

## **Reflective Essay on “Obama’s Deal”: The Politics of Healthcare Reform in America**

Obama’s Deal is a documentary chronicling the life of the ACA policy, watching how the Obama administration shaped, negotiated, and ultimately signed the policy into law. Part of PBS Frontline’s investigative series, the documentary clears the fog around Obama’s ‘change’ campaign which promised a US politically transformed from the past. This documentary is a sequence of calculated political moves, controversial compromises, and hidden arrangements with a much more troubling core than the face value. While watching, I recalled almost every single topic that we learned this semester, from the problem of making policy to the influence of lobbyists and interest groups, and from federalism to dashed dreams of idealism and the legislative process.

As Obama himself is reported to have said while discussing it in the Oval Office, “It’s about healthcare, but it’s not really about healthcare. It’s also about proving whether we can still solve big problems in this country, and this was going to be the test case for that.” He said this quote probably keeping in mind the concerns America was facing and to some degree, it makes sense. This initiative had some very critical concerns and Obama’s presidency was in the cross hair not just for the outcomes, but also for democracy’s health.

The documentary opens with Obama’s inauguration in 2009 and it points out the remarkable significance of his presidency in the sense that he was the first African American to hold the office. “He promised change,” and this is the exact quote from the documentary’s narrator which was also his campaign’s internal motto. Change in Washington was, well, to put it lightly, complicated more than it seemed and faced quite some challenge. He had to in the first term deal with a very fixed political culture, a Congress that was not willing to find a middle ground and the administration had skepticism of its own. After all, it was a severe financial crisis and health care seemed to be a very serious looming distraction. Even more telling, Vice President Joe Biden was “absolutely opposed” to the first term healthcare reform push.

Despite such concerns, Obama moved ahead, in part, guided by his then-Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel, a Vern veteran of political life who had seen how Clinton’s attempt at healthcare reform had unraveled in the 1990s. Emanuel, described in the documentary as “a brilliant political strategist... profane... just a force of nature,” urged Obama to adopt a swifter and more deal-centric approach. This shift moved away from the Obama campaign’s strategy and rhetoric. While he had promised to facilitate a transparent political process free from the influence of avowed special interests, the ACA’s congressional approval was marked by rampant negotiation with the very interests he intended to shun.

From the standpoint of federalism, the ACA is a particularly intriguing area of study. Although the law was drafted, passed, and signed at the federal level, much of the implementation was left to the states, particularly regarding Medicaid expansion and the creation of health insurance exchanges. This decentralizing approach reflects the intricate nature of the U.S. political system in which states can concurrently serve as implementers and resisters of federal initiatives.

Some states enthusiastically adopted the ACA, whereas others resisted or completely rejected features such as the Medicaid expansion. This disparity showcases the capabilities as well as the limitations of American federalism. It enables the agility to implement change, but it can also result in uneven or incomplete service provision nationally.

One of the documentary's most striking insights is the focus on the role of special interests in the health reform's legislative process. Learning from the Clinton healthcare initiative's defeat, Obama's team opted for a more inclusive approach. The narrator notes regarding the inclusion strategy, "They want to get people to the table... they don't want this to be a fight against the insurers [or] the medical industry." As a result, they admitted pharmaceutical lobbyist Billy Tauzin and insurance representative Karen Ignagni into negotiations as, "stakeholders." Ignagni told the president, "You have our commitment to play, to contribute, and to help pass healthcare reform this year." This shocking statement, made on camera, is striking. The troubling aspect is what this commitment actually entails. It would come with a mandate forcing all Americans to purchase insurance and no public insurance option would be allowed. "That was the quid pro quo," the narrator notes, emphasizing the toxic nature of the deal.

The segment from the documentary brings to light the lobbying and campaign financing controversies that underpin the illusion of democracy. It's noted in the film that Tauzin, one of the lobbyists, made millions of dollars from the pharmaceutical industry after serving in Congress. His backroom agreement with the Obama administration guaranteed drug manufacturers that Medicare would not negotiate price reductions—contrary to what Obama had promised during the campaign. One expert in the documentary noted, "It was a payoff to two industries. The drug industry and the insurance industry. There was no question about it." Such bargains illustrate what is known as the "revolving door" in Washington, where public responsibilities and private financial gains tend to merge.

The compromises had a heavy price to pay in the political spectrum. Liberal Democrats were fuming, particularly after the public option—considered the most leftist part of the reform—was dropped so quietly.

Their anger was evident: "Every healthcare lobbyist in America is at the table, and you're denying the people a voice," a protestor was recorded screaming. It is the frustration illustrated in the documentary

that is telling the story of the gap between democratic ideals and the legislature, and that in itself is the core focus of this class.

When 2009 town halls commenced, that was the first time it felt like Obama was losing control over his agenda and then add to that the surge of tea party resistance, it was clear a lack of form of bipartisan exchange was to come, to add to this, key republican negotiator senator chuck grassley had his own party deny him support within the confines of a single closed door. So Wilson shouting “You Lie” at the president during his address was the first taste of the last drop of the glass of civility and bipartisan exchange and agreement of American politics. It is stated in the film how “It crystallized the anger. It crystallized the fervor of the opposition.”

Obama's transformational leadership journey is noteworthy and educational. Perhaps he preferred to exercise influence from behind initially, empowering Congress and avoiding the more blunt styles of leadership employed by previous presidents. However, he did integrated rounds and did step forward with the televised summit. Point by point he dismantled the republican arguments. “We’re not campaigning anymore,” he added. “The election’s over.” The dismantling reached its climax with the sentence I just quoted. “He stepped up in a way that he hadn’t before.”

In the end, the bill achieved the ACA through a process called reconciliation which allowed the ACA to pass with a simple majority in the Senate. On the 21st of March in 2010, the house approved the ACA with 219 to 212 votes. Oddly enough not a single Republican voted in favor. “This is what change looks like,” he quoted and in disguise, I believe that is a prescreened line used in the moment so it appears he says it in more than just a historical context. The moment was monumental, defining his efforts in the legislative battle for over a year.

Regardless of the victory, the costs were steep. The ACA consumed immense political capital, while the disorderly implementation process sapped the goodwill of many people. “We ended up having a process that represented a lot of what the American people hated about Washington,” Obama observed later. Democrats suffered significant defeats in the midterm elections, and debate surrounding the ACA remained contentious for years.

For Obama’s Deal, our classwork makes several insights prominent. It showcases the boundaries of presidential authority. Obama’s entire agenda with a democratic majority was a slog through a tangled web of competing interest factions, institutional limits, and party divisions. It illustrates how many political ideologies center around deals while mostly ignoring core values. Lastly, it exemplifies the issues of federalism, where competing objectives shape national policies, but subnational units, like states, resist implementation.

From a critical standpoint, I view Obama's industry compromise as a matter of practicality that damaged public trust the most. Though the ACA did broaden healthcare access, it was under the system of a profit-oriented model that it was enacted. The outcome was a middle-ground policy that fully satisfied no one: too progressive for conservatives, too corporate for progressives. As the film demonstrates, many of the most impactful reforms, such as coverage for pre-existing conditions, were lost amid the narrative of political compromise and broken promises that garnered such negative attention.

Even so, I appreciate the strong will and ability to strategically pivot that Obama and his team demonstrated. Facing relentless opposition, they accomplished something no president had achieved for decades. While the methodology was fraught, the fact that policy could be enacted—even if the pathway was convoluted and the outcomes mixed—was encouraging.