Why Study Social Science

by John Sides February 6, 2013 POLITICS

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Kindred Winecoff, himself a political scientist, writes in reaction to an earlier post:

> This is an opportunity for the social sciences to demonstrate their value by making a clear, coherent argument. Simply pointing to research on topics of possible public interest (as Sides does) is not enough… it must be accompanied by an argument that that research is *more* deserving of public funding than something else. So far I have not seen such an argument made. I have seen social scientists act like any other interest group: they want public spending on programs that benefit them because those programs benefit them. There's nothing wrong with that, but it's a bit distasteful to equate common rent-seeking behavior with a broad public interest. If the social sciences deserve public funding they ought to be able to make the case on its merits. In a way, Cantor is challenging us to think like civically-minded social scientists.

As I responded to him and to a commenter, I think I and others have tried to make an argument that goes beyond "rent-seeking" and, indeed, we've tried over and over again. But let me try to engage this question again, and at the broadest possible level.

We study social science because *social phenomena affect people's lives in profound ways*. If you want to start with Cantor's focus—physical illness and death—then social phenomena are tremendously important. Social ills—poverty, lack of formal education, family dysfunction, ineffective governments, wars—are associated with and arguably cause a great deal of physical illness and death. You can do a lot to fight malaria with medicine, and we need new and better medicines to do so, but those treatments aren't going to go very far in some developing countries—or at least as far—without more stable political institutions and more effective civil society organizations. Doctors in labs can create a miracle drug. However, that drug won't do that much good if you can't get it to needy populations because roaming militias set up roadblocks and kill NGO workers. If social and political scientists can figure out how to help create stable democratic institutions, how to help resolve civil wars, whether and how foreign intervention can help ameliorate conflict, etc., etc., then they will help save lives—both on their own and in concert with other scientists who focus on new medicines, or more efficient cookstoves, or new ways to filter drinking water, or what have you.

Now let's leave killing and death behind, since much social science isn't about that. Social phenomena also matter in less dramatic ways, but in ways that still make people's lives profoundly better or worse. Consider this partial list:

- Families. What makes families more or less successful? What makes marriages more successful? What makes them fail? What are the effects of divorce? Does it hurt the children of divorce? How much, in what ways, and for how long? A medical doctor can treat the effects of family dysfunction and divorce—say, with anti-depressants or therapy and so on—but we can learn and know more about how to prevent some of this dysfunction from doing social science.

- Schools. What are effective means of educating children? What makes for good teachers? How can we measure and evaluate teaching and learning? How can we overcome inequalities in educational achievement created by socioeconomic status and other factors? The "hard" sciences and medicine might be able to help a bit here, but these too are mostly questions for social science.

- Economies. Fundamentally, what makes them grow or shrink? Few things are as central to people's quality of life as economic prosperity. Here again, there is synergy with, say, medicine: getting sick affects your ability to be economically productive. But doctors are not going to be shed much light on this question. Economists and other social scientists can.

- Mass Media. The information conveyed through mass media—cultural, political, and otherwise—can profoundly influence how we understand the world. How is that information produced? What are the incentives and norms that govern media organizations? How does that information affect people? How does that information help or hurt people—for example, by dismantling or reinforcing stereotypes, or by mitigating or fomenting outright violence? Social scientists spend a lot of time trying to figure this out.

- Attitudes. Why do people develop particular attitudes about social and political phenomena? How does those attitudes affect subsequent behavior? Whether people like or dislike social groups, for example, has an impact on the quality of life for those groups. So we must understand the origins and evolution of attitudes like prejudice.

- Social networks. The networks which people are embedded—which encompass families and schools as well as other institutions—can affect many things about them. Whether they are healthy, whether they are prejudiced, whether they can survive natural disasters, and so on.

That is just a quick jaunt through some of the foundational topics in sociology, economics, psychology, and other social sciences. I should say that the politics, and therefore political science, is immanent in all of those. The policies that governments produce can affect families—for example, by providing child care subsidies, or by allowing same-sex couples to be married and build their own families. Politics also affects the economy, needless to say. Witness the gains or losses of wealth that could be attributed to government stimulus, to austerity, to debt ceiling debates, to financial crises. How political institutions function—and the roles played by voters, leaders, reporters, activists—will also end up affecting people's lives in myriad other ways. Whether they live in poverty, whether they get parental leave when their kids are born, how easy it is to buy a house, how long they sit in traffic, how much tax they pay, how good their health care is, and so on and on.

My problem with this laser focus on the hard sciences and on medicine is that it pretends that people's quality of life simply depends on physical phenomena—how fast computers are or how much their knee hurts and so on. That's simply not true. Much of people's happiness—indeed, including whether they have access to computers or can endure a physical malady—depends on social phenomena. If I wanted to turn the tables, it wouldn't be hard to find research in medicine and the "hard" sciences that seems much further removed from people's daily lives—and their actual happiness living those lives—than is much social science.

But none of that speaks to trade-offs: why should the government fund social science over, say, medicine? At one level, that's not a fair question, because it assumes a zero-sum game that doesn't necessarily exist or need to exist. Why not fund both social science and the "hard" sciences by reducing agricultural subsidies? But I'll grant the question for the same of argument.

One answer I'd give is that it's very hard to determine the value of any research ahead of time. It's hard because any one research project is narrow. It's hard because you can't anticipate how one project might inform later ones. It's hard because some funding goes to create public goods—like large datasets—that many others will use, and any one research project is also cannot be anticipated. It's hard because some research won't work, and we can't know that ahead of time. (Commenter Eric L. makes this point as well.) For example, my mom worked on a multi-million dollar NIH grant to see whether certain vitamins would reduce the risk of a second stroke among stroke victims. Null effect. Here's the JAMA article. Easy to say, "What a waste. I can't believe Sides's mom got all that dough. Should have given those millions of dollars to political scientists studying civil war." But how can you know? And even if the medical research did work, it's very hard to measure its impact relative to other research in other fields. If a new drug extends the lives of patients with a particular kind of terminal, but rare, pancreatic cancer by 2 months, what is the value of that relative to research that shows how to improve the reading abilities of thousands or even millions of children?

You can't answer questions of relative benefit very easily. And thus to say that entire fields of study are worth $0 in federal funding but other fields of study are worth millions or billions of dollars reflects very little about the actual or potential real-world impact of those fields' research programs. Even a more nuanced claim—the marginal impact of every dollar spent on medical research is greater than the marginal impact of every dollar spend on social science—is hard to test. Nor is it clear why the most impact wouldn't be attained not by doing zero-sum calculations between sprawling and disparate fields like "medicine" and "social science" but by funding only the most promising medical research and only the most promising social science research. Alas, then we're back to figuring out what is "promising" *a priori*.

Given these challenges, what the federal government does do and should do is allow its elected leaders to make decisions about how to allocate resources across multiple fields of study—via funding of the NIH, NSF, etc.—and then allow processes of peer review by experts in those fields to determine which specific projects seem most promising. Eric Cantor and others are perfectly within their rights—indeed, it is their job—to decide how much funding these agencies receive or whether they receive any funding. It is also their job to exercise oversight over these agencies to ensure there is minimal fraud and waste. Scientists are not entitled to federal funding any more than farmers or highways.

My point is simply that what political leaders seek to do—what good government seeks to do—is make the lives of citizens better. Social phenomena are central to the quality of our lives. Thus we gain from funding the disciplines that illuminate those phenomena.

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John Sides

John Sides is an associate professor of political science at George Washington University.

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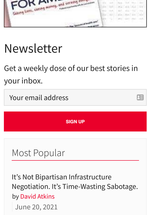
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