

The changing relationship between government and policy scholarship: Challenges to nonpartisan research in Brookings's second century

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INTRODUCTION



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Over the past half-century, the relationship between research centers and governing authorities in the United States has undergone a profound transformation. Increasing polarization between the political parties has reduced demand for nonpartisan research while sparking a proliferation of think tanks with overt links to specific parties and ideologies. Rising public skepticism about policy expertise, changes in funding patterns, and a far more complex media environment also have played important roles.

This is a familiar if important litany. Less familiar are the changes in the U.S. government itself—in particular, its increased analytical capacities at the national and state levels and in some of our major municipalities as well.

These changes have reshaped the relationship between Brookings and our public institutions. From the 1920s through the 1960s, the federal government often asked Brookings for direct help in crafting policies and mechanisms of governance. For example:

- Shortly after what became the Brookings Institution was founded, one of its scholars, William Willoughby, took the lead in making the case for a unified national budget. The chairman of the House Committee on Appropriations asked him to draft a bill to that effect, which he did. Willoughby then testified before the committee and wrote its report. The House and Senate subsequently passed the bill with only minor amendments. The final result, the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921, created the president's Bureau of the Budget (the precursor to today's Office of Management and Budget) and the office of Comptroller General.

- During the 1920s, studies on international debt issues by Harold Moulton, Brookings's first president,¹ deeply influenced the Dawes Commission. In a press conference, an unhappy Commerce Secretary, Herbert Hoover, blamed Moulton for a major write-down of the French debt. Other Brookings studies on international debt led to the adoption of uniform standards for reporting international financial statements.
- A Brookings study requested by the Secretary of the Interior, Hubert Work, led to the comprehensive reform of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and became known as the "Bible of the Indian Service."
- President Franklin Roosevelt read a Brookings report on price controls in the National Recovery Act and was sufficiently troubled to create a committee under the direction of the Secretary of Labor to examine the question. Subsequent Brookings studies concluded that the administration of the NRA had broken down and that the Act could not achieve its objectives. Over the protests of the NRA Administrator, FDR set up a comprehensive review board headed by Clarence Darrow, which concluded that the NRA codes had failed as a mechanism of business governance. Before FDR and Congress had a chance to act, the Supreme Court put the NRA out of its misery by declaring it unconstitutional.
- A Brookings book developed the system of apportioning congressional representation among the states that was embodied in the Congressional Apportionment Act of 1941.
- In December of 1947 a perplexed Senate Foreign Relations Committee reached out to Brookings for advice on how to organize and administer the Marshall Plan. In transmitting this request, the committee's chair, Senator Arthur Vandenberg, noted that "the deep and universal respect which the Brookings Institution richly deserves and enjoys would make your recommendation of tremendous value to those of us who are struggling in the trenches with this conundrum." A team led by Leo Pasvolsky, the head of Brookings's International Studies Group, completed this assignment in three weeks. Brookings's work provided the blueprint for the Marshall Plan. In the floor speech, Senator Vandenberg noted the Senate's "great obligation to the Brookings Institution for the masterly job it did. The provisions in the pending bill largely follow its recommendations."
- Brookings's conferences for federal executives were widely hailed and prompted the passage of the Government Employees Training Act of 1958. Subsequent Brookings work on public personnel practices reshaped those of the federal and New York City governments.
- Brookings research on presidential transitions led to papers prepared by Brookings staff and transmitted to the Nixon and Kennedy campaigns in 1960. In a memoir, Ted Sorenson described how these memoranda defined the agenda for JFK and his team during the transition and stated that Brookings "deserves a large share of the credit for history's smoothest transfer of power between opposing parties." A few years later, a Brookings researcher, Laurin Henry, made a compelling case that transition expenses should be publicly financed. Acting as a consultant to the Bureau of the Budget, he drafted a bill to this effect, which was enacted into law and signed by President Johnson in 1964.

¹ A brief note on institutional history: the kernel of what became today's Brookings, the Institute for Governmental Research, was founded in 1916. Over the next few years, Robert S. Brookings and his colleagues spearheaded the formation of two other entities—the Institute for Economics and the Robert Brookings Graduate School of Economics and Government. In 1928, these three activities were consolidated into the Brookings Institution, with Harold Moulton, who had directed the Institute for Economics, as its first president.

