An Interview with Dan Schnur

Dan Schnur, *University of Southern California*
Steve Friess, *freelance journalist*

Dan Schnur is the director of the Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics at the University of Southern California (USC), where he works to motivate students to become involved in politics, government, and public service and teaches popular classes in politics, communications and leadership. He also is the founder and director of the USC Dana and David Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences/*Los Angeles Times* poll series. For years, Dan was one of California's leading political and media strategists, whose record includes work on four presidential and three gubernatorial campaigns. In 2014, Dan ran for statewide office as a non-partisan candidate for California Secretary of State.

His interview brings asks us to consider these points:

- To get practitioners to see the value of political scientists' work, "we need to make more of an effort to show them that we respect theirs."
- "The trick is finding a way to present the value of the information without sounding condescending" or partisan.
- However, there will always be people who don't want to hear what our research or data shows, so we cannot focus on not offending/upsetting people, but rather establishing a track record of credible work and building respect over time.

Dan Schnur was interviewed by Steve Friess, who has written for Time, Politico, and many other outlets.

STEVE FRIESS (SF) Let's start by asking do you think there is a problem that political scientists and the academy have, in general, with how they interact with the public? Do you think that political scientists can do things differently? If so, in terms of explaining what they do to the public, how can they show the value of their work?

DAN SCHNUR (DS) I think there is a problem. Most voters are not going to be part of this discussion. It's a question less about the public in general than about their elected representatives, and do they see sufficient value in the work that political scientists do to continue being supportive of their work. Is that fair?

SF Sure. Go ahead.

DS Years ago I wrote a chapter for a book, and the first sentence of that chapter was, "When it comes to politics, practitioners are from Mars, and academics are from Venus." I think both communities hold the other in very low regard. Practitioners don't think that academics understand what they do, and academics tend to look down at practitioners for having goals that are less lofty than ours. You can't solve one without solving the other. If the political science community wants to be treated with more respect by practitioners, we need to treat *practioners* with more respect.

SF Okay. One way would be to show practitioners how political science matters to them. You just finished a campaign for statewide office in California. What lessons from political science can you identify that came into play during that campaign?

DS Probably not a lot, but I will come back to that question because, while some interesting research can be done after the campaign, I doubt that it's directly relevant to the broader question. Academics—and I catch myself doing this, too—tend to look down at practitioners, and if we don't, it's very easy for us to act like we do. By our nature, we are backseat drivers and Monday morning quarterbacks, and if you are the front-seat driver, or the Sunday afternoon quarterback, you quickly develop some resentment from people who tell you how to do your work better than you do it. Treating practitioners with higher regard will not automatically and immediately lead to them treating our work with greater value, but it's an important step. We need the self-awareness to realize that, while there are many reasons that practitioners should take their work more seriously, we may have unintentionally contributed to our current challenge.

SF Now, the current challenge includes things like the Coburn Amendment, that make it more difficult for Congress to fund political science research. Where do you see that as an issue? What do can be done?

DS The political science community needs to explain to practitioners why they should value our work. Before that can happen, we need to make more of an effort to show them that we respect theirs.

SF How do you do that?

DS When you involve someone in a process, the more likely they are to respect the outcome of that process. You asked me a great question earlier, which was what came out of my campaign that would be of some value to academic research. I am not aware of that being a frequently asked question by the academic community to the practitioner community. That's not to say that political scientists should only study what practitioners think is important. But involving them on the front end, could lead to important progress.

SF The general public—and among them the politicians, elected officials, and even journalists—aren't clear on what political science is and what its value is. One way that can be changed would be if more political scientists were able to explain themselves better in the media. Do you agree?

DS That's a great point; I agree with that wholeheartedly. Too often, the media turns to the political scientist simply as a source for punditry. "I quoted a Democratic consultant; I quoted

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a Republican consultant; now I need an academic to show how even-handed my story is."

SF Certainly, we do that.

DS And we revel in it! The next best thing to being asked by a reporter about the work we're doing is to be asked by a reporter about something else.

SF What do you mean?

DS If the local newspaper is not going to do a story on the subject of my thesis, the next best thing is for them to call and ask me my opinion on the latest poll numbers and the latest attack ad.

SF I do this all the time; I worked at *Politico*. I would call certain academics who knew how to talk to me, and I would try to get their position on what was happening in a certain electoral race or why something had happened. Is there a way to speak to journalists that shows that the responses they're getting come out of research, and not just out of some one's observation?

