An Interview with Lynn Vavreck

Lynn Vavreck, *University of California, Los Angeles*
Steve Friess, *freelance journalist*

Lynn Vavreck is professor of political science and communications studies at University of California, Los Angeles. She writes for both university presses and the *New York Times*. With John Sides, she coauthored, *The Gamble: Choice and Chance in the 2012 Presidential Election*, which they wrote and released in real time during the election.

In this interview, Vavreck contends "that it is not any scientist's job to make the results of his or her scientific work accessible to a layperson." However, given that the discipline relies on public support, this is a place where APSA and universities can be doing more to help. Doing scientific research is a very different skill than being able to articulate the value of that research in plain English. To this end, Vavreck makes several proposals, including:

- APSA ought to have a science writer on staff who can quickly read someone's peer reviewed publications, understand why they are relevant and also complicated, and be able to prepare a press release or whatever is needed at that moment.
- APSA should collect these short summaries/reviews, sort them topically, and make them available on APSA's webpage so that media and others could find expert research quickly.
- We could use e-journals for publishing results that are timely but not paradigm-changing.

Lynn Vavreck was interviewed by Steve Friesss who has written for Time, Politico, and many other outlets.

STEVE FRIESS (SF) Is there a real problem with political scientists communicating the relevance of their work to the broader public?

LYNN VAVRECK (LV) I am of two minds on this. It is not any scientist's job to make the results of their scientific work accessible to a layperson. We don't want scientists to have to think about it, whether it's the natural sciences or the social sciences. Jargon exists within these disciplines to facilitate the fast and efficient exchange of knowledge of information among experts. We want to allow the experts to work in their field and their domain, and efficiently communicate with the other experts in that domain, which means that often, the average person is not going to read a scientific publication and understand or track what the finding is, or even what the question is and why that's interesting. That's okay. The problem is that at some point, if as a discipline, you're relying on public support in terms of dollars, your benefactors may ask, "What are we getting for our money?" If you work in the natural sciences, you can point to rockets that you sent to the moon or satellites that are finding new moons around Jupiter. In the social sciences, however, it's more difficult. What have we produced? What are members of Congress and taxpayers getting with money that they're providing? It's not the job of the scholars doing the work to explain it. Here, our professional associations and our universities could be doing more to help. There are people whose job it is to translate complicated things into simple, accessible terms. Journalists are in that set; take something really complicated and put it in a frame the average reader can appreciate, understand, and respond to. So, instead of slapping my colleagues' hands for not demonstrating why work on representation should matter to members of Congress, why don't the professional associations actually hire someone to read the work, to talk with them about it, and to write a five-sentence or one-paragraph description of why this work is relevant? That service is what we need to provide professionally, but we're not.

SF How did you acquire the skills for working in the media—you're on TV, and you write for the *New York Times*, and so on?

LV I wrote for the newspaper and gave tours of campus when I was in college, so I think that set me up with a unique set of skills that I draw upon when I engage in publicly facing political science. In the beginning, the television work was easier for me than the written work for the newspaper. With television, you really only have to botch that up once or twice, because it's preserved on video and you can see it over and over again, to realize either you've got to become a lot better at it or stop doing it. Because I teach big lecture classes, I've always been comfortable in front of people. I realized that for television, my sentences couldn't be very long or very complicated and that I needed to provide summaries and questions for the person interviewing me in the answers I was giving them during the interview. In the beginning, you think, oh, someone will call me, and we're going to sit down and go through all the things they want to ask me, and I'm going to tell them all the things I'm want to say, and then, we're going to have this really nice conversation where we both know what's coming, but we're going to be doing it on television. That never happens. For whatever reason, with television, the house is always on fire. That doesn't stop me from doing it, because I've learned what to say to encourage the interviewer to ask the next question that I want to answer. Developing television interviewing techniques was easier for me than learning how to write a 600- or 900-word piece about scientific results for the *New York Times*. That skill took me nine months to a year to hone and I'm still learning. And, I'm still really slow at it. I'm sure, if they gave you and me each the same facts and the same kind of context for a piece and said, "Go write 800 words on it," you would be done at least five times faster than me, because it's not natural to me. Academics think about their work as being question-driven, and journalism—the kind that I've been doing—is really answer-driven. So, it isn't exploratory; it isn't, "come along with me on this interesting thought escapade." It's, "Here's a fact about the world."

SF Some political scientists want to do their research and don't understand why it is important for them to learn how to engage public audiences. Do you think that this is a problem?

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LV Because you write for a general audience faster than I do, and because I have completed this research, why don't you just write about my science? Everyone can stick with what they're good at and what's easy for them to do. When I started in the profession, as a professor, in the late 1990s, it was unusual for political scientists to show up in media, whether television or written. What changed that a lot is technology. The web has provided this tremendous news hole, which no one can fill with only the paid reporters. That opens up a huge space for academics to put their work out there, perhaps not always in perfectly accessible ways, but at least in ways that can signal journalists, "I'm working on the problem that you're writing about, so when you need interpretation, or you need a quote, or you need to know if what you're doing comports with what I'm doing, call me." Because of the web, it's easier now for reporters to connect with academics.

