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How Change Happens—  
or Doesn't:  
The Politics of  
US Public Policy

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# Contents

<i>List of Tables and Figures</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
1 Change in the Messy World of Partisan Politics	1
2 Assessing the Policy Battlefield	7
3 Evaluating Policy Problems	23
4 Not All Policy Is Created Equal	43
5 The Overrated Value of Bipartisanship	63
6 When the Insiders Get It Wrong	81
7 Politics as a Fight	103
8 Elections: Do They Matter?	119
9 Coping with the Unexpected	135
<i>Bibliography</i>	141
<i>Index</i>	149
<i>About the Book</i>	163

# 1

## Change in the Messy World of Partisan Politics

IMAGINE THAT THE YEAR IS 1946. PRESIDENT HARRY TRUMAN is a Democratic Party hack who drinks and plays poker with his cronies from the corrupt Pendergast machine in Missouri. He is an accidental president, heir to the throne only after the beloved Franklin Roosevelt—who had been president for so long that many Americans cannot remember a time without him—dies from a cerebral hemorrhage.

Truman inherits a war-weary country. The big industries built during the war are downsizing, resulting in a drop in industrial production by 30 percent in early 1946 and a rise in unemployment from half a million to nearly three million and raising fears that the twelve million men (and some women) coming home from the war will not have jobs. There are labor strikes, shortages, and inflation. Under pressure from a “hamburger famine,” Truman lifts the price controls on beef, causing prices to shoot up to record levels. Now people can have hamburgers, they just can’t afford them. The president just cannot seem to win.

US businesses are worried that Germany will collapse, that Europe will follow, and that a “dollar shortage” will mean that US exports, which during the war had risen as high as \$15 billion, might drop back to the prewar levels of \$3 billion.

In Truman’s United States, there are not one but two generations alive and voting who have fought wars on European soil for European reasons. There is definitely no appetite for more war. And yet in Truman’s United States, the mantle of global leadership is shifting. In 1947, as Great Britain withdraws its support of the anticommunist

forces in the Greek civil war, a turning point is reached in postwar geopolitics. Britain is simply too devastated by the war—too weak, too poor, and too saddled with rebuilding—to take the lead in the newly emerging war against the Soviet Union and its desire to spread communism throughout the world. Long before it is clear to the public, it is clear to the political class that the big question before the country will be when and how the United States steps into its new role as global leader in the fight against communism. When the United States intervenes with aid to Greece and Turkey in February 1947 the Cold War is born.

One month later, on March 12, 1947, Truman goes before Congress, and in a dramatic speech articulates what becomes known as the “Truman Doctrine.” The central focus of the speech is summed up as follows: “It must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.”<sup>1</sup> But the Truman Doctrine, the first shot in an inevitable Cold War, is very unpopular in a Congress as war-weary as the people it represents. Both Democrats and Republicans are skeptical. Senator Harry Byrd (D-VA) shows great hesitation about spending the amounts of money that will be needed to implement the Truman Doctrine. Liberals like Senator Claude Pepper of Florida and Truman supporters like Senator Allen Ellender of Louisiana, both Democrats, object to the fact that Truman went around the newly created United Nations in creating this doctrine. Senators Price Daniel (D-TX) and Kenneth S. Wherry (R-NE) think the doctrine will surely lead to war.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, Europe is devastated by the war. Its industries and cities are in ruins, as is its agriculture, sparking real fears of food shortages and famine. All of the chaos is helping Communist parties in Western Europe gain strength. In France and Italy the Communist parties emerge in the post-Cold War era as the major force on the Left. In the first postwar election in France (1945) the Communists win 26 percent of the vote. In 1946, Communists win 19 percent of the vote in Italy.<sup>3</sup> Joseph Stalin, onetime ally of the United States, is not looking like a friend. But the nation is sick to death of war, and as a result the United States is tiptoeing, reluctantly, into its new role as global leader against the Soviet Union.

Harry Truman’s leadership during this time is spotty at best. To be fair, no one in the Roosevelt administration had bothered to keep him “in the loop,” as they would say today. In fact, when he comes

into office, Truman doesn't even know about the super-secret development of the atom bomb—the bomb that he will eventually give the order to drop. By the time of the 1946 midterm elections, Truman is looking like a political dead duck. No one respects him. Harold Ickes, interior secretary in the Roosevelt administration, calls him “stupid” in public. In Texas, the following joke makes the rounds: “I wonder what Roosevelt would do if he were alive. I wonder what Truman would do if he were alive.” Senator William Fulbright of Arkansas suggests that Truman appoint a Republican secretary of state and then resign so that the Republican can become president. (In the absence of a vice president the secretary of state is next in line for the presidency.)

In one of his early speeches to Congress, Truman proposes a set of ambitious domestic policies, including a bill to provide national healthcare. These proposals eventually become known as Truman's “Fair Deal,” the unfinished pieces of business from Roosevelt's New Deal days. While some applaud, many had hoped that the big government plans of the Roosevelt era would be over. Truman's ambitious domestic programs go nowhere.

