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Demand- and Supply-Side Factors in Government's Performance as a Problem-Solving Institution

ISPS Working Paper

Prepared for the Workshop on Governments and the Politics of Problem-Solving
December 5-6, 2024
ISPS ID 25-31

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Alan S. Gerber and Eric M. Patashnik

Abstract

The essay identifies factors on both the demand- and supply-sides of the political market that constrain problem-solving in modern American government in sectors such as education, healthcare and housing. These factors include the lack of incentives for policy entrepreneurship to generate demand among voters and mass publics for good public policy; the belief of highly influential economic elites that they are insulated from many of the problems affecting everyday citizens; the power of concentrated interests; partisan polarization; missing state capacity; cultural differences between academia and government that impede knowledge transfer; and a misalignment between the behavior of professional groups and the public interest.

Key Words

Problem solving
Government performance
State capacity
Political entrepreneurship
Partisan polarization
The professions

We thank David Mayhew for comments on an earlier draft. We also appreciate the helpful feedback of Matt Grossmann, Roberta Romano and Steve Teles. This essay is an issue brief prepared for a conference. Our thinking on this subject is evolving and we welcome suggestions and criticisms which will be reflected in subsequent work.

Many people hold in their heads a simple and appealing model of how modern society advances. We call it the "folk theory of societal progress."[1] The theory holds that scientists, engineers, physicians and other experts use their knowledge and professional training to develop insights into the management of a wide variety of tasks from building bridges and treating cancer to managing the money supply and preventing cyberattacks. Expert views are codified into best practices by universities, professional societies and government panels and then become embedded in the standard operating procedures of bureaucracies, hospitals, schools, and other institutions. When gaps between practice and evidence are large and persistent, professionals identify and address them without undue delay. In sum, the theory presumes that the institutional arrangements and practices on which citizens rely are not perfect but *generally* well-functioning. Widely heard phrases like "doctor knows best," "trust the teachers" and "follow the science" signal that many people—especially college graduates who are likely to be knowledge workers themselves (Grossmann and Hopkins 2024)—possess an intuitive belief in the folk theory of societal progress.

Unfortunately, the folk theory of societal progress is too sanguine. It fails to account for *persistent* deviations from best practice and for the lack of investment in both problem identification and the development and implementation of methods of improvement. Key institutions with public service missions can fail at their core missions for long periods of time without triggering corrective action. Consider the following illustrative examples:

- Life expectancy in the United States is more than four years below other advanced nations. Although the U.S. spends far more per capita than any other wealthy country on medical care, it has the highest rates of "preventable and treatable deaths for all ages" (Blumenthal et al. 2024, 12). Every demographic group is vulnerable to the U.S. healthcare system's underperformance, including affluent white citizens (Emmanuel et al. 2020). One of the many sources of underperformance in U.S. health care is waste. A great deal of medical spending has low value and does little to improve health outcomes (Cutler 2018). It is common for doctors to prescribe diagnostic tests, treatments and procedures that are ineffective or even harmful (Prasad and Cifu 2019). According to some estimates, "less than half—perhaps well less than half—of all clinical decisions are supported by sufficient evidence" about what works best for patients (Institute of Medicine 2011, 97).

- The U.S. struggles to build things (e.g. highways, bridges, charging stations for elective vehicles) on time and at reasonable cost Dunkleman 2025; Klein and Thompson 2025). It costs more than 2.5 times as much per mile to build urban-transit infrastructure in the U.S. than in the average wealthy democracy, and long project delays are common (Liscow 2024).

- Four in ten fourth graders have "below basic" readings skills, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Goldstein 2025). Low levels of reading proficiency have persisted for decades, suggesting a "large-scale and

[1] We borrow the term "folk theory" from Achen and Bartels (2016) who describe and debunk widely held beliefs and intuitions about democracy.