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SF You're an academic, but you also do a lot of television and other media work. What have you gotten out of that? How has that affected how you teach, what you teach, or what you study?

LV I can't say that it has affected how I teach, but it has affected the amount of attention students pay to me. They come to my office hours more frequently, they stick around after class because they want to walk with me to the next class, and perhaps their interest and understanding increases. In terms of my research, again, working with the media is honestly more of a distraction than something that helps my productivity. Obviously, the time that I spend writing for the *New York Times* is time that I'm not spending writing articles for peer review, so that's a cost. You have to be ready to make that tradeoff. Because of this, I would not recommend that assistant professors engage in this work. It takes time away from doing research, and we need our young scholars doing science.

SF Some people believe there's something antiquated about how academic tenure is awarded, and the way work is valued in the academic world needs to change—like publishing in journals and the long publication cycles of journals. What do you think?

LV In terms of the academic standards of promotion and tenure, I can't really see a world where we would discount the weight put on peer-reviewed scientific publication—books or articles—and give more weight to the things like I'm doing now, writing for public audiences. I think that I'm a unique voice in the public space, talking about campaigns and elections among a set of pundits and practitioners, because of my scientific work on advertising and messaging and how candidates and voters make decisions. The science has to come first. Is something wrong with the process that actually gets good work into print? At the very least, the science funnel is clogged, and we're not getting enough good work in to print or doing it fast enough. There might be reasonable ways to fix this, but there could be unintended consequences, too. One idea behind online journals is to give people a place to publish results that are timely, but possibly not theoretically important. There should be places where people can quickly publish high-quality scientific work that addresses questions that are contemporary and incremental. We don't have that place now, and we need it. That type of publication would increase the interest of people like you, who maybe are writing a story about, say, what happens when a woman runs for president. When the topics become relevant, researchers with unpublished results tucked away somewhere should be able to dust them off and get them into print quickly so the public conversation can be based on scientific results when we have them. But we don't want all our publishing to be pushed to this kind of fast turnaround with a focus on findings. We need places like the *American Political Science Review* where new theories can be derived and tested and old theories can be extended. Ultimately this is the heart of what we do and why we exist as scientists. We cannot discount that.

SF I've asked this question of a few others: What do you see as the difference between a pundit and a political scientist?

LV The biggest difference is that any kind of statement or inference that a political scientist makes—that I make— in public is based on data-driven research, or qualitative research that may not amount to big data, but that is done using scientific methods. My conclusions and my inferences are drawn from the body of work that I, and my colleagues, have produced. Pundits make claims, come to a conclusion, or make a prediction that is not necessarily based on any kind of evidence other than their own opinion. Even so, in some cases, pundits can be very valuable. For example, someone who's run six presidential campaigns, or has done the advertising for six presidential campaigns, might say, "Hey, look. We can send Hillary Clinton out there to talk about Benghazi, but I can tell you right now, she's not going to change any minds." Is there any value in that person making that claim? I think there is. I'm more sympathetic to this line of argument than many people in political science, but I've learned a lot from talking to campaign professionals. There's value in hearing the opinions of people who have experience. There's also value in looking at what the evidence tells us, and really, the most interesting conversations probably happen when those two worlds come together; but they rarely do. I read Double Down, the book [by journalists Mark Halperin and John Heilemann] about the 2012 election, in one sitting. I loved it, and that always surprises people, especially my colleagues. They think of it as hyperbolic storytelling about the drama and the personalities involved in the campaign, whereas my book on the 2012 election with John Sides was all data-driven. But, the reason I enjoyed reading *Double Down* was that I viewed it as a story of why the campaigns did what they did. Why did they decide to make this move? Why did they decide to tell this story at this time? Our book, *The Gamble*, told you whether any of those strategies worked. We don't know why they were doing it; we just know whether what they did worked. Both of those stories are interesting and important to understanding the entire process.

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SF You received NSF grants for some of your work. I'm sure you're aware that there's been plenty of discussion in Congress about whether the NSF should be funding political science research. Where do you think it's going to end up?

LV Yes, I have received NSF funding and I'm aware of the congressional discussions. I have a pessimistic view. What happens in Congress is very much about getting a compromise among the members. But they have a lot of interests that they need to satisfy. There will always be some use for that money that seems more relevant to more of their constituents than spending money on political science, or any social science. And, we are unlucky not to have a champion out there willing to call in favors that they've accumulated over their years in Congress to prevent cuts to political science programs. That's what is needed in my opinion. It's easy [to defund political science research in Congress]. It could be an amendment that ends up on a bill. People always say, "When it gets to the Senate, they'll figure it out." That's what happened with the Coburn amendment. [It was taken out.] Then it came back in conference. What's that about? It's about somebody needing something, and political science got traded away. When something is changed in conference on a bill, that's not a typo. Ask yourself, who is the member in either chamber who is going to go call in their favors to save the social sciences? I'm not sure that person exists. As long as members keep wanting to push these cuts, a big principled uprising in Congress for science and peer review is not going to stop them, because such an uprising is unlikely to happen.

