

# **Does Anyone Listen to U.S. Academics?**

## **The Assertion of Policy Expertise in Challenging Times**

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As the U.S. Senate sought to dismantle the Obama Administration's health care reform law in June 2017, the Republican leadership came under intense criticism for its lack of transparency. Breaking with tradition, Senate committees held no hearings on the proposal and even refused to release a draft of the proposal to the public before sending it to the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) for the customary economic analysis. When a reporter asked a conservative Senate aide if that person had seen the bill, the aide said no, adding sarcastically: "We are assuming since they sent it to CBO today that it will then make its way to K Street, then to *Politico*, then we will see it. You know, the way government is supposed to work" (Byrd 2017).

This anecdote illustrates the state of the U.S. policy advisory system in an age of political dysfunction. "K Street" refers to the rich corporate lobbyists whose offices line that Washington thoroughfare. *Politico* refers to a widely read news source that covers the political minutiae of oligarchical policymaking. The sarcastic line "You know, the way government is supposed to work" tells us that even the political insiders within the *majority* party feel that the policymaking system is insufficiently inclusive. A piece of legislation that will affect the health security of tens of millions of everyday Americans is shrouded in secrecy, with only select, unrepresentative actors being privy to its details.

Once upon a time, political scientists celebrated American pluralism (Dahl 1961; Truman 1951). From the Progressive Era through the 1960s, scholars documented the proliferation of membership organizations and growing stockpiles of informal social capital (Skocpol 1992, 2003; Putnam 2000). Organizations were established to represent business, identity groups, and broad public interests (Berry 1999; Walker 1991). Groups begat more groups, producing a vigorous contest of ideas and viewpoints (Truman 1951). Social patterns of segregation,

ironically, contributed to the proliferation of groups, as women and African Americans created separate associations to press their concerns. In the 1960s and 1970s, social movements for equality rights birthed another generation of interest groups (Berry 1999, Ferree and Martin 1995; Goss 2013). All of these organizations benefited from America's multilayered, porous government structure and constitutionally protected freedoms of speech and association.

Although scholars have long warned of elite bias within the pluralist system (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Domhoff 1978; Schattschneider 1960), America's mid-century interest group universe appears to have been considerably more inclusive and less oligarchical than it is today. Although women and people of color have far more legal equality now than they did then, the organizations that speak for them – and for broad public and consumer interests – are considerably more top-down, less participatory, and perhaps less representative today (Goss 2013; Skocpol 2003; Strolovitch 2007). The system has gone from “membership to management” (Skocpol 1999). Authentic face-to-face engagement has been displaced by checkbook donations and industries that manufacture “grassroots for hire” (Skocpol 1999; Walker 2014).

The oligarchical turn in the interest group system is reflected in politics generally. Commanding majorities believe that big corporations, wealthy individuals, and inside-the-Beltway interest groups have too much influence over politics (Rasmussen Reports 2016). More than half of Americans think that ordinary citizens could do a better job than their elected officials in running government (Smith 2015). In this environment, a brash “outsider” candidate, businessman and reality show host Donald Trump, rode anti-elite, anti-media, anti-politician resentment to unexpected victory in the 2016 presidential election.

The burgeoning of an elite political class, along with the incipient popular backlash

against it, has implications for scholars. Based on their educational credentials and perches within leading institutions, scholars are members of the elite class. However, this privileged position puts them in the middle of furious political crosswinds that at once favor elites and hold them in disdain. Academics also have the political knowledge and civic skills to navigate the policy sphere. However, what they have to offer – disinterested scientific knowledge – seems to be of little interest to politicians locked in partisan warfare and beholden to campaign donors with their own agendas. As I discuss below, the ability of scientific evidence to transcend politics has always been in question, but it appears to be even more so today. And yet, even in a seemingly hostile environment, growing numbers of academics are seeking a prominent role in the policy advisory system, traditionally dominated by interest groups and business lobbyists.

