What Tom Coburn Got Right: Political Science and Democratic Accountability

Michael L. Frazer, Associate Professor of Government and Social Studies, Harvard University

mfrazer@gov.harvard.edu

Abstract: Recent limitations on federal funding of political science—spearheaded by Senator Tom Coburn—have raised the question of whether political scientists should be held publicly accountable for their work. I argue in this paper not only that they should, but that they should be held to stricter standards of accountability than those to which other scholars are held. Like all those wishing to draw on public funds, political scientists must give public justifications for their claim on these scarce resources. Yet the public is not only the patron of political science research; it is also its subject. As such, political scientists also have a special obligation to procure a civic, collective analogue to the informed consent which must be obtained whenever individuals are the subject of research. The appropriate form of accountability for political science would not involve scrutiny of individual studies by government officials, but collective democratic examination of the diffuse effects of political science on civic life.

1. **Is Turnabout Fair Play?**

While political scientists in the United States have always had a keen interest in the American Congress, in recent years Congress has also had an interest in them. Republican Senator Tom Coburn of Oklahoma first turned Congressional attention to the discipline in 2009, introducing an amendment to defund the NSF’s political science program. Coburn’s amendment was defeated, but a similar amendment was introduced in 2012 by Representative (now Senator) Jeff Flake of Arizona. It passed in the House largely along party lines, with overwhelming Republican support. Coburn then again introduced a similar amendment in the Senate. When he saw that it was unlikely to pass, Coburn softened his position somewhat. In March 2013 he introduced a new amendment to defund all political science research except that which the “ the NSF Director certifies… are vital to the national security or economic interests of the United States.” The NSF Director was instructed to “publish a statement of the reason for each certification… on the public website of the National Science Foundation.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This amendment made it into the full spending bill that was ultimately signed by the President.

Coburn’s legislation remained in effect for less than a year; funding for the political science program without these conditions was included in the 2014 budget. During this short period, grant applications made to the political science program were required to explain how the proposed project met one or both of the Coburn criteria. As soon as the law lapsed, this requirement was dropped, and grant proposals could return to merely discussing the two standard review criteria: “Intellectual Merits” and “Broader Impacts.”

As the dust settles over this episode, political scientists have now begun to use the distinctive tools of their discipline to try to understand why they have been targeted in this way.[[2]](#footnote-2) While positive political scientists struggle to figure out what causes Republicans to choose them as political targets, normative theorists can also contribute something to the investigation. While our methods of textual analysis and moral argumentation may not be able to determine what causes congressional Republicans like Coburn and Flake to single out political science, we can help determine what would justifysuch treatment of our discipline. Are there any good ethical reasons to hold political scientists to stricter standards of public accountability than those to which we hold other scholars?

One place we might look for good reasons to single out political science are in Coburn’s own arguments for his legislation. Even if we are suspicious that these arguments do not reflect Coburn’s genuine motivations, they may at least point us towards a plausible case for his views. Coburn certainly has a tenable case that, like all recipients of public funds, political scientists have an obligation to use these resources wisely, and should be held publicly accountable for doing so. Yet this does nothing to distinguish political scientists from the many other kinds of scholars who receive public support—not to mention the countless other recipients of our tax dollars for all sorts of other purposes.

In order to justify a focus on political science in particular, we must turn to a kind of argument that Coburn insists that he is not making—that Congress should hold political scientists accountable, not as their patron, but as their research subject. The Senator doth protest too much. Good arguments for enhanced public accountability for political science in particular can only be identified when we examine the ethical obligations that scholars have to the human subjects of their investigations. This examination will take us rather far from the text of Coburn’s speeches and statements on the subject. Our goal, however, is not to identify Coburn’s own reasons for his position on political science, but the best justification for his position.

1. **Public Patronage and Political Accountability**

Senator Coburn’s arguments concerning political science focus narrowly on the issue of the financial support that the discipline receives from the National Science Foundation. The American people have entrusted the NSF to spend their money wisely, and Coburn maintains in a 2009 statement that “the agency should be held accountable for how those funds are being spent.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Here, Coburn is siding firmly with one side in a long debate on political accountability for publicly-funded scientific research. Typically, scientists have favored delegating government decisions on science funding to scientists themselves. As specialists conducting work that the public cannot be expected to understand or appreciate, scientists can only be held accountable to their professional peers, not to the public at large or their elected representatives. For several decades following World War II, the public was basically willing to cede the point. Don K. Price, writing in 1965, worried that science was becoming “something very close to an establishment, in the old and proper sense of that word: a set of institutions supported by tax funds, but largely on faith, and without direct responsibility to political control.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

In the decade that followed, democratic forces were to mobilize against establishments of all types. The scientific establishment was no exception. Paul Feyerabend gave voice to this democratic push-back, insisting that scientists receiving public support must be held accountable to the popular will. “The objection that science is self-correcting and thus needs no outside interference overlooks… that in a democracy the self-correction of the whole… overrules the self-correction of the parts,” he writes. “Hence in a democracy local populations not only will, but also should, use the sciences in ways most suitable to them.”[[5]](#footnote-5) This chastened view of the proper relationship of scientists to the larger society that supports them survives into the twenty-first century. Philip Kitcher, in the most prominent recent book on the subject, insists that scientists should think of themselves, not as members of a “secular priesthood,” but as public servants, “capable of offering to the broader community something of genuine value.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Their public masters must then hold them accountable to insure that their valuable services are provided properly.