> long-standing failure to provide students in the U.S. with the early-literacy skills relevant to realizing their academic potential." (Novicoff and Dee 2025). Many schools have taught reading using discredited methods like "three-cueing" and "balanced literacy" despite a scientific consensus on the value of explicit instruction in phonics, letter knowledge and decoding (Hanford 2019; Goldstein 2022; Mervosh 2023). To their credit, 40 states have passed laws to promote the "science of reading," but successful implementation of evidence-based reading instruction requires the development of new instructional materials and investment in teachers' professional development and training, and it remains uncertain how much these reforms are changing "everyday classroom literacy practices" (Novicoff and Dee 2025, 2).

Of course, many things work reasonably well in American society. Most kids learn to read. When citizens pull fire alarms, fire trucks arrive. And the U.S. has produced a remarkable level of scientific and biomedical innovation over the past half century. Our argument, of course, is not that the U.S. is a failed state. But *relative to both the nation's economic and scientific potential and the track record of peer nations*, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the U.S. is underperforming in important ways, and that the lack of government problem solving is a key contributing factor.

There are many forces that push *against* government playing an energetic role addressing collective problems to improve societal performance.[2] Perhaps the most important is the existence of vested interests (Moe 2015). In virtually every domestic policy sector, there are well-organized groups that have a stake in the status quo. Vested interests gain materially or in other ways even if existing practices impose large costs on society (Anzia 2022). For example, homeowners benefit financially from restrictive zoning, even if limits on building and development worsen housing affordability for new entrants.

A critical question for understanding government's role as a problem-solving institution is not whether powerful forces maintaining the status quo exist but rather whether such forces can be overcome, for it is ultimately the relative weakness of the forces pulling government into a problem-solving role *combined* with the influence of existing stakeholders that explains why societal challenges persist (Patashnik, Gerber and Dowling 2020). By drawing attention to the conditions under which problem-solving forces emerge (or fail to emerge), our perspective adds weak public demand to the view that greed, "corrupt interests" and ideological fanaticism thwart good policymaking, Put simply, where is the outrage when important problems remain unaddressed?

What is Problem Solving?

Problem solving can be defined in several ways. Many political scientists adopt an *information processing* perspective, exploring how "governments detect, prioritize, and address a dynamic flow of changing challenges for the political system" (Jones and Baumgartner 2015, 7; Adler and Wilkerson 2012). The focus is on how policymakers gather and assimilate information

[2] In our framework, problem solving is not only about patching and filling. Missing a latent opportunity for improvement also counts as a "problem" (Bardach and Patashnik 2023).

about problems from diverse sources. We view problem solving through a different lens, defining it descriptively as a *style of policymaking* whose aim is "to generate a synergy of expertise, commitment, talent, and enthusiasm" to improve institutions or practices and, "thus, in effect, to promote 'good government'" (Moe 2019, 157). As a mode of governance with a focus on making good public policy, problem solving can be distinguished from other styles of policymaking, such as symbolic politics, distributive politics, and policymaking in which winners simply impose their preferences on losers based on ideological or partisan muscle (Mayhew 2006).

Problem solving requires creativity, knowledge, skill, and often a great deal of effort and persistence. Nothing guarantees that a democracy will generate the level of collective problem solving required to achieve its potential. Viewed from this perspective, problem solving can be conceptualized as an activity that is produced in a political market. On the demand side of this political market, the key issues are whether voters, organized groups and other actors will reward (though votes, campaign contributions, political support, etc.) problem solvers. On the supply-side, the issue is whether government officials as well as non-state actors involved in policymaking will use their resources and authority to produce solutions, that is, to define problems, generate and probe evidence, pass bills, and ensure successful implementation. In the remainder of this brief, we identify some factors that influence the degree to which demand-side actors provide rewards for problem solving and the degree to which supply-side actors develop components of problem-solving and receive rewards for doing so (Table 1).

Factors affecting demand-side actors

We examine factors that shape the problem-solving activities of five key demand-side actors: the mass public, demand-side policy entrepreneurs, the affluent, interest groups, and demand-side intellectuals. We highlight their distinguishing features and challenges they face in producing incentives for the production of solutions to societal problems.

