Presidential Tracking: Development of Data-Driven Politics

Barbara Trish
“Evidence-based” is the twenty-first century coin of the realm, with broad, seemingly unbounded applicability. Practices relying on evidence, their counterpart “data-based decisions,” and the tracking, data collection and analysis that fuel all have infused the public realm, our personal lives and all areas between. Presidential politics is no exception, especially as practiced by Barack Obama.

Obama’s road to the White House in both 2008 and 2012 was paved with tracking and analysis. The 2012 campaign, for example, reported knocking on more than seven million doors, with more than 200,000 volunteers calling voters, relying on “data and analytics “to ensure” they talked to the right voters.” The phrase “metric-driven campaign” was used widely to describe the campaign approach, and both the campaign and observers posited that Obama’s competitive advantage over Mitt Romney took the form of data. But the evidence-based practices and the heavy promotion of them extend well beyond the election season. Executive agencies and the White House operation turn to data-informed processes in the tasks related to management and even for concrete decisions, like determining targets for drone strikes. The public is also invited into this world of data, tracking and metrics, offered terabytes of information through the e-government initiatives heavily promoted by the administration, with the promise that through access to information the public will be able to hold the government accountable.

Despite the hype associated with evidence-based practices, little of this is genuinely and fundamentally new. This is true for both twenty-first century presidential politics and the broader world. Still, the data-rich enterprise writ large has reached a critical juncture, so pervasive that it has become the default choice, the go-to solution for decisions, management and administration. This is significant because it essentially forecloses other options, transforming a genuine question of Should this be based on data? into the rhetorical Why wouldn’t this be based on data? But this predisposition has very real implications for the conduct of life, politics and – more narrowly – the presidency.

1 Details of campaign self-reported in the “2012 Obama Campaign Legacy Report.”
Data-Based Enterprises

At a fundamental level, evidence-based processes in the practice of politics are rooted in the same beliefs and orientation that have been entertained by philosophers of science for the past century. They are positivist, at least according to the “most common modern meaning” of the term: based on a premium placed on “data of observable and accessible sense experience ... reject[ing] hypotheses that are not empirically verifiable” (Susser 1992, 102). But though rooted in the ideals of positivism, the more direct foundation for its application in the world of politics comes from politics itself, namely the Progressive reforms of the early twentieth century, which became infused in the programs of the US government; these reforms were inexorably linked to the social-scientific orientation of the academy.

Progressive sentiment at the turn-of-the-century emphasized disrupting the power relationships that marked politics by modifying the institutions and practices of politics to empower the public. The Progressive Era reforms of parties, elections and urban governments are well known, intended to wrest control from the forces which had previously prevailed, namely the wealthy and the powerful political parties. But there was also instruction on how to disrupt the stranglehold. In the words of journalist William Greider (1992), Progressive reforms pushed “information-driven” politics: “[Reformers], trying to free government decisions from the crude embrace of the powerful, emphasized a politics based on facts and analysis as their goal. ... [F]orcing ‘substance’ into the political debate ... would help overcome the natural advantages of wealth and entrenched power.” (46)

The move toward evidence-driven politics had a counterpart in the academy as well. At about the same time that progressive sentiment took hold in politics, reformers in American political science moved to establish a distinctive approach to the study of politics, “attempt[ing] to break free of the legalist and theoretical way in which political life was studied in the European academy.” (Susser, 1992 4.) This new discipline of political science adopted the norms of science, with a focus on “phenomena that are empirically accessible, ... [capable of being ] observed, charted, and measured.” (Susser 1992, 6.) This orientation became dominant within the discipline during the second half of the century and, notwithstanding serious objections and at times deep divisions within the academy, remains a dominant – probably the dominant – approach of scholars to understanding the political world.
The Presidency

While the nexus of ideas, politics and the academy might offer a compelling narrative for the basis of evidence-driven political practices, it falls well short of explaining the wide diffusion of data-based enterprises to almost every corner of human activity, ranging from business to art, and it would seem all else. Hardly any activity in the twenty-first century escapes the “evidence-based” label.

