DEMOCRATIZING EVIDENCE

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THE OLIGARCHY OF EVIDENCE

It is not an exaggeration to say that the evidence-based policy enterprise in the United States resembles an oligarchy more than a representative democracy. It is an enterprise shaped by elites: evidence for the public, shaped by the few.

For over two decades, through Republican and Democratic administrations, and in systems as varied as education, human services, criminal justice, and international development, the federal approach to developing and using evidence has been top down. Evidence-based policy was dominated by support for randomized controlled trials to test the impact of social programs and then the leveraging of federal dollars to incentivize states and localities to adopt those programs (Haskins and Margolis 2014). At first glance, it is hard to argue with this strategy. The logic is tidy: *Fund more of what works and less of what doesn't* (Orzag 2010). But closer scrutiny reveals the shortcomings of a system that privileges the perspectives of federal policymakers over that of system leaders, front-line practitioners, and communities. In this light, federal evidence-based policy initiatives have too often suffered the folly of paternalism, presuming to know what practitioners and communities need better than they do.

Practitioners' and communities' distrust of evidence does not stem only from federal policymakers' actions. Researchers also have been complicit.

Academics have long been critiqued for "drive-by" research, in which they enter a poor or racially marginalized community to collect data for their studies and then exit without engaging the community in ways that could enhance its welfare. Researchers too rarely even circle back to share their findings with communities. Universities reward academics when their research impacts their fellow researchers but fail to appreciate—or sometimes outright disdain—when research impacts communities and practitioners (Hart and Silka 2020). In education circles, teachers and families have characterized this phenomenon as research done *to them* rather than *with them*. Others simply label it as extractive.

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A more equitable approach to producing and using evidence to support policy would embrace democratic principles. Stakeholders across civic and professional roles and positions in society would have meaningful roles in identifying what evidence is needed and deciding how it should be used (Tseng, Fleischman, and Quintero 2018; Democratizing Evidence in Education 2022). *Democratizing evidence* calls for an inclusive process to determine the purpose evidence should serve. Whereas research questions often arise from researchers' conversations with each other, a more democratic approach would pursue research agendas that arise from vibrant back-and-forth exchanges between researchers, practitioners, and communities as they tackle the real-world problems most important to them. Program evaluations would be driven not by policymakers seeking thumbs up/thumbs down judgments but by practitioners seeking to improve their work and by the beneficiaries of public services who want programs to better meet their needs. Under a democratized evidence agenda, setting research goals and priorities would be less an academic exercise, and evaluation would not be a check-the-box compliance exercise to satisfy policymakers. Instead, diverse stakeholders would deliberate, negotiate, and compromise over what evidence is needed and for what purposes. The agenda-setting process would likely be messier, take longer, and be more resource intensive, but evidence initiatives would yield meaningful work that serves the public interest.

Democratizing evidence also means communities, practitioners, and the broader public have access to evidence and are equipped to use it to advocate for the policies and services that would benefit their communities.

People will, of course, continue to disagree about their values and the proper role of government, but greater access to evidence and well-designed opportunities for public deliberation over evidence can foster a more evidence-informed citizenry. Moreover, research and data can help forge a shared public understanding of the major problems facing society and the range of potential solutions for them. Perhaps most importantly, evidence can be a stronger tool for democracy: communities can hold the government accountable for its use, nonuse, or misuse of evidence.

DEMOCRATIZING EVIDENCE IN ACTION

Research initiatives that embody democratic principles already can be found in communities across the country. For example, the local Children and Youth Cabinet in Providence, Rhode Island, has brought together fifty-five cabinet and community members from two neighborhoods to set data-driven priorities for kids, select programs to address those priorities, and develop a plan to finance and implement the programs (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2022). In Broward County, Florida, girls and young women conducted youth participatory action research to identify, and then advocate for, ways to improve the juvenile justice system—a project supported by the county's Children Services Council (Gallagher 2019). And for years, community members and education researchers have jointly designed science education curricula that integrate Indigenous ways of knowing with Western science by teaching about plants and animals alongside students' Indigenous cultural practices, histories, and stories about the environment (Meléndez and others 2018).

Examples of democratizing data include the Rockefeller Foundation and Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth's investments in data science for social impact, which dovetail with grassroots efforts such as Discriminology,[1] an initiative that enables Black and brown communities to use school data to advocate for educational equity. Data for Black Lives[2] is another organization that unites activists, organizers, and mathematicians in the mission of "using data science to create concrete and measurable change in the lives of Black people." These efforts share the underlying principle that those who are most harmed by society's racial and economic inequalities must be able to "have a greater say over their future" (Pacetti 2016). As data is leveraged for social impact, we must be sure community members are active participants. Wielding data allows communities to exercise self-determination

to ensure that policies and programs serve them *in the ways they want to be served* (Gallagher 2019).

LOOKING AHEAD

A Democratizing Evidence initiative would fit well within President Biden's goals of "bringing science back," while fostering racial equity. On January 20, 2021, Biden issued the Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities through the Federal Government, which required agencies to conduct equity assessments and develop plans for redressing long-standing inequities across the federal government. A week later, his Memorandum on Restoring Trust in Government through Scientific Integrity and Evidence-Based Policymaking called for equitable delivery of programs across all areas of the federal government. To fulfill these ambitious goals, the communities meant to benefit from government policies and programs should have access to the evidence. They should have a say in identifying which problems require more evidence. And they should have a seat at the table in interpreting the evidence and determining what it means for government action and spending.

In short, the Biden administration must democratize evidence. Incorporating the basic principles of democracy into federal evidence initiatives would overturn the oligarchy of evidence and leave an enduring legacy for generations to come. To get there, the administration could: 1) require science agencies and research and evaluation offices to meaningfully engage communities and practitioners in establishing research priorities; 2) set aside funding to equip community-based organizations to participate in evidence initiatives from the agenda-setting to the implementation and monitoring stages; and 3) ensure community-based organizations have equitable access to federally funded research and evaluation findings and well-designed opportunities to deliberate over those findings and their relevance for future policy action. Democratizing evidence in these ways would usher in a new era of equity-centered and evidence-informed policymaking.

NOTES

1. See the Discriminology website, www.discriminology.org.
2. See the Black Lives Matter website, http://d4bl.org.

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