How Social Science Got Better

Overcoming Bias with More Evidence, Diversity, and Self-Reflection

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All History and Policy

In the midst of the Great Recession, former Federal Reserve chair and economist Alan Greenspan made a stark admission to a congressional committee: "I have found a flaw [in my economic ideology]. I don't know how significant or permanent it is. But I have been very distressed by that fact." He pronounced himself in "a state of shocked disbelief" that banks could not regulate themselves out of their own self-interest after "going for 40 years or more with very considerable evidence that it was working exceptionally well."[1]

The re-evaluation of fundamental economic premises was not limited to Greenspan. The economic crisis provoked a broader rethinking of the failure to anticipate the crisis, leading to changes in how economics is studied and taught. Forty-one economics student protest groups from nineteen countries argued that "The real world should be brought back into the classroom, as well as debate and a pluralism of theories and methods."[2] The discipline's core theories, they said, had been too closely tied to an ideology that failed in policy and prediction. Books like *What's Wrong with Economics, Crisis and the Failure of Economic Theory*, and *The End of Theory* argued that economics was hopelessly attached to inadequate models.[3] Nobel laureate Paul Krugman was left to ask: "How Did Economics Get It So Wrong?" His answer: the discipline had mistaken beauty in formula for eternal truth, building models based on a narrow reading of US history for use in policy debates.[4] Harvard reformulated its economics classes to incorporate more empirical data and theories from psychology and sociology.[5] Economists tried to revise standard models but found that humans may be a lot less calculating and optimizing and more responsive to narratives than the models assume.[6]

Like Greenspan, economists also realized that too much of their discipline's views had been tied to the past few decades of economic behavior in the United States. They returned to analyses of the Great Depression and inequality in global history. Also like Greenspan, they acknowledged that purpose-driven models for policymaking too often combined ideological ideas about the role of government

with ontological precepts about human behavior.[7] These twin realizations revisit social science's historical divorce from its two antecedents: history and policy. Economists' desire to build a general model of human behavior from limited history is hardly an outlier; it is a microcosm of the trajectory of American social science from subdisciplines of history to their scientific ambitions. Likewise, economists' hidden merger of policy advice and theories of human behavior was visible from the foundations of political economy. The social theory that guided the development of social science was born of political contestation, long including debates about whether economics' focus on self-interested behavior should guide public decisions over other collective ambitions.

This chapter uses social science's origins to investigate its incomplete divorce from history and policy. Social scientists began studying history and seeking to influence social decisions, but they used a scientific self-image to unattach themselves from historians and social reformers and raise their relative status. Social scientists still work with the same historical variation and they are still judged by how well their findings translate into policy. If patterns change over time, social scientists are limited to the same periods to study as historians. And all of us are driven by collective social goals colored by our ideological views.

Given that social scientists must consider explanations over short- and long-term time horizons and operating through groups and societies as well as individuals, that leaves us in a difficult predicament. We are motivated to inform action today but limited by the historical variation available (and we expect heterogeneity across time and place). Learning from the patterns of history does not lend itself to informing collective decisions unless we are careful about the conclusions we can draw and the non-empirical motivations that guide us. We privilege our point of view in the present moment and assume that widely seen recent patterns are timeless or eternal.[8]

But that hardly leaves us hopeless. Historians consider theories more as thematic elements of narratives, tending to accept some role for many pieces of the story. Social scientists want to divvy up the explanatory power of each element, in part to assess when and how outcomes can be changed. Scholars can also draw from our desires for reform while recognizing that they change our scholarship. Social science was created to systematize historical investigations and intervene in the contemporary world, learning from natural science to specify and limit the biases of the researcher. It should not seek to replace traditional history or policy debate, but its efforts to structure and organize knowledge remain quite valuable to both. Despite discounting one another's work, for example, historians and social scientists eventually converged on similar chronologies and causal mechanisms for major international conflicts.[9]

The current moment will always intervene on our values and disrupt our prior theories. After a decade of economic growth following Greenspan's remarks, the

global economy was hit by a pandemic-driven recession in 2020 that reignited debates over whether economic theory was too narrow, whether economists should guide policy over other disciplines, and whether scholars can build general knowledge or simply react to the circumstances of the latest events. Instead of learning only particularized lessons about what was missing in anticipating these events, social scientists can aim to permanently acknowledge the role of our policy ambitions and historical knowledge in understanding human society. Thankfully, today's historical analyses in social science are more careful and today's policy interventions are more cognizant of our limited role in the making of society's collective choices.

The Separation from History

Historian Dorothy Ross argues that American economics, sociology, and political science all slowly separated from history from the late nineteenth century to the 1920s, spurred by modernization and a belief in American exceptionalism. Social scientists came to view social life as both a natural process and a controllable evolution toward social goals.[10] In her periodization, a crisis of exceptionalism from 1865 to 1896 characterized by Gilded Age economics and a socialist threat stimulated a historicist challenge to budding social science. It was answered by a progressive social science from 1896 to 1914; pragmatism rose alongside scientific aspiration, manifesting in marginalism in economics, social control in sociology, and realism in political science. From 1908 to 1929, science ambition rose further in a conflict with the last gasp of historicism: institutional and neoclassical perspectives fought in economics, instrumental positivism arose in sociology, and pluralist group conflict replaced constitutionalism in political science. Emulation of the natural sciences eventually enabled a turn away from both the practical politics of progressive reformism and the final separation from history as a less systematic pursuit. Ross finds this was visible in associational politics within each discipline as well as in their public feuds.[11]

This trajectory holds critical lessons: the initial break with history was less a turn away from politics than toward it. Sociology's rise was not based on a tempering of the policymaking ambitions of economics, but a desire to expand them beyond the economy to social behavior writ large. As historian Mary Furner argues, claims of scientific status were advanced in order to gain status in these public debates, as university professors took over social science associations from reformers.[12] Industrialism and urbanization raised the profile of society-wide problems; social scientists wanted to defend the desirability of American society but argued that reform was needed to retain its advance.

