

Q&A with Providence College Authors of 'Today's Health Care Issues'

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PROVIDENCE – Providence College (PC) Professors **ROBERT B. HACKEY, PhD**, and **TODD M. OLSZEWSKI, PhD**, along with a dozen student co-authors, recently published a book on health care issues and disputed policies presented through a Democratic/Republican lens. "Today's Health Care Issues" is part of a reference series, "Across the Aisles," by publisher ABC-CLIO, LLC.

Some of the issues examined are the COVID-19 pandemic, guns and public health, health insurance marketplaces, immigrant health coverage, marijuana, Medicaid expansion, Medicare drug pricing, physician-assisted death, vaccine mandates, and veterans' health care. Chapters offer readers a historical background but focus on more contemporary health policy debates. In each chapter, the authors present:

- An "At a Glance" introduction to the topic
- A bulleted list of key positions/themes for each party
- A detailed overview of the issue that includes key milestones and decision points
- Democratic and Republican perspectives on the issue featuring key leaders and spokespersons
- Sidebars that capture policymaker positions for/against the issue

RIMJ invited the authors to further elaborate on the book and the role PC students engaged in, both in the writing and in coursework.

Q. What was the genesis for the book and author collaborations?

A. PROF HACKEY: I was approached by an editor at ABC-CLIO in 2018 about contributing a volume on health care policy to a new reference series that would span nearly 20 different policy issues. I knew I couldn't tackle such an expansive project on my own. I invited my good friend and colleague Todd Olszewski, who previously collaborated with me on evaluating health care reform in New Hampshire for the ACA Implementation Research Network, to co-author the volume. Todd's background as a historian of medicine complements my own work on federal and state health care reform, public opinion, and rhetoric. Together, we bring both



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Excerpt

Vaccine Mandates

Vaccination represents a fundamental achievement in medicine and public health. While Democrats and Republicans have generally agreed about the effectiveness of vaccines as public health measures, partisan controversy has focused on government-imposed vaccine mandates and what exemptions, if any, should be permitted. In 2020, all 50 states and Washington, DC, had vaccination requirements for schoolchildren, and they all provided for medical exemptions to these state mandates. The District of Columbia and 45 states allow religious exemptions, and 15 states allow philosophical exemptions; however, 5 states – California, Maine, Mississippi, New York, and West Virginia – do not allow nonmedical exemptions to their state vaccination mandates.

...This philosophical divide has precedents dating to the 19th century. During that time, many states enacted compulsory smallpox vaccination laws for children and adults. Penalties for refusing immunizations against smallpox included exclusion from school systems for children and substantial fines or quarantine for adults (Colgrove 2016). The 1905 U.S. Supreme Court case *Jacobson v. Massachusetts* upheld the right of state governments to enact compulsory vaccine mandates. The court's decision reflected the widely held belief that preventing outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases that threaten public health warranted the forfeiture of individual liberty (Gostin 2005).

...The use of coercion to ensure vaccine compliance raises important questions about individual liberty, freedom of choice, and government regulation in the name of public health. By 2019, all states mandated immunization for enrollment in public schools, and all states also allowed medical exemptions to those mandates. However, states vary with respect to which vaccines are mandated. For example, Connecticut, New Jersey, Ohio, and Rhode Island have mandated the influenza vaccine for children in child-care facilities, but Rhode Island and Virginia (and the District of Columbia) are the only states that have mandated the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine for secondary school students.



Robert B. Hackey, PhD



Todd M. Olszewski, PhD

historical and contemporary perspectives to each of the chapters. Since this was an ambitious project with a tight timeline, we recruited more than a dozen current Providence College students to join us as co-authors for various chapters. Our students were exceptional colleagues who became our eyes and ears as we grappled with each policy issue.

Q. This book presents, similar to a Point /Counterpoint, Democratic and Republican views on contemporary health/policy positions, but it is not a partisan presentation. Why not Progressive, Independent, right /left positions, given the attention they are receiving on so many of these issues today?

A. PROF. HACKEY: The series presents readers with past and present Democratic and Republican positions and records on a wide range of issues. One of the primary goals of the series is improve the knowledge and ‘policy literacy’ of the public about contested issues. Our volume is written on two distinct levels – we present each topic in an accessible manner for lay readers, but each chapter has a strong evidence-base that draws upon peer-reviewed sources, public opinion polls, and public statements by policymakers and key stakeholders that will be of interest to academics and policymakers.

