Twitter Thread by Ezra Klein

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This is a good @mattyglesias post about techno-politics but I want to quibble with the part of it that's about my essay on the policy feedback loops you can build by Just Helping People Fast. Matt writes: https://t.co/MuBlgQV6LW

> Ezra Klein wrote something similar a couple of days earlier quoting Sanders.
>
> To me, though, it's important to draw a distinction here. Klein and Sanders are right to think that more decisive action to improve the economic situation would have mitigated Democrats' losses in 2010 just through the basic mechanism of "voters like having money."
>
> But House Democrats who voted against the Affordable Care Act did something like 5-15 points better than similarly situated members who voted for it. In general, public opinion on issues shifts against the incumbent president's party. Republicans suffered midterm losses in 1982, 1986, 1990, 2006, and 2018), and I doubt Sanders would say that's because they were insufficiently right-wing. The most likely explanation is that we see a recurring pattern of overreach and backlash. The public wants to see the government stabilize the economy but generally prefers politicians who avoid big controversial change. Promising to be bipartisan polls really well, then informed people get angry that these promises amount to a promise to not do very much, but that just goes to show that voters like the idea of a politician who's not doing very much.

Over at Mischiefs of Faction, @Smotus makes a similar point: https://t.co/al6fS5tZXP

In a paper I did a while back with Brendan Nyhan, John Sides, Steven Greene, and Eric McGhee, we found that Democratic House members running for reelection in 2010 were punished for participating in this productivity. Those Democrats who voted for the Affordable Care Act did worse in the 2010 elections than those who voted against it. Voting for Obamacare made Democrats look more liberal and more out of step with their districts, which hurt them electorally. Several other major bills that session had a similar effect on Democratic careers. Indeed, the Obamacare vote likely cost Democrats their majority in the House.

> Obamacare was correctly perceived as a tradeoff; it was a longstanding priority for the party that could well cost it its majority. The question was whether majorities are for preserving or for using.

And this idea that a vote for Obamacare (or any other major Democratic priority) was potentially costly was certainly on the minds of Democrats at the time. Speaker Pelosi made a point of releasing Democrats in moderate districts from any obligation to vote for it once she had the bare minimum to support the bill. Obamacare was correctly perceived as a tradeoff; it was a longstanding priority for the party that could well cost it its majority. The question was whether majorities are for preserving or for using.

I want to be clear here: I'm saying that the Affordable Care act was, from a political perspective, badly designed, and that *a different health care plan* might've led to a better Dem performance in 2010. But these arguments don't grapple with that.

To @Smotus's point, Pelosi released those House Democrats at the end, not the beginning. Having covered the beginning of this, I can tell you a lot of those Democrats thought a bipartisan health care bill would be great politics for them!

But they didn't get that.

This is key. The ACA was built on the political theory that:

1. Bipartisan policy is easier to pass — and more popular once passed.

2. Working off of the Heritage Foundation/Romney template could get you a bipartisan health bill.

1 was probably right. 2 was utterly wrong.

Given that 2 was wrong, my counterfactual is this: What if Dems had done something like drop Medicare eligibility to 50 and expand Medicaid eligibility up to, say, 250% of poverty. (Or pick your simple, quick health policy.)

I think that could've passed through reconciliation in 2009 and been implemented in 2010. If you don't, imagine something else that could've passed that way, and been implemented at speed.

Would Democrats have performed better in the midterms under that scenario? I can't prove it, but I think so.

(Dems also would've performed better if the political theory behind the ACA had panned out, but it didn't!)

(Someone will pop in and say that moderate Senate Democrats wouldn't have voted for that plan in 2009 and they are right! That is why I am trying to convince Senate Democrats to think differently about this going forward.)

To put this differently, Dem policymaking has, for decades, been operating under pre-polarization rules. Complexity is often a function of dealmaking inside broad, ideological coalitions. It can be worth it if you get the coalition. But these days, you don't.

Instead, you get the worst of both worlds: the complexity you added to try to make the deal, plus attacks on that complexity by the people you were trying to make a deal with.

Chuck Grassley told Dems he'd support the individual mandate then slammed it as unconstitutional!

So as I say in the piece: policy needs to speak for itself, and speak clearly. At times, that will lead to worse policy. It will sometimes lead to less-expansive policy, so you can move quicker. But bad politics leads to much worse policy, long-term. https://t.co/H7nnSykgwM

This is, in recent decades, an untried strategy. Perhaps it would fail. To tag Matt's big theory of politics, it is unlikely a coalition with enough power to pass stuff aggressively could discipline itself against also passing a bunch of unpopular stuff its activist class wanted.

But I want to stand up here for the idea that we haven't collapsed into a nihilistic politics where nothing matters.

It is hard for policy to break through into people's lives. But not impossible. Obamacare actually does help Democrats in elections now! So did $2k checks in Georgia.

Go faster, go bigger, go simpler. At least try.

One last ACA point: I covered that bill closely. I supported it then, I support it now. But it was designed under the ideological constraints and theories of its moment in a way people now forget.

Its immediate political failure needs to be appreciated, precisely so those ideological constraints and theories are different next time, and the bill can be better designed. What moderate Dems think is good for them is a very important constraint on policy design.