During the past five decades, such requests from government have become less frequent. As a result, Brookings has sought, and to some extent found, new modes of influence. It works to raise public awareness of previously ignored issues, to shape the public agenda, and to offer policy advice, privately as well as through an increasingly diverse menu of public communication. When Brookings scholars are invited to join administrations, moreover, the impact of their ideas on public policy can be direct and consequential.

For the most part, however, Brookings must often seek to influence government, not as an official partner, but as a source of unsolicited advice that is frequently but not always welcome. It is unlikely that Brookings scholars will be invited to design the blueprint for comprehensive tax reform or for the federalization of Iraq. In no way does this undermine Brookings's effectiveness. Throughout its history, the Institution has reposed its confidence in the long-term ability of high-quality, independent research to shape the environment within which public policies are debated and to influence policy choices when circumstances permit. Today, this stance of strategic patience is more important than ever.

This focus on long-term outcomes, which I believe to be necessary as well as wise, will require forbearance from the individuals, foundations, and corporations on whose support institutions such as Brookings must increasingly depend as well. The demand for rapid, measurable, direct impact on policy outcomes is bound to frustrate donors and recipients alike.

I offer these reflections from a vantage-point of both observer and participant in American politics over nearly half a century. During this time, during which I wandered through—and sometimes played roles in—six presidential campaigns, I have witnessed the collapse of consensus politics and the end of the “end of ideology” era. As a domestic policy official in the Clinton White House, I lived through the intensification of partisan polarization that gathered momentum after the 1994 mid-term election. More recently, I helped found No Labels, an organization that seeks to restore our political system's capacity for cooperation, in part by organizing a bipartisan caucus that builds trust across party lines and works together on important legislative initiatives.

My practical activities dovetail neatly with my research as a Brookings senior fellow, where I have had the opportunity to study the gap between the political parties, now wider than at any time since the 1890s. As an academic for three decades before I was invited to join Brookings, I had the opportunity to develop the theoretical and historical understanding that shapes my political analysis and policy recommendations. At the other end of the spectrum, for some years I have written a weekly column for the *Wall Street Journal*, which has forced me to get to the point within a strict word limit on an unrelenting schedule.

During the past five decades, the relationship between government and policy scholarship has been transformed. Polarization has increased the demand for research tailored to the requirements of competing parties and factions. But the change goes deeper. Trust in expertise has been replaced by its opposite—a skepticism that often shades over into outright distrust. The very idea of impartiality has been called into question, not only in academia, but among political elites and average citizens as well. We are now enduring—who knows for how long—a full-fledged populist revolt against the claim that highly trained people in different disciplines have knowledge that deserves a measure of deference in the public square.

Along with many Americans who can remember better times in our politics, I am dismayed. But I should not have been surprised. As a graduate student and young scholar, I focused on political philosophy. One need not study

this tradition at length to learn that every form of government has its characteristic deficiencies. From the beginning to the present day, democracy has always been exposed to the threat of demagogues who play on the people's fear and resentments. The politics of passion often dominates the politics of reason.

But the problem goes deeper still: There is a perennial, structural tension between knowledge and power. Those in positions of public authority have their own beliefs and goals. They seek advisors who confirm the former and advance the latter. Few welcome the counsel of those who challenge their beliefs or bring the news that they cannot fulfill the promises that fuelled their rise to power. The unpleasant task of economists is to tell leaders that all good things don't go together. The equally unpleasant task of military experts is to tell leaders that their objectives are not commensurate with the resources they are willing to deploy. Politicians always want advisors who tell them, "Yes we can"—which is, of course, exactly what the people want their politicians to say.

In focusing on the pathologies of the demand for knowledge, I should not neglect the parallel pathologies of the supply side. In retrospect, it is clear that many experts overreached badly in the decades after World War Two. Quantification in the social sciences was taken too far; reality often refuted the most confident predictions; entrenched theories ran up against stubborn realities. Even worse, experts ranging from experimental medicine to urban renewal came to believe that their knowledge warranted the authority to act—without consulting the affected parties, or despite the preferences of the people.

Institutions such as Brookings desperately need a climate of equipoise between knowledge and power—a new balance in which the claims of expertise receive due recognition as important but not dispositive elements in the never-ending project of democratic self-determination.

BROOKINGS'S FIRST HALF-CENTURY: THE RISE OF CONSENSUS POLITICS

I now return to the beginning of my story to flesh out changes over time in the context within which Brookings has conducted its work. The period between the end of World War One and the outbreak of World War Two witnessed a number of ideological challenges to liberal democracy. As the Great Depression deepened after 1929, these movements gained ground, first in Europe, then in the United States. By the end of the 1930s, both communism and fascism enjoyed significant backing among Americans. A decade later, after the defeat of the Axis Powers and the onset of the Cold War, American support for anti-democratic movements collapsed and the range of ideological contestation narrowed.

