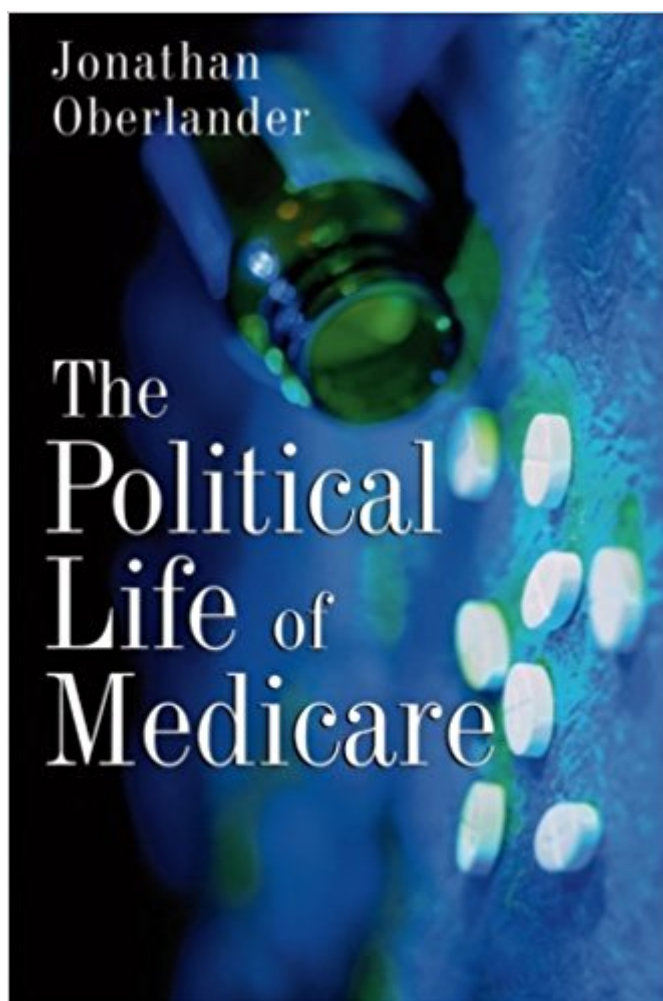


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# The Political Life Of Medicare (American Politics And Political Economy)



## Synopsis

In recent years, bitter partisan disputes have erupted over Medicare reform. Democrats and Republicans have fiercely contested issues such as prescription drug coverage and how to finance Medicare to absorb the baby boomers. As Jonathan Oberlander demonstrates in *The Political Life of Medicare*, these developments herald the reopening of a historic debate over Medicare's fundamental purpose and structure. Revealing how Medicare politics and policies have developed since Medicare's enactment in 1965 and what the program's future holds, Oberlander's timely and accessible analysis will interest anyone concerned with American politics and public policy, health care politics, aging, and the welfare state.

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“This book combines in-depth personal interviews, historical data, and legislative records in an insightful case study of Medicare. The 50-year history of this program is enlivened by a search for patterns based on theories from political science. . . . The book also explores new theories of path dependence and the roles of ideas in public policy in the US.” (Choice) “A brilliant little book, combining a grasp of programmatic and political detail sure to appeal to scholars of health policy with crisp prose and careful argument accessible to policymakers and most of Medicare’s beneficiaries. . . . Oberlander’s analysis is organized around three persistent tensions in Medicare politics: the gap between the program’s promise and its performance; the fiscal and

administrative tug-of-war between private provision and public payment; and the political and actuarial dilemma of delivering "service" benefits on a foundation of social insurance financing. . . . The meat of the book tackles the post-1965 history of Medicare's fragile consensus regarding program benefits, financing, and administration. • (Colin Gordon Health Affairs) "This is a very good (and very well written) book for anyone interested in US health politics." (Robin Gauld Political Studies Review) "Clearly, no one can claim to understand contemporary American politics and policymaking without understanding the Medicare program. Few scholars are more knowledgeable about Medicare politics than health policy expert Jonathan Oberlander. Combining rich, detailed narrative with acute political analysis, Oberlander offers an illuminating guide to Medicare's evolution since the program's creation in 1965. The book immediately takes its place as the best short monograph on Medicare's political development, current status, and future prospects. . . . Well-organized, elegantly written, and jam-packed with sophisticated insights about the substance and process of U.S. policymaking, the book deserves to be read by anyone concerned with American national government, health-care politics, and the welfare state. • (Eric M. Patashnik Perspectives on Politics) --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

In recent years, bitter partisan disputes have erupted over Medicare reform. Democrats and Republicans have fiercely contested issues such as prescription drug coverage and how to finance Medicare to absorb the baby boomers. As Jonathan Oberlander demonstrates in *The Political Life of Medicare*, these developments herald the reopening of a historic debate over Medicare's fundamental purpose and structure. Revealing how Medicare politics and policies have developed since Medicare's enactment in 1965 and what the program's future holds, Oberlander's timely and accessible analysis will interest anyone concerned with American politics and public policy, health care politics, aging, and the welfare state.