We provide context by reviewing the policy history of each issue, but we don’t take sides or endorse particular policy

viewpoints. Instead, we allow each party’s position to speak for itself. Our approach was guided by the series’ editorial mandate, which focused on party differences, rather than ideology. We discuss ideological differences between – and in some cases within – parties, but our goal is to highlight how each party

frames debate over these issues. The ultimate goal of our book, and the series itself, is to improve the way we talk about contested issues by helping individuals – regardless of their partisan views – to better understand where each party stands and the origins of these beliefs.

Q. I found the vaccine mandate chapter (See Book Excerpt) especially relevant given its focus today with the COVID-19 vaccination mandates. Do you see this and other historical parallels fundamental to framing policy discussions?

A. PROF. OLSZEWSKI: The vaccine mandate chapter became increasingly relevant as the COVID-19 pandemic progressed. My co-author Amanda McGrath and I started working on that chapter in January 2019 – more than a year before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. In our research, we documented a long-term but growing ideological divide among Republicans and Democrats regarding vaccine mandates in general and nonmedical exemptions in particular. These debates were far from new, as policymakers had already debated whether vaccine mandates represented necessary public health measures or unfair constraints on individual liberty and religious freedom. To a certain degree, some of the historical precedents included in the chapter explain how and why COVID-19 vaccine mandates have become so politically polarizing.

Q. Who is the target readership for this book?

A. PROF. HACKEY: Books in this series are intended for patrons of high school, public, and college and university libraries. We target a general audience and provide context and background for readers in each chapter. A secondary audience includes undergraduate and graduate courses on health care reform, health policy, and public health.

We’re using selected chapters from the book in a class we’re teaching together this fall. Students really embraced the volume’s approach of presenting both parties’ position in an even-handed way, without pushing a particular point of view. After reading each chapter, we ask them to wrestle with their own views on the subject so that they can decide what they think and explain their views to others. For us, that’s the essence of what we hope the book will accomplish – creating more informed and thoughtful citizens who are ready to engage in spirited public debates about important issues is what our country needs at this moment.

Q. What was the most surprising policy issue that the authors uncovered in this research that they were not fully aware of before?

A. PROF. OLSZEWSKI: Bob and I teach in the Department of Health Policy and Management at Providence College. Even though our professional training differs (Bob is a political scientist and I am an historian of medicine), we have both taught and written about historical and recent health reform efforts. I appreciated the opportunity to explore policy topics that I might not have written about otherwise. Most illuminating for me, though, was observing the inconsistent ways in which both political parties apply their respective ideological values to health policymaking.

Q. An exciting project with many student collaborators. Was this a funded project and how long did it take to complete?

A. PROF. OLSZEWSKI: We started this project in June 2018 and reviewed final page proofs in July 2021. We were fortunate to receive financial support from several sources. Providence College's Center for Engaged Learning subsidized a series of team dinners to build community among our student collaborators. PC's School of Professional Studies awarded us a summer grant to hire two students as editorial assistants; these two collaborators provided crucial support in 2020 by identifying necessary updates to chapters that we first wrote in 2019. We envisioned our student collaborators as junior scholars rather than traditional

research assistants, which made the writing experience more rewarding. Students' responsibilities were comparable to ours when preparing each chapter draft; they offered feedback on our writing and we offered feedback on theirs. By promoting trust and transparency within each chapter team, we reinforced the collaborative nature of our project and assigned equal credit for each co-authored chapter.

Q. What advice do you give today to your students who wish to pursue careers in public health and policymaking?

A. PROF. OLSZEWSKI: We have had the opportunity to co-teach our department's intensive writing seminar while working on the book. We organized our edition of the course around several chapter topics;

students write op-eds, engage in in-class debates, and write traditional research papers that expand upon their op-eds. We encourage the students to "think on their feet" and carefully consider issues from more than one point of view. By encouraging students to question everything, they learn how to formulate their own position on a given policy topic and to be able to defend that position by drawing upon multiple forms of evidence and data. Ultimately, we hope that the course prepares students to become thoughtful and principled future professionals whether they pursue careers in health care, public health, or health policy. ❖