In this paper, I provide thoughts on the role of publicly engaged scholars and their research in the American policy advisory system. I define that system to include any governmental body, nongovernmental organization, professional lobbyist or lobbying firm, ad hoc commission, or consulting organization that regularly provides inputs – money, evidence, moral suasion - into the policymaking process. The advisory system would also include individuals who regularly provide the same inputs on behalf of a business or philanthropic interest. In this constellation of interests, scholars are a small and little noticed group. However, as I discuss below, they are seeking to expand their voice and impact.

This paper is organized as follows. I first briefly review the modest role of academic research in the policy process historically. I then discuss recent moves by both individual academics and academic networks and associations to expand this role. I conclude by highlighting three challenges facing such work and by offering an argument for why scholarly engagement in the public sphere may be especially important in today's difficult times.

## Configuration of the US Policy Advisory System

Scholars have long maintained that legislators strive to make good public policy, even if it's hard to do so (Derthick and Quirk 1985; Kelman 1987). For these humble public servants, there is reason to value reliable, rigorous information about public problems (particularly complex ones), as well as potential policy remedies (Schlozman and Tierney 1986). But we also know that legislators operate within organizational and political contexts that structure their activities, time use, information flows, and calculations of political interests (Arnold 1990; Fiorina 1989; Mayhew 1974). Thus, there is a strong *a priori* reason to believe that the incentive structures surrounding legislators profoundly influence their demand for objective, scientific policy research.

Even before the present age of partisan warfare, decades' worth of studies had found that legislators made little use of academic and other scientific research (Gray and Lowery 2000; Weaver 2000; Hy, Venhaus, and Sims 1995; Sabatier and Whiteman 1985; Feller et al. 1979). Perhaps the most hopeful finding came from John Kingdon's classic study of agenda-setting in the 1970s, in which he found that academics, researchers and consultants were the fourth most important player (after the President, Congress, and interest groups) in elevating new policy ideas (Kingdon 2003). However, even in this study, academics were rated as very important by only 15 percent of Washington political actors interviewed and in only one sixth of the policy case studies. In general, research has found that lawmakers rely primarily on other sources that may provide less objective, less systematic, and less reliable information.

In a study of Minnesota legislators, for example, Gray and Lowery (2000) found that ideas about "policy solutions" came primarily from personal experience, constituents, legislative staff members, fellow legislators, and lobbyists; academics were among the least commonly

cited sources. Likewise, a survey of legislative research agencies in 45 states found that most did not use college and university experts, and when they did, those contacts consisted largely of informal phone calls, as opposed to research studies and memos (Hy, Venhaus and Sims 1995). The importance of legislative staffers as information sources has been noted in numerous studies (see, for example, Sabatier and Whiteman 1985; Feller et al. 1979; Price 1971). But even legislative staffers, who collect primary information for legislators, rate academics relatively low on the list of those from whom they learned about problems or solutions (Gray and Lowery 2000; Sabatier and Whiteman 1985).

Studies have identified a number of supply-side and demand-side barriers to legislators' use of academic policy research. On the supply side, there is evidence that scholars do not produce research in ways that busy legislators and their staffs can easily utilize. The 45-state study noted above found that half of respondents discounted academic research because scholars could not produce work within the time frame required by legislators. Agency staffers also frequently complained that academics had trouble packaging their work in comprehensible ways. Other barriers included the inability to pay academic experts, the perception that academics lacked real world experience that would inform their research, and the reality that some legislators were not interested in scholars' views (Hy, Venhaus, and Sims 1995). Kirst (2000) reached similar findings about the relevance of the messenger, timing, and means of communication. Nutley, Walter and Davies (2007) emphasize not only the challenges of timing and packaging in terms of getting research to policymakers, but also the equally important challenge of ensuring the research is used.

To be fair to scholars, they have faced few incentives to design, to produce, and especially to disseminate accessible work tackling real-world issues. For professors at research

universities, especially private ones, the guiding wisdom is “publish or perish.” By that logic, the ambitious scholar should focus as much time as possible on designing and carrying out research that can be placed in the discipline’s leading journals (Drezner 2017). As we shall see below, for political science, these journals do not seem especially welcoming to public-facing work. Nor have top research universities tended to encourage faculty members to take time to repackage and share their scholarship with policymakers, the media, or citizen groups. Such efforts have opportunity costs: Every minute spent on research promotion is a minute not spent on research production. The ever-present pressure to publish or perish has intensified as coveted tenure-track slots have dried up and competitiveness in the job market has intensified.