Another narrowing of the debate, this one exclusively American, soon followed. By the end of Franklin Roosevelt's first term, our politics had polarized around the New Deal. Support for it came to define the Democratic Party, while opposition to it dominated the Republican Party, as Alf Landon's doomed challenge to FDR in 1936 clearly showed. But in 1952, Dwight Eisenhower, running on a platform of "Modern Republicanism" that made its peace with the fundamentals of the New Deal, defeated arch-conservative Sen. Robert Taft for the Republican presidential nomination.

After easily beating Adlai Stevenson in the general election, Eisenhower governed as he had campaigned. He signed legislation that expanded Social Security, increased the minimum wage, funded low-income housing, and created the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. In addition, he threw his backing behind major infrastructure projects, including the Interstate Highway System and the St. Lawrence Seaway, a joint US-Canadian system of

locks, canals, and channels stretching nearly 400 miles from the Atlantic Ocean to Lake Superior. In this context, an increasing number of disputes between the parties involved questions of degree rather than matters of principle.

The evolving structure of the U.S. party system also pushed American politics toward greater consensus. The Democratic Party rested on an unlikely but durable coalition between Northern liberals and Southern segregationists. The Republican Party brought together Eastern moderates and liberals such as Pennsylvania's Hugh Scott and New York's Jacob Javits with hard-bitten heartland conservatives such as Roman Hruska of Nebraska and Barry Goldwater, the emerging leader of what was to become the conservative movement. Despite this intra-party diversity, the gap between the two parties' center of gravity was modest by historical standards.

It was against this backdrop that President Kennedy travelled to New Haven in June of 1962 to deliver the commencement address and receive an honorary degree from Yale. (As the teenage son of a Yale professor, I had the good fortune to attend this event.) The young president was in fine form as he began his remarks, observing that he now enjoyed the best of both worlds—a Harvard education and a Yale degree.

After more urbane banter, President Kennedy turned to the meat of his speech—a serious argument about the nature of contemporary economic and social policymaking. His core argument was that the nature of political contestation in the 1960s differed fundamentally from that of the 1930s. “The central issues of our time,” he declared, “relate not to basic clashes of philosophy or ideology but to ways and means of reaching common goals—to research for sophisticated solutions for complex and obstinate issues.” The differences between the parties had become “matters of degree.” We should focus, he concluded, on the “technical questions” needed to keep a “great economic machinery” moving forward.

In his Yale address, President Kennedy gave lucid expression to the “end of ideology” thesis that dominated much of the intellectual world, according to which the ideological contests sparked by the French Revolution had subsided. In particular, fascism and communism had lost the appeal that they had enjoyed in America as well as Europe during the 1920s and 1930s.

The young president spelled out the practical implications of this shift: If we agree on the ends of politics and have a shared understanding of how the world works, we can turn to the experts to generate the most efficient and effective means to our ends. And because these experts were all working within a common framework, it was reasonable to expect that their findings would be technically sound and ideologically neutral.

There was no shortage of evidence to support the president's thesis. In foreign policy, the mainstreams of the two parties agreed on Cold War anti-communism, that is, on the centrality of containing the Soviet Union and other nations that espoused the Communist ideology. In economics, the parties had converged on a version of Keynesian economics. In 1965, free market economist Milton Friedman made it official: “In one sense,” he said, “we are all Keynesians now.” Six years later, after taking the United States off the gold standard, President Richard Nixon announced that “I am now a Keynesian in economics.”

And the social and cultural issues that now divide our politics were conspicuous by their absence. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, which helped launch the contemporary feminist movement, had not yet been published. Nor had Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which did much the same for the modern environmental movement. The civil rights movement, though gaining visibility and strength, had not yet moved to the center of national consciousness;

the March on Washington and Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech were more than a year in the future. Roe v. Wade was a decade away. Public discussion of LGBT issues was rare.

Four years after JFK's commencement address, President Lyndon Baines Johnson addressed a gathering convened to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Brookings Institution. In his speech, entitled "Government and the Critical Intelligence," the president was lavish with his praise. "You are more than a private institution on Massachusetts Avenue," he declared. "You are a national institution, so important to, at least, the Executive Branch—and, I think, the Congress and the country—that if you did not exist we would have to ask someone to create you."

