Covering Science-Related Policy

Science reporting quick tips from SciLine and The Open Notebook

Federal, state, and local policies can have significant effects on the everyday lives of your audience. In some cases, readers may turn to you when deciding how to vote on policies or choosing between candidates. When reporting on public policy, consider what scientific evidence you could incorporate to help you contextualize claims and better inform your audience.

Science can provide context to just about any story on policy.

- Scientific evidence exists for many political issues. For example, you could interview a health economist for a story on health care policy, a civil engineer for a story on infrastructure policy, or an industrial psychologist for a story on labor policy.
- Search for scientific evidence to help you evaluate the potential effect of a policy.
  - Social science researchers—such as sociologists, economists, and psychologists—often track policy trends. Look up scientific papers on the policy issue you're covering to see what relevant trends scientists have examined.
  - If a policy is based on interventions tested at smaller scales—such as a public health program, environmental cleanup initiative, or school-based initiative—look for research evaluating those trials.
  - Look for similar policies implemented in other cities, states, or regions. Data about how those policies have played out might be relevant to your story.
- Think about the downstream effects of the policy and whom it might affect. Reach out to scientists who study those groups for comment on inequities that might surface.

Some policies directly affect science, medicine, or the environment, which will eventually affect your audience, too.

- Search for consensus statements issued by scientific societies, which reflect the shared opinion of experts in that field.
- When you're covering policies that affect scientific agencies and government research, look for experts who have studied these agencies' activities and their outcomes.
- Interviewing researchers affected by policies or government actions, such as cuts to research programs, helps illustrate the stakes at play. Keep in mind that these interviews may require extra sensitivity and security.

Prepare for pushback.

- Many sources may decline your interview requests. Researchers might fear retribution from their institution, funding sources, or government, if they comment on a policy or piece of legislation. Or, they may think they lack the expertise needed to weigh in thoughtfully.
- If sources are hesitant, try asking for evidence around an issue rather than asking sources to critique a specific policy.
- Look for scientists who advocate publicly for or against policies on social media, in white papers, or even by testifying to Congress. These experts may be more willing to comment on a policy directly.

If a policy cites relevant research, read the studies yourself.

- Pay special attention to who funded or carried out research, looking up any groups or organizations you're not familiar with. Sometimes lobbying groups will have misleadingly benign or scientific-sounding names.
- Evaluate the science-related claims being made about policy in the same way you would any claim. Don't suspend your journalistic skepticism and take someone's word for what "the science says."
- If a policy lacks references to studies, that's cause for concern. Ask policymakers what evidence their claims are based on.

➤ Further reading: reporting on policy as a science journalist and the relationship between science and policy.