



Public Policy in an Uncertain World: Analysis and Decisions

Charles F. Manski

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Public policy advocates routinely assert that “research has shown” a particular policy to be desirable. But how reliable is the analysis in the research they invoke? And how does that analysis affect the way policy is made, on issues ranging from vaccination to minimum wage to FDA drug approval? Charles Manski argues here that current policy is based on untrustworthy analysis. By failing to account for uncertainty in an unpredictable world, policy analysis misleads policy makers with expressions of certitude. *Public Policy in an Uncertain World* critiques the status quo and offers an innovation to improve how policy research is conducted and how policy makers use research.

Consumers of policy analysis, whether civil servants, journalists, or concerned citizens, need to understand research methodology well enough to properly assess reported findings. In the current model, policy researchers base their predictions on strong assumptions. But as Manski demonstrates, strong assumptions lead to less credible predictions than weaker ones. His alternative approach takes account of uncertainty and thereby moves policy analysis away from incredible certitude and toward honest portrayal of partial knowledge. Manski describes analysis of research on such topics as the effect of the death penalty on homicide, of unemployment insurance on job-seeking, and of preschooling on high school graduation. And he uses other real-world scenarios to illustrate the course he recommends, in which policy makers form reasonable decisions based on partial knowledge of outcomes, and journalists evaluate research claims more closely, with a skeptical eye toward expressions of certitude.

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