President Johnson singled out three features of "critical intelligence," which he regarded as a crucial dimension of modern governance. There was, he said, hardly an aspect of the Great Society that has not been "molded, or re-molded, or in some way influenced by communities of scholars and thinkers." Many of these policy intellectuals, moreover, had thought deeply about how to "administer complex programs in a rational way," and some had come to Washington to put their administrative views into practice.

President Johnson put special emphasis on one aspect of critical intelligence in particular—the "power to evaluate," which he defined this power as the ability to say about public policies, "This works. But this does not. This costs more than we can afford, or this costs more than it is worth. This is worth more than it costs. This will probably give us an acceptable result. But this will complicate the problem and make it impossible for us to solve."

President Johnson went on to celebrate this "critical faculty" as the essential feature of the intellectual. "All his training, all his intelligence, all his experience, tells him to beware of easy answers." Nonetheless, the president expressed confidence that critical intelligence would end up supporting the agenda of his administration. "The methods which have worked so well in advancing man's knowledge of himself and his universe," he asserted, "are exactly the methods which can show us the way toward better public policies."

BROOKINGS'S SECOND HALF-CENTURY: FROM CONSENSUS AND CONFIDENCE TO CONFLICT AND SKEPTICISM

President Johnson delivered his speech at the apogee of the postwar era's confidence in the power of technical expertise to promote broadly shared aims within a common framework of how the world works. We all know what happened next. The Vietnam War sparked a divisive debate that destroyed the Cold War foreign policy consensus. The stagflation of the 1970s did the same for the Keynesian economic consensus. (Just seven years after Nixon's statement, his party rejected demand management in favor of a bold "supply side" alternative.) The rise of the counterculture and a bevy of social movements put new issues on the public agenda. The official response to the civil rights movement—executive and judicial as well as legislative—resulted in a realignment of America's political parties. By reopening the gates to America, which had been slammed shut since the mid-1920s, the immigration reform of 1965 set in motion the diversification of the population that bulks so large in today's national dialogue. The nominations of the ideologically conservative Republican Barry Goldwater in 1964 and the anti-war progressive Democrat George McGovern in 1972 shattered the moderate-conservative and moderate-liberal consensus in their respective parties. Their challenges to established beliefs and practices were harbingers of the conflicts that have dominated our politics for most of the past four decades.

The collapse of consensus had a shattering effect on the public's attitude toward the federal government. When Lyndon Johnson spoke at Brookings, more than 70 percent of the American people trusted the government to do the right thing all or most of the time. Twelve years later, the share of the people expressing such confidence had fallen to 28 percent, and it was to fall further still.

This massive shift proved enduring. Even in the peak years of the Reagan and Clinton administrations, trust never rose above 50 percent, far below the level of the mid-1960s. Nor, with the exception of a transient spike after 9/11, did it do so in the two terms of George W. Bush. The month he left office, trust in government stood at 25 percent. And it has barely budged during the Obama presidency; as of late 2015, it stood at 19 percent.

These changes reshaped prevailing views of the relationship between government and policy expertise. Little more than a decade after Johnson spoke, a distinguished Brookings economist was to express a more skeptical view of the relation between expert knowledge and the policy process. The Great Society and the War on Poverty, Henry J. Aaron said in 1978, were sustained by “simple faiths.” An urgent sense of the need to act drove the architects of the expansive Johnson-era programs and commanded analysts to suggest policies “best calculated, given available information, to achieve desired ends.” When the climate of opinion shifted, however, an uncomfortable truth became apparent: because the information prior to the implementation of new policies was at best incomplete, the methods characteristic of rigorous evaluation of these policies after they had been put into practice guaranteed that over the long haul policy analysis would prove to be an “intellectually conservative force.”

Aaron explained in considerable detail why this was the case. Policy analysis proceeds case by case, but often the effects of individual policies depend on their interaction with myriad others. So evaluations of specific policies are likely to conclude that they have had little if any effect. In addition, few issues in the social sciences can be tested in the laboratory; most depend on incomplete data created for other purposes. So there will be a gap between what evaluation can reliably show and the kinds of findings on which policymakers can rely. And finally, solving puzzles about income distribution or the functioning of the labor market is even more complicated than unraveling the problems of biology and physics. Underlying social science questions are “all the variations in human personality and the mystery of its development,” the poorly understood determinants of human behavior, and the inherent difficulty of moving from individual to collective action.