When something is changed in conference on a bill, that's not a typo. Ask yourself, who is the member in either chamber who is going to go call in their favors, to save the social sciences?

SF What do you think people should do?

LV I think it's a grin-and-bear-it situation. Perhaps, when the nation's economy swings back to a period of growth the desire to defund political science will fade to the background. This is a tightening-the-belt time. It's probably not always going to be this way.

SF Have you been affected by any of those cuts and changes in California?

LV It directly affects graduate student funding. The NSF supports a number of graduate students with yearlong fellowships each year. We're a competitive program, and our students compete for those fellowships. When the NSF is not able to award those, as a department, we have to put out more money to support those graduate students, which means people like me have to do more public lectures to engage our alumni and donors in support of our department. This is the new normal.

Here's another way: I started running election studies in 2006, when the NSF cut funding for the American National Election Study Congressional Midterm Survey. Suddenly there was no more money for that program after some 60 years. So, a group of us formed a co-op, and academics around the country chipped in $15,000. Everyone who participated got 10 minutes of survey content on 1,000 cases. So, for everyone who chipped in, the project grew by a thousand more cases. We thought we'd raise enough money for 10,000 cases; we ended up getting 45,000 cases. Forty-five people participated in this co-op, and we fielded the largest study of congressional elections that we'd ever fielded. It was a first-time effort, it had a lot of issues, we learned a lot, but we've continued to run these co-op election studies in the presidential years and the off-election years since 2006. In 2008, we took 20,000 people, and we interviewed the same 20,000 people at six points over the year. We really could track attitude change; we could track who was moving from this candidate to that candidate. That kind of work had never been done with that number of observations at that many points in time. In 2012, we decided we wanted to include 1,000 people a week, every week, over the course of 2012, which was a design that provided the power to tell interesting stories. The cuts to funding got people to think about innovating, and I think some good things resulted.

Similarly, in the face of all the increased NSF chatter about cuts, I thought that maybe there was something more timely that could be done in 2012, because these data were coming in week by week. I asked John Sides from George Washington University, who was writing The Monkey Cage blog, if he wanted to run this election study with me. He said yes, and then asked, "Why don't we try to write a book while we're doing it—it could come out right after the election, when the journalists' books come out?" Then I suggested we actually write some of these chapters in real time, and publish them as e-books. This effort was a way for us to engage with other people commenting on the election, which really meant journalists. Throughout that process, we didn't know how the journalists would react; we didn't know if people would take us seriously. Before we stared, we met with probably six or seven people who we knew would be covering the presidential election. We said, "This is what we're going to do. We've got a lot of survey capacity. If you've got questions you want us to ask, just call us." We thought, "Well, we'll never hear from anybody," but everyone was great, and all of your colleagues took us seriously, and they included us in lots of interesting conversations. We went to Iowa, and we went to New Hampshire, and reporters included us in what they were doing. We had a very warm reception, overall. And, that's how I met [The Upshot editor] David Leonhardt, who ultimately asked me to write for him at the *New York Times*.

SF Do any of your colleagues think you sold out or that you're a showboat? Have you had any sense that perhaps people have maligned you for doing this work in the media?

LV I'm sure those people exist! But my colleagues at UCLA, and especially my dean are very supportive. I don't get any departmental course or service release for doing this publicly engaged

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work, but I know the administration values it. My dean has surprised me on more than one occasion by saying "yes" to things he didn't have to provide. We're a public institution, so everybody in the UC [University of California] system understands that engaging the public, engaging our alumni, is really important now. In the profession at large, I haven't had any bad interactions, but I'm sure some people think I'm not the right person to be doing this work. Thankfully, they're not e-mailing me.

Throughout that process, we didn't know how the journalists would react; we didn't know if people would take us seriously.

SF Earlier, you made a very interesting remark that's actually different than what others have said: You think that the organization ought to find a way to explain the results of this material better. What is your recommendation?

LV APSA ought to have a science writer on staff who, very quickly, can read someone's peer-reviewed publication, understand why it's relevant, understand how complicated it is, and produce a press release, a news blurb, or other media piece. That would be that person's, or maybe two people's, full-time jobs. There could be a collection of these short summaries, sorted by topic and searchable on the APSA webpage that reporters could use. For example, you search "attack advertising on women candidates" and boom, descriptions of 25 pieces published in the past 10 years on this question come up with contact information. This could add value to belonging to a professional association. APSA is providing value to this discipline, to me, to my university, to you, the reporter, and to the reader of your publication. I don't know why we would expect scientists to be able to do that, just because they're the people doing the work. It's a completely different skill.

SF Thank you so much for talking to me. I really appreciate it.

LV Thanks for doing this. We really appreciate it. Thanks. ■

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