

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Scientific Fraud and Politics

A press release from the Union of Concerned Scientists recently hit our desk titled "Science Leaders Decry Congressional Attacks on Science and Science-Based Policy." It flagged an op-ed in the journal *Science* that laments "a growing and troubling assault on the use of credible scientific knowledge."

Hmmm. Is this about science, or politics?

Since the scientists brought it up, which is the greater threat to their enterprise: the Republicans who run Congress, or the most spectacular scientific fraud in a generation, which was published and then retracted by the journal *Science*?

Last year UCLA political science grad student and maybe soon-to-be Princeton professor Michael LaCour released stunning findings from a field trial on gay marriage called "When Contact Changes Minds." He found that a 20-minute conversation with a house-to-house canvasser could convert huge numbers of opponents into supporters, at least if the canvassers explained they were gay and told personal stories.

The study quickly became a media sensation, the most talked-about poli-sci paper in years, and it led gay-rights activists including some working on the Ireland referendum to retool their voter outreach.

The problem is that Mr. LaCour stands accused of faking everything from start to finish. Ph.D. candidates at Berkeley David Broockman and Josh Kalla tried but failed to replicate Mr. LaCour's results. They then noticed unusual statistical irregularities in Mr. LaCour's survey panel. He now says he pulled a Hillary Clinton and deleted his raw data. But the canvassing firm he claimed to have employed has never heard of the project—and there is no proof anyone was ever contacted, much less changed their minds.

Mr. LaCour denies wrongdoing and in a response paper assailed the motives of Messrs. Broockman and Kalla, whose violations of academic decorum include their decision to go public and "bypass the peer-review process." That would be the same process that failed to catch Mr. LaCour's

non-findings at *Science* magazine.

The larger question is why anyone invested Mr. LaCour's paper with the authority of "science." Experience and common sense suggest that persuading people to reconsider their opinions is difficult. An uninvited nag carrying on about politics on the front porch sounds like

Look who is lecturing Republicans about scientific truth.

one of the less successful approaches.

Then again, the study flattered the ideological sensibilities of liberals, who tend to believe that resistance to gay marriage can only be the artifact of ignorance or prejudice, not moral or religious conviction. Mr. LaCour's purported findings let them claim that science had proved them right.

Similar bias contaminates inquiries across the social sciences, which often seem to exist so liberals can claim that "studies show" some political assertion to be empirical. Thus they can recast stubborn political debates about philosophy and values as disputes over facts that can be resolved by science. President Obama is a particular aficionado of this bait and switch.

As for those supposedly "anti-science" Republicans, they stand accused by *Science* magazine of trying to introduce more transparency and accountability to federal science grants. The House GOP is also guilty of attempting to spend more on the harder sciences, passing a bill last month that allocates money for the National Science Foundation by directorate—for example, boosting engineering spending by 13.2% over 2015 and biology by 12.6%. Money for the social and behavioral sciences declines by 44.9%.

Scientific misconduct does seem to be mercifully rare, but a lesson of the LaCour retraction is to show more humility amid the illusion of scientific omniscience and to be more skeptical of studies that carry heavy political freight. That goes for the profusion of foods that are purported to cause or prevent cancer, and macroeconomic literature that claim to document a stimulus "multiplier."

Meanwhile, *Science* magazine editors who rebuke politicians might have more authority if their own science wasn't so political.