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THERE ARE NO SCIENTIFIC SOLUTIONS TO STRONG PUBLIC LEADERSHIP

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The pandemic has focused us on the role experts should play in making public policy. Technical and scientific knowledge is indispensable in informing elected officials. Indeed, successful presidents, governors and mayors have an awareness of what they do not know, making their best decisions when they exhibit intellectual humility.

Yuval Levin, Director of Social, Cultural and Constitutional Studies at the right-leaning American Enterprise Institute reminds us, “the pandemic shows there are no purely technical solutions for problems that demand political leadership”. The paradigm that experts can determine solutions to governmental challenges based on the assumption that the facts speak for themselves has been a fantasy since the founding of the nation. In fact, the advice of scientists and experts are most needed when facts are challenged and analysis is embedded in experienced judgment assessing competing interpretations of data.

John Dewey, one of the most prominent American 20th century philosophers of democratic institutions opined, “no government by experts in which the masses do not have the chance to inform the experts as to their needs can be anything but an oligarchy managed in the interests of the few.”

The idea that scientific “expertise can be on top, and not on tap” has been a tenant of American liberalism. President John Kennedy observed, “the fact of the matter is that most of the problems, or at least many of them that we now face, are technical problems...they deal with questions which are beyond the comprehension of most men.” President Biden echoed this sentiment when he suggested that his Administration would summon science to solve the pandemic, climate crisis and other challenges.

Listening to scientists is an invaluable resource for elected officials, but it does not change the reality that compromise and trade-offs are the currency of our democratic system. One need not look any further than mayors, governors and the president trying to balance

science with the economic, social and political pressures to reopen schools and businesses.

Elected officials always benefit from the input of scientists and subject-matter experts. As Levin explains, “Experts are needed precisely when facts and figures do not speak for themselves and require analysis by people with a well-honed aptitude for seeing through fog.” But at the end of the day experts cannot lift the burden that elected officials have to make judgments with incomplete information to balance differing interests.

Illustrative of this can be found in an article Rob Atkinson, President of the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, wrote “Calling on the Wrong Profession: Time to Listen Less to Economists”. In it he writes, “it’s time for Washington to end its cult of economics and start to approach economic problems for what that are: institutional, sectoral and firm problems.” Atkinson is saying public officials should be paying more attention to folks who understand the real economy. Similar examples exist in other areas such as education as educators grapple with pandemic-driven learning losses.

Unfortunately, right-wing populists oppose experts. Princeton’s Jan-Werner Muller finds this concerted attack on professionals has made it easier for Trump to claim he knew better than leading scientists. This may have contributed to the number of COVID-19 fatalities in the United States.

In the current hyper-partisan environment followers of President Trump have voiced conspiracy theories about expert advice when it does not conform to their beliefs. They claim scientists purposely mislead decision-makers in order to promote their own agenda. Trump supporters may see scientific and technical institutions as the English politician Nigel Farage described as “another club of clever people who want to bully us.”

We must guard against our leaders falling prey to the false choice of either government by expert rule or by impulse-driven populism.

Gary Sasse is the Founding Director of the Hassenfeld Institute for Public Leadership at Bryant University