

A Conversation with JIM MANZI

Jim Manzi is the founder and chairman of Applied Predictive Technologies, a software company that enables businesses to design and conduct large-scale experiments, and a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute. In this conversation, Kristol and Manzi discuss how scientific trial-and-error might help us develop better business and policy practices. The two also reflect on the limits of science in politics and offer a modest defense of social science experimentation for policy making.

On the origins of Modern science, Manzi says: "The insight of Francis Bacon 400 years ago is if we take what is really a proto-scientific method and add experiments that test theories, that will create a revolution in human understanding. And I think he was correct and I think that was one of the most important insights maybe in human history."

On experiments and American life, Manzi says: "I think that the basic underlying tension for a lot of American domestic political economy for 30 or 40 years has been how do we manage the tension between the need to have that kind of change, variation, experimentation...on one hand and the need to have social cohesion on the other."

On the limits of science in politics, Manzi says: "We should go [conduct experiments], but we shouldn't kid ourselves that we're going to have anything like the...revolution we saw in physics or even biology. These improvements are going to be useful and should be done but we are not suddenly going to be enabled to scientifically manage political issues."

On faulty economic predictions, Manzi says: "I remember seeing these economists confidently saying...these will be the effects of this amount of stimulus spending. I thought: you can't possibly know that. I just spent ten years figuring out how many Snickers bars ought to go on a shelf at the local convenience store. Predicting what effect that was going to have was really hard. I don't believe you really know this."

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