Kitcher understands, of course, “that the most likely consequence of holding inquiry to the standard of vulgar democracy would be a tyranny of the ignorant.”[[7]](#footnote-7) He therefore proposes a model of collaborative deliberation including both scientists and lay citizens working together to achieve shared epistemic and practical goals, an “enlightened democracy” in which “decisions are made by a group that receives tutoring from scientific experts and accepts input from all perspectives that are relatively widespread in society.” Only this model of collaborative democratic accountability, he argues, can produce what he calls a “well-ordered science.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Kitcher’s model is, he admits, rather utopian, but it can nonetheless serve a morally regulative function. “Scientists have the obligation to do what they can to nudge the practice of inquiry in their society closer to the state of well-ordered science,” Kitcher concludes, “and citizens have the responsibility to do what they can better to approximate democratic ideals.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

1. **Public Patronage of Political Science**

Coburn is well within the intellectual mainstream when he insists that the NSF be held politically accountable, just as all those who spend public funds must be held politically accountable. Next, however, he makes the further argument that its “political science program… does not withstand scrutiny and should be eliminated immediately.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Could Coburn be right that public support for political science cannot pass democratic muster, and that political research has no place in Kitcher’s vision of “well-ordered science”?

Perhaps there would be a place for political science in a time of plenty, Coburn argues, but not in our era of austerity. In a 2009 speech on the Senate floor, he complains that:

The political science community is hot and bothered because I would dare to say that maybe in a time of $1.4 trillion deficits, maybe at a time when we have 10 percent unemployment, maybe at a time when we are at the worst financial condition we have ever been in our country's history, maybe we ought not spend money asking the questions why politicians give vague answers, or how we can do tele-townhall meetings and raise our numbers. Maybe we ought not to spend this money on those kinds of things right now… So we have the political science community all in an uproar, not because I am against the study of political science but because I think now is not the time to spend money on that. Now is the time to spend money we absolutely have to spend, on things which are absolute necessities, as every family in America is making those decisions today.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Coburn repeats essentially the same argument is a 2013 letter to NSF Director Subra Suresh. “Studies of presidential executive power and Americans’ attitudes toward the Senate filibuster hold little promise to save an American’s life from a threatening condition or to advance America’s competitiveness in the world,” he writes.[[12]](#footnote-12) Insofar as Coburn insists that political science research should not be receiving public funding at this time it is because we live in an age of severely constrained public resources, resources that could rescue more Americans from sickness and poverty if they were spent elsewhere.

Again, Coburn finds himself well within the intellectual mainstream. Philosophers as well as politicians find it difficult to formulate a publicly acceptable moral argument for channeling money that could be spent saving lives to instead support finding solutions to seemingly arcane social-scientific puzzles.[[13]](#footnote-13) If there were instances in which political science research could plausibly save lives or alleviate human misery, then these could receive public funding under the terms of something like Coburn’s revised amendment. Cosmopolitan philosophers would probably prefer legislation with a less of a narrow focus on the military and economic interests of the United States, but we could easily substitute language about advancing the peace and prosperity of the world as a whole.

What is odd about Coburn’s position, however, is how much time and energy he has devoted to a field which consumes such a miniscule share of our public resources. The NSF Political Science Program has typically spent a total of about one million dollars annually in recent years. The entire Social, Behavioral and Economics (SBE) Directorate of which it is a part typically receives only 3% of the NSF’s total funding, which in turn receives only about 0.2% of the total federal budget. [[14]](#footnote-14) Admittedly, Coburn has sometimes suggested slashing the funding of the SBE Directorate as a whole rather than merely the Political Science Program, and it is the Directorate as a whole which is (at the time I am writing) currently being targeted by House Republicans. Even when he is discussing the SBE Directorate, however, Coburn’s focus remains squarely on political science. “Rather than ramping up the amount spent on political science and other social and behavioral research,” he wrote in a 2011 report, “the NSF’s mission should be redirected towards truly transformative sciences with practical uses outside of academic circles and clear benefits to mankind and the world.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Harping on the misuse of a million dollars annually out of a federal budget of nearly three trillion dollars—that is, focusing on 0.0001% of government expenditures—seems wildly disproportionate. Even if we move beyond direct public funding for political science research to consider the indirect funding it receives through government support of higher education and tax breaks for private philanthropy, the resources being channeled to political science are still dwarfed by those spent on other fields. Political scientists may indeed have an obligation to account for their use of public funds, but this obligation is one they share, not only with all other scholars, but also with all others receiving public funds of any kind. Others, receiving far greater sums, have not always been punctilious in meeting this obligation. It is therefore not merely odd, but also unfair, to single out political scientists for criticism. Even if Coburn were merely looking for a rhetorically powerful synecdoche for government waste in general, the federal budget includes countless other misappropriations of a million dollars or more that would prove even more shocking to the average American. I will leave it to historians and descriptive political scientists to see if they can explain the intense focus on political science by Coburn, Flake and their fellow Republicans. My question is a different one: Can anything justifyit?

1. **The Subjects of Political Science**

To find a justification for heightened scrutiny of political science, it is necessary to move beyond the subject of mere funding. Political science is no different from any other scholarly endeavor in receiving public support. Yet while the public and its elected representatives are patrons of fields from archeology to zoology, political science (and, to a certain extent, adjacent social sciences such as economics and sociology) can be distinguished from other disciplines in that the public and its elected representatives are also our subjects. Perhaps it is not in his role as a guardian of the public purse, but in his role as the human subject of scientific research, that Coburn has developed his animus against political science.

