An Interview with Brian Baird

Brian Baird, *Former US Representative, State of Washington*
Steve Friess, *freelance journalist*

One of our task force members, Brian Baird, a social science PhD who served in the US House of Representatives (D-WA3) for 12 years, put matters bluntly. He argued that political scientists need to "embrace the legitimacy" of the questioning of the public value of our research, and then use our own discipline's insights to improve how we communicate that value. He, along with a number of other members of Congress with whom task force members have interacted, has noticed political science's limitations in this domain. Baird describes this situation as "a little bit like watching your boxing instructor get knocked out in a bar fight."

Baird was the task force member who most forcefully articulated the value to political science of a video series that plays offense. To improve communication to policymakers and the public, Baird proposed that political scientists:

- "Recognize that challenging the legitimacy … of elected representatives to question where funding goes is a fool's errand."
- "Apply their own insight into how they approach this problem."
- "Do some serious self-reflection on exactly what we're doing with the people's money, and where the value proposition is for that."

Baird contends that a video campaign that illustrates the concrete value of political science will encourage us to more effectively confront the problem of how to translate our research into real-world value and application, which is "very hard for social scientists, partly because of the nature of the discipline and also because they're not trained to think this way.... But, we'll never solve that problem if people don't recognize that it's a valid question."

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

BRIAN BAIRD (BB) It's a significant irony that, if you look at some of the greatest challenges facing our country today—and, in fact, the world—they have a very strong behavioral component. And yet, the behavioral sciences are relatively rarely enlisted in solving those problems, and even more troublesome for the social sciences, their very legitimacy and value is being challenged by policy makers and funders.

STEVE FRIESS (SF) You are not a trained political scientist?

BB No, I'm a clinical psychologist; I specialize in neuropsychology. In Congress, I chaired the Research and Education Subcommittee, which has jurisdiction over the National Science Foundation (NSF) authorization. After that, I chaired the Energy and Environment Subcommittee, which has authorizing jurisdiction over a number of other entities, such as the research activities of the US Department of Energy, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and several others. In both capacities I tried to strengthen the role of the social and behavioral sciences, including political science, psychology, sociology, economics, and anthropology. We held a series of hearings on how social science can help solve several of the significant problems facing our society, such as health care. There is no question that significant components of our health-care costs are the direct result of behavioral issues. The same is true of energy consumption; people choose how to use energy. Political science has a very, very strong role to play because public policy decisions about energy, health care, national security issues both domestically and internationally, are all potential foci of political science.

SF You were just leaving Congress at the time Senator Coburn essentially started working to divert funding from NSF research that would go to political science into cancer or something like that.

BB For many years, now—decades—there has been a steady tendency to assault the social sciences and to try to portray social science funding as wasteful by juxtaposing social science research against some alternative application that may be more immediately, emotionally appealing, like treating breast cancer. The political dare to policy makers goes something like this: if you're running for reelection, and someone has picked a research study funded by federal money that, on the face of it, looks rather absurd, pointless, or obvious to the public, and then you say, "Representative or Senator X was given a choice of wasting money on this social science research project or spending it instead on treating breast cancer," or cystic fibrosis, or lowering your taxes, you can imagine the voiceover that accompanies that attack ad. You can also imagine the impact on voters who assume their money is being wasted on "silly things" and are eager to believe social science research is a waste of money.

SF I see your point.

