

Doing Democratic Data Analysis

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Contents

Preface	5
Who is this guide for?	5
What will I learn?	6
1 Introduction	7
1.1 What is democratic data analysis?	7
1.2 Do I need to be an Excel god before I begin?	7
1.3 What tools should I use?	7
1.4 Getting Started with Excel	8
1.5 Getting Started with R	8
1.6 How to Think about Democratic Data Analysis	8
1.7 Alternate Forms of Data Analysis	9
1.8 Principles of Democratic Data Analysis	9
2 Tidy Data	11
2.1 Tidy Data, or Why you should clean your room	11
2.2 Example	11
2.3 Pivoting	11
3 Reproducible Analysis	13
3.1 Make your life easier	13
4 Data Modeling	15
4.1 Example one	15
4.2 Example two	15
4.3 Assumptions	15
5 Visualization	17
6 Applications	19
7 Resources	21

Preface

I believe that data, *in the hands of public administrators and policy analysts*¹, has the power to transform the way government works.

Big questions will, and should, be asked of big data— the role of government in regulating algorithmic bias, facial recognition, and consumer data privacy is a vital conversation. However, these topics should not detract or deter public administrators and policy analysts from leaning into **small data** for decision-making purposes.

Public administrators and analysts who are data literate will be able to make and inform better decisions while avoiding the pitfalls posed by the latest technological trends. This book represents an opportunity for public administrators and policy analysts to join their subject matter expertise with foundation principles and practices of democratic data analysis— data analysis that is **transparent, relevant, and grounded in the context of ethical and effective governance**.

Who is this guide for?

This guide is for:

- the budget analyst at the Department of Fish and Wildlife who has to compile a monthly report analyzing revenues,
- the manager at the Department of Social and Health Services who is tracking inventory, and
- the research analyst working for the state Legislature who wants to incorporate data into her work session on the latest policy debate.

¹*Not IT departments*

What will I learn?

You will learn an opinionated framework for data analysis in public sector organizations. By opinionated, I mean that I will teach you what I think is the right way to do things given my own experience as a public sector policy and data analyst. Your experience might differ– and that’s great. I hope that where you can use your experience in place of mine, you do to the fullest extent. With that in mind, it is often said that you have to know the rules to break them, so I will teach you the “rules” as I understand them.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 What is democratic data analysis?

This is little-d democracy here, people. Not a guide to data analysis for Democrats, but an approach to data that empowers the subject matter experts within public organizations to do their best work.

1.2 Do I need to be an Excel god before I begin?

No.

1.3 What tools should I use?

This guide is written to be technology-agnostic. The changing nature of technology and the *ahem* lag of state agencies to pick up tools means that the principles outlined in this book supersede specific technologies.

However, you should start somewhere. This guide will include examples for both Excel and R. Government runs on Excel, so all of the examples and exercises will be Excel compatible. If you are comfortable with Excel¹ and want to challenge yourself, boost your resume, and become a data wizard², I would highly recommend learning R. This guide will walk you through all the steps necessary to learn how to analyze data democratically using both tools, but focusing on the principles and practices that are vital regardless of technology.

¹aka you use `vlookup`, `index(match)`, pivot tables, or *Get & Transform* on a somewhat regular basis

²For example, I used R to create this entire website

1.4 Getting Started with Excel

All examples

1.5 Getting Started with R

I would **HIGHLY** recommend you take an afternoon to work through Chapters 1, 2, and 3 of “*R for Excel Users*”. You will thank me later.

1.6 How to Think about Democratic Data Analysis

What is data analysis? It may be easier to start with what data analysis isn’t.

1. Data analysis isn’t math in Excel or a set of specific calculations.
 - Calculations are great, but `a7 + b8` in Excel is deterministic. It gives you one answer. This book is not interested in data analysis that gives you the right answer, because there is no such thing. There are many answers to many questions, depending on how those questions are asked and how the data is analyzed.
2. Data analysis isn’t statistics.
 - Look, regressions are great, but that isn’t the crux of this book. This book is about reading and telling the story of your data in a way that can complement expertise and experience to make better decisions. Statistics are often used as a cheap stand-in for domain expertise and are often abused in favor of trusting the analyst or administrator to back up their assumptions with both quantitative and qualitative data.
3. Data analysis isn’t research methods.
 - No set of tools and practices can stand in for asking the right questions, and transforming data into information to answer that question. This book will give you the tools to work with your quantitative data to answer relevant questions, but all good analysis begins with a good question.

So what are the principles of democratic data analysis?

1. Democratic data analysis gives power to the subject matter expert.
 - Working with your own data lets you answer your question, rather than outsource those questions to IT departments who don’t have the context necessary to turn data into information.
2. Democratic data analysis is easily shared and reproduced.

3. Democratic data analysis is honest about its assumptions and limitations.
4. Democratic data analysis is structured to be easily understood and communicated.
5. Democratic data analysis is approached methodically.

1.7 Alternate Forms of Data Analysis

I want to contrast democratic data analysis with alternate forms of analysis that I have seen in my time working in the public sector.

1.7.1 Oligarchic Data Analysis

- small group of “data people”

1.7.2 Monarchic Data Analysis

- Spreadsheets created decades ago, patched as necessary, and owned by a single or small group of people. Very unapproachable. Can’t ask questions.

1.7.3 Dictatorial Data Analysis

*Not reproducible, all hard-coded, can’t ask questions,

1.7.4 Technocratic Data Analysis

*Excel workbooks straight from the depths of hell. Formulas on formulas on macros.

1.8 Principles of Democratic Data Analysis

- Think in terms of fields, not values
- Leave breadcrumbs for others (and your future self)
- Create a data pipeline and DO NOT DESTROY UNDERLYING DATA—build
- Make assumptions, and document them!
- Show AND tell your results

Chapter 2

Tidy Data

2.1 Tidy Data, or Why you should clean your room

2.2 Example

2.3 Pivoting

Chapter 3

Reproducible Analysis

We describe our methods in this chapter.

3.1 Make your life easier

Chapter 4

Data Modeling

Some *significant* applications are demonstrated in this chapter.

4.1 Example one

4.2 Example two

4.3 Assumptions

Chapter 5

Visualization

We have finished a nice book.

Chapter 6

Applications

Chapter 7

Resources