It would certainly be reasonable for Coburn to fear that our work might paint him and his colleagues in a bad light, perhaps even posing a small but not entirely insignificant threat to their chances of re-election (bracketing the fact that Coburn has now retired from the Senate). Yet Coburn explicitly disavows the notion that he is opposed to research which might negatively impact him. To the contrary, he insists in a 2009 floor speech that “if there ought to be any political science study done, it is: Why are Members of Congress such cowards? That is the thing we ought to study. We ought to study why we refuse to do the right thing because it puts our job at risk.”[[16]](#footnote-16) One wonders, of course, whether Coburn would actually welcome this study if some enterprising researchers were actually to conduct it.

Moreover, even if Coburn’s desire not to continue being a subject of social-scientific research is a plausible hypothesis for explaining his opposition to political science, it seems rather implausible that it could serve as a moral justification for it. If researchers were to uncover some truth about Congress that Coburn would prefer to keep hidden, and his constituents were to allow their findings to inform their electoral decisions, then our democracy would be all the better for it. When the interests of elected officials are in conflict with both scientific truth and the public good, we might think that right is clearly on the side of the true and the good, and not on the side of the officials.

Most researchers, however, believe that they have a moral obligation to adopt a rather different position with regard to their human subjects. In many fields, the principle that no study should proceed without first obtaining the informed consent of its subjects has taken on something of the status of sacred writ. Originating in clinical medical practice, the idea then spread to biomedical research, and from there to most other areas of research on human subjects, including the social sciences. It is enshrined in regulations and codes of professional conduct enforced by Institutional Review Boards at all research sites in the United States that receive federal funding.

Many social scientists complain that this is simply one of many instances of the inappropriate application of bioethical principles outside of their proper sphere.[[17]](#footnote-17) Yet the mere fact that the moral imperative to obtain informed consent from research subjects originated in medicine does nothing to establish whether or not it ought to also apply in political science and the adjacent social sciences, let alone what alternative principles might be more applicable.

There has been a growing literature on social science ethics since the editors of the first major collection on the subject complained in 1982 that “normative analyses of the ethical issues in research have long been marked by a preoccupation with biomedical experimentation.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Yet much of this literature consists of discussions of official regulations rather than the moral principles that ought to underlie them, and it still utterly dwarfed by the ever-more voluminous bioethics literature. It would be foolhardy to ignore the contributions that bioethicists have made to our understanding of the moral contours of the relationship between researchers and subjects, the protests of social scientists that the distinctive ethical issues raised in their research have been distorted by a bioethical paradigm notwithstanding.

1. **Informed Consent and Autonomy**

It would be impossible to survey everything that has been written on informed consent with an eye on its applicability (or lack thereof) to political science. Yet certain trends can be identified within the larger bioethical discussion. Ruth Faden and Tom Beauchamp note a transition over time from an emphasis on beneficence in the justification of informed consent requirements to an emphasis on autonomy. Initially, patients’ consent was sought in order to recruit them as active participants in their own medical care, which itself was valued because it improved medical outcomes. In recent decades, however, patients’ consent has come to be sought even when doing so leads to worse medical outcomes. Physicians are now committed to the principle that patients must be free to make their own choices even at the expense of their health. Once this principled commitment to autonomy was firmly entrenched in medical practice, it spread first to the adjacent field of biomedical research, and then into experimental psychology and other fields involving research on human subjects.[[19]](#footnote-19)

If we agree that autonomy is indeed the foundation of our commitment to informed consent, then there is no doubt that this value is applicable in the political sphere. The idea of autonomy itself originated in the political domain; only gradually did the enactment of legitimate laws by a self-governing polity come to function as a metaphor for the free determination of the beliefs, values, choices, and activities of a self-directed individual.[[20]](#footnote-20) Political analogies and metaphors are still omnipresent throughout the bioethical literature on autonomy and informed consent.[[21]](#footnote-21) If it is indeed incumbent upon all of us to respect autonomous agents, then this obligation might plausibly be thought to apply as much to the collective agency of self-governing democratic polities as it does to the individual agency of biomedical research subjects.

That said, informed consent requirements are only one way in which to enact respect for an agent’s autonomy, and there is no reason to assume that is the appropriate way to respect all autonomous agents in all contexts. As Neil Manson and Onora O’Neill observe, informed consent is not a mere sign of respect, but a tool designed for a specific purpose. It functions as a kind of moral waiver, enabling subjects to allow others to perform what would otherwise be an unacceptable violation of their autonomy. As such, it is merely a new application of the old legal doctrine of *volenti non fit iniuria*—that no injury is done to a willing person. Typically, subjects “use informed consent to waive others’ obligations not to violate their bodily integrity, not to infringe on other liberty rights, and not to intrude into private affairs.”[[22]](#footnote-22) It follows from this analysis that informed consent “has a role only where activity is already subject to ethical, legal or other requirements.” [[23]](#footnote-23) Researchers do not need a waivers to perform actions that they already have every right to do.

