Making Policy More Responsive To Research: A View From The United States

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In an ideal environment, policy should proceed from and be adjusted regularly on the basis of solid (that is, robust and reproducible) research evidence. In the real world, however, this basic rule is followed rather infrequently. Three sets of factors probably explain most of the variance between the "ought" and the "is" in this regard.

The first set of factors revolves around the breadth and nature of the questions about which policy-makers require research-based answers. These questions range from those that "hard" science can answer -- given adequate time and resources -- to those that involve complex social behavior. The latter kinds of questions can be explained and understood only imperfectly and predictions about them can be made only with inferential leaps that are typically very troubling. At the hard science end of the scale, it is reasonable to expect policy adjustments based on robust new evidence that has reached, or at least is approaching, the level of a "paradigm," that is, it is accepted as scientific wisdom. That such adjustments do not happen as regularly as one might expect is a function both of the difficulty of meeting the high evidentiary standards a new scientific paradigm requires and of interference by political factors, a topic to be

addressed below.

As one approaches the social science side of the scale -- the focus of the balance of the essay -- the availability of reliable data diminishes precipitously and methodologies and scientific tools (such as controlled experimentation) become less robust. One of the most important consequences of this reality is that, in highly contested policy areas (such as immigration), the room for interpretation expands enormously and the space between scholarly research and advocacy becomes correspondingly narrower. Occupying that space is a breed of social scientists known, often derogatorily, as advocate-scholars. Their work is disseminated as much by advocacy organizations as it is by "research" organizations engaged primarily in disguised advocacy -- the systematic search for evidence to support their positions. In the absence of definitive research results -- a nearly impossible standard in most social science -- meanings can and often are manipulated with unfavorable results being undermined. As a result, policy prescriptions are almost always contestable on the basis of competing research "evidence," and thus the maneuvering room for politicians correspondingly increases. Policy experimentation (through small-scale pilot programs of finite duration) then becomes the most likely tool of governance.

The second set of factors focuses on the mechanisms through which research evidence is communicated to policy-makers and becomes part of the mix in the making of policy (and political) decisions. If scholars who work on a particular issue develop effective mechanisms for reaching and influencing key decision-makers, the prospects for research evidence becoming part of the mix of ideas that inform policy increases correspondingly. There are a number of vehicles by which this task is accomplished.

The most passive (and thus least effective) way for research to influence policy is through scientific publications and books intended primarily for consumption by the academic community. The "reward structure" of the academy and the importance of conforming with the orientation of one's peers -- who allocate such rewards in the form of future promotions, appointments to positions within professional associations, and even some research grants -- reinforces this practice. Such scholarship -- both by the choice of the research questions

(often theoretical) and the intended audience -- tends to provide little or no direct benefit beyond one's academic peers.

One of the ways in which academic researchers can break this cycle of "relative irrelevance" is through activities such as writing opinion pieces for the newsprint media, actively seeking to generate news stories, and participating in press and Congressional briefings. These are all activities in which they have no comparative advantage and are typically not rewarded for by university faculties. These issues of access and targeted dissemination which affect policy relevance are most often resolved by some type of affiliation with an advocacy organization or through relationships with certain intermediary policy research institutions often known as "think-tanks." By assigning a high priority to educating decision-makers and influencing policy discussions and outcomes, think tanks (typically Washington-based) can thus become both judges and conduits of "relevant" knowledge.

There are fundamentally two types of Washington-based think tanks. (A third type of research organizations also exists-often called "beltway bandits," because many are located along the highway that encircles Washington. They are made up of a vast industry of firms that do research privately for the government.) The majority advocates a particular ideology and invests an extraordinary amount of energy in providing the philosophical and "research" infrastructure that will allow that ideology to gain the respectability that can lead to legislative action. These types of think tanks are often little more than partisan advocacy organizations trying to promote an institutional point of view through studies, conferences, and briefings. A minority of think tanks, however, places great value on most independent scholarly research and engages the provision of nonpartisan advice to decision-makers. As a result, these organizations tend to be more credible -- although their advice does not necessarily carry greater weight with the government.

