

Alternative Facts and Public Affairs

David Schultz
Co-Editor

What is a fact and how do we know when something is true? These are not just philosophical questions. In this era of intense partisan polarization, especially in the United States, the very notion that objective facts and truth exist is contested, and it seems acceptable for elected officials, policy makers, and the media to eschew real facts and opt instead for alternative facts. Contrary to the assertion of former US senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who once declared that everyone is entitled to his own opinion but not to his own facts, it now seems that everyone and each political party do have their own facts and truth. Why? Simply put, scientific facts and truth are not the same as political facts and truth; democracy and science are often in conflict, and the differing groups that support the Democratic and Republican Parties have vested interests in endorsing rival conceptions of truth. This is a dangerous proposition for governance and public affairs, where belief in knowledge, facts, and the pursuit of best practices premised on these is the mainstay of what we teach and encourage in our students as we prepare them for careers in public service.

For 30 years, I have taught American politics, law, and public policy. As someone with graduate degrees in astronomy, philosophy, law, and political science, my research and teaching centers on how policy making can be more evidence-based. In most aspects of our lives and

in business, we are taught to draw on the best available evidence before making decisions. The same should be true for politicians and government. Decisions crafted out of political myths and faulty or no evidence yield bad public policy, wasting taxpayer dollars and leading to failed or ineffective programs. Yet too much policy is created without real evidence.

There are many reasons for this. One can clearly point to intense interest group politics and the corrosive impact of money on politics as possibilities. But there is also a profound difference in how scientists and politicians gather facts and think about the world.

Scientists (and most social scientists) subscribe to the scientific method. This is a rigorous approach, ideally using controlled experiments and the inductive process of gathering discrete data, which are then aggregated to test hypotheses. Scholars also often use statistical sampling to estimate how representative their samples are in terms of the phenomena being studied. One cannot examine every molecule in the universe, and good samples allow for generalizations. But there is always a slight probability of error.

For scientists, facts are rigorously tested but cannot be proved with 100% certainty. Science is about falsifying claims. Scientific knowledge is also incremental, built on what is previously known, as bricks laid one upon another to

construct a wall. Scientists have built a wall of knowledge, facts, and truth. The laws of gravity, Einstein's famous $E = mc^2$, and $1+1 = 2$ are examples. Scientific facts and truth have made possible telephones, television, the Internet, and the cure for polio. If one denies scientific truth, one might as well deny civilization. While we may not have a social science or public affairs equivalent of $E = mc^2$, we do have an impressive trove of data and knowledge about the world of public policy and administration. We may not know truths that are etched in stone, but we do know what has failed and often what should *not* be done. In many cases, we have the lessons of history to guide us, or we simply do the best we can in a world of bounded rationality—we act based on the best knowledge we have and perhaps, in Charles Lindblom fashion, muddle through.

But (social) scientific knowledge is different from political knowledge. What is political truth, especially in a democracy? It is what 50% plus one of the population says: majority rule. For elected officials, what counts as facts and truth is what they learn from their constituents. A politician's world is not one of controlled experiments, hypotheses, and statistically valid samples; what counts as valid evidence in making policies are the stories and interests of voters. This can be powerful evidence to someone who may need support in the next election. What is true in this sense has less to do with rigorous methods of investigation than with how well an assertion plays with the media or voters.

On occasion, scientific and political truth converge, resulting in good public policy. But historically they do not. The tension between scientific or expert knowledge culled from rigorous testing versus political knowledge based on majority rule is deep and has existed since Plato discussed it nearly 2,500 years ago. This is the technocracy/democracy gap. Some have more or specialized knowledge compared to others. Should the people defer to the experts or choose for themselves what they consider to be true? This is where political leadership comes in—to guide the public and make decisions based on the best knowledge at hand.

While science and democracy are in tension, how do we explain the partisan war on science between Democrats and Republicans in the United States? Battles over global warming and alternative facts are sourced in competing economic interests that support or sustain specific biases or factual worldviews. The two parties represent divergent interests that in turn have financial interests in rival conceptions of truth. Right now, Republicans are representing interests generally hostile to science, including energy companies that wish to deny climate change or workers who fear that automation will un-employ them. But this could change.

The gap between scientific and political knowledge might be bridged with more scientific education in schools. It might also be good if we elected more scientists to office. Together, this might create conditions that would make the political process more hospitable to science, yet there is no guarantee. Differing economic interests drive scientific skepticism, as do fear and prejudice, and something needs to be done to address both tendencies. The challenge for scientists and their allies is to convince the public and politicians that science is not a threat but rather enables and enriches our society.

As editor of *JPAE* and as a professor, I remain committed to the old-school idea that facts matter and truth exists and that both should guide the teaching and practice of public affairs. My goal has been to make sure that each issue of this journal contains articles that enhance our teaching and knowledge, helping us in the quest of producing the next generation of scholars and administrators who have the skills and knowledge to do their best to serve their constituents. This issue is no exception.

This issue features a symposium, "Directing Public Affairs Programs," guest edited and introduced by Lori A. Brainard. Serving as a program director is often a thankless task (I served as a doctoral program director for more than 8 years and speak from experience). Directors have a lot of responsibility but often face many con-

straints. The articles in this symposium explore issues ranging from job satisfaction to the unique challenges of small programs, from gender dynamics to the rewards, challenges, and pressures of running programs. Professor Brainard's introduction offers a richer and fuller overview of the symposium, and I will let her speak for the articles therein.

In addition to the symposium, this issue also publishes two articles and a book review. In "Paying It Forward: The Role of Student Philanthropy Course Activities on Civic Outcomes," Jodi Benenson and Erika Moldow investigate how philanthropy course activities contribute to students' understanding of philanthropy and their likelihood of engaging in civic participation. The authors find that having direct contact with nonprofits, doing research into an issue area, assisting in writing a grant proposal on behalf of an organization, serving as a group leader or co-leader, and investing a large percentage of class time on a philanthropy project are activities that most strongly predict students' confidence in their philanthropic skills, abilities, and knowledge.

Gabriel Purón-Cid, in "Information Technology Strategy and Management Curricula in Public Administration Education in Latin America," fills a gap in our understanding of how information and communication technology (ICT) is taught in Latin American public administration programs. He notes that NASPAA has promoted standards in computer literacy and ICT since 1986 but that these standards' diffusion in Latin America has been poorly studied. Purón-Cid draws on interviews with chief information officers and executives (employers) in the public sector in Mexico to identify competencies for ICT curricula.

Finally, Michael W. Popejoy reviews Mordecai Lee's *A Presidential Civil Service: FDR's Liaison Office for Personnel Management*. Popejoy finds it to be a good history that offers rich information about civil service and staffing at a critical time during the Franklin Roosevelt administration.

Collectively, the contents of this issue reinforce the theme of this Editorial Perspective that truth and facts matter: all of the articles underwent peer review, they are grounded in well-respected source citation, and they reach sound conclusions based on real facts and data, not alternative ones.

I hope you enjoy what you read and feel that you too want to contribute to the dialogue by submitting an article, book review, or case study. Please contact me at dschultz@hamline.edu if you have questions, comments, or suggestions. Thank you.

ABOUT THE CO-EDITOR

David Schultz is a professor of political science at Hamline University and professor at the Hamline and University of Minnesota Schools of Law. He is a three-time Fulbright Scholar and the author of more than 30 books and 100+ articles on various aspects of American politics, election law, and the media and politics. Schultz is regularly interviewed and quoted on these subjects in the local, national, and international media, including the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Economist*, and National Public Radio. His most recent book is *Presidential Swing States: Why Only Ten Matter* (Lexington Books, 2015).

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