

Friends of Evidence Keynote Speech

Remarks By Alice M. Rivlin

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I was delighted when Lee Schorr asked me to Keynote this conference and even more enthusiastic when I discovered what the Friends of Evidence were thinking and saying and what they had in mind for the conference.

I have spent a lot of time thinking and writing about evidence and social policy at various times in a long career. I wrote a book called *Systematic Thinking for Social Action* in 1971, which was based on my experiences as Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) at the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) in the Johnson Administration. Evaluation was a radical new idea then, especially systematic evaluation of social policy. At the time, evaluation was mostly associated with cost benefit studies of infrastructure projects (dams and canals) and military engagement statistics (body counts) in Vietnam. The new ASPE team thought of ourselves as pioneers in a social service agency. We were threatening to the practitioners—even the social reformers. I had to fight to restore federal money in the 1969 budget for the income maintenance experiments when the OMB director took it out.

In the following years, I wrote a lot of stuff about planned variation and social experiments. I kept coming back to the evolving story of evidence and evaluation at CBO, OMB—even the Fed--and now I am back at it again at the Brookings Institution where I am working on how to evaluate the long-term effects of the Affordable Care Act.

So this invitation felt like going home. It was a chance to reconnect with my friend Lee Schorr and people like her. I suspected this conference would draw and a wonderful group of people and it has--serious, dedicated evidence-minded progressives:

- Evidence-minded progressives feel strongly that our country is not living up to its potential as a land of opportunity. That many people because they are poor or people of color never have a chance for a

good life. That the tragedy of poverty and segregation is especially damaging for children, especially very young children, who have limited chances to develop their potential.

- They also believe that something can be done. That social change is possible, that some combination of public policy, philanthropy, and private initiative can improve the life chances of these children and their families and make America a more just, fair, productive and less unequal society.
- But they believe that making and implementing effective social policies is hard work. That we have to try things, see how they work, and keep learning until we get it right. We have to generate evidence—solid, convincing evidence that interventions are working and then keep trying to make them better.

I knew this conference would be in my comfort zone—my kind of folks—and I found the Friends of Evidence were singing my song. I particularly resonated to several themes that I found in the background documents:

- Inclusiveness: the idea that evidence comes from many sources and restricting evidence to single methods and measure is likely to be narrowing, distorting, misleading.
- Rigor, but not overdoing it
- Learning from the implementation on the ground, in real communities, with real people, and over time.
- Instilling a culture of continuous feedback and learning from doing.

Great stuff! I'll come back to it.

But I also realized this comfort zone was too comfortable. It felt like a pleasant Island in a raging sea. A little over a week ago we had an election. It was not just one more election that happened to be a good night for Republicans; it should be a wake-up call for evidence based progressives. We are losing. We are not convincing the voting public that social policy can be can make a positive difference.

It is easy to dismiss this election as having little substantive significance. Many pundits have. It was a midterm election—always bad for incumbents.

Obama is a second term president—they always have trouble. The president is unpopular—because he is too stiff and professorial or midterm voters are racist. The Senators who lost were Ds in red states. Not to worry; nothing fundamental is happening. Wait a minute! Something fundamental IS happening. The tidal wave of anti-government sentiment didn't start with this election, but this election provided dramatic evidence. This was a conservative sweep. Not just in red states and congressional districts. Purple ones, too. Mark Udall went down in CO; Kay Hagen in NC. And blue states: MD electing an Republican governor; Mark Warner coming close in VA. President who achieved what Truman, Carter, Clinton could not—affordable health care—so vilified for Obamacare that Democratic candidates could not even mention the name. (Kentucky)

There is a message here. Anti-government rhetoric has always been a crowd pleaser, but this is a venomous new high in anti-government sentiment. 53 percent of the public want less government. Huge majorities think the country is on the wrong track and blame the president. A lot of people think government action makes things worse rather than better. They don't believe that social interventions that progressives favor are good things to do and they don't want to hear about how to use evidence to improve the effectiveness of programs they think we shouldn't be doing at all.

These conservative voters aren't mean. They aren't stupid. They believe that interventions we think might help improve people' lives are a form of arrogant meddling it is likely to do more harm than good. That if we stop trying to help people, they will be stronger, that they will make their way better on their own. These aren't new ideas. But I see progressives, even evidence based progressives, mostly hunkering down rather than engaging. Blame the Koch brothers, blame racism, blame fears raised by ISIS or Ebola. But don't try to engage with these ideas.

So I want to do two things this morning. One is to talk about the historical trajectory of thinking about evidence on social programs as seen from the vantage point of policy makers in Washington. The other is to come back to

the worrying question of why we might win the battle of evidence and lose the war of for better policy.

HEW in the late 60s a wonderful place to be. The congress had recently passed a raft of new programs associated with the war on poverty: Medicare and Medicaid, Head start, Title I, Job Corps, and lots of others. ASPE's job was to find evidence of how the new programs were working. We were not always welcomed by those trying hard to implement the programs and get more money in face of the Vietnam War.

