize many of the most disadvantaged Americans currently excluded from politics who benefit from the ACA’s provisions,

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<sup>69</sup> Hacker and Pierson 2016; Vogel 2018.

<sup>70</sup> For one example, see e.g.: Hertel-Fernandez, Skocpol, and Sclar 2018.



disproportionately poor, minority Americans.<sup>71</sup> And such mobilization could have paved the way for further expansions of the ACA moving closer to universal health coverage.

This approach to progressive policy feedback planning contrasts with conservative feedback strategies. Under a progressive feedback approach, policymakers aim to broaden political and economic inclusion. Conservative feedback loops, as we saw in the earlier example of Scott Walker's offensive against Wisconsin labor unions, often involve undermining political or civic organizations or political participation—strategies that do not fit with a progressive vision of feedback loops. Progressive feedback loops would only seek to undermine or eliminate corporate opposition if there are no other alternatives and when such opposition threatens the goal of broader economic and political democracy. Progressive feedback strategy is therefore not simply a mirror image of conservative strategy. loops would only seek to undermine or eliminate corporate opposition if there are no other alternatives and when such opposition threatens the goal of broader economic and political democracy. Progressive feedback strategy is therefore not simply a mirror image of conservative strategy.

## **A False Choice Between Good Economics and Good Politics**

Contrary to common thinking among some policymakers, attending to policy feedback loops is a critical part of effective policymaking—not an unsavory application of political strategy. The choice between good economics and good politics is thus a false one.

First, policy feedback loops are crucial to policy sustainability. By failing to take feedback loops into account, policymakers may create opportunities for backlash or retrenchment that undermines both the policy and future efforts at progressive lawmaking. Policies that are repealed or that shut off efforts at additional policymaking do no good—regardless of how ideal their economic design.

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<sup>71</sup> See e.g.: Kaiser Family Foundation 2020.

Take the example of the taxation of high-cost health insurance plans in the Affordable Care Act. The tax was championed by health economists, who argued that it would be an important mechanism for driving down health care costs. Unions, however, loathed the tax, which fell disproportionately on the generous plans that they had fought for in collective bargaining with employers. So too did high-income professionals with pricey health plans. Although the Obama administration succeeded in pushing through the tax in the final health reform legislation, broad bipartisan opposition meant that the tax never went into effect. Prioritizing economic over political logic in this case meant that the policy never actually worked—and just wound up antagonizing a key ally of the Democratic party in ways that undermined other administration priorities.

In fact, the Obama administration's emphasis on the health insurance tax may have contributed to the surprise victory of Republican Senator Scott Brown in the special election to replace the late Senator Ted Kennedy. According to one election-night poll, voters who thought that the health reform legislation would tax employer health benefits supported Brown by a two-to-one margin, and Brown carried the union vote by three points.<sup>72</sup> Brown's win meant that Democrats no longer held a filibuster-proof majority in the Senate, scuttling many of the Obama administration's legislative plans.

Even apart from ensuring the survival of public policies, smart feedback designs often make for more effective public programs. Consider the problem of policy take-up. A major weakness in U.S. social programs is low take-up rates: many individuals eligible for social or economic benefits do not take advantage of them, either because of the complexity of applying for benefits or the stigma associated with them.<sup>73</sup> Measures that increase the odds of policy feedback—like making policy benefits more visible and accessible, creating more positive identities around benefit receipt, and connecting benefit use to trusted civic associations—can thus increase take-up rates and make policies work better.

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<sup>72</sup> Early 2010; Molyneux and Bunge 2010.

<sup>73</sup> Bertrand, Mullainathan, and Shafir 2006; Currie 2004.

