

Social Science Should Be a Process, Not a Bloody Shirt

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Jay Greene and Paul Peterson's response to my December 1999 *PS* article spills indignation over a case I did not make while avoiding my basic argument: Advocacy under the banner of science is irresponsible when researchers have not conformed to the norms of their discipline. Rather than wrestle with this troubling issue, Greene and Peterson attack a straw man. They argue that I am attempting to "pillory, marginalize, and suppress the results of scholarly research," "ban" their paper, and institute a "rule" to benefit advocacy groups—such as the one I work for, but not the pro-voucher advocacy groups that fund and publicize their pro-voucher research. This is an invention of my position, but it does allow them to wave the bloody shirt of "academic freedom" before the professorial community in much the same manner that they chose to use science as a trope to legitimize opinions expressed in their 1996 *Wall Street Journal* article.

I argued that Greene and Peterson went beyond their evidence in their public writing on the Milwaukee voucher program. The subsequent research cited in my original article indicates the extent to which they overstated their policy prescriptions and underscored the questionable nature of both their significance testing and their controls for attrition bias.¹ Greene and Peterson's actions and the controversy following their public announcement of their findings illustrate why political scientists should be rigorous when deploying their research to affect the

policy debate. I did not and do not argue against academic freedom in pointing this out, but instead am arguing in favor of good science and its responsible use.

Greene and Peterson's claim that my argument is a proposal designed to favor advocacy groups is rather startling. They are no more strangers to advocacy groups than am I. Much of their research has been funded by voucher advocates and they have worked with advocacy groups to broadcast their results.² Neither they nor I are unique in these affiliations. Many social scientists work for advocacy groups and many advocates work in academe. The dichotomy between advocates and academics is a false one—except in the minds of the public.

Research from the university is typically vested with a higher degree of credibility than research from advocacy groups because of the former's supposed apolitical and objective viewpoint. Most members of the general public assume that reports from the academy will have met appropriate scientific standards just because they are from the academy. The Greene and Peterson research is, in public debate, often referred to as the "Harvard research," not the "research supported by the Olin Foundation." This is because Harvard is a symbol of academic integrity. But Harvard, or any other university, only carries such symbolic value as a result of its faculty's normative commitment to standards in academic inquiry. Because privately funded research may carry a residual mystique of the ivory tower, it is all the more essential that academic researchers strive to meet social science standards when claiming the authority of social science in public debate.

To state this is not to argue against academic freedom. Nowhere did I suggest that Greene and Peter-

son should have been prevented from taking pen in hand to write op eds or other popular media pieces. I would defend any political scientist's right to advocate for causes that they espouse. Political scientists are, after all, citizens as well as professionals. But, when social scientists couch advocacy in science, their fidelity should be to the norms of science. If it is demonstrably not, I believe their peers should criticize them. "Science" is a powerful symbol. A lay audience can easily take a reference to its trappings as a justification of its author's argument. For this reason, I question the practice of putting the cart of public advocacy based on research results before the horse of scientific discourse.

Greene and Peterson also quote me as writing "To present to the general public research that has not endured the scrutiny of peer review . . . , while all the time calling the work 'political science' is a challenge to the very nature of our enterprise as a community of scholars and citizens." The convenient ellipses allows them to equate their research with that of Robert Putnam, Frances Fox Piven, and my own colleagues. The sentence actually reads: "To present to the general public research that has not endured the scrutiny of peer review *and whose statistical results have not been held to the standards established by the scientific community*, while all the time calling the work 'political science' is a challenge. . . ." (Muir 1999, 764; italics added). It is here that the heart of my disagreement with Greene and Peterson over the irresponsible use of unvetted research can be found.