Political scientists built schools and institutes to advise government while developing a more systematic study via statistics and experiments.[13]

The American Economics Association was founded under the auspices of the American Historical Association at a joint meeting with the American Social Science Association (initially a Boston-based group sponsoring civil service reform), with economics the least committed to the reform movement and more academically oriented.[14] Separate disciplines arose as social scientists gained authority and as all moved from humanitarian causes to advocacy of new methods. The institutional origins of psychology and anthropology differed from the shared history of economics, political science, and sociology, but hardly because they were less applied in orientation. Instead, both were partially manifestations of government projects: the regulation of mental illness and the advance of imperialism. Scientism in each discipline reflected a technocratic vision and a demotion of social reform (driven more by women), even though philanthropic foundations and local government continued their interest in the on-the-ground practical ambitions of social efforts.[15]

Social science's separation from history, then, was based on its interest in informing action. Its move from reformism to broad and systematic social schemas was, in turn, a product of raising the mission beyond local interests to guiding broader society. Scholarship, of course, continued to reflect the goals of its time period and its understanding of history. But history as the center of inquiry was discarded because of society's newfound problems and social science's view that it could be the source of their solution.

The Relationship with History

Today, social science has reincorporated history via a systematizing of its findings. On the theoretical side, it moved from historical stories to models of set dependence (where a single turning point changes a trajectory) and path dependence (where each step along the way changes the next).[16] On the empirical side, it is increasingly using key historical events to map long-term changes and effects, especially where they can be seen as natural experiments (such as an agricultural disease forcing migration) or if the order or application of events was random (such as a military draft) or as-if-random (such as a policy implemented geographically in stages).

When social science departed from history, the discipline of history evolved with the rise of archival methods. The norm of traveling to archives fragmented historical scholarship and limited generalization, in turn stimulating systemic collections and related fields.[17] The backlash against studying elites and culturally

dominant groups within history was partially justified by a methods critique that the archives are written by those shaping their own memory. But social history eventually expanded the content of archives themselves and their interpretation.

Inherently historical sciences like archeology have long centered the question of what kinds of traces will remain for long-past events based on factors like what materials and artifacts degrade, what records were made, and the number and diversity of descendants.[18] But each event can create ripples, some dispersing over longer physical and historical distances. That means parochial histories are always part of the combined investigation of human life, and different models of sensitivity to initial conditions limit potential confirmation. By regularly considering history, archeologists try to distinguish between generalizable and local patterns.

But given that major cultural evolution in humans has only come in the last 10,000 to 12,000 years, it is not easy to generate even basic timelines or definitive social patterns; many claims about hunter-gatherer societies, conquests, and migrations remain contested.[19] This should not be surprising. Writing the history of dogs or other domesticated animals also requires a lot of social and historically contingent background knowledge alongside systematic genetic and archeological trace data. And we still lack the complete non-human history.

Geneticist David Reich, author of the grandly titled *Who We Are and How We Got Here*, makes many anthropologists uncomfortable given his global history ambitions and assumed generalizability of his cases and methods.[20] He attempts to learn over broad swathes of human history but acknowledges that what archeologists collect remains mostly in close-by sites and more recent periods.[21] That means scientists are always reasoning from fewer specimens the further away and back we go from the here and now—and we have less accompanying archeological and historical evidence to interpret and align with the genetic findings. Even though Reich is using ancient DNA to quickly change understandings of human history, he is working with archeologists and linguists and often confirming prior views of mass migrations and population mixtures. Where he departs, he often makes the story more complicated by showing more and earlier movement and mixing than others have documented. In other words, he is adding historical contingency and complexity rather than writing one narrative. Rather than products of an evolutionary model that adds a few cultural regularities to our shared genetic ancestry, contemporary human similarity and diversity are consequences of many historical and geographic factors that could have gone different ways.

Political scientist James C. Scott argues that we fundamentally misunderstand human history based on the tales and records of the victors.[22] Since agriculture has been widespread for only 240 generations, he says, our ideas about

urbanization, the development of government, and conflict and cooperation are all based on the particular crops we developed (and where they were planted) and the social arrangements that they required. How societies organize commerce, count inhabitants, draw borders, fight wars, tax and distribute resources, and interact with their environments, he says, are all partially dependent on prosaic needs of staple grains.[23] Since the states that develop also record and measure, they also control the accessibility of historical records. The decline of written records could have coincided with productive overthrows of unequal regimes, but we see them largely as falls of civilizations.[24]

Systems of slavery were built on the basis of agricultural and military needs as well as human social views. Slaves, especially women, were treated as the spoils of war to raise armies. Slavery also became endemic in areas where it was useful for farming. As sociologist Orlando Patterson has found, human slavery was born of group distinctions, with a group that did not belong, but was often expedient. This included women slaves exported before the African slave trade and some societies that had elite slaves.[25] Our eventual abhorrence toward slavery made us rewrite history to see it as less useful, seeing the Northern states as efficient emblems of capitalism and Southern states as backward-looking traditionalists more as myth building than history.[26] Scholars can also err in their corrections, however, making slavery appear overly central to economic growth. But the blossoming of social science concerned with history has uncovered our faulty memories and enabled debates over topics such as the relative importance of cotton in the American South's development and the dominance of women in slavery's global history.