The question of whether political science research should be subject to informed consent requirements thus becomes a question of whether, without a proper waiver from its subjects, such research would somehow wrong them. Most of the time, it would not wrong them in any of the obvious ways that Manson and O’Neill mention. With the possible exception of a few studies on the biological basis of ideology, political research virtually never violates subjects’ bodily integrity. Some political science research may be based on private data about identifiable individuals and therefore pose a threat to subjects’ privacy rights. In these cases, informed consent requirements no different from those used in biomedical research are probably morally (and legally) required.

Yet most political science is based on public information. It does not seem possible to wrong someone merely by analyzing knowledge about them which is already a matter of public record—a record which anyone, researchers included, has a right to access.[[24]](#footnote-24) Government officials, in voluntarily taking on their distinct roles, have knowingly made themselves the subject of far more public information than is available about the rest of us. Accessing these records for research purposes cannot plausibly be said to wrong them in any way.

This is not to say that the analysis of publicly available information has no effect on those being studies. Individuals may experience some distress at learning that they are the subjects of research, even on the basis of public records. Knowing that they are research subjects may also affect their behavior. Such is certainly the case with survey research; there is ample evidence that merely asking about someone’s intentions to perform an action can change his or her subsequent actions. The “mere-measurement effect” is particularly well established with regard to consumer behavior in the market,[[25]](#footnote-25) but there is also evidence that it applies in other domains,[[26]](#footnote-26) including political decisions such as whether or not to vote in an election.[[27]](#footnote-27) Yet these effects on individual research subjects, however real they may be, do not seem to rise to the level of impermissible harms—harms, that is, which would be morally wrong in the absence of the sort of waiver that informed consent provides.

1. **Diffuse Harms**

Rather than merely focusing on the harmful effects of individual social-scientific studies on individual subjects, Hebert Kelman has argued we should pay attention to the possibility of rather different kinds of harms from research. What he calls “diffuse harms” are diffuse in two distinct senses: First, they generally do not accrue to individual research subjects, but to a larger social unit. Second, they generally cannot be “traced to a particular study, but represent the cumulative impact of a continuing line of research.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

Diffuse effects of this sort have been of keen interest to philosophers of social science. They observe that the theories we use to explain our social practices come, over time, to alter those very practices, as social actors adopt a self-understanding influenced by the research of social scientists.[[29]](#footnote-29) Many have noticed that the categories that scholars use to classify their subjects change how those subjects identify themselves, which in turn can profoundly shape their attitudes and behavior.[[30]](#footnote-30) Others point out that theories of action originally developed for social-scientific purposes may come, over time, to effect what ordinary people consider acceptable behavior. In tracing the history of the free rider problem, for example, Richard Tuck argues that “the prevalence in modern economics and political science of the idea that it is not instrumentally rational to collaborate in large groups may well have led people to adjust their conduct accordingly, and to treat actions as legitimate which in the late nineteenth century they would have taken to be illegitimate or imprudent.” More specifically, Tuck argues that “it is unlikely that low participation rates in modern Western democracies have no connection with fifty years of academic theorizing about the irrationality of voting.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

Many of the long-term, diffuse harms which political science research can cause are examples of what Alasdair MacIntyre calls “moral harms.” Moral harms are “ inflicted on someone when some course of action produces in that person a greater propensity to commit wrongs.”[[32]](#footnote-32) If we believe that democratic participation is a civic obligation, then the history of the decline of voting rates which Tuck traces is an example of precisely such a moral harm.

This decline in participation is, moreover, a direct threat to the political autonomy of the societies in which it has occurred. A polity is less self-governing when a majority of its citizens cease to play any role in its governance; its autonomy is damaged. This is quite different from the harm of most ethically impermissible research, which merely disrespects its subjects’ autonomy rather than directly damaging it. Unless an invasive procedure results in brain injury or death, a researcher can violate subjects’ bodily integrity without lessening their continued capacity for free choice. Yet regardless of which is worse, there is no disputing that both disrespect for, and damage to, an agent’s autonomy are serious moral wrongs. If a subject’s informed consent is indeed the only way to remove their moral impermissibility in cases of research on human individuals, then some analogous mechanism must be found to negate the impermissibility of what would otherwise either disrespect or damage collective autonomy.

To be sure, no single piece of political science research, considered in isolation, can be said to damage or disrespect collective autonomy in the way that a single nonconsensual medical procedure damages or disrespects individual autonomy. It is therefore difficult to see how a single study by political scientists could impermissibly harm its subjects in a way that would require the informed consent to render it permissible. The marginal contribution of each study to the diffuse harms that political science can cause might be compared to the marginal contribution each producer of carbon emissions makes to global warming—or, in an even closer analogy, the marginal contribution each citizen in a large democracy makes to an election result through their voting or abstention. In all these cases aggregate effect of many individually unobjectionable actions may produce morally disastrous results. Problems like global warming or civic apathy therefore require collective solutions. Similarly, in the case of political science, the sort of informed consideration of potential diffuse harms which is morally required cannot be a matter of individual subjects consenting to individual studies, but of entire polities offering their general support to broad lines of research about themselves.

1. **Group Consent**

Although scholars have not previously examined the possibility of collective subjects consenting to entire lines of research, there has been some thought given to the possibility of group consent to individual studies. Researchers are most likely to seek some form of group consent when they are dealing with underprivileged communities, particularly those which already have established institutions of self-governance. Many national ethics councils insist that indigenous tribes or nations—and not just indigenous individuals—have a right to offer or withhold informed consent to participation in research.[[33]](#footnote-33) Since these communities are disadvantaged vis-à-vis the larger society but relatively egalitarian internally, it is neither practically nor ethically problematic for a researcher to engage in shared, deliberative decision-making with the group as a whole, thus respecting its collective autonomy as well as the individual autonomy of its members.