Putnam and Piven did not dress their theories in the trappings of science in an effort to legitimize their arguments. This is an important distinction and, again, Greene and Peterson's article in *The Wall Street Journal* is an example of why. By titling their piece "School Choice

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Data Rescued from Bad Science,”
Greene and Peterson explicitly

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called attention to their “scientific conclusions” and gave themselves the authority to declare that John Witte’s evaluation “isn’t just bad science it’s actually harmful to the underprivileged children who most need the opportunities vouchers would provide.” This play on the public’s understanding of the term “science” to increase the perceived legitimacy of their findings could well be said to be “blinding.”³

Take, for example, Robert Putnam’s “Bowling Alone” (1997). Imagine if, instead of an essay on social capital inspired by observing people bowling alone, Putnam had written that his scientific analysis of strikes and spares indicated that team bowling was inefficient. Then, what if he had argued that his social science showed that a tax on team bowling shirts should be used to discourage bowling team formation for the good of bowlers everywhere. Further, imagine that he had announced that because his research

was based on a model that allowed him to be the first researcher to control for the fit of rented bowling shoes, it was better science than that of any other researcher who had examined the issue. In this hypothetical instance, I

would argue that Putnam should submit his findings to an academic journal or an academic conference before submitting them to a major national newspaper or calling a press conference.

Judging from their response, Greene, Peterson, and I appear to agree that social scientists should participate in the public sphere. I believe, however, that we should take special care when speaking as social scientists, and that processes such as peer review are an appropriate source of that care. Greene and Peterson, however, seem to believe that care should be used except when it is inexpedient. They note that they did present their paper at an Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association and received a heated retort from John Witte. I would agree with them that this constitutes a form of peer review, from which they could have gained valuable insights. But the conference was in September 1996,

while their opinion piece was released in August, coinciding with then-presidential candidate Robert Dole’s address advocating voucher programs and the Wisconsin court hearings on the future of the voucher program. If, as they all but do in note 4 of their preceding article, Greene and Peterson argue that scientific norms are something to be sacrificed for the sake of this type of expediency, then I must disagree with their argument.

Finally, Greene and Peterson state that I ignored John Witte’s earlier studies of the Milwaukee voucher program and painted them as the first to write a nonpeer-reviewed analysis of vouchers. They question why I have chosen to “demonize” them.⁴ The record on voucher experimentation in America goes at least as far back as the Alum Rock program in the early 1970s, and much ink had been shed, including some by Professor Witte, prior to 1996. I do not purport Greene and Peterson’s to be the first unreviewed research report on vouchers. I chose to focus on their 1996 *Wall Street Journal* article because the subsequent controversies over the scientific validity of their work provide an object lesson as to why, in performing the important act of communicating results outside the small community of education policy researchers, responsibility should be the order of the day.

Notes

* The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not of the American Federation of Teachers.

1. In their response, Greene and Peterson take exception to my citation of Alex Molnar’s recalculation of statistical significance tests from their Milwaukee research, using a self-effacing comment from Molnar. Molnar’s calculations, however, are correct. John Witte also raised this point in 1996. It has been a source of controversy in Greene and Peterson’s evaluations of the Ohio voucher program as well, leading Kim Metcalf to wonder if Greene and Peterson engage in “Advocacy in the Guise of Science” (Metcalf 1998). In their response to me, Greene and Peterson point out that the combined third and fourth year results of the children in their sample who had received vouchers was statistically

significant at conventional levels. This might be seen as a *post hoc* case of combining favorable analyses in order to increase the number of valid cases, and, hence, significance. It is also a case of examining “survivors” in a program that had 30% annual attrition and announcing that because they were healthy the program was a success. Yet, Greene and Peterson used these results to suggest that vouchers could close the black-white student achievement gap. Greene and Peterson also claim that Cecilia Rouse (1998) has “replicated” their findings. While it is true that Rouse replicated their approach in some models, it is also true that she followed John Witte’s approach, which Greene and Peterson attack, in others. Also, Rouse did not apply the same standards as Greene and Peterson, or choose to

conflate third-and fourth-year scores, or reach the same policy conclusions. The differences between the two works are at least as telling as the similarities.

2. The Olin Foundation funded the Milwaukee evaluation. Peterson has also received funding from the provoucher Harry and Lyme Bradley Foundation and the funders of private voucher programs that he evaluates. He has also worked with Clint Bolick’s Institute for Justice to publicize his findings. In other work, Peterson has written of voucher advocates as reminiscent of “a small band of Jedi attackers, using their intellectual powers to fight the unified might of Death Star forces led by Darth Vader [*sic*], whose intellectual capacity has been corrupted by the urge for complete hegemony.” (Peterson 1990, 73).

