

Policy Brief Proposal

Launch an Informed Conversation on How to Prevent Over-Caution: AN INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGE

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The Pandemic almost literally demands that we finally, effectively address the “Over-Caution” tendency of electoral politics. We are “running out of other people’s money.” Even before the 2020 deep recession (I’m an optimist), and multi-trillion-dollar deficit, the federal government was paying a nearly three percentage point risk premium on debt; three percent more than Germany. Clearly, lenders are beginning to have reservations about buying US Government bonds. We can no longer afford to indulge public officials’ laser focus on the emergency du jour.

The most prominent explanation of that tendency is in Al Gore’s (1993) “Reinventing Government,” where Vice President Gore pointed out that routine inefficiency is ignored; scandal avoidance is paramount. As Emily Chamlee-Wright recently [pointed out](#) through her Hurricane Katrina examples, scandal avoidance (“Over-Caution”) is very costly, and normal. ‘If it’ll save just one more life, . . . it’s worth it.’ Not necessarily! IN CURRENT CIRCUMSTANCES, public officials are eager (desperate?) to not be seen as responsible for an excess Pandemic death; largely [disregarding deaths that result from lockdown](#). See also: <https://reason.com/2020/04/27/for-better-health-find-a-cure-for-government> and [Stop Trying To Create a Zero-Risk Society – Reason.com](#).

In nearly pure ECON lingo, the issue to be addressed – the needed conversation – by the proposed Policy Brief is how to move the political response optimum - during emergencies where perceived failure to act and heartlessness is SCANDALOUS - from close to $MSB = 0$, much closer to the efficiency-maximizing $MSB = MSC$; where ‘M’ stands for marginal, ‘S’ for social, and ‘B’ and ‘C’ for benefits and costs, respectively.

Usually, when we determine that a typical tendency of the political process often produces unacceptable outcomes, we seek fixes in the form of institution changes; incentives and restrictions to curb costly pressures. The locus of such fixes could range from the US Constitution to municipal ordinances. I propose to base a Policy Brief on a search of the literature to locate existing policies focused on risk comparison, and identify ideas, derive new ideas, and identify key questions to be addressed.

I arrive with some notions that will influence my search, and perhaps my recommendations for the needed conversation topics. Lives are not lost or ‘saved.’ They are curtailed or prolonged. Life-years lost or added are not necessarily equally valuable. A lot of people are not aware that routine policymaking already accepts that ‘life’ does not have infinite value. It can’t! Many people will be horrified that, for example, this website (<http://pandemiccosts.com/>) uses \$4.7 million for the value of a saved life. That such valuation is done – that it must be done (perhaps better) – needs much wider recognition, and through an automatic medium other than announcement by a public

official, which will not happen because it will be seen as callous, especially alongside the early body count of the latest disaster.

An assessment by the nascent Institute for Objective Policy Assessment (IOPA) will include at least one external review, preferably by someone likely to have a different perspective than the author of the Policy Brief (me – JM). Please include a \$500 reviewer fee in what you propose as the stipend for this proposed Policy Brief. With your permission, the Policy Brief, including the review, and reply to the review, will be posted to an IOPA Conversation Forum for further issue assessment, and to help launch the needed national and international conversation on valuing human life-years, and risk assessment and comparison.