

Evaluation under contract. Government pressure and the production of policy research[†].

The LSE GV314 Group*

Abstract

Do governments lean on researchers who evaluate their policies to try to get them to produce politically useful results? Do researchers buckle under such pressure? This paper, based on a survey of 205 academics who have recently completed commissioned research for government, looks at the degree to which British government departments seek to produce research that is designed to provide "political ammunition", above all making them "look good" or minimizing criticism of their policies. Looking at different stages in the research process – from deciding which policies to evaluate, shaping the nature and conduct of inquiry and writing the results – the paper finds evidence of government sponsors making significant efforts to produce politically congenial results. The reaction of the researchers appears to be that of more or less successful resistance to these efforts, though the evidence base (researchers own accounts of their work) suggests that this conclusion be treated with some caution.

Political pressure and government research.

Do governments lean on researchers who evaluate their policies to try to get them to produce politically useful results? Governments might be expected to seek to generate good publicity or at least avoid bad publicity from evaluations. Even away from the glare of mass publicity, apparent endorsement or challenge by a scientific evaluation can make a policy or programme substantially stronger or more vulnerable to its opponents or competitors. As Bovens, t'Hart and Kuipers (2006: 321) write, "[i]t is only a slight exaggeration to say, paraphrasing Clausewitz, that policy evaluation is nothing but the continuation of politics by other means". Yet governments might also be expected to refrain from leaning on their researchers. Evaluations provide evidence and insights on which the development of current and future policies may be based, and producing inaccurate or biased research defeats the whole object of evaluation. Moreover, professional social researchers might resist such pressures and any attempt to exert them could, if made public, produce even worse publicity than a negative evaluation itself.

For their part, researchers might be expected to succumb to being leaned on, whether through enthusiastic acceptance of government constraints and cues or through acquiescence. Government contracts offer, if not always substantial personal enrichment, career benefits, access to research material and the prestige that comes of having one's research credentials endorsed by government. By the same virtue, researchers might even give their sponsor what they think it wants to hear even without it asking. Alternatively researchers might resist such pressures. Academic reputations are built on independence and can be destroyed by evidence or suspicions that their expert judgment can be bought such that researchers might be expected to defend their integrity at all costs.

Even if government “leans”, does this matter? Government, like any organization, is bound to be involved closely in the policy research it purchases and its intervention is to be expected, especially if the researchers show any signs of missing what it sees as the point of the evaluation exercise (see Weiss 1970: 62). Moreover, as Weiss (1970: 58) suggests, “evaluation has always had explicitly political overtones. It is designed to yield conclusions about the worth of programs and, in so doing, is intended to affect the allocation of resources”. By their nature, government-commissioned evaluations are in this sense political (see also Chelimsky 2007). For many, even the selective use of research to support a “predetermined position” reflects a “worthy” political model of research utilization, as long as the evidence is made available to all (Weiss 1979: 429; see also Davies, Nutley and Walter 2010: 205; Powell 2011: 15-16). One may well wish or need to be sanguine about the value of the “political model” of research utilization (see Bulmer 1982: 157 and Beyer and Trice 1982: 600 for notes of dissent). However, judgments about propriety and legitimacy aside, if evidence is generated under pressure from sponsors intending to produce results that suit them, then the nature of this pressure and the responses of those facing it are at the very least relevant to our assessment of the character of that evidence.

Despite the interest in “evidence based policy”, and the importance of political values in the use of evidence (see, for example, MacGregor 2013; Boswell 2008; Hope 2004; Fischer 2003; Sabatier 1978) there has been rather scant attention devoted to understanding the impact of political constraints on the production of research under contract for government. The question of the effect that “policy relevant” research might have on reshaping academic priorities across whole disciplines has been raised in a range of different contexts (see, for example, Manzi and Smith-Bowers 2010; Walters 2007; Allen 2005; Hillyard, Sim, Tombs and Whyte 2004; Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Kogan and Henkel 1992; Cohen 1988: 23). However, the degree to which specific research conclusions are shaped by the process of commissioning, and the consequent interaction between government and researchers in its production, has been left largely to discussion of one case or few cases (see O’Brien et al 2008; Allen 2005; Hope 2004; for exceptions see Salisbury *et al* 2010; Walker 2001). This paper explores the question of political pressure in the production of policy research on the basis of an empirical study of academic researchers who have recently conducted evaluations of public policy for government in the UK.

This paper explores what kind of influence government can have on shaping the research it commissions. We first set out the broad strategy for assessing government attempts to steer research towards producing politically favourable results. We examine government-researcher interactions at three distinct stages in the production of policy evaluations: research commissioning, managing and report drafting. We then go on to outline our data and use it to look at the different sources of political pressure within government. In the discussion and conclusion we explore the implications of our findings, above all from the perspective of whether it matters much whether government leans on its researchers and on the consequences for character of evidence based policy.