3. Greene and Peterson assert that the use

of the word 'blinded' in my original title is particularly "violent." While the title is apt, it is also little more than a play on the title of a popular, somewhat dystopian, 1980s love song: Thomas Dolby's "She Blinded Me With

Science." Such adaptations are something of a political science convention in and of themselves.

4. This characterization is particularly ironic given that Peterson has specifically

compared John Witte's evaluation of the Milwaukee voucher program to the Eighth Circle of Hell in Dante's *Inferno* (Peterson and Noyes 1996).

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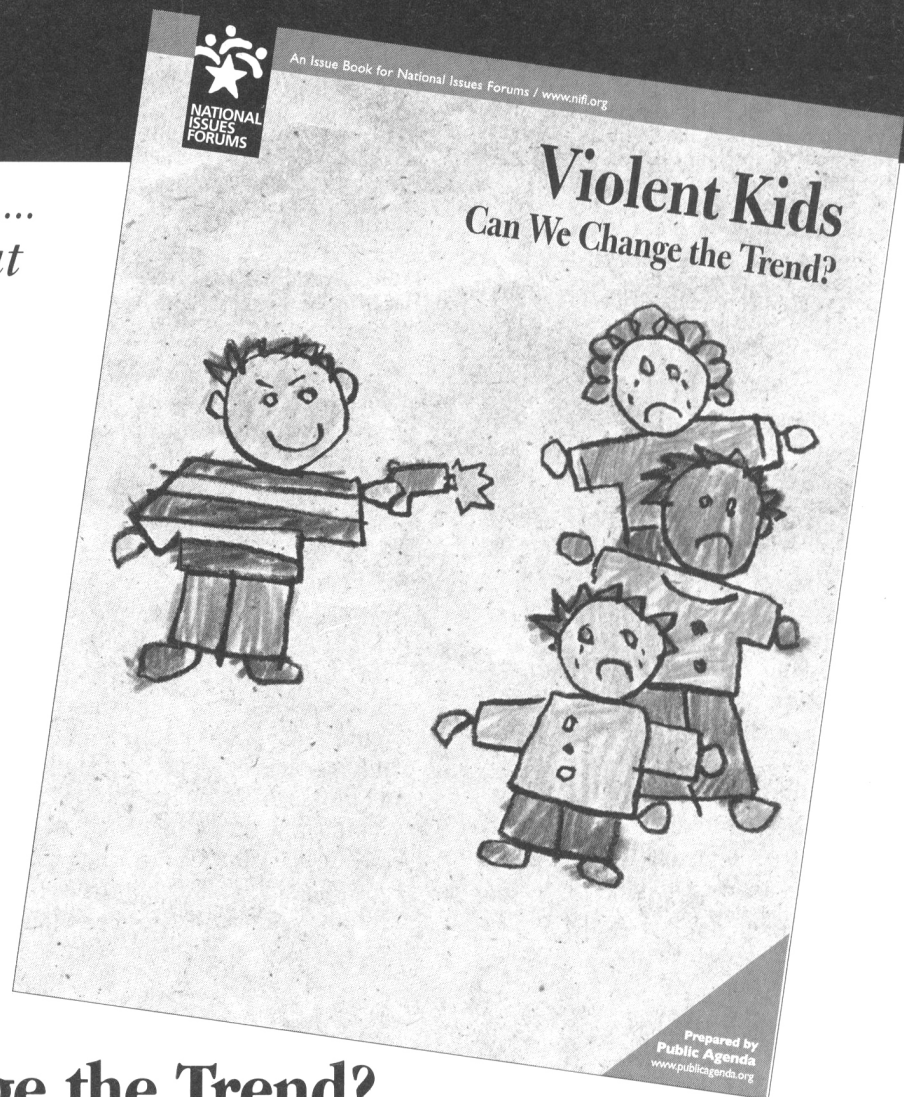
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