Mass public

In a democracy, it is reasonable to expect that ordinary citizens will demand that government address problems facing the public. John Dewey famously argued that everyday citizens can tell if existing policies do not serve their interests, even if they lack the expertise to design solutions. "The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches," he argued, but "the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied" (Dewey 2012 [1927], 153-154). When people can *see* problems with their own eyes, public demand for problem solving can be quite high. For example, Rhode Islanders have recently been fuming about the traffic congestion and business disruptions caused by the state's closure of a

Table 1
Some Factors Influencing Problem-Solving Activity

Demand-side actors: people and groups who provide rewards for problem solving and "good government"

Actor	Limitations
Mass public	• May be unable to recognize when an institution or program is operating below potential • Citizens "morselize," treating each personal experience as an isolated instance rather than part of a larger pattern
Demand-side policy entrepreneurs	• Policy entrepreneurs may receive insufficient rewards for creating public demand for good government
Economic elites	• Insulated elites may lack a direct, personal stake in the government's problem-solving performance
Interest groups	• The problems of concentrated interests may not be aligned with broader societal interests
Demand-side intellectuals	• May have idiosyncratic preferences

Supply-side actors: people who produce evidence, good policy design, laws and implementation strategies

University-based academics	• The knowledge generated by academic career incentives may not track societal problems • Scholars are better at evaluating existing programs than at forecasting the consequences of new policies
Public officials	• Scarce resources may produce greater political returns when allocated to particularistic uses • May be unable to draw upon needed state capacity
Supply-side policy entrepreneurs	• Developing evidence may yield low personal rewards even when social value is great • Entrepreneurial activity may reflect partisan or ideological biases
Political parties	• Polarized, evenly matched parties possess weak incentives to cooperate on problem solving
Professions	• Professionals may use their expertise and authority to serve their own interests and autonomy rather than problem solving

major commuter bridge following a discovery that contractors had failed to correct the bridge's structural flaws over many years.[3]

But many societal problems are *not* "immediately evident to the senses" (Achen and Bartels 2016, 106). Citizens may be unable to tell if something is operating below potential—and may also not know whom to blame (Arnold 1990). There are well-known arguments for expecting weak demand for problem solving from mass publics, especially when problems are novel or complex. A citizen making a rational calculation about how much of their scarce time to invest in any effort (e.g., information gathering, civic participation) to demand a solution to a problem will often conclude that the costs of the investment exceed the expected benefit (Downs 1957). Moreover, even when problems are familiar and visible, people may fail to connect the problem to their political beliefs. To borrow a term from Robert Lane (1962), ordinary citizens often "morselize," treating each personal experience as an isolated instance rather than as a piece of a larger context or pattern with political significance (Mutz 1994). The nation's individualistic culture may reinforce this tendency. When Americans seek to understand why they are experiencing a problem, explanations that center self-blame are common (Kinder and Kieweit 1979, 522).

Demand-side policy entrepreneurs

Policy entrepreneurs play a key role in the policymaking process, investing their time, energy, resources and political reputation to generate policy change (Kingdon 1984; Mintrom 1997; Sheingate 2003). Here we focus on a subset of policy entrepreneurs who seek to create a public demand for good public policy. They can include both elected officials such as former Senator Bill Bradley (D-N.J.) (who helped generate public interest in reform of the tax code during the 1980s) and non-state actors like Ralph Nader (who mobilized public support for auto safety legislation in the 1960s).

A recent example of a non-state actor serving as a demand-side policy entrepreneur is journalist Emly Hanford's role in building a public constituency for improvements in K-12 reading instruction. This was a case where public demand might never have emerged had a policy entrepreneur not raised public awareness of an important problem. When elementary school students are struggling to read, many parents assume their kids are simply not trying hard enough—a conclusion that some schools might even encourage to deflect blame. It won't be immediately obvious to many parents that the problem might be that their kids' school is teaching reading using methods that researchers have found to be ineffective or even counterproductive. Only in the past few years have parents nationwide mobilized to demand that schools use evidence-based instructional approaches such as phonics. Many parents had their awareness raised by Hanford's popular podcast "Sold a Story" on how reading education went wrong. Since the podcast was broadcast in 2022, more than half the states have enacted reforms to align reading education with scientific research (Peak 2024). It is important to note that Hanford did not invent the "Science of Reading." She did not conduct studies of the

[3] But who should angry voters punish for this situation? And what should government do to prevent infrastructure failures in the future? And this is the *easy* case.

effectiveness of teaching phonics. Her important, entrepreneurial role was to raise public awareness, ensuring that lawmakers who introduced legislation to improve reading education would be politically rewarded for their efforts.