The application in the practice of management and marketing is longstanding, the term “business intelligence” first emerging in the late 1980s, with The Garnet Group, which paved the path for the field of “business analytics” (Davenport 2006, 106), diffused widely now for some time. Analytics and evidence-driven practices have similarly infused sports. Billy Beane’s “moneyball,” popularized by Michael Lewis’ book and a feature film, has spread to practically every sport known to man: football, basketball, soccer, cricket, horseracing, lacrosse, swimming – and the list goes on. “Moneyball for ________” is the fail-safe choice for the modern headline writer.

Indeed, the data, tracking and analytics of politics, business, work and leisure are ubiquitous. Data journalism, evidence-based education, “Moneyball” approaches to crime: these are the realities of the twenty-first century. An estimated 16 million Americans use online matchmaking sites, built from platforms that collect data and apply algorithms to identify a perfect partner. More than double that number – 35 million – use technology to self-track (e.g., Fitbit, Nike+, mobile apps). There is seemingly no limit to the application of data, tracking and analytics in the twenty-first century. Consider that the Minneapolis Institute of Arts makes exhibit decisions based on data in addition to curatorial sensibilities (Gamerman 2014). And even more jolting: fitting your dog with a tracking device. Ostensibly, this is to track the pet’s movements, but the upshot is owner competition, even paranoia, about the fitness of pets. These owners live vicariously through their dogs, who are willing accomplices because they intuit what owners need. Apparently this is not the case with cats, who “have their own agenda.” (Wells 2014.)

It is well beyond the scope of this paper to explain fully the origin and evolution of data-driven practices and their cultural impact. However, the applications of metrics, tracking and analytics to inform decisions in presidential politics, in particular in the Obama era, shed some light on the larger phenomenon and, ultimately, offer a prescription for presidential candidates and presidents who must negotiate the data-rich world.

Barack Obama, both as candidate and president, has turned to evidence-based practices, in some cases touting them as hallmarks of his method for campaigning and governing. Granted, these do not make up the entirety of the Obama approach, but they do represent the reach of the world of data and analytics into the presidency. The first and the most prominent case is the heavy reliance on evidence-based practices in both of the Obama campaigns.

**Campaign Science: 2008 and 2012**

The predominant narrative of the Obama wins emphasizes the campaign’s ability to mobilize voters to the polls. In the 2008 election, this came in the form of a ground game flush with money, enhanced by online capacity which included new platforms, all to engage voters, especially new ones. The 2012 addition to the narrative emphasizes the ways in which the campaign was metric-driven and fueled by the insights of social scientific research. These were, fundamentally, data-driven enterprises, maybe not unprecedented in approach, but certainly unprecedented in scope.

The data at the heart of campaign mobilization efforts are voter lists, used by campaigns to identify potential supporters and mobilize them to the polls. These basic lists are longstanding, in fact the byproduct of the of the early Progressive-Era introduction of voter registration, a process aiming to end voter fraud in elections and to curb the powerful and corrupt parties. Ironically, the information collected by this late 19th century reform would become the fuel for the mobilization efforts of the parties and their candidates. Early on, lists provided the only aggregate level portrait of relative strength in party support among the electorate, an indication before the election of how one party would likely stack up against the other. But they also presented data allowing parties to “narrow the scope of their voter mobilization efforts”, both in terms of drawing boundaries around the eligible electorate and
revealing voter characteristics (party affiliations and demographics) recorded by the state in the lists (Hersh 2015 49).

The lists that fueled the Obama voter contact efforts were, on one level, simply the late nineteenth century lists at advanced stage of development: digital, enhanced and readily operational through a user interface. The Obama campaigns, like most Democratic campaigns down the ticket, used “Voter Builder,” the Democratic Party’s propriety data, accessed through a user interface purchased from Democratic-leaning NGP-VAN. These are essentially the same data that a party agent circa 1892 could retrieve – in person, likely copying records by hand – from the local election official. Information about the individual voter – demographics, voter registration, vote history – are now simply compiled in a digital data file and readily organized by the campaign to serve voter mobilization purposes, like generating call sheets and walk sheets for volunteers. But this information is also enhanced and cleaned as parties and campaigns add to and correct information in the data file.

The Obama campaign enhanced these lists through microtargeting techniques. A complicated data-driven process, microtargeting fills out voter lists with “model scores” – that is, synthetic measures of predicted voter traits, like likelihood of voting in the election or of being persuaded. These model scores are created from the results of statistical analyses of large-n survey data applied to the voter file, which is sometimes enhanced with mined data to reveal additional voter characteristics. The model scores, then, serve as a criterion for a particular voter contact effort. For example, a campaign might focus its mobilization efforts only on known supporters with a moderate likelihood of turnout out.