We are also retelling the related history of inter-state violence. War and violent revolution were central mechanisms for reducing inequality, whereas both government-led development and commercial expansion are tools for upward redistribution.[27] If liberals and conservatives seek to claim little trade-off between development and inequality or both want to stand opposed to violence and in favor of equal growth, views of history that do not fit either ideological box may be left out. But attention to these trade-offs is rising.

A simpler example of historical views and political motives may help. At the time of the American Revolution, East and West Florida were also considered American colonies but they have been excluded from our history because they sided with the English.[28] This is not just an exemplar of the cliché that winners write history, but also a reminder that our historical stories are tied to our self-conceptualization. Social science can theoretically be more systematic in its use of historical data, but by default (and without any self-correction) it is subject to the same biases. And history always matters to current analysis because the provenance of data changes what it tells us, and the trajectory of what we are studying influences what we can learn about it today.[29]

Limits of Scientism

Despite the partial turn back to history, social science remains infatuated with the natural science example. Naturalism (the idea that social science reduces to natural science) has long been seen as a polar alternative to more historically informed traditionalism, though both assumed that social scientists also had some practical ambitions.[30]

Even with social science's methodological advances, we are still left with studying either empirical regularities from history or the efficacy of interventions. Inference from history depends on the nature of historical processes (how randomly and interrelatedly they occur). Inference from interventions relies on how well our experiments adapt to new contexts and scale up to broader domains. Each is a product of the degree of variation and complexity in the human world and thus cannot be separated from the classic tools of describing variation and trajectories.

The impulse to systematic investigation is the core of the social science tradition. But we still sometimes get caught up in confusing the image of science with its usefulness. For example, the National Institutes of Health funded a huge rise in both candidate gene research and fMRI brain studies, even though there was a very low probability of replicable findings given small sample sizes.[31] There are still incentives for splashy science—which often means connections to natural science like brain imaging and genetics. But many of the findings so far suggest the same complex processes found in social sciences: many different areas of influence, with some persistence and some changeability but limited success in intervening to change human behavior.

The Relationship with Policy

Social statistics were invented by participants in policy arguments and political disputes, motivating each side to further invest in persuasion via "political arithmetic."[32] Statistics eventually migrated to official government agencies, but never lost their influence in policymaking. The social sciences themselves also developed as outgrowths of public debates over collective decisions.

Scientists' proper role in policymaking is usually conceived as being an "honest broker" of information, rather than an arbiter of decisions, an issue advocate, or a pure researcher.[33] They should move beyond research findings to clarify decisions and potential consequences and suggest new options, the thinking goes, but not cross the line to pure advocacy. But scholars, publishers, and grant makers all seek projects with "policy implications" that can go well beyond the expertise of the researcher, without necessarily asking them to accumulate or weigh alternative views.[34]

The usual audience for social science is bureaucratic, with the "acquiescence of elected officials" with lingering doubts about the motives of scholars.[35] American social science associations' initial political goal was civil service reform, which they saw as helping to rationalize policymaking.[36] Scholars like Du Bois had to thread the thin line between policy relevance and objective research, gaining funding by directly addressing public problems but having a manuscript destroyed by the US Department of Labor because it "touched on political matters."[37]

Today, public expectations of science remain focused on collective problem solving. Focus groups are surprised to learn that scientists direct their own research, choosing topics of interest, rather than being directed to solve particular problems.[38] Even in the most applied contexts, however, government agencies more commonly choose among proposals from scientists than direct research from the top down. Research funding is often justified with reference to an innovation cycle modeled on industrial labs. Models of stages from basic to applied research to commercialization, however, have lost favor to ideas about promoting systems and cultures of innovation.[39] These often require public-private-academic alignment; yet tight relationships between universities, foundations, think tanks, and government agencies are also often critiqued as emblematic of an establishment looking out for its own interests.[40]

Economic models have had the most success in policymaking circles, not only in classic decision models but also in designing mechanisms to incentivize behavior.[41] Most social science requires significant translation to serve as an input in the policymaking process, but economics has created bureaucratic institutions and procedures to enable its input.[42] Influential public-spirited economists still worry about the weakness of their academic field, however, believing that they are trusted more for their data analysis skills than for their theoretical inheritance.[43]

Even as it evolves its theories and preferred methods, economics continues to have broad policy influence beyond economists. Law professor Cass Sunstein, the most cited active legal scholar, promoted a revolution in the use of cost-benefit analysis in government, the continuing advance of social statistics, and the rise of "nudge" policies based on behavioral economics.[44]

The rise of economics in government was part of a broader technocratic movement based in agencies and think tanks. An initial (mostly liberal) expert community in the 1960s was critiqued by an antiwar movement on the left, but was eventually challenged by an upstart conservative movement in the 1970s that sought to replace expert consensus with contests between credentialed ideologues.[45] Although conservatives initially saw the infrastructure of scientific advising as another unelected branch of government working toward its own expansion, they eventually challenged the system on its own merits,

seeing demands for open data and evidence as effective tools for slowing regulation.