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DS There are two answers to your question. The first and the more glib one, is for us to have the self-discipline to not talk about things that we don't know anything about. I constantly remind myself of that; just because the reporter asked my opinion doesn't mean that I have an opinion that's worth hearing.

That takes self-discipline. Let me take a step back, because I think your questions is a really important one. First, programming and conversation can take place in off-years to help reporters better understand how to most effectively use the resources that the political science community can provide, as opposed to simply being "dial-a-quote." But, before we get to that, it's worth recognizing that, unless and until we can figure out a way to change the way that journalism in our society is practiced, we always will be rent-a-quote or dial-a-quote. You worked at *Politico*, and if you had a theory and wanted to test it out for a story, calling Karl Rove or David Axelrod would probably not be as valuable to you as calling Larry Sabato or Kathleen Jamieson. Because [*Politico* editor-in-chief] John Harris would jump in and tell you, "Hey, wait a minute. We're not partisan here. We're not just going to be mouthpieces for Rove or for Axelrod. You need to talk to someone who can offer a more detached insight." But, political journalists have extraordinary amounts of free time in odd-numbered years, and they're increasingly desperate to figure out how to fill it. The political science community can, individually or regionally or broadly collectively, take advantage of that downtime to help reporters understand how to best use the research that we can provide them. Second, we can inform them about the research we're doing that might not be directly relevant to the latest attack ad or the latest poll. Third, we can provide an increasingly inexperienced press corps with some understanding of the political landscape and some historical perspective so that when they are thrust out onto the trail the next year, they're better prepared to cover it.

SF One of the things that others have told me is that there is an institutional bias against serious academics talking to journalists, appearing in the media, or writing for the press. Have you observed that? What you think of it?

DS I don't think it's nearly as big of a problem as it may have been several years ago.

SF What has changed?

DS Society. Hunger for attention. More and more academics grew up in a world in which media attention equals stature. There are still some holdouts, but I don't think it's nearly as big of a problem as it once was.

SF Some people are good at media naturally, and certainly, some people are not. Some people who are not have really valuable research that could greatly influence a lot of discussions and a lot of ways that people look at the political system, including the politicians. How do you bridge that? It's great if you're somebody who's knowledgeable, and good looking, and can go on television and speak well, and learn quickly how to do that. But if you can't, but you have something to contribute, what can the larger political science community, maybe APSA and others, do to help?

DS It's a great point. Taking it to the next level, what you're too polite to say, is somebody who's adept at sound bites is not necessarily the most valuable to political science. The most effective organizations are those that find a way to give their people a chance to do what they do best and avoid putting them in a situation where they're destined to fail. If I can't hit left-handed pitching, a smart manager's not going to let me hit against a lefty. So it's not fair to ask a smart person who's not particularly adept at sound bytes to play the role of media pundit. Instead, in addition to the off-year media outreach that we discussed earlier, in less highly-charged settings, we can reach out to the American Association of Political Consultants. Or, on a regional level, convene a roundtable or a lunch, inviting the most prominent political consultants in a particular region or state. That might be a good way to start a conversation. Political consultants, like political journalists, have a lot more downtime in odd-numbered years. Political consultants are always looking for the next edge and advantage that no one else has. If we engage them in conversation in those off years—in a respectful way that makes it clear that we don't think that we're better than they are—then maybe there's an opportunity to have those lessons heard by people who can act on them. Having been a practitioner for many years and having been an academic and a practitioner simultaneously for many years, it's striking how little regard the two communities have for each other. And, the difference is, only one community can withhold funding from the other.

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SF Yes, and it's the wrong direction for the political scientists.

DS Exactly. Which gives us a greater incentive to fix it.

SF When I asked the question, "What lessons from political science can you emphasize coming out of your campaign?" I meant, were there common ideas about politics that you put into play, as most candidates do, that you can identify as concepts we no longer think about as having come out of academia?

DS Most practitioners would say that most of the things that they believe don't come out of academia.

SF Is that true?

DS Most practitioners believe that most of what they know comes from world experience rather than from political science.

SF These are times when political science is really useful. What's happening in the political world is hard to explain. This has been a month in politics that has surprised a lot of people, and that means there was more to it than people thought. Were the media and politicians taking political science more seriously, would something like the Eric Cantor upset, or the idea of Thad Cochran actually winning his runoff after nearly losing in the primary, be a little less dramatic or surprising?