Demand-side entrepreneurs do not emerge automatically to build public support when they are needed, however. In previous work (Gerber and Patashnik 2006; Patashnik, Gerber and Dowling 2020) we developed a theory to explain why this is so. A policy entrepreneur often must shift public opinion and challenge vested interests, such as publishers who sold reading textbooks based on flawed instructional methods in the Hanford example mentioned above. This effort is akin to making a risky investment. If the investment goes bad, the entrepreneur's own reputation may suffer. But if the effort at persuasion succeeds, the entrepreneur may not obtain credit. In a commercial setting, innovations enjoy legal protections such as patents and trademarks. But in politics, there are no intellectual property rights for policy innovations (Sheingate 2003). The policy innovator may therefore capture only a small share of the credit, reducing the incentive to be a demand-side policy entrepreneur in the first place.

Economic elites

If the mass public (even with prompting by policy entrepreneurs) is an unreliable source of problem-solving demand, what about a key subset of citizens, economic elites? Economic elites have greater capacity to reward and punish than ordinary citizens (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012) but they may not prioritize the problems of the general public or may hold different views than the typical citizen.

Elites may be insulated from the direct costs of government failure. In a recent national opinion survey, Gerber et al. (2024) show that many affluent Americans (those with household incomes of $200k or more) believe their resources and social connections afford them a measure of personal insulation from the problems affecting ordinary citizens in areas such as education, healthcare and neighborhood safety. The rich are much more likely than other Americans to report that their social networks include powerful and knowledgeable people and that they can find help when they need it. While the relationship between elites' perceptions of self-insulation and their policy preferences requires further study, there may be limits to the degree to which the affluent can serve as a source of demand for a government that prioritizes solving the day-to-day problems affecting low- and middle-income people.

Interest groups

The interest group system can also generate demand for problem solving.[4] While scholars have long contended that the interest-group system has an upper-class bias (Schattschneider 1960), a key question is whether the parochial preferences of individual groups will aggregate into an overall demand for the adoption of "good" (e.g., wealth-maximizing) or "bad" (e.g., rent-seeking) policy solutions. Arguments on both sides of this question can be found in both economics and political science (for a review of the public choice literature, see Mitchell and Munger 1991).

[4] Interest groups can also contribute to the supply-side by bringing policymakers' attention to problem-solving opportunities and policy options (Lindblom and Woodhouse 1993).

On the optimistic side, in the spirit of Becker (1983), some scholars argue that the net effect of interest group pressure is to push policymakers to adopt policies that increase social welfare. For example, Kevin M. Esterling (2004) claims that interest groups, acting out of their own self-interest, will lobby policymakers to advance policies that are socially efficient and based on sound academic research. Pointing to illustrative examples like the adoption of emission-trading to solve the acid rain problem, Esterling (2004) argues that when a policy is known to be socially efficient at the margin, the interest groups who would benefit from the policy stand to gain more than other groups would lose. As a result, the benefitting groups will have a greater incentive to invest their resources in a lobbying campaign than will other constituencies, all else being equal (see also Wittman 1995).

Based on a formal model of interest-group competition, Becker (1983, 396) argues that policies that increase efficiency "are more likely to win out in the competition for influence" because such policies produce gains which can be distributed rather than deadweight costs—an economic twist on the conclusions of the original pluralists like Bentley and Truman. While Becker (1983) claimed that his analysis captures the effects of interest-group competition in many domains—including the production of public goods—his model seems most applicable to the pressure that government faces to tax and regulate efficiently. The model seems less relevant to understanding the political demand for policies to reduce massive yet less obvious inefficiencies that impose costs on large, dispersed constituencies. Why isn't there a major public-interest group promoting patients' collective interest in evidence-based medicine? Why is there no "Americans for Better Math Education Association"?