Policies can also build or redesign associated expert communities. Medicare and Medicaid helped expand and professionalize university medical schools.[46] The huge decline in state mental hospitals, with patients declining 80 percent from 1955 to 1985, transformed mental health as a field and nationalized its funding sources.[47] Food and Drug Administration trials support a large number of researchers but also incentivize pharmaceutical over therapeutic treatment.[48] Research on several drugs that are used recreationally, meanwhile, was put on hold for decades despite early scientific success, partially because of high-profile adventurism by university affiliate Timothy Leary.[49]

The political context surrounding research affects how scholarly debates develop. Since criminal justice research and core sociobiological studies of aggressive and sexual behavior raise legal issues, researchers weigh how findings will map onto social desires to blame or excuse activity.[50] Policy debates over terrorism, infectious disease, and climate change are also sites of contestation over both the barrier between science and policymaking and the internal lines of relative expertise within the sciences.[51] The adversarial legal and regulatory practices in the United States make establishing who is an expert, what kinds of evidence are permitted, and which communities need to come to consensus on standards into core political issues. Courts and agencies cite generic standards of scientific expertise and evidence nearly as often as specific cases analogous to each dispute. Science has responded to judicial needs with new ideas about measurement, codifying uncertainty, and establishing causation.[52]

Political Unrepresentativeness

Given their important policymaking role, social scientists should be particularly mindful of the potential for political bias. The public views social science as partly a "guided pursuit of evidence in favor of scientists' personal ideology" on controversial topics.[53] Republicans have less trust in university-created knowledge, especially if they perceive faculty as more disproportionately liberal.[54]

Steven Lubet's critique of ethnography argues that scholarship starts from the ideological perspective that police are bad actors, defendants are often framed, and criminals are needlessly caught up in a bad system; all of those premises could be correct, but they can lead to a search for confirming evidence, with the field judging from ideological premises over evidentiary standards.[55] Conservative critic of social science Jim Manzi also argues that social scientists seek to justify their view of the world (and are not diverted from it absent undeniable evidence); he sees randomized controlled trials as the only solution, but

even there contends that social scientists assume far more potential for scaling up studies than is warranted based on their hope for more government action.[56] But Manzi's solution, to stick with non-government action absent overwhelming evidence of program effectiveness, is less an epistemological principle than a return to his different ideological precepts.

Recent critiques of liberal academia come in the wake of a generation-long attack on the independent and nonpartisan standing of academic social scientists by conservative think tanks, who argued that they were simply providing studies from an alternative perspective born of conservative principles.[57] But that is not a reason to fully dismiss the critiques. Experts are indeed ill equipped to make predictions even in fields closely related to their academic work, often due to their affinity with the assumptions of activists and ideologues.[58]

Within social psychology, there has been an active effort to determine the impact of political biases. A recent collection finds pejorative naming and interpretation, assuming that liberal views are the norm rather than one endpoint of a scale, and aversion to any explanation involving evolutionary motives.[59] These public interventions in psychology caused scholars to organize around studying perspectives missing from current debates and provoked responses from others saying the concerns were overblown (who also systematically studied the role of politics in scholars' findings).

Many of the social psychology examples are related to topics also studied in political science, such as prejudice and conservatism. A recent special issue of the journal *PS* drafted scholars to comment on the effects of ideological bias; most of the examples were similar. They argued that we often misdiagnose conservatism and use uncharitable interpretations based on poorly designed survey scales, especially when investigating relationships with personality and prejudice.[60] They cited instances of misunderstanding and self-censoring and called for more ideological diversity. But even for cherry-picked examples, the clearest cases were a simple fraud and a coding mistake, rather than biases in questions or interpretations. And two articles in the symposium provoked thoughtful follow-ups that suggested concerns may have been misplaced. One found that evidence of the effects of anti-man attitudes on voting was absent from the literature because of null findings, rather than scholarly bias.[61] Another said a data error (ideologically important but mostly irrelevant to the paper's findings) had been blown out of proportion by conservative media.[62]

Political science has a long tradition of treating parties and groups from each ideological side equivalently for model tractability, so the biases may not manifest similarly. Nonetheless, most of its theories and evidence would expect partisan and ideological biases in scholars' interpretation of information.[63] In predictions, experts are often worse than amateurs, especially when their work carries an ideological perspective with it.[64] Social scientists are not representative

of their nations' publics in ideology or partisanship—and they may move leftward during their professionalization. A study of partisan change in the 1960s shows that 40 percent of faculty changed their party identification, mostly by converting to Democrats. Of professors whose parents were Republicans, 60 percent converted to Democrats; only 20 percent of those with Democratic parents converted to Republicans.[65]

Critics from the left and right could both be right about the ideological roles of social scientists. Political diversity may be limited and left-skewed by partisan and ideological metrics, but the kinds of liberals who stay in academia may also have a status quo bias (given their placement in organizationally conservative institutions). Self-selection into staid institutions with cultures that nonetheless question everything may produce political liberals but disciplinary conservatives.

It is easier to see the potential effects of political biases in another time period. Social science was closely affiliated with the "war on poverty" in the 1960s, including both its liberal impulses and its conservative views on the effects of African American family structure and the impact of the "culture of poverty."[66] Social scientists were affected by the availability of grants, prevailing views of racial differences, and the ideological appeal of discussing culture rather than class. This did not produce uniformly liberal responses but was guided by the liberal aspirations of the Great Society.