On the demand side of the evidence-to-policy market sit America’s thousands of local, state, and federal lawmakers. These consumers of policy information have to deal with organizational constraints and political considerations that make it easy to ignore scholarly output. Organizationally, lawmakers face increasing time pressures brought on by the need to fulfill their legislative activities while meeting the relentless demands of the “permanent campaign” (Ornstein and Mann 2000). At the same time, legislators at both the state and federal levels have at their disposal in-house legislative research services. Because lawmakers face severe time constraints and because obtaining and processing new information is costly, it is easier to take cues from trusted sources (Weaver 2000), including within legislative institutions. With the professionalization of legislatures, individual lawmakers turn to committees for cues on how to vote (Krehbiel 1992; Feller et al. 1979) and to legislative support agencies, as well as individual staffers, for policy expertise (Weaver 2000; Feller et al. 1979). In a highly partisan age, recent research finds that partisans are unlikely to believe disconfirming information unless it comes from members of the same political party (Berinsky 2015). These findings are

consistent with studies of imperfect rationality in bureaucratic decisionmaking (see, for example, Allison and Zelikow 1999; March and Simon 1958).

Political constraints have emerged as critical barriers to lawmakers' adoption of research findings. In particular, Kent Weaver has argued that lawmakers "may discount or ignore information that does not fit well into their existing framework of ideas" or ignore policy information that challenges their political interests (Weaver 2000: 144). In his study of the 1996 national welfare reform bill, Weaver (2000) found that rather than coalescing around policies supported by social science research, legislators simply used that research as "ammunition" to reinforce preexisting value-based policy positions, a finding also reached by Weiss (1979). Interestingly, the explosion in information sources – academic centers, think tanks, interest groups, Congressional research agencies, and so forth – has facilitated the selective use of research that supports legislators' political values and interests (Weaver 2000).

From these studies we see that the market for policy-relevant research is fraught with failures. The typical legislator's information search is constrained by time, dependent on convenient intermediaries, and conditioned by political predispositions and realities. For scholars, the incentive structure is also not encouraging. Like lawmakers, they face constraints on time and must answer to constituencies – hiring and promotion committees, deans and department chairs, journal editors – that may not value policy-oriented work and public engagement.

Thus, stubborn realities on both the demand and supply sides of the equation pose a number of challenges to the research community. Scholars sit on the supply side and may have only limited influence on demand-side problems. Nevertheless, we should be thinking about how to alter both supply- and demand-side incentive structures so that the evidence we produce and

the arguments we build gain a broader hearing and enjoy a larger impact. It is incumbent on us to think about these questions. How might we design, produce, and disseminate evidence that is more, rather than less, likely to be incorporated into the policy process? How might we work within our universities to encourage rewards for public-facing work? How might we work with allies in the media and policy spheres to improve the uptake and impact of research evidence?

### **The Publicly Engaged Scholar: Recent Developments in the United States**

In 1999, the influential *New Republic* magazine published an article bemoaning the demise of the public intellectual within political science (Cohn 1999). Gone were the titans who consulted with U.S. presidents, informed innovative policy approaches, and wrote about ideas for mass audiences; in their stead were math types developing formal models that were elegant but divorced from the real world of public problems and public governance. Shortly after the article appeared, a revolution broke out within the American Political Science Association (APSA). Calling themselves the *perestroika* movement, after the putsch to open up the old Soviet system, these anonymous activists sought disciplinary pluralism and greater diversity among APSA's leadership (Monroe 2005). Although not begun as an explicit effort to prioritize public engagement, the movement contributed to political scientists' reconnection with the larger world and provided validation to those who had been connected all along. Out of *perestroika* came a new APSA journal, *Perspectives on Politics*, which publishes timely, accessible articles on major public issues. Scholars who used conventional methods, including qualitative research, to answer big questions were less likely to write off their discipline's flagship journals. And APSA itself

embraced its public intellectuals by electing a string of them to lead the association in the post-*perestroika* age.<sup>1</sup>

