



Evidence Use in Congress

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The enduring climate of intense political polarization and substantial distrust of government in the United States offers a valuable indicator that our government is not doing everything it can to serve the public interest. How can government both continually improve and be held accountable for meeting the expectations of the American public and its leaders? Increased use of evidence-based policymaking offers one promising answer to this question.

Evidence-based policymaking holds the potential to help restore elements of public trust in government and improve how government programs operate. Evidence refers to systematically collected data that have been analyzed with rigorous research methods to provide insights about how policies and programs operate. Evidence-based policymaking is the process through which evidence is applied to inform decisions about government policies and programs.



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Regularly using evidence is an essential element for increasing the effectiveness of government programs. Without evidence, it is difficult to know whether antipoverty programs reduce poverty, if economic development initiatives promote growth, and what policies can most effectively combat the opioid epidemic. Evidence about whether a policy or program was effectively implemented or achieved its intended outcomes enables policymakers to improve initiatives by implementing promising models and effectively targeting taxpayer funds.

Congress has a key role in furthering the use of evidence in policymaking throughout the federal government. Congress provides the funds for agencies to generate evidence, structures federal programs through legislation, and can signal that the use of evidence is a priority.



Today, far too little is known about how well and in what contexts government policies and programs achieve goals and how they can be improved. The 2017 report from the U.S. Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking concluded that the evidence needed for informing policy decisions is too often simply not available. This means that even lawmakers who want to use evidence often struggle to successfully deploy what limited evidence does exist to inform important policies. Further, information processing has become increasingly complex, challenging, and partisan within Congress. Congress is virtually never the producer of evidence, and so it must provide mechanisms and resources throughout the legislative and executive branches, or outside government, to support its objective information needs.

In *Evidence Use in Congress*, a two-volume report, BPC considers the challenges faced by the legislative branch in using evidence, and offers potential solutions for more readily using evidence to inform key decisions. This is not to say that Congress never uses evidence—that is far from the case. But Congress' uses should be more routine and there is much room for progress.

Challenges for Evidence-Based Policymaking

Volume 1 provides an overview of the processes and mechanisms involved in congressional decision-making and outlines challenges faced by Congress in routinely using evidence in legislative actions.

The volume frames three key barriers to the routine use of evidence in Congress:

- **Perception** – Perception barriers occur when evidence exists on a policy, but policymakers perceive, rightly or wrongly, that the evidence is not useful, not credible, or not relevant to the decision at hand.
- **Institutional** – Institutional barriers exist when the structure of Congress, including its decision-making process and staffing structure, impede the ability of policymakers to obtain evidence or cause evidence to compete with other priorities when making a decision.
- **Systemic** – Systemic barriers describe the norms, processes, and day-to-day procedures of Congress that can affect whether relevant evidence is available and usable for policymakers when they need it. It also describes how those factors affect their incentives to use that evidence.

Options for Charting a New Direction

Volume 2 presents 19 options that aim to align the use of evidence in Congress with its institutions, practices, and norms. The options could help encourage more use of relevant, timely, and credible evidence about federal policies and programs in congressional policy debates.

The options are organized into three broad categories:

- **Congressional capacity enhancements** focus on ways to enable and target resources for gathering and interpreting evidence.
- **Institutional modifications** offer ideas for adapting Congress' institutional structure to make the use of evidence in Congress and executive agencies more transparent.
- **Congressional process changes** present options for how Congress could modify its processes to better enable members and staff to make evidence use a priority in routine operations.

The options presented in this report are not recommendations, but rather are intended to start a conversation about how Congress can organize itself to access and use evidence to improve its decision-making processes, and ensure that federal programs function as effectively and efficiently as possible. Members of Congress, their staff, and the American public must determine an appropriate strategy for enabling a culture of evidence and discouraging the dissemination of false or misleading information about government policies.