BB This tactic is a very, very potent assault, which raises a couple of issues. First we have to be honest about this and recognize that, in fact, a significant portion of social science research in multiple categories, including political science and my own discipline, psychology, indeed is of questionable value. This gives us some real existential challenges, and as a member of "the society" of

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professionals, you're not supposed to say such things. But, there's some truth to it, and until we acknowledge that and clean our own house, we will be legitimately vulnerable to attack, because there are things that are worth questioning. To underscore this, I invite my colleagues who receive federal dollars for their research to ask themselves a very difficult question: is your research so inherently valuable, and so obviously of benefit to our society and the world, that you believe most taxpayers, if told about your research in detail, would voluntarily give a significant amount of money to fund your research? Or, if you don't think they would do it voluntarily, would you feel comfortable incarcerating them at gunpoint if they refuse to do so? Or, confiscating their property, their home, and their car so you could fund your study? I frame the funding issue this way because as researchers, we often have a sense of almost sanctimonious self-justification; researchers are so personally committed to the value of what they do and its importance to them individually that they lose track of who gives them research funding. This attitude can be accompanied with a degree of elitism that says, "Who are the public or their elected representatives to question my research?" Well, it's their money, the public's money; they have every right to question your research. The representatives have a responsibility to do so.

SF Let me flip this conversation. How could political scientists, in this case, do a better job at explaining the value of their research?

BB First, we need to recognize that challenging the legitimacy of the right and responsibility of elected representatives to question where funding goes is a fool's errand. If there is any organization or any discipline that ought to understand that, it's political science. Second, political scientists would do well, as would the other social scientists, to apply their own insight into how they approach this problem. We tend not to do this; it's as if we're specialists in doing research on the discipline except when it applies to our own profession. Political scientists need to ask themselves a few key questions: What are the findings, theoretical and empirical, that should inform us in understanding why our funding is being questioned? How do we best respond to this attack, and more importantly still, how do we make our research actually relevant and comprehensible and valued by our society? Political scientists need to embrace the legitimacy of this question, and then seriously ask themselves, "How do our theories and our research findings inform us?" Third, we need to help the public understand why our methods and our findings can help solve problems. The average citizen and most policy makers do not understand the methods, the theories, or the findings of political science or the other social sciences; often, they don't understand the applications, or if they do, they're suspicious of them.

SF This strategy sounds like a great idea, but I wonder how realistic it is. Do you think that the others, like Senator Coburn, could be persuaded to fund political science research?

BB It's a very fair question. Here are a few things to note. First, the four sweetest words in the English language, to a policy maker, are not, "I love you, honey," but, "We have the votes." We have to understand that counting votes matters a great deal; if not, we're in trouble. You don't need to persuade everyone, but you do have to persuade a majority in the House and a supermajority in the Senate, or you're in trouble. We acknowledge that there may be some people who cannot be persuaded, but we have to give sufficient explanation to what we do that so people are willing to risk their political careers for it, or we're going to lose. Many scientists who receive federal grants never make the personal connection that funds they receive are from the taxpayers, taken either voluntarily or involuntarily, and that to defend the researchers' access to that money, some policy makers may have to be willing to sacrifice their career. That's a very powerful realization. If there's a discipline that ought to be able to ask that question and answer it intelligently and systematically, it's political science. And yet, we haven't. It's a little bit like watching your boxing instructor get knocked out in a bar fight. This is the guy who is supposed to teach you all about the art of self-defense, and you're out having drinks, and the next thing you know, somebody's punched him out. You think, wow. What have we learned? Of all the social sciences' funding to be questioned, how ironic it is that political science is targeted! And, that political science, and the other social sciences to be perfectly blunt, has been so feckless in defending it. I am purposefully being provocative. I really want to underscore this point because it is so serious and so important; someone has to be willing to say it very bluntly. Then people need not to martial their defenses and their indignities, but instead say, "What is this person trying to say? He's our friend!" I am your friend, and I have risked my own political career to help defend you. So, if this message is coming from me, or from others, it's worthwhile to listen. Does this prove the critics right? I don't think it should, but I think we have to change what we do.

Of all the social sciences' funding to be questioned, how ironic that it's for political science is targeted! And, that political science, and the other social sciences to be perfectly blunt, have been so feckless in defending it.

SF How should political scientists proceed?