Truman is not asked to campaign in the 1946 midterm elections. The mere mention of his name on the campaign trail elicits boos and catcalls. His approval rating drops to 32 percent in the midterm elections, which are widely seen as a referendum on his presidency. Democrats lose fifty-five seats in the House and twelve seats in the Senate, giving the Republicans control of the House for the first time since 1928 and control of the Senate for the first time since 1930.

The Congress that comes to Washington in the winter of 1947 contains a very large conservative element. They had campaigned successfully on shrinking big government, slashing federal spending, cutting taxes, and rolling back the New Deal. The Republican slogan of that year, “Had enough?” captures the mood of the country. These fiscal conservatives are also decidedly isolationist with regard to foreign policy.

Truman's troubles don't stop with Congress. He is buffeted on the Left and on the Right. On the Left, Commerce Secretary Henry Wallace (Roosevelt's former vice president) is so publicly critical of Truman that Truman fires him. On the Right is Senator Robert Taft of Ohio, the presumed Republican Party nominee for president (and, given Truman's standing, the presumed next president). Taft, an isolationist, is supported by an even more ardent isolationist, *Chicago*

*Tribune* owner and editorial board editor Robert McCormick. (McCormick is the Roger Ailes of his day and the *Chicago Tribune* the Fox News of its day.) McCormick was an “America First” isolationist who even opposed US entry into World War II, which he saw as a war to save “the British empire.” His paper gives voice to the isolationist feelings that are especially prevalent in the Midwest. McCormick believes that “we can work out our own national salvation independently of what happens elsewhere in the world.”<sup>4</sup>

Against this backdrop of trouble at home and trouble abroad one would scarcely expect that Harry Truman could do much of anything. And yet, on June 5, 1947, almost six months to the day after the fiscally conservative, isolationist eightieth Congress had been sworn in, Secretary of State George Marshall makes a commencement speech to Harvard graduates, proposing that the United States spend billions in aid to help rebuild war-torn Europe. In December of 1947, President Truman puts the cost at \$17 billion.<sup>5</sup> This is a staggering amount of money, almost 3 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) in 1947 or about \$160 billion dollars in the 2012 economy. Proposing this in the aftermath of the 1946 elections was bold (maybe even foolish), but actually passing it the following year was, given the situation of the time, nothing short of miraculous.

Why did this happen? How did a weak president, facing a hostile and isolationist Congress, enact a foreign aid package this large in a war-weary country that had had enough of Europe and of foreign entanglements?

The answer to this question is the purpose of this book. US-style democracy is a complex system; understanding why change happens is not at all a straightforward, linear proposition with clear lines of causality. This complexity is often lost in the president-centric media world of today. Popular presidents often fail to accomplish things that everyone thought they would while unpopular presidents succeed in accomplishing the unexpected. Elections are important but not definitive. Political parties matter but factions within those parties often matter more. In the words of Daniel DiSalvo, factions are best understood as “Engines of Change,” not parties.<sup>6</sup> Figuring out when an idea is an idea “whose time has come” is an especially difficult but critical task for the policy entrepreneur or the policymaker. Finding solutions where policy integrity and effectiveness survive the political process is tougher than it seems. The best technocratic solutions often fail the political test.

The fact is, major public policy changes often begin in the orderly world of analysis, but end up in the messy world of partisan politics. To succeed, a new policy initiative must coincide with a political climate and a leadership capacity that allows the proponents to overcome the natural resistance to change. Many good ideas fail simply because the politics are not right at the time, only to come back years later and succeed.

In this book I explore the space where politics and policy overlap by examining the political environments around a series of major modern public policy initiatives. By dissecting a series of policy successes and failures, I describe some of the less obvious and more complex answers to the question of how change happens.

## Notes

1. "March 12, 1947, This Day in History," from History.com. [www.history.com/this-day-in-history/truman-doctrine-is-announced](http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/truman-doctrine-is-announced).

2. Lee Edwards, "Congress and the Origins of the Cold War: The Truman Doctrine," *World Affairs* 151, no. 3 (Winter 1988–1989): 131–141.

3. Donald Sassoon, "The Rise and Fall of West European Communism," *Contemporary European History* 1, no. 2 (July 1992): 152.

4. Barry Machado, "Selling the Marshall Plan," in *In Search of a Usable Past: The Marshall Plan and Postwar Reconstruction Today* (Lexington, VA: Marshall Foundation, 2007), 16. [http://marshallfoundation.org/library/documents/Chapter\\_2.pdf](http://marshallfoundation.org/library/documents/Chapter_2.pdf).

5. Seymour E. Harris, "Cost of the Marshall Plan to the United States," *Journal of Finance* 3, no. 1 (February 1948): 1–15. Note that other estimates of the cost of the Marshall Plan are less but this is the estimate at the time.

6. Daniel DiSalvo, *Engines of Change: Party Factions in American Politics, 1868–2010* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).