Under these circumstances, Aaron argued, “any particular set of facts will be consistent with a variety of theories,” and it may prove impossible or too expensive to generate the data needed to reject false theories. Given these limitations of policy analysis, he concluded, which theories will prevail “depends on the mood of the times and will be affected by the persuasiveness or prestige of their advocates.”

Aaron expressed some ambivalence about this state of affairs. On the one hand, he observed, people unfamiliar with government decision-making are “surprised and often shocked by how small a direct contribution research makes.” But is this necessarily a bad thing? Existing research is probably flawed, but its flaws are usually not exposed until after decisions on which that research bears have been made. Highly regarded researchers often have disputes that policymakers cannot comprehend, let alone resolve. As Aaron wondered, “What is an ordinary member of the tribe to do when the witch doctors disagree?” An awareness of the imperfections and transience of most research helps explain why policymakers give it less weight than analysts believe it merits—and why entrenched preconceptions shape policymakers' reception of research findings.

Against this backdrop, Aaron offered a qualified defense of policymakers against their academic critics: “Far from necessarily being a sign of intellectual mendacity,” he concluded, resolving a conflict between research and deeply held beliefs in favor of the latter may be perfectly reasonable. Common sense and the totality of the evidence—not just recent research, however pathbreaking and acclaimed—have a legitimate and irreplaceable part in political decisions. Policymakers’ commitments to the ends to which policies serve as means will always shape their use of research findings. When particular commitments lose their moral force or when they come to seem unattainable, the reception of research bearing on these commitments will inevitably change as well.

THE NEW CONTEXT FOR POLICY RESEARCH

Aaron’s skepticism reflected a broader reality: The America of the mid-1960s disappeared with breathtaking speed. The decade after Johnson’s speech witnessed a transition to a new America, multiply riven, that we can still recognize as our own.

This profound shift—from consensus to conflict within governing institutions, from trust to mistrust among the public in government itself, from confidence in neutral expertise to suspicion of intellectual elites—reshaped the context within which research centers must function.

One change is obvious: The end of consensus created a bull market for organizations with clear partisan or ideological orientations. In the past half-century, new organizations of this type have sprung up, and many venerable ones have flourished. Founded in 1973, the Heritage Foundation crafted its massive *Mandate for Leadership*, the policy blueprint for the Reagan administration. Founded four years later, Cato became a major libertarian-tinged center of research and advocacy on topics ranging from limited government and deregulation to entitlement reform and foreign policy retrenchment. For its part, the long-established American Enterprise Institute enjoyed a massive increase in contributions and substantially expanded the scope of its activities.

Other parts of the political spectrum responded in kind. Founded in 1988, the Progressive Policy Institute spent the next four years crafting the intellectual and programmatic basis for what became Bill Clinton’s presidency. Not long after the turn of the century, the growth of conservative-oriented think tanks impelled liberal donors to create the Center for American Progress as an explicit counterweight. Just five years later, after the November 2008 election, an article in *Time* could state, plausibly, that “Not since the Heritage Foundation helped guide Ronald Reagan’s transition in 1981 has a single outside group held so much sway.”

Increased investment in research with a specific partisan orientation is one piece of a broader shift in funding patterns that Brookings President Strobe Talbott and Managing Director Kim Churches described earlier this year in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*. Through Brookings’s first half-century and beyond, they state, benefactors typically offered general support to institutions, sometimes in the form of donations to endowment. Leaders of these institutions were able to allocate these gifts as they saw fit, and growing endowments ensured a stream of flexible, reliable funding in perpetuity. Today, however, more and more donors are focusing on specific projects in line with their interests. For their part, foundations are increasingly inclined to concentrate their grants on specific social objectives and to exert detailed control over the way grantees shape and execute individual projects.

These changes can also affect the internal governance of research institutions. Worried that the founder and other trustees would try to influence the selection and conduct of research, Harold Moulton, Brookings’s first president,

demanded that language be inserted into its bylaws stating that “the primary function of the trustees is not to express their views on the scientific investigations conducted by the Institute, but only to make it possible for such scientific work to be done under the most favorable auspices.” Decades later, the late Joe Pechman, a much admired director of our Economics Program, famously remarked that the duty of the trustees was to collect money and put it on the stump.

In their own times, and in their understandable commitment to academic freedom, Moulton and Pechman were overstating the limits of trusteeship. After all, the original trustees came up not just with the initial funding but the very idea of the Institution. Their fiduciary responsibility was not just in the fiscal realm; it extended to the quality and integrity of the work they were funding.