The Obama campaign didn’t invent microtargeting; that title goes to Hal Malchow, who reports that he first used it for a 1995 special election (Malchow 2003). Republican consultant Alexander Gage microtargeted in 2002 for Mitt Romney’s successful Massachusetts gubernatorial bid (Cillizza 2007) and then at the national level for George W. Bush’s reelection campaign in 2004. But the Obama 2008 microtargeting represented a difference in order of magnitude, with a virtually uninterrupted process of modeling and refining the data, and then modeling again, all overseen by Ken Strasma (Issenberg 2012b).³

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³ For a lucid and accessible description of microtargeting, see Washington Post (2007.) “Unraveling a Voter’s DNA.”
Obama’s 2008 voter mobilization campaign was based on the known and modeled characteristics of registered voters. Armed with these data, the conceit of the campaign was that it campaign could dispatch resources efficiently, focusing on individuals on whom their efforts might have a real impact. But by 2012, the Obama efforts would be enhanced by an evidence-based understanding of the effectiveness of voter mobilization techniques, drawing heavily from research with ties to social science in the academy.

Early in the 20th century, as the discipline of political science pivoted to empirical evidence, measurement and data, University of Chicago professors Charles Merriam and Harold Gosnell set their sights on understanding voter turnout. Merriam’s focus was that of an activist, wanting to have an effect on politics, while Gosnell was the methods man, who could structure research that would apply social scientific methods to real-world political questions, in particular voter turnout. In the 1920s, Merriam and Gosnell worked together on a survey-based project on voter turnout, but Gosnell then turned to field experimental methodology – the analysis of data collected through randomized, controlled field experiments – to isolate the effect of voter contact techniques (Issenberg 2012b, ch. 1).

The 2012 Obama campaign was influenced heavily by the modern-day equivalent of Gosnell’s field-experimental approach – specifically, research in the spirit of Green and Gerber, the legions of PhDs they trained, and the Analyst Institute, the left-leaning firm specializing in voter experiments. Green and Gerber had reignited the experimental approach to the question of voter mobilization in early 2000s, with a high-profile edited volume Get out the Vote! (2004), which reported the results of field experiments and which had traction among political professionals. The scholars were, in effect, “whispering in the ears of princes.” (Druckman et al. 2006, 629) The Analyst Institute took form during that first decade as well, first as an “unofficial society” of “science-minded progressive operatives” involved with field or interested experimental research – in real time – undertaken by the AFL-CIO for its mobilization efforts. Eventually this group formalized into the Analyst institute, “designed to operate with scholarly sensibility but with the privacy of a for-profit consulting form.” (Issenberg 2010)⁴

⁴ The Analyst Institute partners with Catalist, a for-profit firm that provides data to organizations on the progressive left, including the Obama campaigns. Catalist, through its microtargeting and modeling has been able to create a list of eligible voters, extending beyond the registered voters that the typical voter list includes.
Results of randomized controlled experiments worked their way marginally into the 2008 campaign, but by 2012 the reelection campaign was gripped by a culture of experimentation, not only in the sort of direct voter contact efforts that mark a campaign’s field organization, but in digital and fundraising efforts as well. It was a campaign of “evidence-informed programs” (IEPs), using the jargon of the progressive left (Issenberg 2012a). Phone bank and canvassing scripts had been “tested,” as were email subject lines (“Hey” being the most successful), and training for volunteers even cited academic, field-experimental studies as the rationale for particular voter contact protocols.

One thread of experimental research had a profound impact on the Obama re-elect: studies that offer behavioral insight into the voter, in particular whether socially or internally-driven pressure brings a voter to the polls. In the run-up to the election, the dominant at-the-door/telephone message of Obama canvassers and callers was “What’s your plan to vote on Tuesday?” This question was posed not so much to discern the specific vote plan, but to plant a message that research had determined would propel the voter to the polls.

Data and analytics permeated the Obama presidential campaigns, and though not every decision was based on the type of evidence-rich, social-scientific enterprise that marked the field operation, the reach of the data voices was wide. It was a metric-driven campaign, tracking every action of volunteers, measuring the effectiveness of techniques and messages and, importantly, allowing the data voices to influence campaign strategy, both broadly and narrowly. “The core of the campaign was not flashy or even particularly innovative except in the willingness of senior staff to listen to numbers people rather than consultants acting on old-fashioned political intuition.”

