



# Limits to objectivity: Relevance and controversiality in the study of political numbers

PhD thesis 2019 · Hjalte Bonde Meilvang

Colleges	Living graduates	Living graduates in Waller's class	Per cent living graduates in Waller's class	Per cent living graduates in Waller's class	Per cent living graduates in Waller's class	Per cent living graduates in Waller's class
Amherst	100	30	30	30	30	30
Bowdoin	100	30	30	30	30	30
Brown	100	30	30	30	30	30
Colgate	100	30	30	30	30	30
Columbia	100	30	30	30	30	30
Cornell	100	30	30	30	30	30
Dartmouth	100	30	30	30	30	30
Hamilton	100	30	30	30	30	30
Harvard	1110	130	11.7	11.7	11.7	11.7
Robert	130	30	23	23	23	23
Kenyon	140	30	21	21	21	21
Marietta	170	30	18	18	18	18
Middlebury	130	30	23	23	23	23
N. Y. City Col.	140	30	21	21	21	21
N. Y. Univ.	190	30	16	16	16	16
Rutgers	200	30	15	15	15	15
Trinity	200	30	15	15	15	15
Union	200	30	15	15	15	15
Wesleyan (Conn.)	270	30	11	11	11	11
Western Res.	140	30	21	21	21	21
Williams	430	30	7	7	7	7
Yale	804	30	4	4	4	4
	4120	401	9.7	9.7	9.7	9.7

	4120	401	9.7	9.7	9.7	9.7
1890	4120	401	9.7	9.7	9.7	9.7
1900	4120	401	9.7	9.7	9.7	9.7
1910	4120	401	9.7	9.7	9.7	9.7
1920	4120	401	9.7	9.7	9.7	9.7
1930	4120	401	9.7	9.7	9.7	9.7
1940	4120	401	9.7	9.7	9.7	9.7
1950	4120	401	9.7	9.7	9.7	9.7
1960	4120	401	9.7	9.7	9.7	9.7
1970	4120	401	9.7	9.7	9.7	9.7
1980	4120	401	9.7	9.7	9.7	9.7
1990	4120	401	9.7	9.7	9.7	9.7
2000	4120	401	9.7	9.7	9.7	9.7
2010	4120	401	9.7	9.7	9.7	9.7
2020	4120	401	9.7	9.7	9.7	9.7

HJALTE BONDE MEILVANG

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This thesis explores the politics of numbers through the concepts of quantification, objectivity, controversiality and relevance. *Quantification* means that the focus is not on numbers as such but on all the steps involved in rendering something in numeric form. *Controversies* are public disputes about a quantification. *Relevance* means that number makes a difference, affecting how political issues are interpreted and handled. Finally, numbers are *objective* when they are taken for granted, when the production process of quantification fades from view.

It is often argued that such objectivity is *made*. Numbers never arrive from nowhere but are produced by someone according to some procedure. Work needs to be done for quantitative information to appear as *objective* information. When objectivity-making succeeds, however, numbers become politically relevant due to the political attractiveness of seemingly neutral descriptions. The politically relevant numbers are those that appear objective, whereas controversial numbers make less of a political difference. This, however, only captures one aspect of the politics of numbers. Politics is about dissent, contestation and conflict, and quantification does not succeed only when it manages to suppress or supersede conflictual politics. To get at this, the thesis explores a number of dynamics between relevance and controversiality.

The first is *controversial relevance*. When something matters, it matters in a way that some will contest. In many contexts, numbers will do political work in spite of critique and controversiality. Controversies cannot be eliminated but if they can be managed, they do not preclude relevance. Secondly, the importance of avoiding controversiality sometimes causes relevance to be traded away in *managed irrelevance*, where politically relevant use of numbers is eschewed in order to evade critique. Finally, controversies can enable relevance. Because quantification is an authoritative form of information, arguing that something should be quantified signals seriousness about addressing it, opposing the quantifier to those who want to 'ignore' the issue by leaving it unmeasured. In this case, debate and contestation about numbers will underline the politically relevant difference between quantification opponents and proponents. A dynamic I term *relevant controversiality*. The politics of numbers is not always a politics of objectivity. There are limits to objectivity.

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