In many cases where society is performing below potential, existing arrangements impose costs on large, diffuse constituencies but provide concentrated benefits to a small number of people. Diffuse groups face relatively high costs of collective action (Olson 1971). These costs can sometimes be overcome through the provision of selective benefits, the support of patrons, and in other ways. Nonetheless, concentrated groups typically possess "immense advantages of organization, effort, and resources" when they vie for influence against dispersed constituencies (Wilson 1998, 566). To be sure, concentrated interests do not always win and policy monopolies on occasion collapse (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). But this basic imbalance of interest group forces implies that a strong political demand for a remedy may not automatically emerge when existing arrangements impose costs on large, diffuse constituencies. Further, when policymakers manage to pass general-interest reforms, and the measures fail to reconfigure coalitional patterns, the changes may not stick (Patashnik 2008).

Demand-side intellectuals

A final demand-side actor that merits attention is intellectuals. Intellectuals are people who "wield the power of the spoken and the written word" (Schumpeter 2008, 147). Their influence on policy debates can be considerable, especially when they provide the "conceptual language" and the "empirical examples" that shape the standards invoked when determining that some situation is a "problem" (Wilson 1981, 33). Demand-side intellectuals can play an important role in helping the public recognize a problem and connect performance to specific policymakers and other actors who should be rewarded or punished. However, it is unclear what

determines the number and focus of intellectuals and if their number and focus are well-matched to the production of ideas that promote social welfare.

In his classic 1942 book *Capitalism, Democracy and Socialism*, Schumpeter observed that intellectuals' views may not be well-grounded. Intellectuals not only lack the "direct responsibility for practical affairs" but also "the first-hand knowledge" that only "experience can give." (Schumpeter 2008, 147). Further, while intellectuals can call attention to the problems of other groups in society, they may have a special interest in the problems afflicting their own social class. Many intellectuals, Schumpeter argued, will find they are psychologically ill-equipped for manual occupations yet be unable to obtain positions for which they believe they are well suited. This mismatch between intellectuals' self-identity and their economic status can generate a sense of resentment, which may lead intellectuals to become not merely advocates of reform but biased against the capitalist system itself (Schumpeter 2008).

Factors affecting supply-side actors

The supply side of problem solving includes the production of evidence, the crafting and passing of legislation, and ensuring successful implementation. Key barriers include the limitations of the academic research enterprise, the inability of public officials to draw upon state capacity, the disincentives for problem solving generated by the party system, and the misalignment of the goals and practices of elite professions.

University-based academics

There has been a large increase in the supply of academic research over the past half century. Not only are there more studies than ever before, but the quality and rigor of social science research has improved (Grossmann 2021). This essay is in some ways inspired by the mismatch between the reform of policy and practices on the one hand and the supply of evidence about performance shortfalls on the other.

There are greater professional incentives for academics to advance the research frontier than to produce work that is aimed at being useful to policymakers. The research that garners citations and scholarly prizes may not address the challenges most important to society. This is especially so if the liberal slant of academia narrows the set of problems (or potential solutions) that receive attention. Second, even when academia produces knowledge directly relevant to societal problem solving, it may not get in policymakers' hands. Academia and government have distinct norms and organizational cultures, and these differences can impede the process of knowledge transfer (Glied 2018). Finally, scholars are generally much better at evaluating policies that have already been implemented than they are at forecasting what may happen if a new policy is enacted (Wilson 1981).

Public officials

Public officials are key suppliers of problem-solving activity. They craft solutions, check the plausibility of ideas from intellectuals and activists, and look out for long-term effects and unintended consequences. Most public officials like to do what is pleasing and what can be done

quickly, easily and lawfully. This is a hard job, and many of the problems modern American government confronts do not admit to easy fixes.[5] Solving complex national problems often requires subject matter expertise. For the individual politician, the elected returns to general goods like policy improvement may be small. In a 2015 public opinion survey, only 23 percent of respondents stated that they were much or a great deal more likely to vote for politician who "is a genuine expert on a policy area that is important to the nation as a whole but is not of special importance to your district" (Patashnik, Gerber and Dowling 2020, 118).