The situation is much more complicated, however, when groups are either powerful externally or hierarchical internally. Respect for the autonomy of a collective agent might be thought to require respect for its standard decision-making procedures, however unfair or inegalitarian these might be. Researchers working in prisons, hospitals and other hierarchical institutions have often sought only the consent of the relevant authorities, not that of every member of the institution. Their decision has been widely criticized be ethicists. If anything, the most powerful members of a collectivity may be those whose consent to a study is the least important. For example, bioethicists are generally comfortable with deceptive studies in which researchers pose as patients in order to observe how they are treated. Those who have defended “pseudopatient” research maintain that the consent of hospital staff is not necessary when investigating whether they use their power over patients responsibly.[[34]](#footnote-34) Informed consent, they argue, is meant to respect the autonomy of vulnerable subjects, not to shield the powerful from scrutiny. Similar arguments can also be used to defend deceptive studies on the inner workings of corporations and other powerful collective agents.

If this reasoning holds within hospitals and board rooms, it might also hold for entire polities and their governing institutions. Elected representatives and other political officials do not have the right to withhold their consent from research on behalf of their constituents. Any attempt to do so would amount to simple censorship—a classic abuse of political power. What is more, public officials may not even have the right to withhold their consent to research as individual subjects—at least not if the research at hand is meant to investigate their behavior in their public roles. This view has been incorporated into some official codes of research ethics. In Canada, for example, the Tri-Council Policy Statement of 2003 specifically exempts “social science research that critically probes the inner workings of publicly accountable institutions” from informed consent requirements, as long as it poses no more than minimal risks to individuals.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Under this view, scholars engaged in research on those who wield public power might permissibly adopt what activist sociologists of a generation ago called “conflict methodology.” Informed consent need play no role in such studies arguing because “those in positions of public responsibility are a special category of individuals, individuals who would use the aspects of informed consent to protect themselves and their organizations from criticism or negative repercussions from the research.” For critically engaged scholars, the powerful “are not to be seen as collaborators in a cooperative research endeavor but as competitors in a conflict to determine and publicize the ‘truth.’”[[36]](#footnote-36)

The main object to conflict methodology, however, is that it turns social scientists into unaccountable guardians of the powerless against the powerful. Although the weapons wielded by scholars may not be anywhere near as damaging as those typically wielded by self-appointed vanguards seeking to emancipate those that they consider oppressed, the potential for abuse here is still genuinely troubling.[[37]](#footnote-37) To be sure, few critically engaged researchers would maintain that their role as advocates of truth and justice should excuse them from having to justify their work to anyone. Given the egalitarian values which motivate them, most would probably be happy to submit to a truly democratic form of political accountability. The problem is that making them accountable to the existing leaders of the imperfectly democratic—or even non-democratic—polities that they study is that the democratic credentials of these leaders are precisely what these scholars wish to question. If it were possible for the demos to offer its unmediated consent to their work that would be another matter, but the true voice of the people cannot be heard so easily.

1. **Substitutes for Informed Consent**

Political science is not unique in being unable to solicit the informed consent of subjects through standard procedures. Scholars in other disciplines have already devoted considerable intellectual energy to finding ways of meeting the spirit of informed consent requirements when the usual forms of consent are impossible. A variety of solutions have been proposed for different sorts of research

Psychologists in particular have devoted considerable ingenuity to finding ways to respect the autonomy of their research subjects even when they cannot obtain fully informed consent before conducting their experiments, typically because their experimental designs involve unavoidable deception. The most common solution has been to seek the informed consent of subject retrospectively, after a thorough debriefing and counseling to help counter any lingering ill effects caused by the deceptive study. Some psychologists also insist that some form of prospective consent be given before experiments are conducted. Subjects might be asked to sign a general agreement to participate in a series of studies which might or might not involve deception, but in which any deception that occurs will be fully revealed once the study is over and retrospective consent solicited.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Anthropologists and ethnographers have developed a rather different form of retrospective informed consent, one under which consent is seen as an ongoing process extending throughout an entire study rather than a discrete decision made at either its beginning or its end. An investigator entering an unfamiliar culture cannot know in advance what questions about it are appropriate for study or what expectations members may have about their participation in ethnographic research. As a rapport develops between researchers and informants, the contours of both the study as a whole and the role of subjects in its progress will emerge gradually, hopefully proving acceptable to all parties involved.[[39]](#footnote-39)

In other situations when advance informed consent by individual subjects is impossible, social scientists have sometimes sought some form of proxy consent. Proxies are most often used in medical contexts, when patients are regularly unable to offer informed consent to care on their own behalf. Parents offer consent on behalf of minors, and next of kin or explicitly authorized medical proxies can make decisions on the behalf of incapacitated adults. Research subjects can also explicitly authorize a proxy to consent to studies on their behalf. Individual subjects could name individual proxies, or entire pools of subjects could authorize a single ombudsman or committee to represent them as a group. On rare occasions, proxies are not chosen by subjects as their authorized representatives, but chosen by researchers as statistically representative. A pool of subjects can be divided into two demographically identical groups; one group is given full information on a (typically deceptive) study and asked if they would be willing to participate. If a high enough percentage of these statistically representative proxies would agree to the study, then research can proceed using the second of the two groups as subjects.[[40]](#footnote-40)

When patients are unable to offer or withhold consent on their own, and no proxy is available, medical practitioners typically rely on what they call “implied consent.” If an emergency procedure is necessary to save a patient’s life, this procedure can proceed on the assumption that anyone reasonable would consent to it if able to do so. As Faden and Beauchamp point out, however, “this ‘implication’ is based on a standard of the reasonable person, not the particular individual.”[[41]](#footnote-41) The consent involved is actually hypothetical rather than implied—based on reasoning about an imagined reasonable person rather than anything that can be deduced about the wishes of a particular patient.