Options for Improving the Use of Evidence in Congress

KEY:  Institutional  Perception  Systemic  Authorizations  Budget and Appropriations  Oversight  Low  Medium  High				
Option	Description	Barriers Addressed	Processes Affected	Feasibility
Options to Increase Congress' Capacity to Use Evidence				
1: Develop a Protocol for Systematic Evidence Use in Program Authorizations	Develop and implement a requirement for the generation of evidence, validation of evidence, and brokering of relevant evidence as a part of the authorization process.	 		
2: Conduct Evidence Trainings for Congressional Staff	Direct the Congressional Research Service to develop and provide a training program for congressional staff on the understanding and interpretation of evidence.		  	
3: Establish a Congressional Evidence Fellowship Program	Establish an evidence fellowship program that provides a pathway for evidence experts to provide tailored, credible, and timely evidence for Congress.	 	  	
4: Provide Additional Flexibility to Hire Evidence Specialists	Reinstitute rules that allow offices to pool funding for personnel, allowing members flexibility to hire evidence specialists.		  	
5: Increase Resources for Existing Legislative Support Agencies	Increase the resources provided to legislative support agencies to support additional duties for making evidence available to Congress.		  	
6: Establish a Database of Evidence-Building Program Designs	Establish a consistent resource for disseminating successful program designs that incorporate evidence-building activities.	 		
7: Collaborate with the Executive Branch on Learning Agendas and Priority Goals	Develop procedures and processes to routinely collaborate and consult on learning agendas and priority goals prior to finalizing activities.	 	 	
8: Seek Commitments for Evidence Use During Confirmations	Seek commitments from presidentially-appointed, Senate-confirmed nominees for executive branch agencies to support the objective use of evidence in their positions and in interactions with Congress.	 		
9: Direct Agencies to Conduct Targeted Evidence Production	Direct targeted evidence-building activities in executive branch agencies.	 	 	
10: Appropriate Sufficient Resources for Executive Branch Evidence-Building	Appropriate direct funding or enable flexibilities for the executive branch to adequately generate or procure evidence needed to support congressional decision-making.	 	 	
Options for Institutional Modifications to Increase Transparency				
11: Establish a Joint Committee on Evidence	Establish a Joint Committee on Evidence, charged with overseeing the executive branch's evidence-generating activities.	 		
12: Provide the Congressional Research Service with the Resources to Conduct Systematic Evidence Reviews	Develop expertise within the Congressional Research Service to develop systematic reviews for the use of evidence in the legislative process.	 	  	
13: Create a Science and Evidence Ombudsman Position	Create a senior leadership role in Congress to connect researchers and evaluators outside government to appropriate individuals within the legislative branch.	 	  	
Options for Congressional Process Changes to Incentivize Evidence Use				
14: Maintain an Evidence Record for Congressional Hearings	Establish and maintain committee-level evidence records that provide documentation of evidence used to inform policy decisions in Congress.	 	  	
15: Prepare Biennial "Evidence Plans" for Committees	Prepare a committee evidence plan at the beginning of each congressional session to identify research and data priorities for legislative uses.	 	 	
16: Align Reauthorization Schedules with Timeframes for Building Evidence	Match cycles of legislative reauthorization in Congress for federal programs with the cycles of evidence generated for those programs.	 	 	
17: Conduct Portfolio Reviews to Support Broad Evidence Use	Institute evidence-based portfolio reviews of programs that cross committee and agency jurisdictions.	 	  	
18: Establish Biennial Budget Resolution and Appropriations	Change the congressional budget resolution and annual appropriations to a biennial cycle.	 	  	
19: Extend CBO's Report on Expired and Expiring Authorizations to Two Years	Extend the Congressional Budget Office's annual report on programs with expired or expiring authorizations to cover an additional fiscal year to encourage evidence planning.			



Moving Forward

Now is the time for Congress to take a thoughtful and serious look at how it makes decisions, and to strengthen the culture of evidence in Congress. Creating a wider culture of evidence in Congress will strengthen its capacity to effectively carry out important legislative duties in a 21st century policy environment, and can begin to restore the trust of the American public in its government institutions. [*Evidence Use in Congress*](#) provides a starting point for those deliberations to begin.



Learn more about BPC's Evidence-Based Policymaking Initiative at bipartisanpolicy.org/evidence

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