In short, the discipline began returning to its roots as a supplier of thoughtful discourse on the big questions of politics and governance. *Perspectives* provided a prestigious forum for scholars who had felt shut out of the more quantitatively oriented journals that had defined good social science. The ascendance of public intellectuals to the apex of the organization provided a powerful signal that public engagement was not only valued but also *valuable*. Indeed, Harvard professor Robert Putnam (2001-2002) used his APSA president's address to assert that political scientists have "a professional responsibility ... to engage with our fellow citizens in deliberation about their political concerns, broadly defined. Political science must have a greater public presence" (Putnam 2003). His APSA successor and Harvard colleague, Theda Skocpol (2002-2003) carried the torch by overseeing a major investigation of economic and political inequality in America – a report that gained favorable attention in the press and from sages across the ideological spectrum (Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy 2004).

Over the past 15 years, America's political science establishment, together with colleagues from other disciplines, has taken bold steps to institutionalize the public responsibilities of academics and to project their voices in the public square. A boomlet of new books suggests that scholars are eager to take up the challenge and are looking for guidance and perspective on the work of the public intellectual (Badgett 2015; Drezner 2017; Stein and Daniels 2017). Here, I review three relevant developments from the United States.

**Foundation support.** One of the nation's leading supporters of public policy scholarship,

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<sup>1</sup> The first five presidents after the Perestroika movement had taken hold were Robert Putnam (2001-2002), Theda Skocpol (2002-2003), Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, publicly identified as an organizer of Perestroika (2003-2004), Margaret Levi (2004-2005), and Ira Katznelson (2005-2006).

the William T. Grant Foundation, grew concerned some years ago that the work the philanthropy funded – largely around children and families – was not having the impact it should have. So in 2009, the foundation created a program on “improving the use of research evidence.” The program, which has spent at \$12.5-million on more than 30 studies, has yielded numerous studies on how to improve the research-to-policy process (DuMont 2015).

**Scholarly media.** The Internet age has opened up a limitless space for the timely dissemination of knowledge and active, sustained participation in political and policy debates. Scholars have colonized this space with specialty blogs (e.g., the Society Pages, Lawfare, HistPhil, and Duck of Minerva), open-access op-ed and policy brief services (e.g., The Conversation, Scholars Strategy Network), and cooperative agreements with mainstream media enterprises (e.g., the MonkeyCage blog and Post Everything, both hosted by *The Washington Post*; the Mischiefs of Faction blog, hosted by *Vox*; and The Upshot, hosted by *The New York Times*). These platforms allow scholars to bring evidence to bear in real time on questions and debates swirling in the media. These platforms also are preferable to offering quotes to reporters because academics can ensure that their material is presented accurately, expansively, and with the nuance that research findings often demand. These scholarly media platforms work in tandem with social media, especially Twitter, and digital media, especially podcasts, to propel participating scholars to public prominence. For example, as of this writing (June 2017), Daniel Drezner, an international relations professor at Tufts University and frequent contributor to Post Everything, had nearly 86,000 followers on Twitter, and Brendan Nyhan, an American politics professor at Dartmouth College, had nearly 54,000. They and others engage in ongoing discussion via their social media platforms, bringing their scholarly knowledge to bear in the frenzied 24/7 news cycle.

**Scholarly Associations.** Social science associations have long had internal constituency groups focused on public engagement – think for example, of the Sociological Practice and Public Sociology section of the American Sociological Association<sup>2</sup> or the Caucus for a New Political Science,<sup>3</sup> which emerged within APSA to influence the country’s direction during the turbulent 1960s. Later, international relations scholars founded the Bridging the Gap program to train the next generation of thinkers on questions of peace, security, and diplomacy.<sup>4</sup> The latest and most ambitious attempt to mobilize scholars’ collective voice is the Scholars Strategy Network (SSN), which began organizing in 2009 and took root in 2011 (Skocpol 2014). A network of nearly 800 scholars at nearly 200 institutions, SSN aims to “improve public policy and strengthen democracy” by disseminating scholarly findings to lawmakers, the media, and civic groups (Scholars Strategy Network 2017). The organization is federated in structure – there are 24 regional networks, plus individual members outside those regions – and works primarily by building relationships between scholars and those who could benefit from their work (Green 2017).