The paid leave program passed by Congress in response to the COVID-19 crisis offers an excellent example. Because of the complicated rules governing the program, many Americans are ineligible and many who might be eligible have not even heard of the benefit. Just 13 percent of Americans say that they “heard a lot” about the program and only 28 percent of business leaders covered by the law reported taking advantage of the program to administer paid leave to their workers.<sup>74</sup> A more straightforward and visible benefit—elements of a stronger feedback design—might have achieved a much higher take-up rate. In a similar vein, building greater worker or small business representation into the design of COVID-19 relief might have addressed the difficulty workers have had in applying for unemployment benefits and small businesses have had in accessing an emergency lending program—two other difficult-to-access recovery benefits with poor feedback designs.<sup>75</sup>

## How a Progressive Administration and Policy Advocates Can Harness Feedback Loops

This brief concludes with several recommendations for policymakers and allied groups seeking to build checks for progressive policy feedback loops into the policymaking process and policy advocacy work. I focus closely on the opportunities for feedback planning within the federal executive. This is because the contemporary White House is well-situated to promote progressive feedback loops by virtue of the very broad authority it has over regulatory policy and in setting public and legislative agendas. Yet despite this potential, feedback loop planning does not fit naturally within the existing infrastructure for policymaking in the executive branch.

One important reason that systematic feedback planning has not occurred to date is that the components of successful progressive policy loops apply *across* policy areas. This means that policymakers working in different departments and agencies must work together to take them into

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<sup>74</sup> Miller and Tankersley 2020.

<sup>75</sup> Block et al. 2020; Hsu and Bernard 2020; Merle 2020.

account. Although this kind of coordinated focus has been relatively absent in recent Democratic administrations, an incoming progressive administration could adopt a new approach to formulating domestic policy that places policy feedback considerations front and center.<sup>76</sup>

The ideal place for a future administration to center this responsibility is within the National Economic Council and the Domestic Policy Council. These are the two bodies within the White House tasked with advising the President on economic and social policy and coordinating policy development, support, and implementation across agencies and Cabinet departments. Because they cut across different policy areas they could thus ensure that the myriad departments and agencies within a progressive administration are all applying policy feedback logic and that administrative initiatives are sequenced in ways that build power across initiatives.

Another important reason why previous administrations have not prioritized feedback planning is that there is not a widespread or commonly-used language for designing and evaluating feedback loops in the same way as other policy tools, like cost-benefit analysis. One goal of this brief is therefore to provide a framework for building in explicit processes to encourage greater consideration of feedback loops into policy proposal design and evaluation.

## Checklist for Progressive Policy Feedback Loops

- How visible, traceable, and meaningful are a policy's costs/benefits and how easily can individuals connect the policy back to government? In particular, is the program delivered or administered in ways that make government's role clear to individuals?

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<sup>76</sup> Indeed, some White House agencies and offices under the Obama administration consciously avoided engaging with organized interest groups or considering the long-term political consequences of executive actions (see e.g. Phillips 2020; Scheiber 2012; Sunstein 2013; Tucker and Nayak 2020). To the extent that recent Democratic administrations have focused on the effects of regulation on organized groups, it has tended to be in trying to undermine organized "capture" of policymaking by interest groups (e.g., in studies of occupational licensing).

- Are there trusted and accurate sources of information about the program, either from the government itself or intermediary groups?
- Will the policy's design and implementation convey respect or stigma towards targeted groups?
- Do government agencies have the capacity necessary to implement the program, including financial resources, talent, and political clout? What does the program do to build linkages between civil society and government administrators?
- How does the program foster supportive organized groups, like businesses, social movement organizations, or civic groups? Are those organized groups facilitating other feedback loops in turn?
- How does the program address its opponents, especially private-sector businesses? Does it include mechanisms to help neutralize or convert those opponents into supporters? If necessary, does it include mechanisms for putting market pressure on private-sector opponents?
- Above all, does the policy deepen political, social, and economic inclusion for historically marginalized groups?

Taking policy feedback loops seriously means starting at the policy design stage and following through to policy implementation. That means discussions of policy feedback loops have to start with the formulation of administrative or legislative proposals and cannot be tacked on at the end once officials have already arrived at a particular design. Policy feedback expertise thus needs to be combined with issue-area expertise. But discussions of feedback loops cannot end with policy design, and need to continue throughout the process of implementation and evaluation, too.

The “Making Work Pay” tax cut provides an instructive example of the costs to not incorporating feedback strategy early on in policy design. Enacted under the Obama administration, these supports were part of the initial response to the Great Recession. White House economists stressed that these cuts would be most effective if they were hidden from recipients. That would encourage Americans to spend, rather than save, the extra money.<sup>77</sup> The tax cuts worked as intended, but their “submerged” design meant that most Americans—more than 90 percent—thought that their taxes had remained the same or gone up in the early years of the Obama administration. Although the administration tried to publicize the tax cut in interviews, online videos, and messaging to allied interest groups, the structure of the policy itself made it challenging for individuals to identify the change in taxes and how it might have affected them personally. No amount of post-enactment messaging or communication blitzes could remedy the hidden design of the cuts, nor the fact that the cuts failed to further empower progressive organized interest groups.