BB Here's what we need to do. First, we accept a legitimacy of the funding question. Second, we apply our own technique. Third, we seriously reflect on exactly what we're doing with the people's money and identify the value proposition for taxpayers. For some lines of research we may just say, "You know it's an interesting puzzle, and we've pursued it for a while, but the return on investment to the taxpayer is probably not going to be sufficiently compelling, and we may need to discontinue it." Also, we need for grant-distributing entities like the National Science Foundation and others that distribute social science-related grants—to say, "You know, in this crop of grant applications, we don't have sufficient ones that we think we can make a compelling case for funding. We're not going to distribute all the money." Related to that, when we draft our grant applications, we need to do a

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better job of making readily available the full rationale for why the grant request is worthwhile. That means being cognizant of how we title our study to what's in the abstract to what's in the accompanying materials to what we post on the website. Many of the attacks on political science and other social sciences are not about the legitimacy of the research; these are more about trying to prove that the government wastes taxpayers' money, which is a mantra predominantly of the Right, and cheap political opportunism. But those two arguments, illegitimate though they may be, gain traction because there is some legitimacy to the claims, even though the motives are illegitimate.

SF Okay. What are the next steps?

BB Now, let's put on our professional thinking caps. Set aside any defensiveness; set aside any rationalizations. Here is an interesting problem. How do we determine worthwhile research? How do we do a better job of communicating why it's worthwhile? Those questions are actually both theoretical and empirical questions. Setting ourselves to that task is not only intrinsically worthwhile; it may be existentially vital for the profession.

SF I come at this question as a journalist at *Politico*. There are some political scientists who are terrific with journalists, who have very high profiles for it, and then there are many who are not. The line between a pundit and a political scientist is often unclear. Is that one of the issues?

BB Yes, I think it is and it's a good observation. Let's draw a triangle. On one corner of the triangle are the media and the public that the media reaches. In another corner are policy makers who are affected by and affect the media. The third corner represents your social science colleagues. If you took each corner and made that the center of a circle in a Venn diagram, you will see a relatively small interaction of the three skills in the middle.

SF Yes, that is correct.

BB The challenge is that many political scientists, who are experts in their field, don't really overlap in their skill set with policy makers and the media. To some extent that results from a lack of training, and to some degree it may reflect the personalities of those who go into academia rather than some other profession. But the trouble is, when academics are tested by the other corners of the triangle, that is, the media and the policy makers, if the academics lack the necessary skills, they can lose. So it's not enough to simply say, "Well, I'm an academic and I just don't do those things." Academics must learn to do this or they should not be surprised if the outcome is unfavorable. The problem is not one of either scholarship or effective communication, it should be both.

SF Right.

BB I received media training just before I ran for office. It's an art; it's actually a science, impressively enough. Most academics have never learned effective communication. We need to approach this deficiency in a few ways. First, recognize that some people do rock-solid research and communicate it very well to policy makers and to the media. Second, others are capable of it, but they haven't had the training, and they are unaware that it's an important skill. Third, some are very good academic researchers and theorists and scientists, but they don't communicate well with the public and never will. To support them we need to give them some kind of translation service or representation. Somebody helps sustain that so Dr. So-and-So doesn't have to come out of the lab. But, Dr. So-and-So does need to be aware that somebody needs to translate the research for the media. This group is like a flock of sitting ducks when the policy makers swoop down on them.

SF I understand. What direction should political scientist take?

BB It's all part of a package and collaboration. If you do one of these in isolation, you won't get there. Nothing happens in Congress without champions and allies. In the practical world, you better have a friend or two, and they better have some influence. You've got to nurture that, and you've got to be cognizant about the realities of their existence. Are they going to sacrifice their political career to defend a "goofy" study?

SF Political scientists, it seems, have a naturally awkward relationship with politicians. I don't know if you consider him a political scientist or just a really smart guy, but Nate Silver took a very statistical perspective on the 2012 election, and then it didn't look good for Republicans, so Republicans made up their own website with their own statistics. Later, they were surprised when the election ended, and they were so far off of what everybody else knew. It seems difficult to persuade politicians when you might be telling them something they don't want to know.

