WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE?

Because It Guides Us Toward Practical and Attainable Solutions

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By Tom Kecskemethy, Executive Director, The American Academy of Political and Social Science

The wisest quote about science that I've read in recent years was penned by Vanderbilt University's Larry Bartels, in an article he wrote during the runup to 2016 general election. He reminded us simply that "[p]olitical science, like any science, is a process of discovery and collective scrutiny, not a fixed body of established facts." The "collective scrutiny" of science is essential to establishing the veracity of its discoveries and the power of its consensus claims. But I've also come to believe that collective scrutiny in the social sciences quietly pushes us toward an important habit of mind: patience and moderation in our approach to fixing social problems.

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Years ago, I attended a lecture on urban education in which the presenter urged that we abandon "education reform" as the guiding principle for solving problems facing inner-city, K-12 schools. Instead, she recommended "educational improvement" as a new north star. Reform, the lecturer argued, is not an end unto itself: it is a blunt instrument, that rarely succeeds in making schools better. Wholesale education reforms are vulnerable to changes in leadership, poisoned politics, or any number of other uncontemplated fiscal and administrative challenges. Educational improvement, on the other hand, would hold measurable aspects of child development and well-being at the center of policy conversations. Working toward improvement rather than reform, she hoped, would make policymakers, school leaders and researchers more willing bring performance data into decision-making, candidly deal with programmatic failures, and perhaps be more amenable to the adoption of incremental approaches and political compromise.

The talk was delivered by a researcher who had spent her career studying education reform, and it was an object lesson in how the professional hopes of a formerly ambitious reform advocate had been tempered by years of empirical investigation and academic discipline. Decades of applying social research methods (ranging from economics to ethnography, and from organizational theory to benefit/cost analysis) to problems in urban schooling had changed her attitude toward fixing problems from righteous indignation to patiently inquisitive, and her prescriptions for education from mostly brazen to balanced and pragmatic. In other words, the more deeply she understood the nuances of human

behavior and the complexities of education institutions, the more willing she was to circumscribe her expectations of what might be possible through reform, and concentrate on what's actually attainable through stepwise improvement.

The *reform vs. improvement idea* occurs to me routinely, because I'm lucky enough to work in a job that reveals both the extraordinary potency of social research and the ways in which it can helpfully delimit policy expectations. The Census and federal statistical system provide another example.

The recent (and extraordinarily unfortunate) politicization of the Census has concentrated our attention on proactive and reactive decisions from the Trump administration that may reduce the 2020 Census's ability to accurately count the nation's population. While the controversy over the citizenship question is finally receding, there are other, more nuanced questions about the census that remain. Last year, the American Academy of Political and Social Science published a volume of research that addressed some questions of accuracy in enumeration, but focused primarily on the more subtle issue of whether the racial categories that we use to classify Americans are helpful or harmful in painting a portrait of who we are as a nation.

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Suffice it to say that our official system for racial/ethnic classification—evolved over two hundred years of census-taking—is fundamentally flawed and dubiously helpful in its ability to give policymakers and researchers the information they need to improve social outcomes and increase the efficiency of government services (*White, Black, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander*, and *some other race* are our official races, coupled with a *Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin* ethnicity identifier). But racial classification is also necessary because it's essential in revealing America's substantial and durable social and economic inequities. The Census racial classification system is problematic, but it's so heavily used and so deeply entrenched in the government's statistical infrastructure that there is essentially no chance for it to be replaced or fundamentally reformed.

For the Census racial classifications—as is the case in education, criminal justice, public housing, taxation and so many other critical social issues—*improvement,* not reform, seems to be the most promising pathway forward for effective change. **So, why social science? Because rigorous social science helps us cut through the noise and offers practical solutions to social problems.**

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