That the narrative of the 2008 and 2012 Obama campaigns emphasize the prominence of evidence-based practices and their effectiveness in orchestrating a win is itself noteworthy. However, the Obama case draws attention to significant aspects of endeavors that prioritize data, tracking, metrics and analysis. First, while they may seem new, they are rarely without precedent, which leads to the question of what accounts for the wholesale adoption of such practices in the contemporary world. Second, does reliance on data and evidence have an effect on traditional power relationships – both within organizations and more abstractly? And

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5 Quotation from TechPresident, as reported by Engage (2012) “Inside the Cave.”
finally, what are the implications of a data-rich approach to presidential campaigns (and others) as social scientific enterprise?

Obama’s microtargeting and reliance on EIPs were in some respects the logical extension of practices begun a century earlier, a reminder that the modern evidence-based practices are the culmination of previous developments and applications. The same could be said of the “moneyball” approach to baseball. While the story of Oakland A’s manager Billy Beane was best-seller/feature film material, baseball statistician Bill James had been on a “systematic search for new baseball knowledge” for some time (Lewis 2003, 69). James and his Society for American Baseball Research (SABR) followers had pioneered statistical techniques to apply to systematically-collected data about players and teams. But two particular changes catapulted the James data-driven approach to prominence. “[R]adical advances in computer technology … dramatically reduced the cost of compiling and analyzing vast amounts of baseball data… [And] the boom in baseball players’ salaries … dramatically raised the benefits of having such knowledge.” (Lewis 2003, 72)

A similar perfect storm of technology and incentives marks the data-driven campaign efforts. Digitally available data, rapid increases in computer processing power, along with the development of analytical tools with application to the political world marked the turn of the twentieth century. And if skyrocketing player salaries of the 1980s placed a premium on resource efficiency in baseball organization, the increasing competitiveness of the contests for the presidency beginning in 2000 reminded campaigns of the importance of marshaling their funds strategically.

At this juncture, a decade and one-half into the twenty-first century, evidence-based campaign practices have been diffused widely, to down-ticket races and in both parties, following a path consistent with the “S-Curve” model of innovation diffusion, which plots cumulative adoption of a practice/innovation over time.⁶ Admittedly, the paths of microtargeting and experimentation are somewhat distinct, but Figure 1 captures their combined essence.

⁶ See for example Rogers 1995.
The takeoff – situated somewhere in the post 2008 era – is facilitated by a number of factors beyond those already mentioned. First, the high visibility of a presidential campaign, coupled with a successful outcome, drew attention to the evidence-rich campaign practices of Obama. And second, the availability of products, many created by Obama alumni, and the campaign alumni themselves rendered the tools of evidence-driven campaigns widely available. But once adopted, the useful byproducts – especially of tracking, became evident; they are tools to motivate staff and volunteers and to hold them accountable, as well as tangible signs of success that can inspire donors.

**A Data-Fueled Presidency**

Obama as president has employed evidence-based practices, but has also invited the American public into his world of data and analytics. Like his data-rich campaign, the
application of tracking, data and analytics in the presidency are not necessarily new, but they are high-profile, and sometimes controversial, aspects of the Obama administration. Perhaps the single most notorious application of data comes in the administration’s counterterrorism policy, that includes predictive analyses of surveillance data for the purpose of targeting for assassination individuals who, while not known to be terrorists, exhibit qualities that are associated with terrorist behavior.

Signature Strikes

Determining targets for military attacks based on evidence is unsurprising. But in the Obama administrations’ procedures for targeted killing of terrorists by unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), commonly known as drones, the evidence is unique. The evidence need not offer certainty that the target is a known and identified terrorist, rather that he interacts with people and engages in activity, even routine, that imply the “signature” of a terrorist. In other words, targets for signature killings are determined by patterns of behavior that are indicative of terrorists, even if the individual is not known to be one. President Bush was the first to authorize such signature strikes (Zenko 2013, 12), though this came at the end of his tenure.

