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Conservatives' Reality Problem

By Timothy B. Lee – 11/09/2012

In 1996, the physicist Alan Sokal wrote a [nonsensical article](#) called “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity” and submitted it to the academic journal *Social Text*. To Sokal’s amusement, his satirical argument was accepted. Sokal’s goal, he [wrote later](#), was to illustrate “an apparent decline in the standards of intellectual rigor in certain precincts of the American academic humanities.” Sokal, a self-described leftist, expressed concern that the politicization of science by left-wing academics was undermining the left’s ability to make convincing, scientifically-grounded arguments for progressive policies.

I thought of the Sokal incident yesterday when I read [this article](#) about the Mitt Romney campaign being blindsided by Tuesday’s election results. Obviously, a bit of wishful thinking is inevitable in a losing presidential campaign. But the degree of cocooning portrayed in that article is surprising. You’d expect at least some of Romney’s highly-paid advisors to be competent at their jobs.

Two decades ago, conservatives liked to argue that the ivory tower had put academics out of touch with reality, and that conservatism had reason and science on its side. The recent collapse of communism seemed to confirm this view. Today the tables have turned. While academia certainly still has pockets of out-of-touch leftists, there has been a much more dramatic decline in intellectual standards on the political right.

I don’t think it’s a coincidence that [Team](#) Romney’s polling cluelessness comes after years of conservatives demonizing pointy-headed academics, including scientists. On subjects like evolution, global warming, the [biology of human conception](#), and even macroeconomics, conservatives have been increasingly bold about rejecting the consensus of scientific experts in favor of ideologically self-serving pronouncements. That attitude may have contributed to their loss of the White House in 2012. It will be much more costly for the country as a whole if it doesn’t change before the GOP next captures the White House.

George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq was a good example of the kind of damage that can be done when elected officials choose ideology over expertise. Bush didn't just ignore the many experts who warned that invading Iraq was a bad idea. The ideologues were so convinced the war would go well that they massively underestimated the amount of preparation that would be required for the occupation to go reasonably smoothly. As a result, the aftermath of the war was much more chaotic than it would have been if experienced experts had been more involved in the planning process. Many more people died and much more property was destroyed than would have occurred with proper planning.

I think global warming is a more complex issue than some people on the left acknowledge. But rather than accepting the basic scientific reality of climate change and making the case that the costs of action outweigh the benefits, many conservatives have taken the cruder tack of simply [attacking the entire enterprise](#) of mainstream climate science as a hoax.

On macroeconomics, a broad spectrum of economists, ranging from John Maynard Keynes to Milton Friedman, supports the basic premise that recessions are caused by shortfalls in aggregate demand. Economists across the political spectrum agree that the government ought to take action counteract major aggregate demand shortfalls. There is, of course, a lot of disagreement about the details. Friedman argued that the Fed should be responsible for macroeconomic stabilization, while Keynes emphasized deficit spending.

But rather than engaging this debate, a growing number of conservatives have rejected the mainstream economic framework altogether, arguing—against the views of libertarian economists like Friedman and F.A. Hayek—that neither Congress *nor* the Fed has a responsibility to counteract sharp falls in nominal incomes.

The conservative movement seems to have adopted the same attitude toward Nate Silver. The world is messy and complicated, and understanding it often requires years of study and a willingness to consider evidence objectively regardless of where it comes from. Yet the conservative movement has increasingly become a hostile place for people who think for themselves, no matter how deeply they understand their subjects.

While many aspects of public policy are the subject of genuine ideological disagreements, there are also many issues where experts really do know things the rest of the public does not. A party that systematically favors ideologically convenient arguments and marginalizes dissenting voices will inevitably make costly mistakes. Thankfully, in 2012 those mistakes merely helped Mitt Romney lose the White House. But sooner or later, a Republican is going to get elected president. We should all hope the conservative movement develops a greater respect for expertise in the meantime.