Policy feedback design considerations must also be taken as seriously as other institutionalized procedures within the regulatory process, like cost-benefit analysis, even though feedback assessments may not lend themselves to quantification in the same way as economic costs or benefits.<sup>78</sup> While policy feedback loops are never guaranteed, there is an extensive body of research that can inform the introduction of new indicators into a review process that is conscious of feedback loops. Outcomes analysts should be projecting—and then tracking post-implementation—include the following:<sup>79</sup>

- **For policy feedback loops involving individuals or categories of individuals**, analysts can draw on survey data, interviews, ethnographies, or data on interactions between beneficiaries, civic organizations, and government administrators. Analysts working in a future administration should be projecting likely changes in individuals’ financial resources, civically-relevant skills,

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<sup>77</sup> Mettler 2011, chapter 3.

<sup>78</sup> See also Tucker and Nayak 2020, 30-33 for how the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs could assess political power-building in its regulatory review.

<sup>79</sup> Summarized and expanded from Skocpol 2018.

beliefs about government, values, motivations to participate in politics, and perceptions of their political efficacy. Surveys probing how Americans perceive policies and the likely impact of policies on their lives could be very helpful. The rapid-response policy polling that Data for Progress is doing, for instance, can play an important role in projecting and evaluating policy feedback loops in the mass public. But this kind of work also needs to be conducted over time and ideally complemented with other kinds of data, like ethnographies and interviews, to fully evaluate the effect of policies once they are in place.

- **For policy feedback loops involving government agencies**, analysts might project and then subsequently track agency budgets, staffing, activities, measures of support in the mass public and among interest groups and political leaders, and records of their interactions with members of the public, politicians, and civic associations and interest groups. There are already many advocacy groups and academics who are collecting this kind of data on the operation of government agencies that policymakers can draw on—for instance, the National Academy of Social Insurance and the Social Security Administration, or the National Employment Law Project and state-level unemployment insurance agencies.
- **For policy feedback loops involving organized civic associations and political groups**, analysts can draw on group-level data, like the presence or absence of organizations, their financial and membership resources, political involvements, activities, structures of alliances and coalitions, and interactions with members of the public and government officials. It is less common for progressive analysts to rely on this kind of organizational-level data as compared to public opinion polls, but it will be an essential part of projecting and evaluating policy feedback loop given the importance of organized interests.

Those charged with thinking about feedback loops must also pay attention to the sequencing of policy and how policy plays out across different levels of government. The ways that policymakers decide to order their legislative or administrative efforts can either pave the way for new opportunities or limit future options. That means policymakers cannot think about designing

policies individually. Instead, they need to ask themselves whether the feedbacks generated by an initial policy action make it easier to pursue later changes. If policymakers can weaken or divide key opponents, they can reduce backlash to subsequent measures. Similarly, if a policy builds up a supportive constituency quickly enough, it can pave the way for later expansions and prevent backlash.

Conservative GOP Governor Scott Walker understood the logic of policy sequencing when he made busting Wisconsin's public sector unions his first big legislative priority.<sup>80</sup> With limited time and political capital, Walker's first move was to divide and weaken a key opponent, paving the way for later political and policy initiatives—including his successful reelection. Given years of mounting resentment against public sector workers, moreover, Walker shrewdly understood that it was easier to scale back government union rights compared to private sector union rights.<sup>81</sup> Once public sector unions were on the defensive, it became easier for Walker's government to eventually enact a right-to-work law applying to private sector unions, too. Walker's reforms reduced the power of unions, which in turn drove down voter turnout and Democratic votes in subsequent elections.<sup>82</sup>

Finally, a feedback-oriented approach must recognize the ways that political effects can change possibilities within and across different levels of government. Changes in national policy can open up new possibilities for policy change at the state or local level, which can in turn drive further shifts in federal policy.<sup>83</sup> As an example, federal subsidies for renewable energy can drive the creation of renewable energy producers and installers that lobby for local and state renewable energy standards. That growing and geographically-dispersed base of renewable energy supporters can then pressure Congress to maintain or even expand the original subsidies—and also spark further changes in federal energy policy that favor green sources.