Although we might worry that hypothetical consent cannot adequately perform a moral role for which actual consent is typically required, appeal to such standards of reasonableness is unavoidable in many areas of decision-making. They even play a role when explicit, individual informed consent is obtainable, governing what information a researcher owes the subject in question. Doctors cannot know their patients well enough to know what arcane facts might, for idiosyncratic reasons, prove relevant to a particular individual’s decision-making; researchers typically know even less about their individual subjects. In order for consent to be properly informed, lawyers and ethicists agree that a subject or patient must be provided with all information that, in their professional judgment, researchers or physicians determine that a reasonable person would find significant to the question at hand. Although consent itself may be actual or hypothetical, the claim that it is fully informed must always remain, at least in part, a hypothetical one.

Holding political scientists publicly accountable will require combining all of the substitutes for standard informed consent procedures outlined in the previous section. Since the diffuse effects of a research program cannot be fully known in advance, public discussion of them will have to be retrospective. Since the populace cannot speak directly, its views will have to be delivered by some kind of proxy. Some appeal to the hypothetical views of an imagined reasonable citizen will probably be unavoidable.

1. **Professional Obligations in Public Discourse**

In order for any mechanism of public accountability to function properly, knowledge about the work of political scientists must be widely disseminated. Political scientists have an obligation to take an active role as public educators; mere informational transparency about their research is not sufficient. As Manson and O’Neill complain, too often:

dissemination is equated with placing material in the public domain—which can often be done by the click of a mouse. Yet material that is disseminated in this way may not reach any relevant audience… Even if disseminated material reaches some audience, it may not be tailored to their capacities, with the result that they may not understand it or grasp its relevance… Transparency sets too lowa standard… Transparent dissemination need not be audience-sensitive; it need not meet epistemic or ethical standards; it need not lead to successful communicative transactions; it need not be open to others’ queries, checks or challenges.[[42]](#footnote-42)

In order to hold political scientists collectively accountable for their work, the public must not only be informed; it must also understand the relevant information. To be sure, much academic research is arcane or technical in ways that the public cannot understand easily. The same, however, is true of most biomedical research, but this does not absolve doctors from their obligation to inform patients as best they can before soliciting their consent. Bioethicists have long struggled with how doctors can successfully advance their patients’ understanding, and they have yet to reach an adequate solution to the problem.[[43]](#footnote-43) It is evident, however, that doctors and researchers have not fulfilled their moral obligation unless they have made a good faith attempt in the matter. Any intention to manipulate others through the strategic use of informational asymmetries is strictly forbidden. In an infamous example of what Manfred Stanley calls “decision by technocratic mystification,”[[44]](#footnote-44) researchers comparing the effects of LSD with a placebo did not tell subjects that they might be given “LSD,” but instead that the drug being tested was “lysergic acid diethylamide,” a chemical name which would not be recognized by most lay people. Although all the effects of “lysergic acid diethylamide” were described in clear detail, the decision to deliberately avoid the term “LSD” for fear that it would lead subject to refuse to participate in the study has been widely condemned in the bioethics literature.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Yet clearly conveying the methods and findings of their work in non-technical language is only the beginning of political scientists’ obligations. They must then actively solicit public feedback. There are many available means for doing so—from the use of statistically representative polls or focus groups as proxies for the wider public to engagement in mass media debates. Political scientists could even take inspiration from House Republicans, who created the website “YouCut” in 2010 to solicit public participation in the search for government waste. The first target was the NSF: Citizens were encouraged to search the NSF website to “identify grants that are wasteful or that you don’t think are a good use of taxpayer dollars.” Suggested search terms focused on the social sciences, particularly political science; they included “media,” “social norm,” “lawyers” and “stimulus.”[[46]](#footnote-46) Admittedly, the information available on the NSF website is ripe for misinterpretation, written as it is for purposes of peer review rather than for purposes of public discourse. Yet this is as much the fault of the scientific community as it is anyone else’s, since non-technical explanations of the nature and purpose of each grant-supported study could be provided for public appraisal. If anything, House Republicans could be criticized for being too soft on political scientists, soliciting criticism from the public only in its role as patron of the studies being funded, and not in its role as the subject of some of them.

One important implication of shifting our focus from the public’s role as patron of political science to its role as subject is that sometimes these two roles can be played by two different populaces. For some lines of research, political scientists will have to go two or more separate processes of political accountability: one for the polities that funded their research, and another for the polities that are its subject. Researchers might be excused from this latter obligation if they are studying authoritarian societies in which free public discussion is impossible. If political scientists do not have to solicit the consent of elected officials being studied their public roles, they surely are under no moral obligation to solicit the consent of unelected despots. Whenever possible, however, political scientists should engage in a continuing process of engagement with the foreign polities they study along the lines already developed by anthropologists. Since they typically studying larger social units than the small communities which are the subject of ethnographic research, political scientists may have to translate the direct, face-to-face rapport-building so valued by anthropologists in to a broader engagement with a nation’s civic discourse. In both cases, however, researchers must display considerable cultural sensitivity in justifying their work in terms familiar in the host culture, soliciting feedback according to subjects’ discursive norms rather than the researcher’s own.

