Brian Gratton’s article (1997) in this issue gives us the unsurprising news that there is a politics of statistics — that research is not a neutral form of fact-gathering but rather a political weapon. His article vividly indicates that the Social Security Board used tainted data to support its efforts to establish the constitutionality of the program in 1937. Indeed, Mr. Justice Cardozo’s opinion provided an eloquent defense of the program, arguing that the purpose of Social Security was “to save men and women from the rigors of the poorhouse as well as from the haunting fear that such a lot awaits them when journey’s end is near” (Cardozo, 1937/1985, p. 33).

To my knowledge, the defenders of Social Security never regretted their tactics in gathering data for the Supreme Court brief (Berkowitz, 1995). On the contrary, they often celebrated the decision, just as I am sure that Thurgood Marshall had reason to celebrate the Court’s 1954 decision in the school desegregation cases. That case, too, rested on social science research that was subject to challenge. Another actuary warned against the use that the agency was making of disability cost estimates. He said the issue was not “costs will hence become very large” (Myers, 1948). The actuary’s words went unheeded. When the program passed in 1956, it initially cost very little and then experienced huge cost increases in the 1970s and again in the 1990s (Mashaw, 1997). Here was a case of the agency ignoring its own research in favor of making what it perceived as an important social advance.

More recently, the effort to preserve Social Security in the face of calls for its retirement has led to renewed controversy over the use of statistics. Here we might consider the events leading to the 1983 amendments. Created by President Ronald Reagan in 1981, the National Commission on Social Security Reform eventually produced the deal that led to these program-saving amendments. In the example, the actuaries accepted a challenge to help prepare cost estimates for a plan advocated by members of the Social Security Advisory Council who favored the privatization of the program. In this case, the actuaries were simply doing their jobs, even though their jobs conflicted in some sense with the political sentiments of their immediate superiors.

Nonetheless, the history of Social Security illustrates that advocacy and objectivity are often antithetical to one another. The times of greatest conflict come during eras of political uncertainty in which, as in Dr. Gratton’s example, the program is struggling for its survival or in which program advocates are attempting to move the program into new realms.

Disability insurance, first proposed in 1938 but not adopted as part of Social Security until 1956, serves as a good case in point. In 1938 an open rift developed within the Social Security Board (as it was then called) over the cost of adding disability insurance to the program. The head of the research and statistics department wanted the agency to announce a definite cost estimate for disability protection, but the chief actuary refused to give a single figure. The actuary said he could not possibly give one estimate and “maintain his professional integrity” (Cohen, 1938). A decade later another actuary warned against the use that the agency was making of disability cost estimates. He said the issue was not the initial cost of the program, which would be quite low, but rather the fact that all restrictions would have to be removed, and “costs will hence become very large” (Myers, 1948). The actuary’s words went unheeded. When the program passed in 1956, it initially cost very little and then experienced huge cost increases in the 1970s and again in the 1990s (Mashaw, 1997). Here was a case of the agency ignoring its own research in favor of making what it perceived as an important social advance.

Research and Politics in Policymaking for Social Security

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course of the Commission’s meetings the members had to vote on which figures to accept for the long-term and short-term deficits faced by the Social Security system. The Democrats on this Commission wanted the actuaries to bless the Commission’s work. To gain that blessing, they accepted the actuaries’ figures and, in return, the Republicans agreed not to push the conservative line that the long-range estimates understated the severity of the problem (Berkowitz, 1991). What was striking about this arrangement was the common assumption that figures related to future expenditures could be the object of political negotiation.

One is tempted to see these developments as part of a post-modernist trend. In the first three decades of this century, Progressive reformers tended to believe that the facts created their own, essentially benign, reality. The problem for these Progressive reformers lay in undertaking investigations that would bring the facts to light. Once uncovered, the facts would have a salutary effect on the political process. Hence, progressive reformers turned to such devices as muckraking journalism and independent commissions of the sort that investigated the Triangle Shirtwaist fire (Perkins, 1946). As the century progressed, reformers came increasingly to believe that the facts were themselves subject to political manipulation and that no one set of facts defined reality. Hence, it became important for advocates to control the research agenda of an agency or commission. In this view, research was somehow exogenous to policy, something that was trotted out to support one’s views and undercut the views of one’s opponents: a forensic science, in other words (Aaron, 1978).

Improvements in the quantitative quality of the research only tended to reinforce this view. The more sophisticated the research, the more ambiguity one could find in the results and the more need, therefore, to choose those facts that favored one’s predetermined position. The negative income tax served as a classic case in point. Expensive and complex research led only to political paralysis.

By the time Ronald Reagan entered office, the committed ideologues of the sort who populated the research offices in the departments that made social policy had learned these post-modernist lessons well. They believed that they had a mandate to end costly research endeavors of the types that characterized the 1970s: no more grand experiments in the fields of health insurance and income maintenance. They also sought to put a stop to what they regarded as pernicious data-gathering practices in agencies interested in their own expansion.

The actions of the Reagan administration were more a reflection of the era than of the President’s political party. The contrast with the administration of Dwight Eisenhower was striking. In the Eisenhower years, there was bipartisan agreement that Social Security, defined as old-age and survivors insurance, was a desirable program that should be expanded. In pursuit of this goal, the House Committee on Ways and Means operated with remarkable discipline, particularly after 1958 when Wilbur Mills took over as chair. Creating Social Security bills, Mills took full advantage of the research done by the actuaries in the Social Security Administration in order to set limits on the amount of the increases in benefits (Berkowitz, 1995).

The trouble in Social Security came later, and there was little that social science research could do to stop it. Ironically, it was not until the system was put on what economists regarded as a scientific basis, with benefit increases automatically linked to changes in the cost of living without mediation by Congress, that the program ran into controversy over its long-term funding. When Mills legislated Medicare in 1965, he relied on the help of the Social Security actuaries and, to a lesser extent, of economists on the Council of Economic Advisors in making long-range cost estimates. Without the aid of microsimulations of the sort later done at the Urban Institute and elsewhere, policymakers largely flew blind. As the econometric sophistication of policy analysts grew, however, the level of controversy in the program increased, rather than decreased.

In the beginning of the century and again in the period between 1946 and 1977, policy analysts expressed confidence that improved research methodology would somehow allow social policy to be removed from politics. That did not prove to be the case. When people agree on the basic premises of social policy, they tend to believe that decisions can be left in the hands of experts whose expertise is defined in part by their prowess in doing research. When people disagree on the basic premises — as they do today — there is little reason to believe that good research can cause them to change their minds. It is not research that moves social policy so much as more fundamental changes in the economy and the political system. Therefore, Brian Gratton’s findings of a link between research and politics should neither surprise nor dishearten us, so much as they should permit us to think about larger patterns in the politics of statistics.

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