Nonetheless, the turn away from general institutional support toward project-specific funding has made a big difference. As Talbott and Churches argue, this tightened linkage between donors and grantees complicates the task of maintaining both the reality and the perception that nonprofits are truly independent from external pressures. The costs of failing to do so are high and rising. Institutions such as Brookings must do their work under heightened scrutiny from the media and within a public culture dominated by suspicion and anger, much of it directed at elites. Washington think tanks, Talbott and Churches conclude, are especially vulnerable because of their proximity and connections to the federal government.

Other changes are subtler but nonetheless significant. The professionalization of the social sciences has induced many university-based academics to turn inward and focus on specialized problems within their disciplines. The gap between academia and the world of public policy has widened, and young scholars are forced to choose between these two worlds early in their careers. In the 1950s and 1960s, scholars often would come from universities to Brookings for a few years and then return. Today, young scholars who do this run a significant risk of not receiving tenure if their articles are not placed in leading journals of their disciplines, many of which are unwelcoming to policy-oriented research. Even senior scholars have become reluctant to take the leap from major universities to organizations like Brookings. The transition from funding dominated by endowment and general support for scholars to an “eat what you kill” mentality has further complicated the task of attracting senior scholars of the first rank.

From the beginning, Brookings has been Janus-faced, oriented both to the policy world and to academia. Brookings’s leaders have long believed in the importance of maintaining the Institution’s reputation for high-quality research within both communities. As the split between them widens, this task is becoming increasingly difficult.

By Brookings’s 75th anniversary, this trend was already apparent. Historian James Allen Smith, an expert on think tanks, noted the Institution’s delicate balancing act. “Research at Brookings,” he observed in *Brookings at Seventy-Five*, “must be measured by the policy community’s standards of practicality, timeliness, and relevance, while at the same time the research must strive to pass the academic community’s tests of theoretical significance, technical proficiency, and empirical soundness.” He added, “Professional rewards and career patterns [at Brookings] differ markedly from those of most university scholars.” Occupying a mediating position with a foot in both camps was difficult a quarter of a century ago and it has not gotten any easier.

THE EVOLUTION OF “IMPACT”

Not long after assuming the presidency of Brookings at the beginning of the Institution’s second half-century, Kermit Gordon, who had previously served President Kennedy as director of the Office of Management and Budget, offered an arresting reflection on the nature of impact in public policy research. “The path along which it affects decision-making is so tortuous that the trail becomes difficult or impossible to follow. Diligent investigation would assuredly uncover a few cases in which the causal nexus between study and decision is direct and unambiguous; but these would clearly be in a small minority. . . . In the end, the initiative may be decisive in inspiring an important policy decision, but it will have been strained through so many filters and combined with so many other ingredients that the causal chain may be untraceable.”

Gordon’s remarks did not fully describe Brookings’s first fifty years, but they proved prophetic about the next fifty. Writing on the occasion of Brookings’s 75th anniversary, James Allen Smith underscored the changes toward which Gordon had pointed. “The influence of analytic work . . . is always difficult to assess. The specific lines by which research findings are introduced into governmental deliberations by an outside research organization are always tenuous. . . . Institutions are connected to the process in diverse ways, and sometimes those linkages operate less like hard connective tissue than like nerve endings transmitting quick signals.” For these reasons, Smith argued, “No responsible social scientist would try to force conclusions about the direct causal relationships between research findings and policy outcomes.”

These conclusions reflected new realities. For example, the federal government’s own analytical capacities have expanded significantly in recent decades. Cabinet departments and independent agencies have their own policy shops. The executive branch has the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), staffed with seasoned and highly professional analysts. In addition to the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), the legislative branch can draw on the work of the Congressional Research Service, the Government Accountability Office, and the Joint Committee on Taxation. These institutions have reduced demand for what was early on a principal avenue of direct Brookings impact—providing government with reliable, impartial analyses of its programs and institutions. These changes help explain the decline of governmental requests for Brookings’s assistance, which were routine during Brookings’s first half-century.

