Richard L. Brodsky certainly offers insights of intrinsic worth into the elements of democratic theory that modulate the relationship between the public and government institutions in his article “Public Value Accounting: Establishing the Philosophical Basis.” At the heart of the search for public value as a measure of the success or failure of government is a conscious, if unspoken, effort to shift from objective to subjective metrics. Efforts to elevate value-based, democratic expressions and evaluations seem self-evidently good. They are not hard to visualize in an academic setting. But American political institutions have an embedded preference for objective standards that will not easily be replaced.

This entrenched preference is most visible in two areas: the long-standing use of gross domestic product (GDP) as the default measurement of performance and the relatively newer insistence on standardized testing for the evaluation of educational performance by teachers.

With respect to GDP, it has been and remains the preeminent metric, with direct consequences for programmatic decisions and enormous political consequences in elections. Its limitations are obvious and were even acknowledged by its intellectual parent, Simon Kuznets, who said in 1934, “The welfare of a nation can scarcely be inferred from a measurement of national income as defined by the GDP” (Kuznets 1934, 7).

There has been broad dissatisfaction with GDP as a measure of government success. It ignores distributional consequences and leaves value-based policies with no competing argument. How should we assess the success of the food stamp program, for example?

In the face of such concerns, a number of academic and state-based efforts are being made to substitute a Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI), which assesses “26 variables related to economic, social, and environmental progress. Economic indicators include inequality and the cost of unemployment. Environmental indicators include the cost of water pollution, air pollution, climate change, wetlands depletion, forest cover change, and non-renewable energy resources. Social indicators include the value of housework, higher education and volunteer work as well as the cost of commuting and crime” (Daly and McElwee 2014).

To an extent, GPI does objectify what we would otherwise think of as value-based metrics by costing out things such as pollution and climate change. But it indicates that issues as fluid as inequality, homemaking, volunteer work, and use of renewable energy sources also have a place in the effort to judge the success of government programs. The movement is small but building, and it will likely be the practical expression of the concern for value-based metrics asserted by Moore.

The bitter divisions about standardized testing in education have pitted policy makers, elected officials, teachers, parents, and schools against each other in many states. Enshrined in law in the Race to the Top program and the No Child Left Behind Act, standardized testing has been subject to scathing criticism, led by noted educator Diane Ravitch. “Evaluating teachers in relation to student test scores will have many adverse consequences. . . more time and resources will be devoted to raising scores on these tests. The curriculum will be narrowed even more. . . because of the link between wages and scores. There will be even less time available for the arts, science, history, civics, foreign language, even physical education. Teachers will teach to the test. There will be more cheating, more gaming the system” (Ravitch 2010).

Even as parents withdraw their children from the testing regimen, no value-based countermetric has emerged as an alternative. Use of portfolios, grades, and other evaluation techniques for students and teachers does not have the simplicity and clarity of test scores.
Notwithstanding the value of Moore’s contribution, no matter how the relevant public is called into being, and no matter how it expresses itself, the drive for objective measurement of government programs stands as a towering obstacle to change. Wide use of GPI and the development of alternative assessment techniques in education are practical requirements for a continued discussion of the relationship between the governed and the governing in American society.

An effort to construct a theory of “public value” also has intrinsic value. But it similarly bumps into the practical exercise of political and governmental power by forces that prefer objective metrics to subjective values. An explicit recognition of this conflict is the first step to resolving it.

References

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