It also provoked a conservative backlash to social welfare policy scholarship, premised as much on the bankruptcy of expert-led anti-poverty policy evaluation as on the actual ineffectiveness of redistributive programs. The long debate over poverty birthed many social-science-supported social welfare policies but also the counterrevolution of Charles Murray's *Losing Ground*, which suggested these policies made things worse. Social science was central to both a new political consensus on welfare dependency in the 1980s and the reinvention of place-based policies led by William Julius Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged*.[67] Today's biases may similarly be mixes of conservative and liberal assumptions rather than a simple discounting of conservative views.

The American Association of University Professors, known for its work defending tenure, has a long history of defending faculty rights to participate politically. The social science associations supported these efforts but had different ethical concerns. Anthropologists were concerned with relationships to government funders, political science with disclosure of funders and data, and sociologists with politicization of academic evaluations.[68] But social scientists' remaining ties to conservatives have been politically important. NSF social science funding was repeatedly threatened by concerns about liberal bias, with 150 congressmen complaining by 1965 and NSF responding with funding restrictions.[69] An early Reagan administration effort to cut social science out of

the NSF was stopped due to intense mobilization, especially by conservative economists touting its nonideological benefits, but NSF remained wary of social science and became more economics-focused in response.[70]

Conservatives have long been more critical of "eggheads," academic experts driving policy—but the role of elite intellectuals also divided Democratic constituencies.[71] In the Trump era, anti-intellectualism again became ascendant but even more concentrated among Republicans. Democrats have become more likely to defer to scientists and scientific research, but perhaps only based on the issues currently associated with expertise.[72] A majority of Republicans believe that scientists are just as biased as nonscientists.[73] Research shows that scientific communication can help acclimate public partisans to scientific information, connect to diverse cultures, and establish the importance of consensus, but that is no match for a political elite that sees scientists as taking a side and wants to intervene against their influence. Conservative messaging has also reached the right-leaning public, with increasing concerns about free speech and bias in academia.[74] But another conservative strategy, exemplified in the move from creationism to "intelligent design," is to emulate scientific concepts and create new expert communities, fudging a court-imposed line between science and religion.

It is not just courts that have trouble distinguishing ideological views from scientific ones. In one study, economists stated that only the content of a statement—not the speaker—should be judged, but when put to the test they did not follow that script.[75] When presented with identical economic statements attributed to left and right sources (e.g., Karl Marx or Adam Smith saying the same aphorism), economists evaluated them based on the source. And the biases were stronger in the most policy-relevant fields. Ideology is also associated with research topic selection, citation networks, faculty hiring, methods, specializations, and departments. Although economists usually show wide agreement on policy questions, ideology divides them when they do disagree.

The influence of the politics of scholars in each time period is also evident in psychology. Its scales of survey questions and go-to interventions and measurements are products of their specific historical motivations, such as studying "obedience to authority" and measuring "authoritarianism" in the context of the Holocaust. Core psychological concepts like personality, motivation, attitude, and emotion are hardly "nothing but socio-historical constructions," but they are also not "natural kinds" that can be interpreted outside of the history of particular research aims.[76] The long debate over intelligence testing, for example, involves both (some) liberal blindness to the consistency and impact of cognitive ability and an aggrieved conservative view that liberal skepticism is born of a broader ideological conspiracy to accuse conservatives of racism. But the interesting pattern is that all kinds of related studies continue, despite common claims of silencing or self-censorship.

Psychologist Jay Van Bavel told me there is reason to be concerned but grounds for hope: we should "look for conservative people or views being squeezed out, but we didn't find liberal studies less likely to replicate. People predict bias but need to be specific about when and where it might come about. It's more likely on topic selection where we don't have institutions to protect us." Sociologists seem more open about their ideological views, with more reason to be worried about their influence. Jeremy Freese called the lack of ideological diversity "an existential issue for the discipline." "We wouldn't even know the conservative view [in some areas and we're] . . . bad at presenting conservative arguments. [That means we] leave things unexplored." Judging findings as "appropriately sociological often means [whether they're] practical for left politics. That's not consistent with organized skepticism," one sociologist told me. "Most people don't care; I think it's not healthy . . . no question that the topics the discipline is interested in are shaped by political values." Mark Mizruchi points to examples of sociological findings being dismissed not due to their evidence but because they did not fit with liberal worldviews, causing public backlash.[77]

Political scientists pointed to how scholars actively participate with liberal partners on field experimental research. Jessica Preece, one of the few political scientists who has worked with conservative partners, said, "Our first job is to describe the political world and the way people operate. That is hard to do if our experiences are all the same. It is harder to understand when our experience with or as conservatives is so limited." When she worked with a state Republican Party on a gender field experiment, "people were amazed but we had to use their help in designing the experiment; we couldn't [motivate women to seek office based on the] need for diversity; we needed to emphasize families and communities."

A political scientist summed up broader worries: "At this point it is almost impossible to find political scientists who voted for Trump, even though about half of the US population voted for him. This breeds a dangerous groupthink, conditions the type of questions people ask, and leads to overly facile explanations of political phenomena." Alex Coppock told me, "We should be very worried about political complexion of disciplines . . . but it's a real issue because we are culpable for both political and professional ethics." Gary King said political science has long dealt with political bias affecting its insecure relationship, with government and those worries are spreading to other fields: "We study government and politics; we should think about diversification of viewpoints."