Jonathan Oberlander's book, *The Political Life of Medicare*, 2003, is in some ways complementary to Theodore R. Marmor's book, *The Politics of Medicare*, 1970, now in a second edition, 2000. Prof. Oberlander, of the University of North Carolina, did graduate studies with Prof. Marmor at Yale. The Oberlander book gives a briefer treatment of the development and enactment of Medicare but a fuller treatment of the political disputes over Medicare during the 1980s and 1990s. Both books consider the Clinton administration's attempt at health care reform in 1993 and 1994 and the Medicare cuts in the Balanced Budget Act of 1997. Both stop short of prescription drug coverage in

2003 and Congressional postponements of Medicare cuts in 2003 through 2008 (once each), 2009 (twice) and 2010 (once so far). Neither book analyzes the arbitrary structure of the cuts nor predicts their postponement. In 2003 Prof. Oberlander predicted a health-care reform "option to build on the current mixed system of care by expanding public coverage in combination with new subsidies for private insurance" [The politics of health reform, Health Affairs, March, 2003, at [...]]. That is the approach finally taken in 2010. The article predicts such an approach will fail to control costs and predicts a system involving individual insurance mandates "is unlikely to sit well with conservatives who are opposed to federal intrusion into individual liberties," indeed the current focus of opposition. In March, 2010, Prof. Oberlander offered his assessment of the current health-care reform plan [A vote for health care reform, New England Journal of Medicine, at [...]]. Here he again predicted fierce opposition and problems with cost controls, but he supported the 2010 plan as a major advance, comparable only to Medicare in providing a "foundation for a fairer, more efficient health care system." Both Prof. Marmor's and Prof. Oberlander's books provide valuable insights into the first major U.S. venture at national health care. They are the only book-length reviews of Medicare that explore its political as well as its policy dimensions. A review of Medicare as part of an "incremental" approach to national health care in the U.S. is also available in Japp Kooijman, *And the Pursuit of National Health*, Amsterdam Monographs, 1999. It seems clear that Prof. Oberlander is likely to write a sequel to his 2003 book, considering the new steps taken in 2010, 45 years after enacting Medicare.

Usually, I cannot get through books on the social sciences. They are too long for me, and their repetitive, unfocused writing style makes it hard to me to see how the author is structuring his or her arguments. This book, assigned by my political science professor as the best book on Medicare, is a welcome counterexample to that generalization. Jonathan Oberlander covers the political history of Medicare with clarity, gusto, and (most importantly for me) concision. The body of the text takes a mere 196 pages. The book is extensively annotated with 48 pages of notes. It is printed on good paper, has an attractive cover, and is well proofread and typeset. The bulk of the book covers the history of Medicare from its inception in 1965 to the present. Oberlander's thesis throughout the book is that, after much political debate prior to its enactment, Medicare was ruled by a bipartisan legislative consensus from 1965-1995 which subsequently unraveled in Gingrich's Republican Congress. He analyzes the consensus by breaking it into three aspects - benefits, financing, and regulation - and showing how each aspect involved large changes in the program with little controversy over this thirty-year period. (Oberlander tends to dissect ideas into lists like this at every

scale, so much of the book reads like a huge outline. While those accustomed to more fluid prose may find this style pedantic, it leaves no doubt as to how Oberlander's analysis is structured and contributes greatly to the book's clarity in my opinion.) After the three chapters on benefits, financing, and regulation, Oberlander has a short but terrific chapter debunking the application of various monolithic political theories to Medicare. He argues that American national government, contrary to prevailing scholarly thought, is capable of great independence from external forces in its creation of policy. While Oberlander warns that "this chapter is intended for political scientists," its extraordinary logical clarity made it easy to follow, even for a chemist like me. Unfortunately, the book gets more uneven in the last chapter, which covers the politics of Medicare since 1995. This 40-page chapter sapped enough of my motivation that it took me two months to finish. Oberlander's didactic analysis verges on murky and disorganized in places, and his liberal political outlook, which merely peppers his excellent writing with a bit of personal color in the first four chapters, starts to get distracting. He repeats the notion that "1995 changed everything about Medicare" so many times that I began to wonder whether he believes his own thesis. It was a disappointing end to an otherwise fine book. But overall, it's impressive how well Oberlander brings a potentially dull subject to life. For anyone interested in Medicare (or American politics in general), this book is worth reading.

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