This latter type of think tank thus emphasizes solid research and the formulation of alternative policy options to decision-makers that are based on the available evidence. The information they provide comes fundamentally from two sources: from the academy (often accessed through different forms of relationships with major scholars)

and from their own investments in research. As one might surmise, the objectives are primarily to "translate" analytical findings into results that are understandable to non-specialist audiences and to address key policy concerns. Although perhaps no longer unique to the United States, think tanks of this last variant are largely an American invention.

Think tanks are of course, by no means the only "arbiters" in knowledge-based policy-making in the United States. Two well-respected institutions with a claim to strong and impartial analysis are the General Accounting Office (GAO) and the Congressional Research Service (CRS) -- the evaluation and the research arms of Congress, respectively. Both of these agencies were established to provide Congress with non-partisan independent studies and reports on compelling policy issues. Yet another important source of analytical information is the executive agencies that conduct in-house research -- although with these organizations the "hotter" the politics surrounding an issue, the more such information tends to be discounted.

The mid-level staff of most of the institutions discussed in this paper is composed of a relatively new cadre of researchers who possess increasingly superior research skills and are imbued with an unusual sensitivity to policy. These new policy researchers are products of the many public policy programs, which are largely another U.S. innovation. These relatively recent university-based institutions house programs committed to the training of hybrid re-sear-ch/policy analysts who upon graduation use their talents to conduct the research necessary for the formulation of solid policy.

The third set of factors that interferes with policy being as informed by research as it should be revolves around something much less tangible -- but more important -- than the first two: the politics of the policy process. As a rule, the more politicized an issue area is, the less room available for serious research to influence that policy. However, there are still a number of steps that can increase the probability that knowledge obtained from research can play a significant role in the process. A starting point for achieving this goal is for a critical mass of researchers (many more than currently exists) to ask policy-relevant research questions. Then from these questions

they must identify, examine, and evaluate "best policy practices" (with relevant examples not necessarily limited to the United States) for decision-makers to consider as policy options. In practical terms, this means being able to outline for the most relevant policy-maker-a member of Congress, a senior official, a mayor, a city-manager, or a program administrator-the major options available with regard to a relevant issue and the most likely effect or implications of each.

A number of other pertinent steps must also be taken by researchers in order to navigate the political process in a manner that provides policy-makers and politicians with feasible policy options. One absolutely essential -- and largely self -- evident-step is for researchers to produce results that can withstand the scrutiny of those who are likely to oppose the policy implications of the findings. This not only includes good research design, sound analytical methodologies and clear writing, but also the time to tease out carefully and discuss explicitly the policy implications of one's own research. Another step is for policy-savvy researchers to attempt to incorporate, from the planning stage, a built-in outreach component to their research project in order to cultivate a "client-base" for their findings. This strategy is most effective if the project's "clients" understand and take ownership of the process-thus, potentially turning themselves into willing and eager consumers and possibly even advocates of the research results. A project's "clients" might include senior policy-makers, but even more importantly the intermediaries who guard the intersections between research and policy and who, by controlling the access points to senior policy-makers, can either facilitate or severely hamper the serious consideration of a project's research findings.

Finally, in all cases, researchers must be extremely mindful in their research of three canons that will always militate against meeting their hopes for policy relevance. The first is that the processes of politics and policy research are hardly ever parallel and are almost never co-terminous. This disjuncture makes devotion to the conduct of policy-relevant research much more difficult. The second is that the perspectives of researchers and many policy-makers (and almost all politicians) -- and the prisms through which each community views "reality" -- are typically different. Frames of reference will

always colour both how each community views research and the relevance of findings to policy-making in different situations. The last, and probably most difficult, is that researchers can only rarely anticipate correctly and meet the timetable of politics.

In an ideal world, an effective policy-research link should be able to do three things. First, it should be able to identify and rank-in a manner that takes into account political priority-a set of topics on which policy would benefit from research-based answers. Second, it should develop and constantly nourish the capacity both to conduct unimpeachable research so that the findings are reliable, and to draw out their policy implications in an objective and non-partisan manner. Finally, it should be able to improve the odds of negotiating the politics of the policy process by ensuring that the research process is transparent, so that key communities are aware, and even included in, the planning of the research and the dissemination of its results. Unless these criteria are met, the ability of research to effect policy outcomes in a systematic way will be severely hampered, if not completely blocked.