The Trouble with Recognition of Ideological Bias

Although scholars recognize their dominant political perspectives and see some potential for bias, it has not generated the same level of concern as other biases.

Conservatives have complained, but their calls for greater representation have been limited (as have other scholars' appetite for it). There can be no doubt that social scientists are politically unrepresentative. I asked social scientists at major US research universities to identify their partisan and ideological perspectives, using the standard seven-point scale of party identification (asked in two questions) and a matching seven-point ideological scale from left to right. Figure 8.1 illustrates the distributions.

More than 80 percent of social scientists in all disciplines identify as Democrats. The percentage of Republicans range from 8 percent of economists to 1 percent of anthropologists. In fact, more respondents wrote in that they were a form of socialist than identified as Republicans. There was limited variation on the ideological scale. Among anthropologists, 94 percent placed themselves on the left side and less than 1 percent placed themselves on the right side; among economists, it was 68 percent on the left and 13 percent on the right. Almost no one was more conservative than center-right, but many placed themselves on the far left of the scale (including 38 percent of anthropologists and 36 percent of sociologists). The modal category in every discipline except economics was one notch toward the center from the left end of the scale (more economists placed themselves on the center-left). In the American public, there are slightly more Democrats than Republicans, but more people identify as conservatives than liberals (though the public in many other countries is more likely to place themselves on the center-left). Very few members of the American public place themselves far on the left.

This is an extraordinary level of scholar political concentration, given plenty of evidence that partisanship and ideology cloud judgments of facts and evaluations of evidence. Despite widespread critiques of faculty liberalism, the American public (even Republicans) dramatically underestimate the lack of ideological diversity (with 15 percent believing there are more conservatives than liberals and another 20 percent perceiving an even split).[78] Academia is designed to counter individual biases through collective introspection and feedback, but these levels of ideological and partisan conformity likely make that difficult. Although the patterns may reflect selection into the professorial occupation more than discrimination, they may still produce incentives for conservative faculty and graduate students to stay quiet about their political views.[79] International surveys have also found values and identifications of the political left to be much more popular with social scientists—with political distributions far more concentrated than for other professions.[80]

Social scientists are somewhat aware about the potential for ideological bias. I asked social scientists to what extent (on a scale from 1–5) the political ideology of researchers influenced the content of research in their discipline. Figure 8.2 illustrates the results. Interestingly, sociology and anthropology are the most

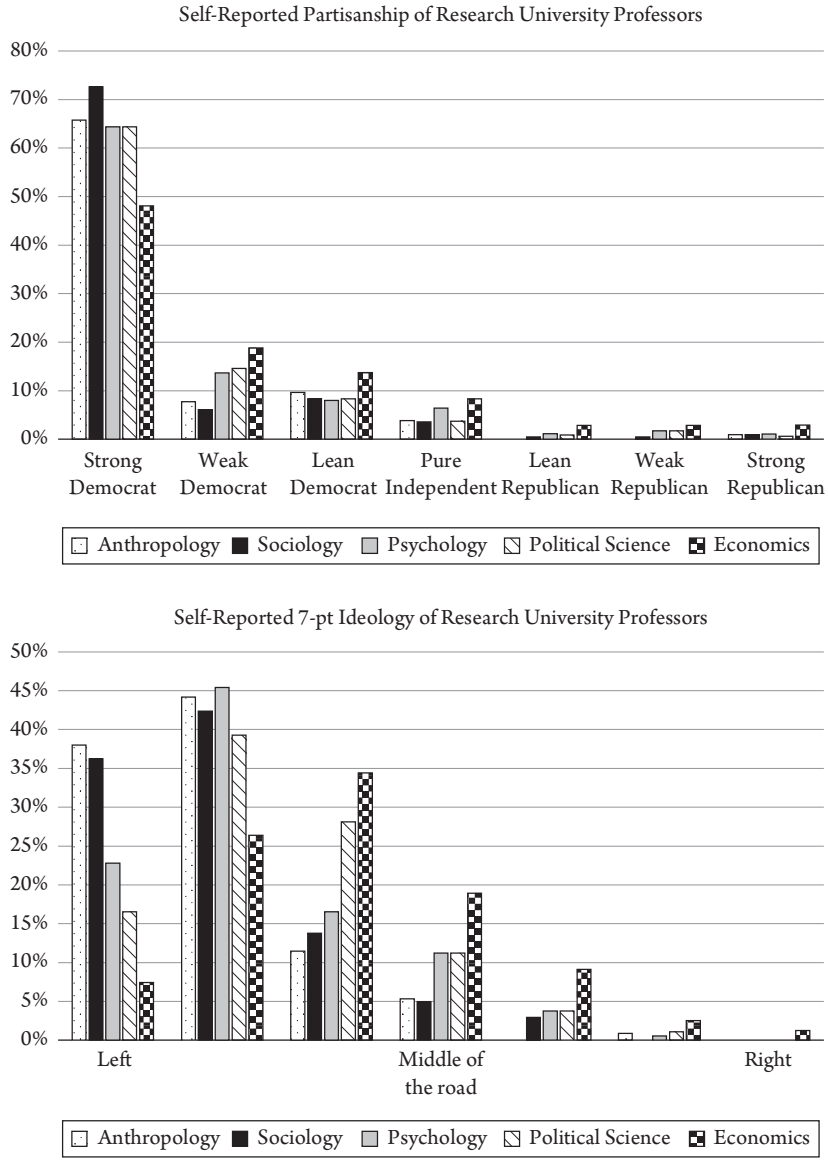

Figure 8.1 Partisanship and Ideological Self-Placement of Social Scientists. Data from the author's 2020 survey of social scientists at major US research universities. n=1,141.

cognizant of ideological bias. They may recognize that they are the most left-wing disciplines, though some respondents may still perceive their disciplines as too far right (a few complained about neoliberal views in their open-ended responses). Overall, the perceived influence of ideology is just below that of race and gender (as reviewed in Chapter 4).