As the once-tight links between government officials and nonpartisan research centers frayed, it became harder for Brookings to achieve direct impact on policy choices, and the balance shifted toward an ensemble of more diffuse effects that shaped the climate of opinion within which policy was made. Outstanding examples of this new mode of impact included the Brookings Panel on Economic Activity in 1970, whose influential publications endure to the present day, and the annual economic and budget series, *Setting National Priorities*, which may have helped encourage Congress to create its own capacity for fiscal analysis. It was not by chance that Brookings’s Alice Rivlin became the founding director of this new institution, the Congressional Budget Office. The Tax Policy Center, a joint effort of Brookings and the Urban Institute, has become a premier source of impartial analysis of revenue options and proposals. The online blog *Lawfare*, which went live in 2010, has become a benchmark for the analysis of legal and policy issues raised by military action against terrorists and their subsequent detention. In a similar vein, Brookings scholars established a new framework for evaluating the effects of welfare reform; helped move social mobility to the center of public debate; focused national attention on congressional dysfunction and metropolitan opportunities; laid the foundation for establishing the G-20; and raised global awareness of the nexus between climate change and the problems of poorer nations.

The Reagan-era Tax Reform Act of 1986 offers a counterpoint to the decline of direct influence—namely, the ability of Brookings scholars to pursue a research agenda over an extended period to shape not only the policy environment but also the contours of the new policy. Although the victorious reform effort was the work of many hands, many financial writers emphasized the influence of fabled economist Joseph Pechman and the Brookings Government Finance program. As Pechman and other Brookings economists helped lay out the basic architecture of tax reform—a broader base with lower rates—Congressional leaders such as Bill Bradley, Dick Gephardt, and Bob Packwood were able to join forces with President Reagan’s Treasury Department to turn this framework into legislation that eventually commanded strong bipartisan support.

Another such example: A grant of more than \$20 million (in 2015 dollars) enabled Pechman to hire (and rent) a wide spectrum of talented scholars, conservative as well as liberal, whose huge output ended up devastating the intellectual basis for much regulation then in effect and laying the foundation for the bipartisan deregulation movement that continues to figure in our national debate.

Shaping the policy environment is more complicated than it used to be. Many policymakers and their staffs may be less likely to read books, long the coin of the Brookings research realm. While continuing a robust program of book publication, Brookings now offers a wide array of papers, policy briefs, and short comments, disseminated in blogs, podcasts, and tweets as well as hard copy. Events on high-profile issues and publications expand the Institution’s outreach to the general public as well as to communities of scholars and public officials interested in specific topics. And because today’s media environment is so densely packed, Brookings must devote substantial resources and effort to the staff and systems needed to break through the babble and ensure that our scholars’ voices are heard.

It would be a mistake to leave the impression that direct impact on policy outcomes has disappeared. For example, the Metropolitan Policy Program’s distinctive model, which brings research to bear on the problems of specific metropolitan areas and regions, often involves formal advisory relationships with these jurisdictions and helps develop reform agendas tailored to local circumstances. In this respect, it restores the direct dealings with states and cities that Brookings scholars forged in the 1920s and 1930s, when many nonfederal administrative systems, from budgeting and taxation to personnel practices and procurement, desperately needed modernization but lacked their own analytical capacities.

Nor is shaping legislative or policy agendas the only way of affecting policy outcomes. The Election Reform Project, a partnership between Brookings and the American Enterprise Institute, brought high-quality research to bear on the implementation of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), passed in the wake of the 2000 Florida recount fiasco. By the time this five-year project delivered its final report, it had helped shape on-the-ground implementation of HAVA in areas ranging from electronic voting machines to the electoral participation of Americans in the military or overseas.

As the executive branch expands, an oft-cited maxim—“Personnel is policy”—becomes ever more relevant. Today, Brookings scholars who are invited to join presidential administrations often serve as avenues of direct influence by fusing their expertise with the policy process. As chair of the Council of Economic Advisors, for example, Jason Furman has helped shape the Obama’s administration’s budget submissions while working hard to build the Brookings model of evidence-based public policy into the administration’s *modus operandi*. On loan to the National Security Council, Bruce Riedel played a leading role in guiding the administration’s policies on Afghanistan and Pakistan. Other Brookings scholars in the administration have played pivotal roles on issues ranging from international economics to East Asia, US-European Relations, and the struggle against terrorism.