Information about precisely what data and analytical tools inform the signature targeting is sketchy, under a cloak of secrecy owing to its role in national security efforts. But through the efforts of journalists and watchdogs, relying on some leaked documents and comments by unnamed officials, a vague picture emerges, as indicated in this NBC News account:

Analysts use a variety of intelligence methods and technologies that they say give them reasonable certainty that the “signature” target is a terrorist. Part of the analysis involves crunching data to make connections between the unidentified suspects and other known terrorists and militants. The agency can watch, for example, as an unknown person frequents places, meets individuals, makes phone calls, and sends emails, and then match those against other people linked to the same calls, emails and meetings. (Engel and Windrem 2013)

7 The classic example given is an individual with others doing jumping jacks, which could be indicative of a terrorist training camp.
These operations are run on data collected by the NSA, and the strikes carried out by the CIA and the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). Various reports mention data mining and meta-data. In all likelihood, network analytic techniques help pinpoint the signature target based on his relationships with other known or presumed terrorists.\(^8\) The Intercept (2013), Glenn Greenwald’s online platform, highly critical of the US drone policy, offers detail about the signature strikes as revealed by a former drone operator: “Rather than confirming a target’s identity with operatives or informants on the ground, the CIA or the U.S. military ... orders a strike based on the activity and location of the mobile phone a person is believed to be using.” An October 2015 Intercept report – “The Drone Papers” – offers further detail about the processes and internal politics of drone strikes.

Concerns about signature drones strikes run deep. They involve targeted assassinations of individuals who, by virtue of data analysis, are judged at least reasonably likely to be terrorists. Falling short of certainty when the end result could be death is a difficult concept to accept. But what critics find equally disconcerting is that the signature strikes often involve collateral damage, injury and death to non-combatants. The estimates reported by The Intercept (2013) are staggering: “[A]t least 273 civilians in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia have been killed by unmanned aerial assaults under the Obama administration [as of early November 2014.]” But NBC news reports that “[a] half dozen former and current U.S. counter-terrorism officials ... [said] that signature strikes do generally kill combatants ... [although] intelligence officials doesn’t always know who those combatants are.” (Engle and Windrom 2013)

Advances in technology – drones, the footprint created by the mobile devices and the NSA’s ability to track and analyze this exhaust – have opened the door for signature strikes. What’s more, the challenge posed by non-state actors in the post 9/11 era makes this an especially attractive option for national security practitioners, only enhanced by the fact that this program does not put Americans directly in harm’s way. The signature strikes purport to identify the location of an individual who, given his pattern of activity and relationships, might well be an enemy combatant. In effect, this process imputes information into the collection of data, much like microtargeting models the probability of a registered voter being persuaded. Yet the differential impact of the errors embedded in the two evidence-based applications is stark. In the voter contact world, contacting a registered vote who really isn’t persuadable means that

\(^8\) Though presented in tongue-in-cheek fashion and using an example less weighty than assassination, Healy (2013) describes basic network analytic techniques that could be used to isolate a signature target.
resources are spent inefficiently – and possibly an election lost. But in the world of drone strikes, the result is potentially death, even for those simply “caught in the vicinity” of a drone assassination (Intercept 2015).

Performance Management

While the signature strikes constitute a relatively new development and one that was expanded dramatically under Obama’s national security apparatus, other evidence-based practices in the administration have longstanding precedent. Performance management is one such case, and – like other evidence-rich enterprises – it took shape in the Progressive Era, though its modern manifestations formed under Bill Clinton.

Performance management broadly speaking is an orientation to administration and a set of practices that focus on outcomes; it took off in the public sector in the 1990s, and it was consistent with the ideal of results-oriented government. In the institutional presidency, performance management is administered by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), which exploits the practices in its management capacity and its responsibilities in preparing the president’s budget. Barack Obama, like his two predecessors, uses performance management routines to inform decision making about agency and program effectiveness.

This approach to management is codified the 1993 Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), requiring federal agencies to engage in strategic planning and undertake annual performance plans. It was rapidly and universally diffused to all state governments within a decade (Moynihan 2009, 2). And in 2010, Congress passed the GPRA Modernization Act, which revised specific expectations for performance management, including some movement from annual to quarterly reviews and reporting, making strategic management an ongoing process. These endeavors are data-heavy, requiring that agencies establish goals and track progress toward achieving them.