I also asked faculty to assess the extent to which their disciplines are increasingly recognizing the potential for partisan or ideological bias in research (on a

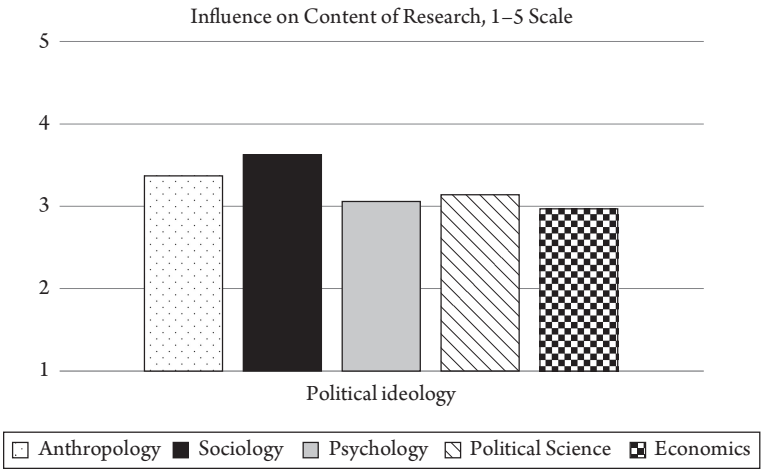

Figure 8.2 Perceptions of Ideological Influence on Research. Data from the author's 2020 survey of social scientists at major US research universities. n=1,141.

1–5 scale from "a lot" to "not at all"). Figure 8.3 illustrates the results. For a comparison, it also includes their assessments of the extent to which their disciplines are recognizing confirmation bias. All disciplines are reportedly recognizing both forms of bias to some degree, though recognition of partisan or ideological bias is just below the midpoint in most disciplines and it is below recognition of confirmation bias in all disciplines except anthropology. These ratings are also well below the recognition of racial and gender biases.

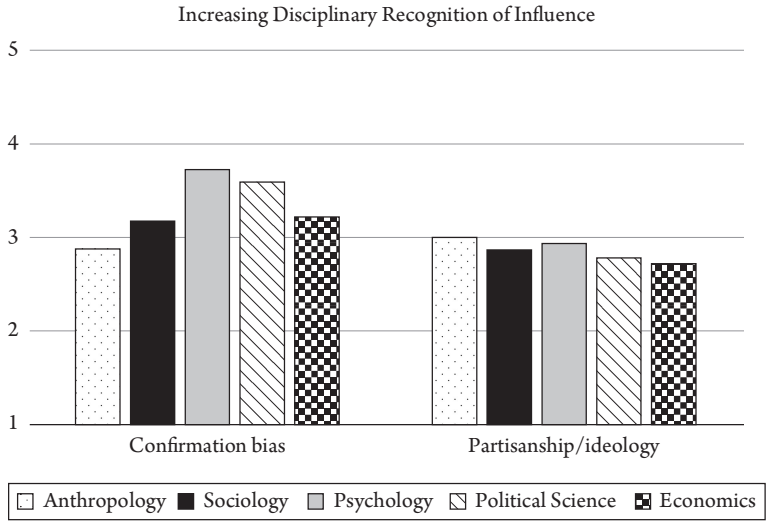

Figure 8.3 Social Scientists' Perceptions of Confirmation and Ideological Bias. Data from the author's 2020 survey of social scientists at major US research universities. n=1,141.

Scholars thus see the potential for research biases related to partisanship and ideology but may not recognize the degree of underrepresentation of conservative views. Even economics, which is perceived to be a right-leaning discipline based on some of its public intellectuals, is only conservative relative to the other social sciences; relative to the public, it is decidedly on the left. The long history of social science shows that these ideological perspectives do not foreclose the possibility of representing the perspectives of conservative interests, such as the American military or business sector. And conservatism in the American public may be an outlier globally, suggesting scholars are (at least slightly) more representative of global publics. But scholars are likely still too quick to see conservative influences and not cognizant enough of the way partisan and liberal ideological views seep into their questions and investigations.

Scientific identity, social norms of collaboration and skepticism, and institutional practices of review can all limit ideological groupthink in social science.[81] But our applied goals may still be limited. As a vocation initially mobilized by reform goals, where does that leave us? Being cognizant and up front about our (normally liberal) goals, including how widely they are shared within the population we inhabit, can be a starting point.

