# Politics in evaluation: Politically responsive evaluation in high stakes environments

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## ABSTRACT

The role of politics has often been discussed in evaluation theory and practice. The political influence of the situation can have major effects on the evaluation design, approach and methods. Politics also has the potential to influence the decisions made from the evaluation findings. The current study focuses on the influence of the political context on stakeholder decision making. Utilizing a simulation scenario, this study compares stakeholder decision making in high and low stakes evaluation contexts. Findings suggest that high stakes political environments are more likely than low stakes environments to lead to reduced reliance on technically appropriate measures and increased dependence on measures better reflect the broader political environment.

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## 1. Politics in evaluation

### 1.1. Politically responsive evaluation in high stakes environments

The nature of evaluation settings often place evaluators in a position of having to balance stakeholder needs with technical feasibility (Greene, 1990). To negotiate these demands many evaluation theories offer guidelines for practicing evaluators. Rossi, Freemen, and Lipsy (1999) discuss the impact of political urgency on evaluation deadlines, and suggest limiting the use of technically challenging evaluation designs to pilot programs rather than large scale evaluations due to the substantial time commitment and sever lack of evaluator control. Patton (2012) advocates increased stakeholder involvement in the evaluation process to improve design credibility and eventual evaluation utilization. Guba and Lincoln (1989) advise evaluators to include the perspectives of different stakeholders when valuing the design and final results of any given evaluation. They argue that each stakeholder views the evaluation with differing realities and political perspectives, which require evaluator acknowledgment. Although many of these theoretical approaches offer overlapping and sometimes contradictory advice, at their core they recognize the need for constant contextual and political awareness during the evaluation process.

Even before an evaluation begins, the act of deciding whether something should be evaluated is a political act (Taylor & Balloch, 2005). During the evaluation itself, the consequences of evaluator actions can affect downstream stakeholders not immediately present. Thus, more so than other types of research, the environment of evaluations can lead to political situations (O'Brien, Payne, Nolan, & Ingleton, 2010). Indeed, since the development of modern evaluation in the 1960s and 1970s, many evaluators have acknowledged the political inherency of the process (Datta, 2011). Most social programs were spawned from legislative politics, with funding, resources, and accountability indirectly or directly tied to political constituencies (Weiss, 1993), and the need to better understand the political environment that programs operate in is important for the continued feasibility of the evaluation. Analysis of political implications should occur throughout the evaluation process to help evaluators understand the interests of various stakeholders and their potential reactions to evaluator actions (Patton, 1987; Palumbo, 1987; Weiss, 1993). This is especially crucial as methods and measures are being selected because this stage in an evaluation often combines the evaluator's technical expertise and judgment with the values and interests of various stakeholder groups. If the methods and measures are not credible to stakeholders, regardless of technical soundness, then their potential to move stakeholders to action can be severely limited.

Evaluators are also influenced by the political environment surrounding the evaluation (removed for anonymity) conducted an empirical study examining evaluator methodological reactions

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to stakeholder feedback. The results suggested that evaluation designs were changed in the face of stakeholder feedback (especially when those with the most political influence [i.e., decision makers] opposed the evaluation design) to improve stakeholder buy-in and reduce resistance. The changes did not occur for technical reasons but for mostly political ones. This is a relevant finding that was replicated by Cullen, Coryn, and Rugh (2011) who surveyed participatory evaluators working in international development evaluations. The survey asked them about the consequences of involving stakeholders in the evaluation process. The findings suggested that having stakeholder participation helped improve understanding of the political environment surrounding the evaluation and increase the perception of validity.

The idea of improving validity perceptions has also been discussed throughout the evaluation literature. House (1980) expanded the definition of validity to include the perceived credibility of the methods and measures from the stakeholder perspective. Greene (1990) observed the common value and technical tensions that arise as evaluators attempt to balance the needs of the evaluation with stakeholder responsiveness. Others, such as Datta (2011), Weiss (1998) and Chelimsky (1987), have noted that the method and measure selection process is rarely ever purely a technical process, and the political environment in which evaluations take place should be considered when finalizing the methods and measures used. This study builds on these ideas by empirically examining how the political environment that stakeholders occupy can directly influence decisions stemming from evaluation findings. The hope is to highlight the importance of taking into account the political environment of stakeholders and to test a framework for understanding the influence of politics on the evaluation process.