In its early rhetoric, the Obama administration purported to expand the efforts of the Bush Administration (Jochum 2009), which had itself prioritized performance management and had devised and plugged its Performance Assessment Rating Tool (PART), a quantitative assessment of goals and performance used by 234 federal programs, estimated to account for
20% of the federal budget. Jeff Zeints, the acting director of OMB at the start of the Obama administration, described GPRA and Bush’s PART as important starting points for the new administration. But he established that analyzing and acting on the information collected would be goals of the Obama administration, moving beyond what he described as a “compliance” focus under George W. Bush (Jochum 2009).

The Obama-era performance management was spearheaded by “performance guru” Shelley Metzenbaum, who pushed for follow-through on goals and who was responsible for developing www.performance.gov, a tool to both articulate the administration’s approach to performance management and to provide access to the extremely large numbers of reports and reviews filed under the program. The website is testament to the ways in which the rhetoric of data infuse performance management, and the reports therein provide vivid – and lengthy – illustrations of the products of this approach to management.

Public administration has an inside baseball quality to it, but as obscure as these data-heavy applications in performance management are, they have potentially profound impacts on governance. Consider, for example, the need to identify goals to track the progress toward meeting those. Even this puts constraints on aspirations, rendering those qualities of performance that are difficult or impossible to manage not credible goals. And a goal-directed operation has important organizational ramifications. Perhaps most fundamentally, targets and goals are tools to impose control on a large and complex organization. And to the extent that OMB coordinates the performance management system, it puts yet more power in the hand of that office.

E-Government

Evidence-based performance management has a counterpart in the Obama administration’s “Open-Government” initiative, which commits to providing citizens access to data, making the work of the federal government more transparent and giving the public new tools to hold government accountable. Open-government, also known as e-government, efforts

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9 For more information, see http://strategisys.com/omb_part#sthash.8rSPJDKG.dpuf.
took shape in many countries world-wide at the turn of the twenty-first century, at the time focusing on using the internet as a platform to provide access to services and to interact with the government. Filing taxes electronically with the IRS would be an example of this early e-government function. In the early years, the US was a world-wide leader, both in terms of citizen access to the web and government services offered through it. A sign of early White House commitment to e-gov, the Bush administration created “czar” position to head up the administration’s efforts, placing the leader at OMB in the Office of Electronic Government and Technology (OEGT).

Effective e-gov has been a stated goal of the Obama Administration from the outset, issuing two formal plans (an early Open Government Initiative and a 2011 Action Plan) and promoting the goal of “an unprecedented level of openness in Government.” The emphasis has evolved from that in place under George W. Bush, moving beyond citizen access to services into the realm of abundant available data for citizen use in measuring the government and entities which must file reports with the government. The Obama data.gov portal provides access to these data (including some state-collected data), ranging from the visitor logs of the White House, to the information collected about hospital free structures, to measures of road traffic injuries, and even popular baby names. At present, data.gov hosts over 189,000 data sets. Citizens are also given pathway to policy-making influence through the WeThePeople platform for petitions, with the promise that if a 100,000 signature threshold is met, the White House will review the petition.

Despite the ambition reflected in the Obama open-government initiatives, the US has slipped in world-wide rankings, still in the top-ten but surpassed by some European and Asian governments. The 2014 UN rankings designate the Republic of Korea as a world-wide leader. Consider capital city Seoul’s “Information Communication Agora” website, which gives citizens access to all administrative documents of the city – the paperwork, the worksheets, even those merely in progress (Lee, translated by Shin 2013). Still, Obama’s open-data initiative is widely viewed as a promising and open, granted somewhat ironic given other attacks on transparency

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that have been leveled by the administration. For example, the White House refuses to release records petitioned under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) from the Office of Administration, a unit within in the Executive Office of the President (Wilson 2015).

But promise of e-gov is premised on more than available data. A system of accountability also requires that citizens engage with and analyze the data, and that there is some meaningful path to feedback. The prerequisites are quite high: “Users of government data sets need more than a passing familiarity with a fairly complex set of tools to extract, manipulate and visually represent the information.” (Mazmanian and Lutton 2015) Early reports on the success of data.gov emphasized that goals like these had not been met by a longshot (Van Buskirk 2010). And despite Pew 2014 survey findings that over one-third of Americans had accessed data provided by the federal government over the previous year, a federal computing watchdog quipped, “Sorry, open data: Americans just aren’t that into you.” (Mazmanian and Lutton, 2015)

The Politics of Data

Evidence-based processes have worked their way into politics and the U.S. presidency, just as they have in countless other domains. They are founded on the premise that evidence-based processes are somehow superior (more rigorous, objective, more efficient) than the alternatives. They can guide a business to enhanced profitability, they can lead a candidate to victory, and they can equip the state in its battle with non-state actors. Relying on objective data, rather than instinct or traditional methods, is in the spirit of science, the enlightened path toward progress. And in some corridors, data-based enterprises are seen to have disruptive potential in its ability unseat traditional power holders.

