

Social Science and Public Policy: Bridging the "Great Disconnect"

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(based on Paul Gary Wyckoff, *Policy and Evidence in a Partisan Age: The Great Disconnect* (Urban Institute Press, 2009)

Overview

- Use of Evidence in Medicine and in Policy Debates
- The “Great Disconnect” Between Policy and Evidence in Four Policy Areas
- Two Modest Suggestions

Use of Evidence in Medicine and in Policy Debates

an example of evidence in medicine: the
hepatitis B vaccine

- Wolf Szmunes and the New York
gay community
- 1083 participants
- random assignment
- double-blind procedure

Use of Evidence in Medicine and in Policy Debates

an example of evidence in policy-making: Reagan's 1981 tax cut

- largest tax cut in U.S. history
- based on supply-side theory
- weak parallels to Kennedy tax cuts
- David Stockman: "none of us really understands what's going on with all these numbers"

Use of Evidence in Medicine and in Policy Debates

a thought experiment: what if the
contexts had been switched?

Use of Evidence in Medicine and in Policy Debates

policy-makers use very little of the
policy analysis we generate

- Nelson (1987)
- Weiss (1989)
- Mooney (1991)
- Whiteman (1995)

Use of Evidence in Medicine and in Policy Debates

Kirp (1992):

- “a retreat from analysis in public life”
- “a triumph of postmodern sensibility in the domain of policy”
- “a focus on the telling of anecdotes rather than on policy substance”

Use of Evidence in Medicine and in Policy Debates

Meanwhile, in medicine, the use of sophisticated statistical tools is growing

- Weiss and Samet (1980)
- Emerson and Colditz (1983)
- Resnick et. al. (1987)
- Rosenfeld and Rockette (1991)
- Juzych et. al. (1992)
- Cardiel and Goldsmith (1995)

Use of Evidence in Medicine and in Policy Debates

My meta-analysis: over half the articles
in medical journals use inferential
statistics

Use of Evidence in Medicine and in Policy Debates

“This study suggests that the prevalence of analytic studies and inferential statistics in otolaryngology journals is increasing ... A consequence of these trends is that a greater level of statistical expertise will be expected of future writers and readers of the otolaryngology literature.” (Rosenfeld and Rockettee 1991)

The “Great Disconnect” Between Policy and Evidence in Four Policy Areas

- the “Great Disconnect” between policy claims and evidence
- an apology for my American focus

The “Great Disconnect” Between Policy and Evidence in Four Policy Areas

Voting Your Wallet

- our expectations

-American National Election Studies,
1960-2000

-Ray Fair studies

explaining Presidential vote, 1916-
1992

The “Great Disconnect” Between Policy and Evidence in Four Policy Areas

Voting Your Wallet

- the reality: reviewing the record
 - Keech (1995)
 - DeLong (1996)
 - Lipford (1999)

The “Great Disconnect” Between Policy and Evidence in Four Policy Areas

Voting Your Wallet

- the reality: reviewing the record

“Looking back at the budget since World War II, it is difficult to argue that on balance ‘discretionary’ fiscal policy has played *any* stabilizing role.” (DeLong 1996)

The “Great Disconnect” Between Policy and Evidence in Four Policy Areas

Voting Your Wallet

- back to medicine again

The “Great Disconnect” Between Policy and Evidence in Four Policy Areas

Economic Development

- an “arms race” in tax incentives

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- Phillips and Goss meta- analysis(1995):
tax elasticity = $-.35$

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Economic Development

- an “arms race” in tax incentives
- Phillips and Goss meta- analysis(1995):
tax elasticity = $-.35$
- Fisher lit review (1997): elasticity of
public services similar to tax elasticity

The “Great Disconnect” Between Policy and Evidence in Four Policy Areas

Similar patterns of exaggerated claims
in:

- education
- welfare

The “Great Disconnect” Between Policy and Evidence in Four Policy Areas

Thesis of the Book

We debate phantoms and mirages,
while the actual, more modest choices
remain undiscussed

Two Modest Suggestions

- a disclaimer: these are only suggestions for small-scale trials

Two Modest Suggestions

Infiltrate the Other Side!

- Why should they pay attention to us?

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Infiltrate the Other Side!

- Why should they pay attention to us?
- The current problem: policy-makers do not always major in our disciplines.

Even if they do, statistics is taught as a separate, forgettable technical course.

Two Modest Suggestions

Infiltrate the Other Side!

- the solution: teach social statistics in high school, in core university courses, and in introductory courses

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- integrate statistics with course material on policy debates

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- the challenges: teaching statistical concepts with fewer mathematical and technical tools

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Infiltrate the Other Side!

- the challenges: teaching statistical concepts with fewer mathematical and technical tools
- bridging the gap between statisticians and the rest of us

Two Modest Suggestions

Establish Some Ground Rules for the Debate

- the inadequacy of “because I said so”

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Establish Some Ground Rules for the Debate

- the inadequacy of “because I said so”
- a hierarchy of evidence

Two Modest Suggestions

A Suggested Hierarchy of Statistics

- Large-scale experiments
- Meta-analyses and literature reviews
- Small-scale experiments
- Multivariate statistical techniques
- “Raw” figures and percentages
- Case studies and anecdotes

Two Modest Suggestions

Establish Some Ground Rules for the Debate

- a model to follow: levels of evidence in medical journals

Two Modest Suggestions

Level of Evidence Classification in *The Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery*

- Level I – randomized controlled trial
- Level II – prospective cohort study or poor quality controlled randomized trial
- Level III – case-control study or retrospective cohort study
- Level IV – case series
- Level V – expert opinion

Review

- Use of Evidence in Medicine and in Policy Debates
- The “Great Disconnect” Between Policy and Evidence in Four Policy Areas: macroeconomic policy, economic development, education, and welfare
- Two Modest Suggestions infiltrate the other side and establish some ground rules for the debate