In recent decades, numerous Brookings scholars have played a direct policy role from the outside. For example, our scholars designed the \$100 billion of targeted tax cuts proposed by the George W. Bush administration in 2008 and approved by the Democratic-controlled Congress. (One of the participants in this bipartisan process, Douglas Elmendorf, subsequently became director of the CBO.) Brookings scholars helped craft the McCain-Feingold Finance Reform Act, the additional child tax credit included in 2001 tax reform act, and the counter-insurgency strategy military leaders implemented in Iraq and Afghanistan.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding these encouraging examples of impact, there is cause for concern. The need for high-quality, unbiased research conducted in full independence from political pressures and donors' wishes has never been greater. The supply of funding for such research, however, has declined since the mid-point of Brookings's first century, and the political demand for it has waned as well. The ideological polarization of the major political parties has created a sellers' market for research that is the policy equivalent of a legal brief—namely, evidence and argument neatly arrayed to support predetermined conclusions. (In a noted article, Alice Rivlin decades ago dubbed such research “forensic social science.”) And funders' demands for measurable evidence of research's influence on public policy have spawned a proliferation of technical assessments of impact, with decidedly mixed results. The demand for quantification leads to a focus on countable outputs such as media hits, congressional testimony, and the like. But as Evaluation 101 teaches us, outputs are one thing, outcomes quite another. The multiplication of citations is at best loosely connected with the successful translation of research into policy.

In a 2011 memorandum to Brookings's Board of Trustees, then-Managing Director William Antholis analyzed the ways in which research can influence public policy. The key, he argued, was to distinguish among the stages of the policy process, from agenda-setting to debate-shaping to policy design. (He might well have added program evaluation, which can illuminate the need for adjustments once policy is implemented.) Each stage, he argued, was addressed to different audiences and oriented toward specific outcomes. And each employed a distinctive ensemble of tools. He warned against “Jeopardy research”—putting us in the position of having to come up with a question that leads to the answer a funder wants.

Revised to include the earliest stage of the policy process (making the public aware of hitherto unrecognized issues), Antholis' proposal continues to guide Brookings's thinking. And it illuminates a key difficulty. When think tank donors and trustees seek improved impact, they typically have in mind the final stage—proposals that directly and demonstrably affect government policy. In so doing, they often overlook or devalue the preceding stage, without which we never reach direct impact on policies actually adopted. In a vast, diverse democracy with a uniquely complex system of governance, consensus on new policy takes years, even decades. Policymakers first must agree that a specific problem requires a government response, and they must sift through a range of possible approaches before settling on one that balances policy requirements and political necessities.

All this is to say that real-world policymaking exhibits three features that often frustrate individuals whose principal experience is in the private sector: It takes a long time; it is often impossible to measure or document the myriad forces through which it comes to fruition; and it requires public acceptance as well as expert endorsement. From time to time ideas spring up that grab the attention of the public and elected officials and move swiftly to adoption and implementation. But such episodes are the exception and should not be taken as

benchmarks or even as aspirations for the normal policy process.

An additional argument for patience is the deep partisan polarization that too often paralyzes our governing institutions. For institutions such as Brookings (not to mention the country), nothing is more important than reducing this polarization. Whenever possible, individual Brookings projects should be shaped with this end in mind, and funders of every kind should promote it as a form of self-interest rightly understood. Unless the political parties can be induced to relearn the habits of compromise, much independent, nonpartisan research will be bound to fall on barren soil. It has taken decades for today's divisions to develop, and they will not vanish overnight.

Measurable impact is, obviously, desirable, but it is often not possible. I would hope that funders interested in public policy would recognize the distinction. As political donors have learned to their distress, there is no guaranteed relationship between large contributions and desired political outcomes. *A fortiori*, there is no such direct connection between such outcomes and contributions to research organizations such as Brookings. Serendipity will occasionally yield such linkages, but they are not to be expected. And they take time to develop. The short-term perspectives that now disfigure much of the private as well as public sectors yield equally pernicious results when imposed on research.

There is no guarantee that the political system will be ready to accept even the soundest policy recommendations when they are first conceived and made public. Often such ideas must wait years or even decades until their time comes. One of the principal functions of research centers is to lean against the myopia that dominates today's public and well as private sectors while standing ready to push strongly for research-based policy recommendations whenever circumstances permit.

Brookings will stand or fall on the proposition that over time, rational inquiry can help shape public affairs. That is an article of faith, a conviction that we hold dear but cannot prove. We can, however, validate it through the ameliorative power of reason in the public realm.

Even—and especially—in the face of adverse political trends, we should do what we can to promote the values and ideals that are at the core of our mission and protected by our independence. In this noble and endless endeavor, Brookings must play a leading role in its second century. This will require a politics less dominated by zero-sum partisan contestation. Just as strategic patience is a virtue for statesmen, so it is for investors in Brookings as an institution in whose broad mission they have long-term confidence.

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