

Personal Reflection. From Pills to Presidents: Understanding Efficacy from an Anthropological Perspective. Mason Alford and Carlota Solà Marsiñach

Anthropology matters, especially in times of socio-political crisis, not only in helping us better comprehend the world we live in, but also in creating shared spaces between seemingly irreconcilable worlds and world views. When evaluating the efficacy of political leadership, our minds and our media often jump to abstract classifications of performance: the Economy, Healthcare, Immigration. These monolithic categories become guiding frameworks through which we draft policy, structure government and organize political discourse. But to what extent do these sweeping taxonomies of presidential performance, such as The Economy, evade the lived experiences of individual citizens and non-citizens? To what extent are policy buckets such as Healthcare and Immigration unfitting (and even harmful) ways of organizing leadership agendas?

Anthropological research matters in times of crisis, as it traces the constellations of influence between supposedly distinct spheres of policy. Furthermore, it sheds light upon the ritual aspects of the election process and, most importantly, it elucidates the links between political discourses and the lived experiences of voters by critically examining the notion of efficacy. The measurement of efficacy, for everything from pills to presidents, comes as a social negotiation among multiple actors, a multivalent process more than the effect of a single magic bullet. Anthropological fieldwork demonstrates that ‘efficacy’ is not a static category. The following papers will discuss that, on the contrary, perceptions of efficacy pivot on expectations and context, which are socio-culturally constructed and diverse. There is a bidirectional influence that stands between doctor and patient, mother and child, politician and trade unionist. Anthropological thinking introduces nuance to the blanketed terminology that pervades the Oval Office. It recasts phrases such as The Economy as more than the objects of one political program, but also as subjects of broader neoliberal structures within which they exist. Today, more than ever, we must leverage the fruits of anthropological theory when evaluating political efficacy and acknowledge the interconnected web that links health care to immigration, economies to environments, and president to citizen.