BB Or, perhaps, that they very much do want to know. Both situations present real challenges. On the one hand, the findings and methods of political science can shine an unpleasant light or hold an unpleasant mirror up to individuals or parties, or even to the enterprise of politics. That result can be unpleasant, and someone might want to turn off the light or break the mirror. On the other hand, these also can be utilitarian. The Republicans may not have liked Nate Silver's work, but now they're trying to emulate some of those techniques. They never may have known about Bayesian statistics before, but I bet they've got a lot of Bayesian-oriented statisticians working hard now.

SF Is that political science, or is that statistics, or is that some sort of political science application of statistics?

BB It's the latter: the political science application of one of many statistical approaches. And those tools are useful. Like all science, they have potential to be used for good or ill, and the definition of whether they're being used for good or ill, to some extent, lies in the eye of the beholder. Then, the ability to apply Bayesian statistics depends on the quality of the data. The data's a science, too. Remember: a very significant portion of all science throughout history has been refinement of the instrument. People tend to think they did the experiment, and it all resides in the experimental design. In fact, the biggest supercolliders in the world are giant scientific instruments, and in the case of political scientists, their instruments might be different, but as fundamental to that discipline as might be a physicist to a supercollider. How do you do an accurate phone survey in an era when people have both Do Not Call lists and cell phones or they're completely unwired? That really changes the validity of your instrument, and now you have

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a new signal-noise ratio. A physicist is always trying to refine the instrumentation to sort out the "signal from noise," or to understand the nature of the noise. Political scientists have to do the same. The challenge political scientists now may face is people who say, "Okay, so what? Who cares?" If a political party wants to do that for its own self-interest, let them pay for it. Why should the taxpayer pay for that? Theories and findings of the social sciences suggest that you communicate differently with people who are at different attitudinal positions or knowledge positions. You have to be strategic in your communication. For example, some people start out never having thought about the value or application to political science or what psychologists would call "precontemplation." Others people have thought about it, so they're in "contemplation," but they haven't got much of an attitude one way or the other. Others have thought about it, and they might even be prepared to embrace it or support some, but they haven't made that first step, and then others say, "No, I know what social science is, I value it, and I would take action to support it." That's where you want people, policy makers, to be. But, you can't jump to asking somebody who's never really thought about the value of social science to take an action that might not be easy because it doesn't make sense.

SF I see how that follows.

BB Consider this question and an ad campaign that we could call, "How do you know?" The premise is to create real-world practical questions for people to get thinking about a topic. Then the answer is based in social science. You can tailor these to each of the sciences. For example, if you want to defend psychology, you could show a picture of the jet that crashed into the Potomac in the early 1980s when there was ice on the plane's wings, and you could say, "Why are we not seeing as many air accidents today?" A big part of the answer is psychology; psychologists and communication theorists studied conflict communications and changed the protocols of cockpit communication. This change has helped prevent accidents like the one in the Potomac River that claimed 78 lives. People don't know that. But what's important is that they ask themselves, "How do we know?" So, let's apply it to political science. What if the outcome of an election in a country could have very significant national security impact for the United States? If so, what discipline can help us better predict the outcome and understand the consequences? Of course, the answer is political science, but most people probably haven't thought of this result.

SF Of course.

BB Of course. We both say, "Of course." About 99% of the American people will say "of course" to that, so that's a good start. But the next question is "would it be beneficial, then, for the United States to make some predictions about who is going to win or lose an election, and what the consequences might be, depending on that outcome?" People would say, "Yeah!" Then, you would say, "What discipline does that?"

SF Right. Political science!

