



Commentary: All the presidents' children

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There is a difference between Democrat and Republican administrations. That difference can be measured in many ways. Whether you think the difference is great or slight, very much depends on from where you are looking. Looking from within the USA, the differences can appear huge. The increasing polarization in voting patterns within that vast country is recently becoming more evident as every presidential election takes place.¹ So too are the growing disdain and contempt with which supporters of these two political parties appear to hold each other and those they consider each other's natural supporters.²

Rodriguez, Bound and Geronimus's paper³ shows that there is now another way in which the growing differences between Republican and Democrat administrations are becoming more apparent. All else taken into account, some 3% more infants die each year when a Republican president is the resident of the White House as compared with when a Democrat is incumbent. Democrat presidents may not be messiahs, but Republicans ones, it transpires, are worse.

The USA is one of the most populous countries in the world, has one of the highest fertility rates in the rich world and, among rich nations, suffers from the highest infant mortality rate, thus this 3% is 3% of a very large number of American infants who die each year. Put another way, Rodriguez *et al.*'s paper finds that for babies conceived during the incumbency of a Republican president, some 3% fewer are likely to see their first birthday than are babies conceived during Democratic tenure. If you are concerned about the health of your potential future offspring then clearly, along with taking folic acid supplements, you should ensure you vote the right way.

The authors of this research lag the presidential tenure factor by a year so that each president's policy's impacts might have enough time to have had an effect. However, it

might equally be possible that there is an effect on pregnant mothers of even knowing that a majority of their fellow countrymen and women have chosen one side to rule over another. There are many possible paths that could result in the outcome found here. These range from the direct effect of spending cuts on health care, to a poorer mother possibly being more likely to self-medicate by drinking more alcohol if she suddenly finds that the party in power label people like her welfare queens.⁴

Discerning the precise mechanism whereby a fetus in the womb and babies alive at any point during a Republican presidency become more likely to die in the first year of life is far harder than determining that these additional deaths occur. This leaves the authors of the paper suggesting a vague formula. They propose that their results suggest: 'the political system is a component of the underlying mechanism generating health inequality in the United States'. They are right, but we need to know more in future about both how this happens and why Republicans value young lives less than Democrats. And it is not just infants that are affected and undervalued. They may simply be the most immediately susceptible to present policy. Infants have no store of resilience from having benefited from living through better, earlier times.

It was reported that infant mortality rates in the USA were rising absolutely for the first time since at least the 1950s in 2005, during the Bush administration's tenure.⁵ It was in 2010 that the first overall fall in life expectancy for all of the USA was reported.⁶ Those falls in US life expectancy had occurred 2 years earlier, at the end of the Bush era in 2008. By 2013, life expectancy falls were being reported from more detailed analysis of that earlier period for some groups of women in the USA: poor women, Black women and now also poorer White women, and especially for women in the southern states.⁷ As yet the full

assessment of Obama's record is incomplete, although the first 2 years of his presidency are included, with favourable results, in the Rodriguez *et al.* study.

It is not just among the young that mortality rates can either not improve or can even rise in absolute terms during periods of greater cuts to general resources, periods of growing attacks on the concept of the public good and periods when individualistic politics are promoted along the lines of telling people that there is no such thing as society, just themselves and their families (if they have a family). We know from international evidence collected from a variety of countries that when such Conservative Republican rhetoric has the upper hand, suicide rates are increased by roughly one extra self-inflicted death a day.⁸ And we also know that it is not just infants but also the elderly who are especially vulnerable and often overlooked, not just in the USA but in its most comparable of politically allied countries, the UK.

In the UK, deaths among people aged over 85 years have risen abruptly in absolute terms following the introduction of austerity measures by the UK government. Again there was a lag of about a year before the full effects were felt. In the year to June 2013, some 23 400 more deaths than expected occurred (5% more elderly people dying in Coalition-run UK to compare with the 3% rise in infant mortality in Republican-ruled USA).⁹ Post-retirement life expectancy in the UK is now falling. By 2012–13, men aged 65 years in the UK can expect on average another 18.3 years to live, whereas female life expectancy at age 65 has now fallen to 20.6 years. This is a drop of 2% in post-retirement UK life expectancy as compared with the 2010–11 figures and coincides very closely with the roll-out of the incoming 2010 UK Conservative-led Coalition government's unprecedented programme of cuts to local authorities, numerous social support schemes, housing and welfare payments.¹⁰

Because no good reason has yet been put forward for such a rise occurring from some combination of 'natural causes', it has to be suspected that the effects of the incoming Coalition (UK Conservative-led) government are perhaps similar to those of an incoming cost-cutting and similarly less caring Republican regime. It has already been determined that the rise is not due to influenza and pneumonia, which contributed only 5.8% and 3.5%, respectively, of the rapid absolute increase in elderly mortality in the UK since 2012.¹¹ Again the precise mechanisms may be hard to pin down. The announcement in July 2011 that the UK's largest private care home provider was about to go bankrupt and might need to close all 752 of its care homes is unlikely to have no effect on the health of its elderly and frail customers. But that threat to elderly peoples' homes was only made possible because the

Coalition government in power did not intervene at an earlier stage. The BBC posted this story as a piece of 'business news'.¹²

Finally, some may argue that 3% excess infant deaths in the USA or 5% additional early elderly deaths in the UK is not a large proportion. For those who think like that, it is worth bearing in mind that this is the difference when Republican administration tends to be replaced by Democrat and vice versa (or when Labour and Conservatives swap tenure every 5, 10 or 15 years). It takes one Democrat period of office to reduce the level again, to reduce it below that which would be expected given all the usual trends and factors. But what would happen if there were Democrat mandate after Democrat mandate with no intervening Republican backsliding?

What if the USA were more like many mainland European countries, and a coalition of parties led by Democrats were every so often replaced by a Socialist-led coalition? How much lower would infant mortality in the USA be then? Would it fall to levels as low as those which many mainland European countries enjoy? And what if the UK were to follow the European model more than the American dream? What might happen to mortality rates in the UK if UK politics in general took a step to the left, so that the UK Conservative party was no longer aligned with a group of European far-right fringe parties¹³ but with the European right-wing mainstream? It could well be these apparently small difference mount up decade over decade, and that explains a large part of the international inequalities in mortality rates seen between rich nations today.

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