Even if public officials possess an incentive to tackle problems, they may be unable to draw upon the state capacity needed to serve the public (Johnson and Koyama 2017). In the post-war era, U.S. state capacity was relatively high, signaled by the federal governments' ability to carry out ambitious endeavors like building the interstate highway system and landing a man on the moon. In more recent decades, however, government dysfunction has been far more visible. To be sure, there have been some recent efforts to boost state capacity. For example, Congress adopted the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act to strengthen federal agencies' capacity to generate and use evidence. But these measures have failed to address the fundamental political causes of declining state capacity. On the left, progressives have built a larger administrative state to carry out an expanded policy agenda in areas like environmental protection, but in doing so they have imposed many new procedural rules and requirements. While the accretion of procedures was ostensibly intended to promote democratic accountability, it made it harder for government to implement policies successfully (Dunkleman 2025; Klein and Thompson 2025; Lindsey 202; Bagley 2019). On the right, anti-statism has been ascendent (Lindsey 2021). Even before the emergence of DOGE, Republicans had been waging a multi-decade campaign to sow public trust in government's ability to solve problems, defund public services and attack the legitimacy of the administrative state (Fried and Harris 2021). Viewed in this light, the second Trump administration's current effort to dismantle or weaken state capacity, politicize the civil service, and attack neutral expertise can be seen as the culmination of a long-term project.

Supply-side policy entrepreneurs

Policy entrepreneurs also can be found on the supply side of problem solving. Tasks here include generating evidence, developing and passing legislation and ensuring that policy solutions are successfully implemented. As with their demand-side counterparts, supply-side policy entrepreneurs can emerge from either government or civil society. Examples include the Cato Institute's development of a proposal to privatize Social Security during the George W. Bush administration and health expert Gail Wilensky's development of a plan for a center on research on the comparative effectiveness of medical treatments.

Supply-side policy entrepreneurship is challenging, time-consuming work. The rewards to a given actor for engaging in this work may be much lower than are available for alternative ways of allocating effort. For example, a public official considering investing in supply-side entrepreneurship to gain a reward from voters may conclude they are better off focusing their scarce energy and resources on constituent service. Another limitation is that the evidence,

[5] Thanks to David Mayhew on these points.

proposals and implementation strategies generated through supply-side entrepreneurship will be influenced by the ideological assumptions or commitments of the set of actors interested and trained to do this work, which may or may not be representative of those of the larger public.

Political parties

Two intertwined contemporary developments in the party system—growing polarization and heightened party competition—also make it more difficult for policymakers to solve problems. Passing measures to tackle important problems often requires supermajorities. When there is little overlap in policy preferences between the liberal and conservative parties, it becomes harder for party leaders to negotiate deals and reach bipartisan agreements (Binder 2003). In addition, polarization raises the stakes for parties of being in the majority or minority, fueling the rise of the permanent campaign. Politics becomes more conflictual, making the parties "less able to afford a hiatus between elections when governing takes precedence over electioneering" (Fiorina 2006, 245). Polarization can also undercut the degree to which the U.S. federal system can serve as a "laboratory of democracy" in which states experiment with different policy ideas and those which are discovered to work well diffuse to other states over time. In a polarized context, states may be unwilling to learn from the experiences of states with a different partisan leaning, biasing the search for solutions (Shipan and Volden 2021).

The close competitive balance between Democrats and Republicans in the United States today further weakens incentives for problem solving. As Frances Lee (2016) observes, heightened partisan competition creates strong incentives for the two parties to oppose one another *even when they do not have a substantive conflict*. Lee notes that addressing many challenges such as the need to raise the debt limit requires a willingness to accept tradeoffs. A minority party that only needs to win a few more seats to regain majority control has a strong incentive to force the majority party to take responsibly for difficult decisions and exploit any resulting backlash, while a majority party that is unable to secure bipartisan support for policy solutions may well prefer to kick problems down the road (Lee 2016, 207). Problem solving may be a bit easier when politics is less competitive, and control of the national government does not hang in the balance in every election. Finally, changes in the internal composition of each party may also be contributing to a waning of problem-solving activity on Capitol Hill. For example, as the center of gravity in the Democratic party has shifted from labor to a constellation of donors and progressive activist groups, the party coalition has changed its focus from delivering public services to embracing broader transformations in the national culture (Grossmann and Hopkins 2024).