BB You see what I mean? First, people need to understand it and feel confident. I've applied the same reasoning to ocean acidification and climate change. You ask people "What does CO_2 plus H_2O equal? They'll respond, "Oh, no, chemistry. I hate chemistry." Then, you say, "Hang in there. It equals H_2CO_3," right? Two hydrogen atoms, one carbon atom, three oxygen atoms—you write it out for them so its clear—it is actually simple math. That result is carbonic acid, meaning, you've just made H_2O, good old water, more acidic, which is what is happening with ocean acidification. The point is that people thought they couldn't understand it; only scientists could figure it out, and some commentators debate this. But, when they look at it, they say, "Oh, that make sense." And you respond, "Absolutely, it makes sense." And, that's why this is not theoretical; that's why ocean acidification is real, and it's a big problem, because CO_2 plus H_2O equals carbonic acid. Well, if you can start this kind of discussion about political science, and we can create the value proposition that people can understand, that's a huge first step. Second, we have to apply that same value proposition to any study that receives federal funds. Here's the challenge: it's hard for social scientists to do this, partly because of the nature of the discipline and because they're not trained to think about how basic research studies translate into applied value. So, the translational research that we hear about in the biological sciences, seeks to answer the question of how can this core basic biological science finding be translated to a medical application? This question of translation and application represents a particularly acute problem for the social sciences, as well. But, we'll never solve that problem if people don't recognize that it's a valid question. Or, if researchers continue to retreat to the tired and ineffective canard of, "Well, science is like that. We never really know up front the value of something until down the road, and oftentimes, things that don't seem so viable initially have extraordinarily important applications." That is absolutely true; game theory is an example of that. But one or two examples of a truism—i.e., that sometimes things have surprising value down the road—do not prove that a lot of things that look ridiculous, in fact, are likely to be valuable. They may well be simply ridiculous.

SF I see what you mean. But where do we go next? What's at stake?

Consider this question and an ad campaign that we could call, "How do you know?" The premise is to create real-world practical questions for people to get thinking about a topic. Then, the answer is based in social science.

BB Many of the most pressing problems that face the globe and our country have, at their core, factors that are the essence of what social scientists, including political scientists, do in their work. We will not be able to convey this value, or have any impact on what we're studying, if we do not apply our discipline to understanding how it can have more of an impact on everyone.

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SF As president of Antioch University in Seattle, what have you done to encourage your political scientists to bridge this gap between the value of research and persuading the public of that value?

BB Ironically, academics, who talk about preparing people to think critically and be adaptive, are facing a profoundly new and challenging environment on many fronts. Faced with those challenges, they often say, "Oh my goodness, of course you should fund us with taxpayer dollars and value us because we are sure we are so very worthwhile." But, then, when someone asks, be it a policy maker, a member of the public, or a student who has to put up the tuition money, "Okay, prove it. Demonstrate your worth and the real value of our investment in a tangible way or we won't pay." The academics say, "How dare you ask us to prove our worth?" It's no wonder that people are increasingly dubious of the value of our research or even of our educational institutions. Told that the question of value is itself rejected, or given platitudes and tautologies in place of evidence, the policy maker and the taxpayer say, "Well, if that's the case, that you just want me to take your word for it or assume the outcome is self-evident, I'm not sure this is a good investment after all." And this is even more powerfully felt if the academics also use the public or private investments in ways that have the effect of provoking derision or disdain for the policy makers, business people, or the public. If you're doing a lot of research that basically says this or that side of an argument is fundamentally stupid or selfish or deluded, don't be surprised if your research or your institution is not likely to be particularly welcomed. Saying all this so bluntly is not an effort to diminish the importance or value of the work of political science or scientists. Rather, it is an effort to call on political scientists and other social scientists to use their important and valuable skills, talents, and knowledge to make a real difference, both in how what they do affects the world, and in how they communicate the value of what they do to the policy makers who determine their funding. And, unless they do that, they won't impact the world, as they might, and they shouldn't expect that they'll be successful in continuing to receive public money.

SF I really do appreciate your time and your thoughtful insights. Thank you very much. ■

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