In this spirit, “evidence-driven” is every-bit the ideology that liberalism or conservatism are, a world view that has a clear vision of what is good and presumptions about how to achieve this. Therein lies a certain irony: Objectivity and detachment central to this world of data and analytics, but the enterprise has – at its core – fundamental biases. Social scientific communities have had the luxury of addressing these questions over time, waging battles in the academy over what constitutes meaningful evidence and whether the norms for evidence foreclose the exploration of specific questions. Consider the classic debate within political science about power, that teased out both the nature of power and requisite evidence (Bachrach
and Baratz 1962) as well as the real limits of an approach that mandates evidence (Lukes 1974). Indeed, the “post-behavioral revolution” in political science was a battle waged about the blinders erected in a social scientific approach to the pressing questions of politics. The battle over evidence and methods wages on, as evident in a somewhat more recent and high-profile dispute about the discipline’s flagship journal (see “Mr. Perestoika”) and in some academic departments across the nation.

But these are not just academic battles; they resonate in the real world, and at times they bubble to the surface among practitioners and those affected by the evidence-based world. Barack Obama’s “College Scorecard” is a good example. Developed by the Department of Education, the scorecard offers data to prospective college students, fueled by a web-based user-interface that allows comparison of colleges and universities in terms of a variety of factors, including cost, graduation rates, and income prospects post-graduation. President Obama introduced the Scorecard in his 2013 State of the Union Address, emphasizing that it would empower parents and student, giving them access to data that they “they can use to compare schools based on a simple criteria — where [they] can get the most bang for [their] educational buck.”12 But the empowerment of students is based on decisions – about the basic selection of criteria and the details of measurement – made by someone else, in this case the Department of Education. The introduction of the Scorecard was met with a spate of criticism, ranging from the dated and/or incomplete quality of the data presented to the need for contextual information in order for students to utilize the Scorecard effectively. But most on a fundamental level, the Scorecard could be seen as the imposition of values on families of prospective students regarding the criteria on which they judge colleges. And examples abound of different criteria or measurements yielding variable portraits of a phenomenon. Look no further than the Las Vegas debate of the 2016 Democratic presidential hopefuls. On social media, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders prevailed, while public opinion polls generally gave the nod to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

The choice of criteria is always a significant in an evidence-based world, because this affects not only judgments calls on success or failure, but also the incentives structuring decisions of political, economic and social actors. Consider a strategic goal of Obama’s Department of Agriculture (USDA) to ensure access of all children to safe, nutritious and

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12 2013 State of the Union Address.
balanced meals. In the absence of specific expectations about rural versus urban performance on this measure, rural children might well fall through the cracks, since programmatically it is easier – and hence more efficient for implementation – to reach children in U.S. urban areas. Indeed, with stated criteria for success comes the very real possibility of “gaming” the system (Bevan and Hood 2006)

Ethical concerns also imbue these evidence-based practices. Signature strikes constitute an especially vivid example, replete with questions of ethics related to data, well beyond those grave concerns associated with targeting under certainty. Though privacy of likely terrorist subjects may not be a pressing concern, privacy of Americans whose mobile records are mined by the NSA is. But even the more mundane applications of presidential data-based decisions have ethical aspects to consider. The mere collection of information about registered voters by states –necessary and longstanding in the effort to combat voter fraud – is governed by those very same public officials who will use the data for their electoral bids (Hersh 2015). But there is also concern about the challenge posed by the way these data are used, with some even suggesting that “engineered” elections a la the Obama model undermine democracy (Parry 2012)

These examples of overt considerations of the methodological nuances and ethnics of evidence-based practices notwithstanding, the applications in the real world of politics – cast in broad brush strokes – seem to be at a juncture of wide diffusion without significant attention to their shortcomings or alternatives. The take-off in diffusion was facilitated by the digital world and computer processing, which made the accumulation, sharing and analysis of data monumentally easier than in the past. High-profile applications of evidence-based methods, along with the voice of data evangelists, practitioners and even journalists who spread the good word of data, reinforce the appeal that data have power. And if the approach has the imprimatur of the academy, all the better. This is the cultural force that poses a significant challenge – even roadblock – to objective analyses of the shortcomings of a data-based world.