Whether at home or abroad, however, political scientists need not maintain a pose of detached neutrality, but may be passionate advocates for the value of their research. The work itself may be framed as either objective science or engaged praxis; the debate as to which of these is more ethically and politically appropriate must wait for another occasion. When it comes to the process of justifying this work to its public patrons and subjects, however, a political scientist has all the rights and responsibilities of any individual advocating a particular partisan position. Rights of participation may be greater at home, while responsibilities of cultural sensitivity may be greater abroad, but in both cases individuals participating in public discourse can feel free to advocate their position in the strongest terms possible, as long as they are careful to avoid morally objectionable forms of manipulation, mystification or control. Bioethicists agree that, when a treatment is medically necessary, doctors may be morally blameworthy if they do not try to persuade their patients to give their consent through any non-manipulative means available.[[47]](#footnote-47) Political scientists would be equally blameworthy if they did not do their best to persuade the public of the value of socially necessary research.

There is a difficult question of what we should do if the best discursive efforts of political scientists do not succeed and the public remains adamantly opposed to their work. This situation needs to be carefully distinguished from one in which disapproval of political science is expressed through official channels, particularly when the democratic legitimacy of these channels is precisely what critical researchers are attempting to question. In the latter case, political scientists could feel free to resist the opposition of elected officials to their work by any morally acceptable means available. (The question of precisely which means are permissible would be best answered as part of a general theory of civil disobedience.) Even in the former case, it may still be permissible to resist genuine expressions of the popular will. Political scientists can claim a right, grounded in the principle of free expression, to continue their studies based on public records, each of which taken in isolation cannot be said to wrong its subjects.

Yet the public has rights as well. As a patron of political science, it may decrease or withdraw its support—whether by stopping research grants to political scientists, decreasing public support for the institutions of higher education that host political science departments, or by eliminating tax breaks for private support of the discipline. The public may also refuse to be a cooperative research subject. Individuals may refuse to participate in experiments or surveys; government agencies may stop collecting social statistics; records may remain public while being stored and formatted in ways that make them difficult or impossible to use as sources of social-scientific data. If we accept that democracies have a right to control movement across their borders, some states may even prohibit foreign scientists from gaining entry for purposes of archival or field research. None of these measures would amount to a ban on political science, but their cumulative effect would likely lead to the disappearance of the discipline over time. Since the potential diffuse harms of political science are also cumulative and long-term, this seems entirely appropriate.

Of course, simply because the public has a right to take a variety of measures which would lead to the disappearance of political science does not mean that it should actually pursue any of them. Political scientists may have very good arguments for why it should not, arguments stronger than best available case for why it should. Yet it is not the strongest argument which rules in a democracy; it is the people. If we wish the decisions of a popular sovereign to coincide with the rule of reason, then, as Kitcher observed, our only hope is to enlighten the people to the greatest extent possible.

Fortunately, when political scientists engage with popular discourse in order to meet the obligations owed to their patrons and subjects their contributions to public deliberation can also have the beneficial side-effect of helping to bring about democratic enlightenment. Feyerabend argues that, appearances to the contrary, “a full democratization of science… is not in conflict with science” precisely because participation by scientists in the give and take of democratic decision-making “is the best scientific education the public can get.”[[48]](#footnote-48) In this way, public justification of their work may not merely be a moral obligation which political scientists owe to the fellow citizens as their patrons and subjects; it may also be an obligation they owe to their students and colleagues to help promote the long-term survival of the discipline.