But the level of unrepresentativeness suggests we should also search the conservative scholarship we do have for objectives, such as social cohesion, economic freedom, and shared morality, that might deserve more attention as outcomes. Political unrepresentativeness should give rise to niches for conservative hypotheses or interpretations to further test and develop (analogous to those found by women scholars entering fields dominated by men). Initially discounted conservative-aligned ideas, such as the negative effects of divorce on children or the underwhelming performance of implicit bias measures in predicting behavior, will be more accepted as scholars make recognizable progress working from out-of-the-mainstream viewpoints. Because political science studies multi-sided affairs like elections and policymaking, it has often been able to learn from at least the political efficacy of both sides, even when scholars share only one side's goals. The same is likely true in studies of conservative moral foundations in psychology or conservative social movements in sociology. The danger is not in learning from scholars motivated by goals like remedying economic inequality but in failing to learn from scholars focused on goals like improving stable families. We need both communities checking each other's assumptions.

One concrete step is to support efforts within academia to hear from conservative (or ideologically diverse) scholars, including their challenges but also their research approaches. I am a member of Heterodox Academy (heterodoxacademy.org), an organization of nearly 4,000 academics that provides resources, research, awards, and a community for scholars concerned about ideological diversity.

Participation is concentrated in the social sciences, with active members across the five core social sciences discussed here. The organization has enabled liberals to see some of the concerns that drive other scholars. In my own area of research on party and ideological differences, it has helped minority-viewpoint scholars coalesce around projects to investigate whether prior findings depend on the particular survey question wordings and topics used in previous work (they often do).

The Trump era, including the associated rise of education level as a larger correlate of partisanship, obviously made it more difficult for liberals to find common ground with conservative scholars—or even for conservative scholars to identify with the Trump-led Republicans. Economist David Autor told me, "There's almost no academic influence in the Trump administration. That's not healthy . . . but it's not that economics has changed; the Republicans have." Trump's behavior after losing the 2020 election (justly) further alarmed scholars, who saw the nation's failure to peacefully transfer power as a sign that their critiques of Trumpism were prescient warnings built on firm evidence from other nations and American history, rather than ideological biases.

And many liberals now see racist or sexist views on the American right that they cannot countenance. They also object to attacks on universities associated with conservative scholars, including caricatures of social science research and racial minority student concerns. Part of the aversion, however, may stem from hearing the loudest conservative objectors rather than from the diversity of objectives they bring.

The Niskanen Center (niskanencenter.org), where I am affiliated as a senior fellow and host of the Science of Politics podcast, is another example of an institution making progress on this front. It has become a home for scholars of a libertarian, center-right, or center-left tilt who were alienated by the Trump administration and the state of the Republican Party. It pursues direct policy change but is also open to highly theoretical discussion merging academic and policymaker concerns, giving a hearing to conservative views. Jeffrey Sachs's painstaking efforts to track university speaker disinvitations and faculty firings related to political views responded to conservative complaints but showed them to be overblown, with attacks not concentrated against the right.[82]

Other scholars can make their own decisions about affiliating with political organizations. I suggest only that they acknowledge how their own political goals affect their scholarship, imagine how a community with different policy objectives might approach their research questions, and take advantage of the shrinking remaining political diversity to uncover blind spots in their research areas. Scholars should not have to give up on the social justice or egalitarian goals that drove many of them to scholarship (they were there from the beginning of the social sciences), but they should want to know if different policy goals

would produce a different empirical view of what they study. We should not simultaneously argue that race, class, or gender have major effects on our scholarly viewpoints and that our political views and ties are irrelevant. We never fully split from our reformist compulsions, and they still affect how we see the world.

Systematizing Our Limited History and Acknowledging Our Policy Goals

Neither social science's interest in influencing collective decisions nor its inheritance from history are inevitable downsides to systematic investigation. Knowing that both impulses were there from the beginning contextualizes current concerns and our ongoing ties with the discipline of history and the policymaking community. We still aspire to guide decisions based on the limited human collective experience. Like astronomers, we are trying to understand a broader universe from a peculiar place in space and time. But unlike them, we are attempting to realign the stars in our community based on our knowledge. Both that motive and that vantage constrain our objectivity.

Historian Andrew Jewett finds that attacks on science from the left and right have repeatedly re-emerged since World War II and taken surprisingly similar form, often overgeneralizing about the effects of a scientific worldview and ignoring internal scientific self-reflection on limits and values (especially in the social sciences).[83] Critics have long been concerned mostly about technocratic social engineering, supposedly born of modernizing hard science views applied to human life and ignoring the role of values and inequality. But many social scientists share similar concerns and scrutinize the broadest claims, questioning quick knowledge applications absent public debate.[84]

Social science might be able to learn from muckraking journalism, which initially had institutional ties and similar values to our early associations. Journalists have long faced the challenge of staying normatively focused on oversight but "taming the potentially distortive" risks of that effort.[85] Their solution is to work hard to make the pieces of stories fit together while acknowledging trade-offs between uncertainty and actionable information. Social scientists similarly provide information for public decisions but seek information from unbiased investigations. Our tools for doing so are more immense, but the difficulty of constraining our impulses is the same.

We can also learn from our past. As historian Oscar Browning put it, social science "coordinates the most interesting facts of history; it gives method to investigations" that make them interesting to decision makers.[86] In the early days of social science, there was more back and forth between broad social theory, historical reflection, and data analysis than we remember. We are all engaged in

a similar effort to tell the human story based on what has come before. Social science never completed its divorce from history or policy, but it developed the resources, methods, and communities to develop independently. We can fulfill multiple roles as long as we remain cognizant of how our political and presentist outlooks both intentionally and unintentionally guide our understanding. Through self-reflection and efforts to diversify goals and practices, social scientists are improving both our scholarship and the potential applications of our lessons.