The professions

A final constraint on the supply of problem-solving activity concerns the behavior of the professions. In modern society, responsibility for identifying societal problems and locating the best solutions largely falls to credentialed people trained in law, medicine, public health, and other specialized bodies of knowledge. Professionals have the potential to contribute expertise and authority to societal problem solving but without external demand they may not supply ideas or pressure for improved performance. In the absence of external rewards and punishment for their contribution to the solving of societal problems, their internal norms of professional groups

to serve society may be weak, and their collective action is often focused on professional concerns such as money and autonomy (Parsons 1949; Dzur 2008).

For example, Patashnik, Gerber and Dowling (2020) show that orthopedic medical societies resisted evidence showing that a common surgical procedure (arthroscopic debridement for knee arthritis) works no better than a placebo operation in which a surgeon merely pretends to operate. Medical societies used their political resources and authority to lobby the federal government not for research funding to resolve any lingering scientific uncertainty about the best way to treat this condition but instead for continued reimbursement of the procedure through Medicare. This is a common response of medical societies when studies challenge existing medical practices, and it appears to have broad support among rank-and-file physicians. For example, a 2015 survey of 750 U.S. physicians found that a majority believe that advocating for the economic interest of doctors in their practice area should be a priority of their medical society (Patashnik, Gerber and Dowling 2020, 102). In the same survey, almost 75 percent of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that when a medical study calls into questions the effectiveness of a treatment widely used in their specialization area, their society should "take an active role in critiquing the quality of the study and pointing out any weaknesses of the study." In sum, many doctors want the leaders of their profession to play an "attack dog" role when common medical practices come under scrutiny rather than simply advancing scientific understanding of treatment options (Patashnik, Gerber and Dowling 2020).

Another risk is that professionals may use their power to remake society in accordance with their own political values or ideology. Liberals outnumber conservatives in many professions. As educational polarization has increased, conservatives are becoming increasingly skeptical that the recommendations of professionals are in the public interest and should be followed (for survey evidence of conservative skepticism toward medical scientists and public health experts, see del Ponte, Gerber and Patashnik 2024). As Matt Grossmann and David A. Hopkins (2024, 243) argue, "Republicans at both the elite and mass levels have become less respectful of such figures. Instead, they suspect that credentialed specialists claiming intellectual authority use their status to impose their liberal values rather than offering objective, knowledge-driven assessments of societal problems and potential solutions." There is a basis for this skepticism. Some scientists and public health experts failed to show appropriate humility about their role during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some told "noble lies" (such as about the benefits of vaccine boosters for low-risk populations), and punished dissenters, even when those challenging prevailing views had evidence on their side (Macedo and Lee 2025).

Concluding thoughts

Our review of the factors that inhibit problem solving is selective. Many other factors on both the demand- and supply-sides shape a society's problem-solving performance, including decisions about whether to keep certain tasks within the political sphere or remove them by delegating authority to expert institutions like the Fed. We also focused on a limited number of actors. Several other actors not mentioned here merit careful attention, including the media. We have discussed demand- and supply-side factors separately, and the key issue is their interaction. When policymakers anticipate they will not be rewarded for problem solving, they will supply less. And when the government fails to contribute to problem solving, it is possible that demand-

side actors may lower their expectations, leading to a suboptimal equilibrium. We have focused on the amount of problem-solving activity without much attention to its *quality.* There is a difference between an actor being a busy problem solver and being a creative, effective and skillful one (see Mayhew 2006). A key task for political science is to develop better measures of problem-solving activity, quality and impact. This essay has focused on problem solving in the contemporary United States. It would be fruitful to perform a comparative, historical-institutional analysis, examining the experiences of other counties, places and time periods. A final matter for inquiry is whether the sluggish adoption of improvements across domains is due to a few big, general factors that impair problem solving or to many specific details of each case.

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