Evidence-Based Policy

Despite what we might like to believe, humans are not rational agents. Our actions are driven by a complex mix of emotional stuff, including values, biases, and distilled past experience, and tons of other information that we find difficult to unpack. It’s easy to see how quickly a fact can be converted into a feeling: when I look at the weather forecast and see that there’s an 80% chance of rain on Saturday, my mind quickly translates “80% chance” into “near certainty”. I expect rain, and I can prepare emotionally for rain. If it doesn’t rain, I might be angry at the forecasters for “predicting rain” when none was destined to fall.

Emotions are extremely informative, and our brains do an excellent job of reducing a lifetime of experience into a gut feeling that we can use to make quick decisions like whether to pay more for organic peppers or whether to trust a new babysitter with our child. However, it’s hard for us to tell when our gut feeling is guiding us in the right direction, and when it might be relying on the wrong sorts of cues to make a decision.

This comes up a lot in politics. I find it easy to identify this kind of thing in people I disagree with: failure to pay attention to evidence that our climate is changing as a result of human activity, a desire to save money now by cutting back on programs such as education and health care that will lead to significant savings in the long term. But every once in awhile I notice the same kind of behavior in myself – I’ll hear a story on the news that suggests that a program I support isn’t effective, or that a candidate I voted for hasn’t had a good record on issues I care about, and I’ll quickly make up an excuse or get angry at the program or candidate’s opponents, instead of evaluating the new information that I’m getting.

The best way I’ve found to deal with the unreliability of emotions is to have rules: decisions that you make consciously and rationally that you make yourself follow even when your emotions disagree. I don’t allow myself to buy fresh fruit, no matter how good it looks, if I already have fruit at home. I don’t buy big ticket items the week after I get my paycheck. I always wear a helmet. I let someone know where I am if I’m out past midnight, no matter how safe I feel. Even though I often feel silly following these rules, I’ve made a decision that there are times and places where my emotions aren’t reliably going to keep me happy and safe. Because politics are so emotionally charged and so difficult to grapple with, they seem to me like a critical place to apply rules. In many cases, the rule can be a very simple one: require evidence that a policy or program is effective, rather than basing decisions on what your values or ideals lead you to expect.

Emotions are invaluable, but there are times when it’s a mistake to go with our gut. I read an article recently in the *Fixes* blog at the New York Times about a topic that’s long been close to my heart: the use of data in making decisions about public policy. Last month, the federal budget office announced that agencies should show how they plan to evaluate the effectiveness of their programs, and that this information would be used to decide which budget requests to improve.

The entire article is well-worth reading, but I’ll just give a few highlights here:

What’s different is not just that these programs have to be evaluated using scientific methods, but that funding is being tied to evidence-based models in the legislation. In the case of the administration’s home visitation initiative, 75 percent of the funding must go to support programs that have been shown to produce results.

Last year, the president [promised](http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2011/11/08/president-obama-speaks-holding-head-start-programs-accountable#transcript) to reform Head Start along similar lines. Among Head Start grantees, there are high performers and low performers. The problem is that, historically, the government hasn’t known which is which — or insisted that states find out and allocate funds accordingly. It’s as if an investor failed to consider profitability when buying stocks. “Under the new rule, programs are going to be regularly evaluated against a set of clear, high standards,” President Obama declared, adding that funding will go to programs that work and will be taken away from those that don’t.

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At the state level, the evidence movement is also advancing, led by the [Washington State Institute for Public Policy](http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/default.asp), a neutral research body that assembles evidence on a wide array of social programs — and then translates the findings into a user-friendly analysis so even the most number-challenged lawmaker can figure out the cost and benefits. For example, according to WSIPP’s [most recent](http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/pub.asp?docid=12-04-1201) “Return on Investment” report, among programs that focus on juvenile justice, the highest yielding investment is Functional Family Therapy (with a net present value of $67,108) and the worst bet is a program called Scared Straight (which yields a net *loss* for society of $5,014).

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The Pew Charitable Trusts is now working to spread the Washington model to other states through an initiative it calls [Results First](http://www.pewstates.org/projects/results-first-328069). “There’s a real potential in this approach to deal with the polarization in the country,” says Gary VanLandingham, the director of Results First. “At the end of the day whether you want big or little government, you want government to do things that work.”

I could not agree more that evidence is necessary to evaluate programs that receive government funding. The article touches on the importance of this type of evaluation for spurring innovation and finding solutions that are effective, as well as weeding out costly programs that don’t serve the interests of the government. It also makes an analogy to the medical field, where until about 50 years ago pharmaceutical companies did not have to provide evidence of effectiveness to have drugs approved for sale.

The article also talks about the way that evidence-based policymaking is politicized – members of the Bush administration struggled to advance such ideas because it was viewed by the public as a sneaky way to cut social programs. For evidence-based policy to become the standard in a democracy, we the voters need to get behind the cause. We need to make our own rules about how we’re going to make use of evidence when voting in elections and on ballot measures, and when talking to our friends and family about political issues.

We can’t expect to act like rational agents all the time, and we wouldn’t want to – if you take out emotions, what’s the point of anything? We have to rely on our values to tell us what we want the government to achieve, before we can ever evaluate whether a program or candidate can achieve it successfully. We also often need to rely on our gut to tell us whether the evidence we’re getting is reliable or whether it tells the whole story. And no matter what rules we make up, we can’t avoid being affected by a candidate’s personality, or a targeted attack ad, or the feeling that our mother wouldn’t approve. But being an informed voter should mean more than knowing the content of the bill you’re voting on, or the stances of a candidate. As more evidence about policy effectiveness becomes available, we should take it upon ourselves to expect and make use of