

Five minutes with John Sides: “Political reporters could take findings from political science research and use this to provide context in their campaign reporting”

by Blog Admin

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John Sides has been bringing political science research to current events since he co-founded his political science blog in 2007. Here he discusses the need for political science in journalism and the role that such detailed research can play in adding to a news story, for the benefit of journalist, reader and academic.



What is The Monkey Cage, and what is it trying to achieve in this US presidential election cycle?

[The Monkey Cage](#) is trying to bring political science to current events. It talks about political science research and tries to make its lessons applicable to what’s going on in the world. With regard to the US presidential campaign, that means bringing previous studies and new data to bear to get a more empirically rich understanding of what’s happening.

You wrote a [paper with Brendan Nyhan](#) that discusses how there might be a better marriage between political science and political journalism. How do you see that working?

On the one hand, it’s easy to be bullish on political journalism right now because there’s just so much of it. A lot of reporters are working to learn things and uncover things. And I think that’s good. It makes it all the more likely that reporters will catch things that might otherwise have been ignored. So I’m positive in that sense.

I think the challenge that journalism confronts, though, is what to do with that information, how to understand it, and what context to put it in. Often, you still have a lot of the dogs chasing the same car. The same stories get written in the same ways by different outlets. These are some of the features of political journalism that have been noticed for years: pack journalism, for example, is still very much in existence.

The value of political science — although of course we can’t do this consistently, every single day — is that we can take what’s happening in the campaign and put it in context of the research that’s been done, and try to understand what’s really important and what’s not important here.

So what Brendan and I have tried to argue is that political reporters could take findings from political science research and use those to provide context in their reporting about the campaign itself. So, you do the same reporting but you might put some of your learning in context.

So much is changing in campaigns — the digital revolution and the increasingly bleak prospects for public financing of presidential campaigns. How relevant can much of the older, canonical political science scholarship be?

What changes in campaigns and elections is the amount of money that is raised, and to some extent how that money is spent. Obviously, there have been innovations in vehicles for raising and spending campaign money. In the past this meant the advent of television advertising decades ago. It's meant the advent of large datasets of information about voters and the [targeting to locate those voters](#). It is true that it's always going to take academic research a little while to be able to investigate the consequences of these innovations. They have to happen, and then we have to gather data and analyze it so we understand it.

At the same time, what we've learned up to this point is still relevant. To some extent, what we've been studying for the past 70 years is: How much does campaigning influence voters and outcomes? We've been [studying this](#) for a long, long time, and just because more money is spent — or because that money is being raised or spent differently — doesn't mean that a dollar today is different than a dollar spent in 1950 or 1980 or 2000.

In particular, political science has established that there are the limitations on the amount by which campaigns can move voters, particularly in presidential general elections. I don't think there's any reason to expect that things have changed dramatically, just because campaigns are micro-targeting and Super PACs are spending or will spend hundreds of millions of dollars. In part that's because there's a diminishing marginal return to all this spending. Every dollar you spend is not a new vote for the candidate. The difference between spending nothing and spending \$100 million is going to be different than spending \$1 billion and spending \$1.1 billion. I don't think that the system makes the scholarship obsolete so quickly.

Sometimes the argument that "everything has changed" is assumed to be true even before we have evaluated whether the past is actually irrelevant. So in some sense political science gets challenged with a conjecture stated as if it's a fact, and there's no easy rebuttal to that conjecture because we can't answer it yet. Should we really throw the baby out with the bath water here because a [casino magnate can dump money](#) onto Newt Gingrich's Super PAC? Does that mean that 70 years of political science is no longer operative? I don't think the world typically works that way. It's very rare in science in general that something happens that necessitates throwing out everything that has been learned up until that point. There are very few paradigm-shifting events.

If we make mistakes as political observers, it's often by thinking that 'this time is different' and by being insufficiently attentive to the continuities between the past and the present. It doesn't mean that those continuities are perfect, or that there's never change. I just mean that on average, if we're going to make a mistake as political observers it will be to overestimate the consequence of the novel things that are happening.

This interview was originally published on the [Journalists' Resource website](#), run by Harvard University's Shorenstein Center. You can read the interview in full [here](#).

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