SSN aims to support four uses of evidence, as summarized by Makkar et al. (2015, Table 1) based on earlier work by other scholars. These four uses are:

*Instrumental* use, meaning “research directly influences what issues to prioritise and/or what action should be taken to deal with the identified issue(s)”;

*Conceptual* use, meaning “research is used to provide new ideas, understanding, or concepts to clarify thinking about the policy issue without directly influencing content”;

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.asanet.org/asa-communities/sections/sociological-practice-and-public-sociology>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.apsanet.org/RESOURCES/For-the-Public/Political-Science-Organizations/Caucuses-in-Political-Science/Caucus-for-a-New-Political-Science>

<sup>4</sup> [bridgingthegaproject.org](http://bridgingthegaproject.org)

*Tactical* use, meaning “research is used to justify or lend weight to pre-existing decisions and courses of action relating to the issue”; and

*Imposed* use, meaning “research is used to meet organisational, legislative, or funding requirements to use research.”

For each type of use, SSN assumes that policymakers will not be interested in scholarly research unless they have a personal relationship of trust with the academic or with a “civic intermediary” that disseminates the scholar’s work (Green 2017). Civic intermediaries are a subset of interest groups that broker information for the general public – groups such as think tanks, such as the Oklahoma Policy Institute, and citizen associations such as the League of Women Voters (Green 2017). SSN also seeks to achieve policymaker buy-in by having scholars “co-create” research with them, meaning that policymakers are consulted ahead of time about questions that the scholar might answer (Green 2017).

All of these engines of scholarly expression – a philanthropic program to develop knowledge on the evidence-to-policy process, a diverse array of new media outlets, and an association for public intellectuals – owe their beginnings to entrepreneurial leaders and/or publicly oriented scholars. Often they had an assist from patrons in philanthropy and the mainstream media. These developments suggest that it’s a good time to be a scholar who cares. But challenges remain – and they are not to be dismissed.

### **Evidence-Based Policy Advising in Challenging Times**

Scholars seeking a public impact can find both free spaces for their ideas and moral and tangible support structures for their engagement. Nevertheless, robust scholarly engagement is likely to encounter three key barriers: 1) incentive structures that do not encourage public scholarship; 2) a hyper-partisan political environment that discourages the dispassionate search

for evidence and may especially disadvantage political scientists; and 3) the diffusion of authority over ideas. I consider these in turn.

*Challenge 1: Incentive Structures Undermining Public Scholarship*

Elite universities, where most research of potential public consequence takes place, insist on maintaining a reward structure for faculty members that discourages their public engagement. This reward structure has been in place for decades and, given the complexities of university governance, it would require a lengthy and contentious process to even begin to think about changing. This three-pronged reward structure weights research most heavily; hence the axiom “publish or perish.” Teaching is important but it is a distant second. The third element is service, which includes service on committees and such; it lags far behind in importance. Tenure and promotion decisions never hinge on a professor’s service. Our concern here, public engagement, is typically lumped in with “service,” which lies at the bottom of the barrel. To be fair, public engagement in some circumstances might enhance the professional rewards to good research – for example, work that generates a “buzz” in the media or in policy circles might also lead to higher citation counts and awareness among senior peers. But the road from engagement to professional impact is jagged, long, and uncertain. Gatekeeping committees that control tenure and promotion are likely to focus primarily on the quantity of publications and on their quality as assessed by senior referees.

