On lost falsifiability of experts

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OPINION

Honestly, there are too many political analyses to go around. However, quantity is not my concern, rather it's the quality of some of the said analyses that worry me. The former feeds the latter, though; Since there's a fierce competition to make yourself known and have your voice heard, some political analysts fall in the trap of covering all bases.

What is that trap? It's a futile attempt at making sure that your hypotheses and theories stand tall against any and all objections. Why it's futile? Because we're talking about human sciences, where there are innumerable, possibly unforeseeable variables at play for almost all outcomes. We cannot and would not put political figures and political situations in the lab to control unwanted variables from messing with the result.

One may rightfully ask what is wrong with covering all bases? After all, most of us were raised thinking that it's the highest standard that any scientific theory can achieve: to never be proven wrong, to have something to say to anything. Why would this be a problem? It's only a problem when it's an ad-hoc explanation to objections, when you find that a base has slipped your mind that must be covered lest you lose credibility. If adopted, this strategy is a disservice to you and your audience as it kills queries just to kill them, not to answer them.

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Before we go any further, it serves to see how this manifests itself. Most commonly, we see this in action when the analyst suddenly jumps from the micro-level to the macro-level in response to an objection in the micro-level or vice versa. For example, I have one particular Iranian analyst in mind who's routinely guilty of using the first kind of jump — but I'm sure you can find more once you see the signs. In making sense of what the United States or Israel does, he sometimes gets cornered by his own hypothesis and micro facts on the ground. To get out of that corner, he has a last-ditch escape: "You have to see things over a longer period of time." So, he frequently says, in effect, that Washington and Tel Aviv never make mistakes; rather they take one step back to take three steps forward in the future. You just have to wait and see it pay off some time in the future.

It may be so that a world power has drawn a master plan that fools everyone, everywhere to think that they are on the back foot, while they are a few steps ahead of the others. But, realistically, how possible is that? While such maneuvers look good in movies, they have historically been proven to backfire long before the intended results are achieved, if ever.

We're talking politics of the 21st century. It lives and dies by public opinion — in more or less democratic societies, at least, which is almost every society. A stunt like the one imagined by our big-brained analyst is bound to take a hit on the popularity of those political figures or parties that take the fall. Consequently, they may not stay long enough in the office to see their master plan pay off.

Furthermore, any plan that encompasses even one year, let alone several years, is taking a higher risk of falling apart compared to those that encompass a few days, weeks, or months. Why is that? Because situations change, rapidly. The chess pieces of politics move around so much that it's becoming less like chess and more like a full-blown sport such as football at this point.

The improbability of this argument aside, my main gripe is this: to bet that a regional power is going to somehow eventually make something out of a mess for itself is unfalsifiable; it's a safe enough bet. You just have to expand the said period as much as needed to include the positive development you seek. If it happens within a year, great; if not, wait till it happens two, three, or more years. You can go another route and claim that your earlier argument was justified if the US or Israel can be interpreted to gain anything however small. Basically, you can't lose when you make that argument, but no one wins either — not in time when it matters, at least. Your argument is flexible enough both in its temporal and evaluation criteria that it's unfalsifiable.

Remember, when the objection jumps from the micro-level to the macro-level, it is acceptable to continue the conversation at the macro-level if you so choose. It's only problematic when it's the theorist who responds in macro to a question that is still in micro. One such objection in the case above may be this: "But the White House itself has admitted mistake and full responsibility here."

Per the reasons above about the situation of 21st-century politics, this objection must figuratively be a "slam dunk." However, we still see experts try to wiggle out of it by broadening the temporal or spatial scales. I'm all for learning from history, but this feels more like finding a horse that performs reliably in horses, betting on its future, and being sure that you would win decisively at least half the time and win the other half if you move the goalpost.

What about when the analysis suddenly jumps from the macro-level to the micro-level? Consider that two experts are discussing the effectiveness of a country's economic policy. Expert A objects that the policy is not working and needs to be changed as it has specific detrimental long-term effects. Expert B responds, "What constitutes 'working' is subjective and depends on individual perspectives." Expert B is not wrong but his (probably intentional) lack of criteria for evaluation is killing the discussion. If he gets his way, we should stop talking about such issues altogether as there are always some who are benefitting from a policy or are oblivious to its effects.

This is, in effect, muddying the waters, and it's more prevalent than you think. Just look at how much Donald Trump cites anecdotes to prove his views and policies are correct and those of his predecessors' were horrible.

> Your political arguments and analyses must be falsifiable; otherwise, you are just being egoistic to save your skin. There has to be a metric, a criterion, by which we could say that you were wrong. So, make some valuable observations, draw a line in the sand, and in the off-chance that you're wrong, let yourself be proven wrong. It's not the end of the world. The audience wants to get something out of reading your op-eds and interviews, not to be as lost among facts and views as they were before.

For example, on March 13, 2017, the US president held a White House listening session on the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) and Republican efforts to repeal it. During the session, Trump stated, "The press is making Obamacare look so good... The fact is, Obamacare is a disaster." To illustrate his point, he invited around a dozen individuals who claimed to be negatively affected by Obamacare, including a woman from Arizona whose premiums increased, a Democrat opposed to abortion funding, and a man from Tennessee considering switching to his wife's insurance due to rapid premium increases.

One can debate the veracity of the claims of these people, but that would be hypocritical. If there's anything I would like to do is to promote believing in what the people say over what they may secretly intend. So, instead of debating that and getting stuck in an unconstructive and rather accusatory loop, I would point out that Trump's appeal at anecdotal evidence is unfalsifiable — not that it actually is, but that it is not the route that we would go and not the route that achieves anything. Why would it not achieve anything? Because by the same logic, the proponents of the said policy (Obamacare) could resort to anecdotal rebutting as well — and maybe even better.

You, as someone with certain views on politics, have to take a stance. You can't be undermining their own arguments just to make them watertight. Noticing and accounting for complexities and nuances is fine but don't overdo it and play both sides. To hear someone say, "I could be wrong" or "I guess we'll see," is to realize that the speaker does not have a way out of everything beforehand — and that is so rare and valuable these days.

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And I'm not saying that you should go around insulting people and taking harsh stances. There's a happy medium. Sometimes, finding this medium seemingly boils down to this rule of thumb: don't assume (and convey) a sense of superiority over the audience. You, a human political (aspiring) expert, cannot possibly know everything. Your debater, your audience, and even the subjects of your analyses are human as well, and the same applies to them. Not only it's fine to allow the possibility of being wrong, but it's also unintuitively proper and laudable. So, don't go around finding a rebuttal to every objection; chances are you are testing the limits of what is falsifiable and ultimately, useful.

Then-chief of staff of Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Herzi Halevi acknowledges failures surrounding Hamas's October 7 attack, on October 12, 2023.
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