In our framework, we use the term "political credibility" to describe a state of balance between stakeholder and evaluator needs and values (i.e., technical demands). That is, when negotiations between evaluators and stakeholders result in a mutually agreed upon evaluation question, methods, and measures, the evaluation is politically credible. This balancing act can be affected by multiple factors, including the characteristics of the evaluation (such as the level of funding, timeline, or evaluator

approach). Stakeholders and evaluators may agree that a case study is the most appropriate method for answering an evaluation question, for example, but time constraints or budgetary restrictions may prevent a high quality case study. This can result in the selection of other methods with sound technical quality (e.g., pre–post surveys) but without the same level of perceived credibility, thus resulting in lowered political credibility.

The framework presented in Fig. 1 is an initial description of a politically responsive evaluation (PRE), which takes into account stakeholder interest, technical needs, evaluation characteristics, evaluation purposes, and contextual factors. The framework was initially introduced in a published chapter (Azzam & Levine, 2014) that described the full range of factors influencing the political credibility of an evaluation. As Fig. 1 illustrates, multiple factors can influence the political credibility of the evaluation and they include the purpose of the evaluation, contextual factors, and evaluation's characteristics. The purpose of the evaluation focuses on the intent of the evaluation and is meant to indicate if the evaluation will be used for accountability purposes (summative), for program improvement (formative), or for program learning and development (developmental). Each one of these purposes is associated with a different set of questions to be answered and methods to be used. They can also be related to different levels of anxiety or excitement. For example a summative evaluation would produce much more anxiety among participating stakeholders then a formative or developmental evaluation which may generate excitement due to its learning and development focus.

Evaluation characteristics, such as budget and timeline or theoretical approach, are important factors that can influence the parameters of what can be done in the evaluation from a logistical and theoretical perspective. An evaluation with a short timeline and small budget may not be able to respond to stakeholder needs even if the evaluator is willing to do so. There are also contextual factors surrounding the program and evaluation that can influence attempts to establish political credibility. High stakes contexts would generate a tremendous amount scrutiny and pressure on the evaluation and stakeholders and may limit the ability of the evaluator to respond to stakeholder needs due to fear that the evaluation may appear biased. Lower stakes contexts may offer
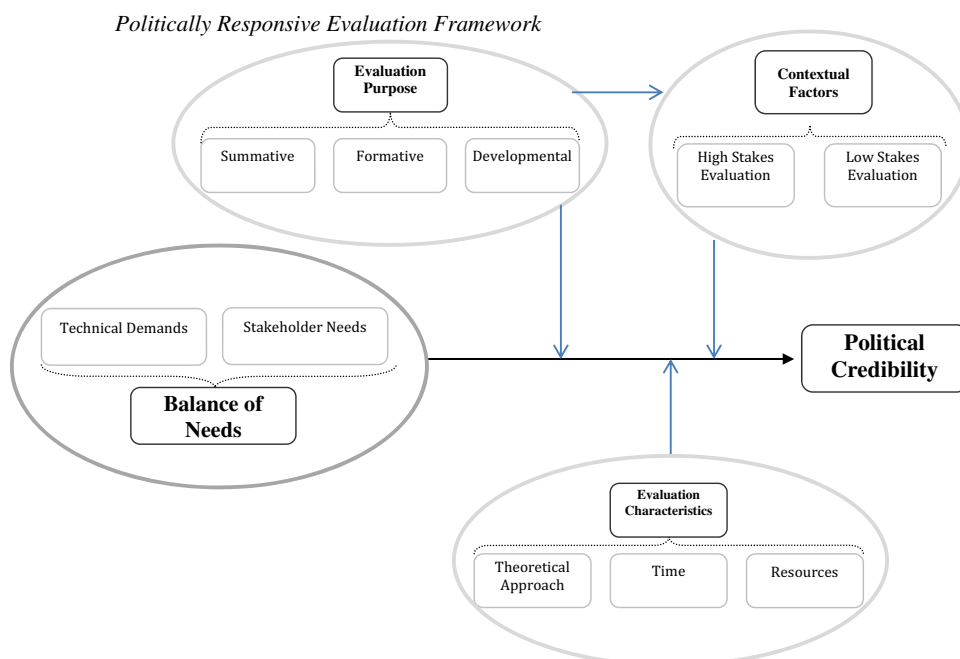


Fig. 1. Politically responsive evaluation framework.