Incentive structures might inhibit scholarly engagement in ways beyond the demands of tenure and promotion. Consider work routines and how those that structure scholars’ time differ from those controlling lawmakers, the media, and interest groups. Scholars tend to work slowly, and for good reason. Their job is to produce careful, systematic, replicable research that advances a typically well-developed body of knowledge. This kind of work takes years to

complete. Once the work is completed, it takes months or even years to be published, and by that time, scholars are often deeply engaged in the next set of questions. Policymakers, the media, and interest groups are bound to a much faster schedule. Issues rise on the agenda relatively quickly, and these inside players need answers now. Sometimes scholarly schedules and political schedules are in sync, and scholars can provide a good answer to a precise question. But often such exchanges are not possible, either because the scholar is engrossed in different research or because she has not examined the particular question at stake (Green 2017). SSN is helping solve this problem by maintaining a large database of two-page, plain English summaries of research that policymakers, journalists, and interest groups can access immediately and by convening groups of scholars who can identify individual members capable of a rapid response (Green 2017).

### *Challenge 2: Partisanship and Policymakers' Search for Information*

Scholarly efforts to inform policy also are complicated by the contemporary political environment, which is characterized by hyper-partisanship. Partisanship affects engaged scholarship in several ways. For one, liberals and conservatives have different beliefs not only about *how* to address public problems, but also about whether many conditions are actually problems in the first place. This disconnect has appeared most prominently in connection with global climate change, but it applies to other issues as well, including the extent of racial bias in policing and the integrity of U.S. voting systems. Relatedly, partisan belief systems influence where policymakers search for information and what kind of information they deem credible. As Jasney and colleagues (2015) have found in the context of climate change, policymakers exchange information within distinct “echo chambers” and do not contend over evidence until it is time for political battle. The fact that most political scientists are politically liberal may

undermine their scientific credibility with conservatives, who now control the federal government and most state governments (Drezner 2017).

### *Challenge 3: The Diffusion of Authority over Ideas*

In a powerful new work, *The Ideas Industry* (2017), foreign policy scholar Daniel Drezner argues that ideas continue to be powerful, even amid partisan cacophony and populist rejection of intellectual elites. Nevertheless, he suggests that that engaged scholars wishing to public intellectuals face an upstart challenge from “thought leaders.” Thought leaders are “intellectual evangelists” who “develop their own singular lens to explain the world, and then proselytize that worldview to anyone within earshot” (Drezner 2017, 9). Thought leaders are TED Talk types, “true believers” in their own “creed,” rather than professional skeptics (Drezner 2017, 9). To Drezner, thought leaders have the upper hand because they can attract funding from likeminded plutocrats and cultivate their own idea bubbles, free of the clashing viewpoints common to traditional institutions such as universities (Drezner 2017, 12-13). These thought leaders benefit from declining trust in scientific and educational institutions and other traditional sources of authority (Drezner 2017, 49; see also Hayes 2012).

### *What Is an Engaged Scholar to Do?*

In the scheme of things, scholars were never powerful political players, and there are many reasons to believe their power resources have dwindled in recent decades. Neither the political system nor elite universities seem especially eager to mobilize academics in the service of good governance. Nevertheless, we are witnessing a mini renaissance of public engagement within the academy, a movement enabled by patrons, new media platforms, and scholars bent on providing associational spaces for colleagues who wish to engage.

What are scholars to do? How are they to navigate around the headwinds and catch one

of the tail winds? One answer may be to ignore the winds and focus on a gentler breeze: Write an op-ed; submit a research brief to SSN. As Drezner (2017) notes, these activities take less time than one might imagine and may have unexpected professional rewards. A second answer, most relevant to tenured professors and institutional decision makers, is to develop formal mechanisms for documenting and rewarding engaged scholarship. This work can be done in subtle ways. The annual reports that faculty members often file with their deans might contain a question on “how have you engaged with the wider world?” Requests for outside letters might ask referees to address the candidate’s contributions beyond the academy. Journal editors might ask that papers contain a “so what?” section to highlight real-world implications.

Finally, scholars might reconsider the call that Putnam (2003) issued more than a decade ago. He argued that academics have a professional responsibility to engage with everyday citizens as they seek to address their public concerns. Scholars might have a similar responsibility to engage with policymakers, whose desire to construct efficient and effective public policy is being undermined by partisan animosity. Academics are by nature critical thinkers; they understand nuance and broader contexts. These are important skills, especially today. In an age when the institutions of democratic governance are under strain, and extremism is erupting around the globe, public engagement by academics may be not only a professional responsibility, but also a moral calling.

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