1. SA 65 to HR 933, Full-Year Continuing Appropriations Act of 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For an analysis of the determinants of votes in the House see, Joseph E. Uscinski and Casey A. Klofstad, “Determinants of Representatives’ Votes on the Flake Amendment to End National Science Foundation Funding of Political Science Research,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 46:3 (July 2013), pp. 557-561. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://coburn.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseActionFiles.View&FileStore\_id82180b1f-a03e-4600-a2e5-846640c2c880 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Don K. Price, *The Scientific Estate*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965, p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method*. Third Edition. New York: Verso, 1975/1993, p. 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Philip Kitcher, *Science, Truth and Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., p. 117 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., p. 133 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., p. 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 2009 Statement, op cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Congressional Record of Speech by Sen. Tom Coburn Thursday, November 5, 2009, accessed via capitolwords.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. March 12, 2013 Letter to Subra Suresh, available at http://www.coburn.senate.gov/public//index.cfm?a=Files.Serve&File\_id=60c99a67-2f0d-4c83-9b3d-1d65225d6abb. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See, for example, Veronique Munoz-Darde, “In the Face of Austerity: The Puzzle of Museums and Universities,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 21:2 (2013), pp. 221-242. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Uscinski and Klofstad, op. cit. p. 557 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Tom Coburn, “NSF: Under the Microscope,” April 2011, p. 53. Available at http://www.coburn.senate.gov/public//index.cfm?a=Files.Serve&File\_id=2dccf06d-65fe-4087-b58d-b43ff68987fa. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Speech of Thursday, November 5, 2009, op. cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. ““Cynically interpreted,” the authors of a textbook on research ethics observe, “funding support has been used coercively by biomedical agencies to apply their view of the world from other disciplines.” See Mark Israel and Iain Hay, *Research Ethics for Social Scientists.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006, p. 40. For a monograph-length defense of the historical accuracy of this claim, see Zachary M. Schrag, *Ethical Imperialism: Institutional Review Boards and the Social Sciences, 1965-2009*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. For an analysis of the damage it has done to the practice of social science, see Will C. van den Hoonard, *The Seduction of Ethics: Transforming the Social Sciences*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Tom L. Beauchamp, Ruth R. Fade, R. Jay Wallace, Jr. and Leroy Walters, eds. *Ethical Issues in Social Science Research*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ruth R. Faden and Tom L. Beauchamp, *A History and Theory of Informed Consent.* In Collaboration with Nancy M. P. King. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Michael L. Frazer, *The Enlightenment of Sympathy: Justice and the Moral Sentiments in the Eighteenth Century and Today*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 3-4. For a full history, see J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Faden and Beauchamp, op. cit., p. 238. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Neil C. Manson and Onora O’Neill, *Rethinking Informed Consent in Bioethics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 183, p. 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For a neo-Kantian argument to this effect, see Ruth Macklin, “The Problem of Adequate Disclosure in Social Science Research,” in Beauchamp, Faden, Wallace and Walters, op cit., p. 203. See also Paul Davidson Reynolds, *Ethics and Social Science Research*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1982, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See, e.g., Vicki G. Morwitz and Gavan J. Fitzsimons, “The Mere-Measurement Effect: Why Does Measuring Intentions Change Actual Behavior?” *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 14:1&2, 2004, pp. 64-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See, e.g., G. Godin, P. Sheeran, M. Conner and M. Germain, “Asking Questions Changes Behavior: Mere Measurement Effects on Frequency of Blood Donation,” *Health Psychology* 27:2, 2008, pp. 179-184 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. A. G. Greenwald, C. G. Carnot, R. Beach and B. Young, “Increased Voting Behavior by Asking People if they Expect to Vote,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 72, 1987, pp. 315-318. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Hebert C. Kelman, “Ethical Issues in Different Social Science Methods,” in Beauchamp, Faden, Wallace and Walters, pp. 90-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See the essays collected in Part I of Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 13-184. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See, for example, Ian Hacking, “The Looping Effects of Human Kinds,” in Dan Sperber, David Premack and Ann James Premack, eds. *Causal Cognition: A Multi-Disciplinary Debate*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 351-383, p. 369. See also Kitcher, op. cit., pp. 52-61. The *locus classicus* for these sort of arguments is, of course, the work of Michel Foucault; see especially *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage Books, 1966/1970/1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Richard Tuck, *Free Riding*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Alasdair MacIntyre, “Risk, Harm and Benefit Assessments as Instruments of Moral Evaluation,” in Beauchamp, Faden, Wallace and Walters, op. cit., p. 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See Israel and Hay, pp. 70-71. In New Zealand, the Maori Health Committee interprets the treaty of Waitangi as giving Maori *iwi* (nation or tribe)and *hapu* (extended family) these rights. The official reports of the Maori Health Committee can be found online at http://www.hrc.govt.nz/news-and-publications/publications/maori. Similar policies regarding research involving indigenous peoples exist in Australia and Canada. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See Kelman in Beauchamp, Faden, Wallace and Walters, p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Tri-Council (Medical Research Council of Canada, National Science and Engineering Research Council of Canada, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada), *Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*. Ottawa: Public Works and Government Services, 2003, as cited in Israel and Hay, p. 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Reynolds, p. 97. See R. J. Lundman and P. T. McFarlane, “Conflict Methodology: An Introduction and Preliminary Assessment,” *Sociological Quarterly* 17, pp. 502-512. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See Macklin in Beauchamp, Faden, Wallace and Walters, op. cit., p. 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See Reynolds, pp. 34-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. See Ibid., pp. 60-61 and Israel and Hay, op. cit., p. 64. For an official statement on the topic, see El Dorado Task Force. *Final Report.* American Anthropological Association, 2002. Available online at http://www.aaanet.org/edtf/final/preface.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. See D. Baumrind, “Principles of Ethical Conduct in the Treatment of Subjects: Reaction to the Draft Report of the Committee on Ethical Standards in Psychological Research,” *American Psychologist* 26:10 (1991), pp. 887-896. Baumrind suggests that 95 percent approval by proxies is a “safe standard.” For a discussion, see Reynolds, op. cit., pp. 34-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Faden and Beauchamp, p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Manson and O’Neill, op. cit., p. 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See Carl E. Schneider, *The Practice of Autonomy: Patients, Doctors and Medical Decisions*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, especially pp. 48-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Manfred Stanley, *The Technological Conscience: Survival and Dignity in an Age of Expertise*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978/1981,p. 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See “Ethical Standards for Psychological Research,” (Informally Known as “The Cook Commission Report,” *APA Monitor* 2 (1971), pp. 9-28, p. 14, as cited in Faden and Beauchamp, op. cit., p. 183. For a philosophical analysis of this case, see Manson and O’Neill, op. cit., pp. 12-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. See http://www.majorityleader.gov/YouCut/Review.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. See Faden and Beauchamp, p. 347. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Feyerabend, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)