Leaning, political advocacy and evaluation

Government may either lean on researchers, that is, it can exert pressure on them to provide politically useful reports, or it may not. The researcher's reaction to any pressure might be to buckle under the pressure and produce the kind of politically supportive report the government wants or it might stand firm against such pressure. With these two variables, leaning/not leaning and buckling/not buckling, we can derive four broad types of relationship. Where government leans and researchers buckle we have a "servant/master relationship" (Manzi and Smith-Bowers 2010: 143), a relationship of servitude where "strong control [is] exercised by ministers and civil servants due to concerns about the political implications of the findings". Researchers could, of course, also buckle without government leaning on them directly, producing a second type of relationship which we can term "docility". For example, Allen's confessional (2005: 1004) invokes Foucault to show how "my constant exposure to the disciplinary power of research funding bodies, since 1993, and my submission to its 'inspecting gaze', moulded me into a 'docile' researcher intuitively oriented to producing satisfied funders". A third type of relationship, where government leans but researchers do not buckle, can be described as "resistance". A fourth kind is where government does not lean and researchers do not buckle – "both parties have equivalent objectives and are committed to the goal of truth seeking" (Manzi and Smith-Bowers 2010: 141) – which we may term "collegiality". As we will see, it is not quite so easy to fit the empirical reality into four categories as it is to derive a two-by-two table, yet the typology will provide us with a set of expectations about what we might find in the empirical research and a terminology for discussing the results.

How do we tell whether government is leaning or exercising reasonable diligence and support in supervising research? An operational distinction might be based on whether government officials and/or politicians make intentional efforts to shape the conduct of the research so as to increase the chances that it reaches conclusions useful to them politically; efforts intended to provide good "political ammunition" (Bulmer 1982: 155). As a *mens rea* issue of intention it becomes very difficult to investigate. Not only is it impossible to see inside the heads of others, there are also many individuals involved in commissioning and managing research and they may differ in their inclination to lean and in the particular objectives they seek in so doing. They may decide to lean at one stage in the process and not at another; they may be cross-pressured, undecided or even just confused about exactly what they want from the research (see Salisbury et al 2010: 119). Our approach to the question of the degree to which the government leans on researchers by pursuing "political ammunition" objectives as opposed to "scientific relevance and quality" objectives is based on a set of expectations about how government handles its relationship with research and researchers at different stages in the development and management of a project. Some types of government behaviour are, we argue, are more consistent with the intention to produce political ammunition, others are more consistent with the pursuit of scientific relevance and quality.

In this paper we divide the process into three stages, effectively chronological, at which we expect to find evidence of political ammunition or scientific relevance and quality objectives. In a first stage, commissioning and designing the research, we would expect the quest for political ammunition to be reflected in governments disproportionately selecting topics for evaluation and designing research questions which have the potential for making the government look good and its opponents bad

(see, for example, Ham, Hunter and Robinson 1995: 71), and choosing evaluators more likely to provide favourable results. In a second stage, managing the research, one would expect a government as client pursuing scientific relevance and quality objectives to orient its continuing relationship with the researchers to the provision of advice and guidance in maintaining the policy focus of the research concerned and providing data and support in gathering evidence. At this stage the pursuit of political ammunition would lead sponsors to try and steer the research so that it reaches desired conclusions, usually positive (or at least not negative), about the policy. In a third stage, writing up, we would expect direct attempts to make the conclusions of the research more positive than they would otherwise have been as evidence of political ammunition objectives.

How do we tell whether researchers buckle or not? Our evidence on this issue is of two types. First there is direct evidence derived from specific questions about respondents' reactions to pressures at different stages in the production process from those that commissioned them. Second, we look at the degree to which the conclusions of research were critical of government as evidence that researchers were following or resisting government wishes. Norris (1995: 274) writes "Just as civil servants can never be seen to be critical of ministers or government policy, researchers funded by government risk similar strictures. Criticism is a problem". Even if one does not accept that government is quite so intolerant of criticism, or that critical reports, say of predecessors or rivals, cannot constitute welcome political ammunition, on the whole we might still expect the degree to which a report remains critical of policy despite government leaning to be a broad indicator of resisting pressure to produce political ammunition.

The study

Empirical data

Our analysis is based on a survey of academic researchers who have been involved in commissioned research. We examined all the reports on government-commissioned research from 2005 onwards we could find online in autumn 2011. These included reports on evaluating schemes for providing "handypersons" to elderly and disabled people (DCLG 2011), an "action research" evaluation of a new system of managing criminal offenders (PA Consulting 2005) and a quantitative evaluation of new methods aimed at dealing with fraud in Jobseekers' Allowance, a major unemployment benefit (Middlemass 2006). We noted the names of the authors of these 215 reports, where named. We included only academic researchers working for a university or an organisation based in a university for practical reasons. In our early approaches we received no replies from researchers working for commercial organisations; almost all academics replied to our emails. At this early stage before the questionnaire was drawn up we interviewed 22 researchers. Academics were authors or co-authors of 95 of the 215 reports and these yielded 251 unique names for which we could find valid email

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