DS Making that case would be helpful, and here is how to provide it. Establish a paper trail pre-election. We're not soothsayers, that's not what our job is, but unfortunately, one way to gain credibility with the media and the practitioner audience is being able to foresee outcomes with more information on hand than other people. At least at the outset, establishing a pre-election paper trail—even if the mainstream news media does not write, "Professor Smith Points to a Cochran Victory"—at least it's part of the record, so afterward, in the off-year, we can sit down in the forums I mentioned earlier to say, "Here's what our research found, and here's what we saw going in to the Cochran-McDaniel runoff." The trick is finding a way to present the value of the information without sounding condescending.

SF Well, not only without sounding condescending but also, particularly in real time, without sounding partisan. And that's hard. When you look at the way that Nate Silver was treated in the run-up to the 2012 election, he was right! He didn't make up the numbers; he didn't influence the race. He just took the data and went with it, the same way he did two years earlier, when it was 2010 and it was Tea Party revolt. But, because the Romney campaign didn't want to hear it that way, the Republicans certainly didn't want to hear it that way, if Nate Silver had been a congressionally funded political scientist, they would be threatening his funding!

DS People blame the pollsters. For about five years now, I have run the USC/*LA Times* poll, and people who I know, who I like, who trust me and respect me, when we put out a poll that is not in their best interests, they vilify both it and me. I've known [unsuccessful Los Angeles mayor and US congressional candidate] Wendy Greuel for many years. We put out a poll last spring that showed her running well behind [Los Angeles Mayor] Eric Garcetti shortly before the mayoral election. Her campaign consultants issued a scathing memo, attacking us and our survey. We were correct, but the losing team always hates the umpire. So, the lessons from Nate Silver shouldn't be, "Don't offend people." It should be, "Establish a track record of credible work, and ultimately, in the long run, you're going to gain the respect you're looking for."

SF I imagine political scientists who agree with the idea that they need to be more engaged with the public or the practitioners but who then hear that you and Nate Silver, and other people in various shades of this world, get threatened when they say things that people don't like, and I just see those people wanting to run under their covers and stay there.

DS I understand that and I sympathize with it. The only problem with that is if you're never seen or heard from, there's a lot less incentive to fund you.

SF Any other thoughts, generally, about what APSA can do? What the media should do?

DS APSA, in particular, can play a role both as an organization and encouraging its members to put together either actual programs, or the template for off-year programs, with the news media and the practitioner community. We do have a platform. For better or worse, the media comes to us as the default pundits. Right now, we adjust to fit what the media needs. But we should speak to reporters and editors, tell them, we'll give you the quote on the latest poll, no problem. But here are other things that we can provide. We want to talk to you about these things, not when you're on deadline or thinking about next week's debate, but when you're planning your coverage. If you're a younger reporter, in the months before taking on your first statewide campaign, we can help. APSA can take seven or eight respected political science voices here in California and put together a seminar for journalists. We can include the go-to consultants on both sides, too. And while we have their attention, we say, "Hey, look, since you've got some downtime before the next election, here's some work that our members have been doing that we feel might be useful to you."

APSA, in particular, can play a role both as an organization and encouraging its members to put together either actual programs, or the template for off-year programs, with the news media and the practitioner community.

SF Doesn't Harvard University do something like that after presidential elections? Don't they have an annual event when they get gather all the key players and do a post-mortem?

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DS They do, and a lot of other universities around the country, including ours, do the same thing. But that's a little bit different.

SF How do they differ?

DS Harvard, ironically enough, always had a relatively limited academic presence. They play a very valuable role, as do we, as does Berkeley, as do plenty of others, in convening the players after the election to talk about what they've experienced. Ironically, there's relatively little political science involvement. I'm guilty of this, too. We did a smaller gathering after 2012, and in 2008, we partnered with *Politico*. Harris came, and [*Politico* PlayBook writer] Mike Allen came, and [*Politico* co-founder Jim] VandeHei came, and back in the day, [former *Politico* reporter and now-*New York Times* correspondent] Jonathan Martin came. Senior people from both the Obama and McCain campaigns joined us. Not a single political scientist was in sight. When there is an academic presence at one of these conferences, it tends to be isolated from the practitioners' discussion. If you're the high-profile panel with David Axelrod and Karl Rove, then the political scientists have a separate conversation that night after dinner. There's relatively little cross-pollination. I'd also say that doing it in the context of private discussions, rather than in addition to public conversation, is not a bad idea, too. Sitting around a table over lunch with half a dozen political professionals might yield even better results than having a similar conversation in front of the public.

SF Thank you so much for taking the time with me. I really appreciate it. ■

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