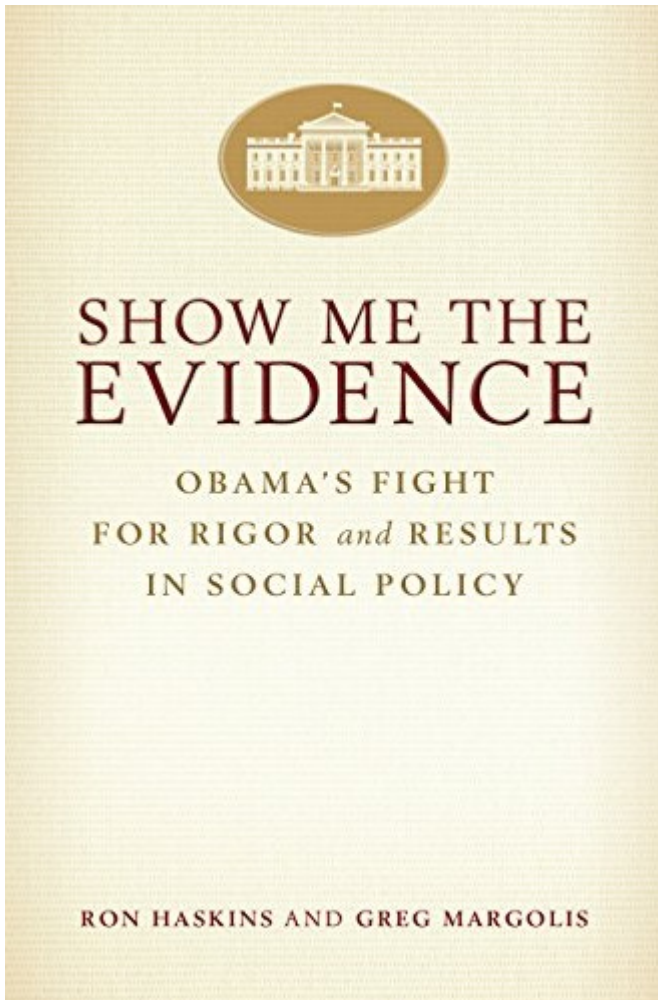


Sometimes government works

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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In Review



Show Me the Evidence

by Ron Haskins and Greg Margolis

Brookings Institution Press

When it comes to conversations about government spending, two subjects tend to get conflated. The first is an ideological debate about whether or not the

government is in general any good at doing things. The second regards the actual effectiveness of specific things the government does. And the second conversation is far more concrete, productive, and important, which is why [it drives me crazy when the first one prevents people from engaging the second](#).

Ron Haskins's new book is pretty wonky, but the [articles](#) he's [written](#) to promote it are quite readable. The Brookings policy expert and former GOP staffer praises federal efforts, begun by the Bush administration and ramped up under Obama, to ensure that social policy is shaped by evidence of what works. Here's [Haskins in the Times](#):

I am committed to the principle that the government should fund only social welfare programs that work. That's why it's imperative that the new Congress reject efforts by some Republicans to cut the Obama administration's evidence-based programs. Especially in a time of austerity, policy makers must know which programs work, and which don't.

The GOP efforts Haskins refers to here are [an ongoing part of congressional appropriations battles](#), not a new fight. But it's a real threat, because the evidence-finding is itself a (small) budget line, and we all know how well Obama's spending priorities tend to go down with an opposition Congress. Haskins goes on to detail some model programs producing solid evidence of success: a teen outreach program in Florida, a multistate tutoring program, home visits by nurses in Lancaster County, PA.

Evidence-based policy does a lot to flesh out the difference between waste and valuable investment. This in turn makes it harder for politicians to hide behind more skeletal sketches of either one. The sort of thing Obama and Haskins are promoting has a bipartisan heritage—and [the potential for a bipartisan future](#), at least if and when elected officials stop campaigning for a minute and try to govern.

[Nancy LeTourneau offers some useful caveats](#) to Haskins's argument, noting that evaluating policy is not a simple thing. But she also maintains that "this kind of pragmatic approach to social policy is critical for liberals to embrace because the best way to advance a progressive agenda is to demonstrate that government works." She's right—and the answer to "government doesn't work" isn't "yes it does." It's showing how specifically it *often* does, and building support for these

specific government programs.