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<sup>80</sup> Hertel-Fernandez 2019, chapter 6.

<sup>81</sup> Cramer 2014.

<sup>82</sup> Feigenbaum, Hertel-Fernandez, and Williamson 2019; Hertel-Fernandez 2019.

<sup>83</sup> See e.g. Trachtman 2019.



Important as these changes processes will be, they will not be sufficient on their own to entrench a policy feedback perspective in executive branch decision-making. Changing the culture of policymaking within the executive branch will require identifying appointees sympathetic to a policy feedback outlook and providing these concepts to incoming staff in easy-to-use formats. It should also involve changes to the sort of demands that interest groups make on the executive branch and changes in what donors prioritize in making grants to advocacy organizations and social movements.

## Losing the Battle, Winning the War?

Do policy feedback loops require policy enactment to succeed? While policy success produces the most substantial shifts in political power, unsuccessful policy drives can also inspire feedback loops. Well-designed policy campaigns, even when they do not succeed in changing policy, can inspire greater participation in politics in ways that could result in a more favorable terrain for policymaking in the future: by shifting public opinion, cultivating leaders and activists, pulling more individuals into politics, and cementing political alliances.

One example is the Fight for Fifteen's campaign for a \$15 an hour minimum wage and higher labor standards. Even where this campaign failed to change minimum wage laws or build union membership it did succeed in shifting public opinion and creating a new norm around this demand. Previously skeptical Democratic party leaders, researchers, and policy advocates—and even many Republicans—now accept a \$15 an hour wage as the new floor.<sup>84</sup> It also created a new cohort of leaders now active in the labor movement and local and state politics who are pushing for a range of progressive economic priorities.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> See e.g. Greenhouse 2016; Rolf 2016.

<sup>85</sup> Ashby 2017.

The “public option” played a similar role during the campaign for the Affordable Care Act. Grassroots advocacy groups—most prominently the organization Health Care for America Now (HCAN)—made a public alternative to private insurance one of their central demands in health reform. HCAN was able to use excitement around that proposal to build considerable grassroots support for the organization and for reform more generally. HCAN then channeled the energy into pressuring wavering Members of Congress throughout the lengthy debate where every vote counted.<sup>86</sup> While the public option did not end up in the final legislation, advocates were able to use it as a powerful organizing and lobbying tool.

The lesson from these examples is that policy proposals that do not end up enacted can still mobilize political power when designed appropriately. It is not the case that every loss can be turned into a policy feedback loop. But policy advocates and policymakers should be mindful of such opportunities to use proposals and losses in this way, especially when policy proposals can create or bolster existing political or economic organized interests.

## The Promises of Feedback-Informed Policymaking

Progressives must tackle daunting challenges in the coming years. Well before the crises created by the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States faced deep threats related to economic inequality and insecurity, a warming planet, decaying infrastructure, rising ethnonationalism, ascendant counter-majoritarian politics, and longstanding racism and sexism. Recovering from the current crises and addressing these threats will require major responses from all levels of government, but especially the federal government. As policymakers grapple with the scale of this response, they need to design policy in ways that can build further political power and opportunities.

Consider the remarkable mass protests that emerged in June 2020 in response to police violence against Black and Brown Americans. The protests have brought new attention to egregious civil rights

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<sup>86</sup> Skocpol 2013, 41-3.

violations, potentially reshaping public opinion and developing widespread pressure for policing reform. Imagine the possibilities for building the political voice of Black and Brown communities if these reforms did not just change public safety and policing practices but also supported *organizations* in these communities that could continue to hold policymakers accountable in the years to come.

Such a feedback loop perspective is not guaranteed, even during responses to major social and economic crisis like the ones we are living through now. Instead, it will take a deliberate effort to incorporate new routines and personnel into all levels of government. That is not likely to be easy—but the payoffs could be significant as progressives can entrench existing policies, pave the way for future changes in government action, and boost the political and economic voice of Americans.

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