

A Different Policymaking Approach: **Follow the Evidence**



The Bipartisan Policy Center has launched a project to help advance the greater use of rigorous evidence-based analysis in the federal legislative and budget process. BPC's goal is to identify ways that Congress can employ this approach, in which policy decisions are based on data and research, on a broader scale so it becomes an integral part of the legislative and budget process.

BACKGROUND

There is increasing interest in so-called evidence-based policymaking—using findings from scientifically designed research studies and other rigorous evaluations to measure how well programs achieve their stated goals. That evidence can then be used to steer scarce public resources to policies that have a proven record of success. This movement in policymaking springs in part from the advances in research design, explosion of data gathering, computation capability, and analytic capacity. But it also represents a natural evolution of long-time efforts to incorporate scientifically based findings into the policymaking process.

There is strong bipartisan support in Congress for advancing this approach to policymaking. The Ryan/Murray Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking launched in the spring of 2016. Named for its principal sponsors, House Speaker Paul Ryan (R-WI) and Senator Patty Murray (D-WA), the commission is charged with analyzing the data inventory and infrastructure of the federal government and making recommendations by September 2017 on how current collected data can be used most effectively to evaluate programs and facilitate research.

Many lawmakers are also encouraged by the prospect that building and using solid evidence of actual program outcomes can be the foundation of bipartisan agreement in many policy areas, and can help them to achieve consensus despite the highly charged partisanship of recent years.

KEY ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Even with strong support for expanding the use of evidence in congressional decision-making, there are challenges to its wider use.

Managing the data and trusting the analysis. For lawmakers, there may be important questions about the nature of the data and how it is analyzed. A major concern is protecting the privacy of personal data. Other questions involve the transparency of the data—that is, making complex data accessible and comprehensible to non-technical users. Determining who does the research, how it is funded, and the objectivity or potential political bias of the researcher is also a concern.

Recent initiatives have originated primarily within the executive branch under both Democrat and Republican administrations. Lawmakers may at times be reluctant to trust the executive agencies or suspect political manipulation of the research to advance a policy position. Some will wonder whether advocates of evidence-based policymaking have a separate agenda, including to justify more spending for new policies or as a base to justify spending cuts or program elimination. So far, the focus of evidence-based initiatives has been on social policy interventions and domestic policy but perhaps could be expanded to include other areas of the federal budget.

How is evidence-based policymaking different from earlier performance-based reforms? Some argue that Congress already uses evidence in evaluating agency budget requests, crafting legislation, and conducting oversight of federal programs. In addition, questions arise about the difficulty in distinguishing an evidence-based policymaking approach from other performance-based reforms of recent years, such as the Government Performance and Results Act, and the Bush administration's Program Assessment Rating Tool.

What constitutes rigorous evidence—proof that a given theory, concept or design works—and how it differs from other information used to support legislative decision-making is an important question. Researchers value randomized controlled trials (RCTs) or other scientifically designed experiments to test various policy approaches.

Are those the only methods that can produce reliable data and evidence? RCTs may require some time, several years in some cases, to yield significant results.

Are other data sources available, such as program administrative data or “real-world evidence” that could be used to produce valid evidence of program outputs on a shorter timetable but with similar confidence in the results?

Accountability vs. Flexibility. A fundamental principle underlying the congressional authorization and appropriations process is accountability for the use of public funds. Lawmakers' need to specify the purposes for which funds are provided must be weighed against the flexibility researchers may need to gather and evaluate an evidence base on how certain policies are working.

While all of these issues raise valid concerns, lawmakers in both parties agree that legislative and budgetary decisions should have a sound factual and evidentiary basis. In the 114th Congress, bipartisan majorities have approved several evidence-based initiatives. This growing momentum lays the groundwork for using rigorous research and data evaluation on a much broader scale in Congress, and holds the potential to improve the prospects for reaching consensus on a range of policy challenges facing the nation.

BPC'S PROJECT TO ADVANCE EVIDENCE-BASED POLICYMAKING

BPC is working with the Evidence-Based Policymaking Collaborative—a group of policy experts from the Urban Institute, Brookings Institution, American Enterprise Institute, and Pew Charitable Trusts. The goal is to develop a series of evidence-based toolkits for policymakers based on the best practices from specific interventions and successful research protocols.

Working with the collaborative and informed by the work of the Ryan/Murray Commission, BPC will engage key participants in the policymaking process to exchange ideas about the most effective ways to employ evidence-based approaches in the legislative and budget process. From these conversations, BPC will seek to identify the challenges and hurdles facing broader use of rigorous evidence in policymaking, discern ways to address those challenges, and then make consensus recommendations on steps that could be taken to incorporate a stronger evidence-based approach into the everyday work of the Congress.

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