Granted, there has been movement in this direction, but politics seems to lag behind regarding reflection. An instinct-versus-data debate resonated strongly in business some years ago, with analysts projecting situations in which instinct is a more appropriate decision tool than data. Hayashi (2001) asserts that corporate strategy is ripe for gut-based decisions,
operations management for data (61). Right now in management circles, performance management approaches are taking a hit. Some major private firms – Deloitte, GE, Adobe – have recently moved away from traditional personnel performance management systems, which quality-of-data problems one of the stated reasons (Buckingham and Goodall 2015). While the evidence-based ethos of other areas may not have been subject to the systematic reflection that has marked business, there are temperate voices that challenge the impulse toward data. Buzz Bizzinger’s *Three Nights in August* (2005), about Cardinal manager Tony LaRussa’s approach to baseball, is seen as a rejoinder to the Michael Lewis/Billy Beane moneyball saga. And while it may seem at the apex of fashion, data-journalism is subject to overt reflection about its limitations, even by Nate Silver (2012), arguably the highest-profile practitioner of it.

This deliberate reflection and possible adjustment (and even abandonment) of data-based strategies represents a logical step in the life cycle of an innovation. If the initial and adoption and eventual take-off mark a first wave, transforming the innovation into a default is the second wave. (See Figure 2) But this is a phase marked with particular threats, especially the unthinking adoption of the innovation and the forced application to areas that may not be amenable to it. The observation offered by philosopher of science Abraham Kaplan seems apt. “Give a young boy a hammer, and he finds that everything he encounters needs pounding.” (Kaplan, quoted in Susser 1992) Conscious reflection, weighing the opportunities and limitations of the evidence-based enterprise at large and the specific applications of it, is critical, and it marks a third wave development of the evidence-based era.

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13 Though Hayashi also quotes famed economist Herbert Simon, who questions the binary: “[I]ntuition and judgment are simply analyses frozen into habit.” (2001, 63)
In some sense, this is a moving target, since the applications continues to expand, not just taking up the universe of conventional uses, but stretching into realms not previously considered. Signature drone strikes not have been on the table – given technology and data – in the twentieth century, possibly even the early years of the twenty-first. Or consider the personal tracking phenomenon, which extends the reach of data and analytics into the daily lives of individuals not fathomed, even by individuals over time who have tracked things by traditional pencil-to-paper techniques. Taken to an extreme, subscribers to the quantitative-self (“Q-self”) movement define themselves by their ability to track, and they are driven by their efforts to seek self-knowledge through tracking (Wolff 2010). There is seemingly endless potential for the venues for data and analytics to expand, rendering the y-axis in Figure 2 not particularly meaningful.

**A Recommendation**

This paper has described a handful of evidence-based practices that mark the presidency. Clearly there are many more not considered. But though data, tracking and analytics have
standing as a cultural phenomenon and permeate broadly even the presidency, it would be inaccurate to suggest that the presidency operates on data alone. Still, the presidency is enough of an evidence-based operation to give pause, and this paper recommends deliberate reflection on evidence-based practices. Quite possibly this is already on the agenda, already undertaken; indeed, such discussion and reflection likely evade the public eye. However, if the presidency has not entered the third wave with eyes open, it should.

Skeptics need to be part of equation. Campaigns, executive agencies, the White House need to hear the voice of people who, though trained and experienced in data-rich approaches, still entertain the possibility that there are costs to those approaches, and even that there might be valid alternatives.\textsuperscript{14} Processes are important as well. They have to honor ways to inject arguments that might run at odds with prevailing wind.\textsuperscript{15} This is especially important given the hype associated with data – and its go-to/default status. In short, presidential moneyball requires not just the data scientists, but also those who can challenge them.

\textsuperscript{14} There may be room for ethicists as well, especially in the counter-terrorism initiatives.

\textsuperscript{15} This recommendation is longstanding, seen in early research (Janis 1982) and more recent (Sunstein and Hastie 2014.)
References