Both advocates and evaluators were naïve by today's standards. We all thought simple interventions could change lives and evaluation would show clear results quickly. It gradually dawned on all of us that progress was going to be more complicated. Evaluation showed Head Start gains faded. Try harder: Start a Follow Through Program; have a full day program; start earlier; focus on health as well as cognitive development; involve parents; get teenagers working with kids; involve seniors as foster grandparents, etc.

At the beginning advocates were suspicious of evaluation, often hostile. We wanted to study things; they wanted to do them. Both advocates and evaluators got more experienced and less naïve. Both learned and came to appreciate each other. Meticulous experiments designed with control groups—fabulous under the radar work at MDRC. Tried larger scale experiments—whole communities. I was a big enthusiast of the income maintenance and health insurance experiments. We learned a lot from them, both substantively and methodologically, and also came to realize their limitations. Especially, hard to use temporary isolated interventions, even in several cities, to predict the effects of a permanent universal program.

Personally, my biggest epiphany in those early years was a realization that this is a huge, diverse country with different local cultures, strong desire for individual and community autonomy. Washington does some things well—sending checks. But it seemed impossible to sit in Washington and write regulations that will make sense in thousands of local communities, not

arouse resentment. (Title one story. Donna in Alaska.) I also learned that implementation is everything—and it is hard.

The Civil Rights Movement and the War on Poverty coincided, which was a good thing. It made poverty a matter of justice; generated enormously positive reinforcing forces. But the historic coincidence had some unfortunate legacies. One was identification of poverty with race; the impression that fighting the damage of growing up poor was all about urban ghettos. The other legacy—with us to this day--was the excessive focus of progressives on the federal government. Progressive movement of around 1910 started in the states. The movement of the 1960s started in Washington and pitted feds against states, especially, but not exclusively in the South. Huge change in last several decades as some states have again become “laboratories of democracy.” Progressives have refocused on communities and place-based initiatives. But the residue remains. (RWJ Commission example.) The Affordable Care Act (ACA) is national legislation, but it might be the last big federal social program. It patches a big hole in health care coverage. But ACA it will play out in the states and be greatly shaped by local politics and culture. Evaluating the effects of the ACA will take painstaking efforts to understand the situation on the ground and successes and failures were determined by how implementation played out in individual states. (Why was the NY exchange successful, while MA was a failure, when one might have expected the opposite?) The answer will not be found in analyzing national statistics. In order to create a culture of continuous learning around the ACA, we will have to use both national statistics and on the ground observation. Not just anecdotes and not just statistics. Something in between.

I learned a lot more about evidence in the early years of the CBO. The job of the new organization was to provide evidence of the benefits or savings from government programs as well as their costs. It was a hard job then and it still is. CBO has an able staff working hard to produce the best evidence it can. It is always under attack—often from both sides of the aisle at once—which proves how necessary evidence has become to public policy.

Let's fast forward to the enormously exciting present. We know a lot more than we did: about early childhood development, how young brains react to stress and violence; how adolescents develop. Know a lot more about effective teaching and learning. Know children are different, learn in different ways. We know we aren't going to discover the magic formula for teaching all children. We talk about blended learning. The health policy community knows more, too. We know that good health is not just about health care; it is mostly about healthy behavior. But healthy behavior is strongly related to poverty and race and place. We can't tell people to exercise if not safe to walk out front door; can't tell people to eat vegetables if they have no place to buy them, or are not used cooking and eating healthy food. Pediatricians can't control asthma in the ER if children live in homes with mold and dust.

Evidence-minded progressives are more eclectic, too. They are exploring wide varieties of evidence. There are dangers of distorting behavior—even cheating--when we rely too heavily on test scores or other single measures. There are dangers of relying too heavily on single methods, such as randomized control trials. One result may be selection of innovations that are easiest to evaluate in a controlled trial, but not the most effective way of solving the problem. The fact that this meeting is happening--that serious interaction is taking place among scholars of different disciplines on how do we best collect evidence--is enormously reassuring.

Biggest breakthrough of recent years is growing realization that people have to work together--teachers and parents, health planners and community planners, schools and neighborhoods, and, perhaps especially, the so-called experts. Tired of the buzz words, interdisciplinary, silos and stove pipes. Ratio of talk to action is high. There are endless meetings. Working together is very hard to do. Not many years ago in this very city I got the school superintendent and the director of planning into the same room and discovered they had never met. Hard, but some of it is happening.

I am an optimist and I see lots of encouraging, exciting work going on with the world represented here today, most of it at the community level, and

centered on concept of continuous feedback and developing a culture of learning. Left to ourselves, this group would change the world. Work in neighborhoods, schools, to promote change, get professionals in different disciplines working together. Develop eclectic, but rigorous evaluation designs. Learn from them.

But then there is the world outside our comfort zone. There are all those people who don't believe in what we/you are trying to do. Polarization and more and more separate worlds. What to do?

We have to engage with people outside our comfort zone—listen to and engage with their ideas. We have to admit that not everything progressives have favored over the years has worked. Get out of the stereotypes. Admit that rich people aren't all evil and poor people aren't all good, hard-working, upstanding citizens. Work at the state and local level where problem-solving and compromise are more necessary.

I certainly don't have many answers, but I know we can't just talk to ourselves and those who agree with us or we will be isolated from what is happening out there.