
Guide to Working with Policymakers

Policymakers – legislators and executive branch officials at the federal, state and local levels – are responsible for understanding many different policy issues, and often take positions on those issues. Overworked and understaffed, policymakers want and need the input and expertise of scholarly experts who know the research in a given area. However, because of time constraints – perhaps because of preconceived notions about academics as being out-of-touch or inaccessible – the onus falls on scholars to proactively reach out to policymakers, at least until an ongoing relationship is established. The good news is that by developing relationships, building trust, and providing valuable information over time, scholars can become go-to resources and thought-leaders in legislative battles and policy debates at the highest levels of government.

The policy team at SSN, led by **Linda Naval, the National Deputy Director and Director of Public Policy and Legislative Affairs**, can provide guidance and support as members navigate the complex yet exciting world of dealings with policymakers. She can be reached at: lindanaval@fas.harvard.edu.

Nuts and Bolts

There are many ways to collaborate with policymakers and influence public policy decisions with evidence and research. Here are some possibilities:

Personal Introductions

Developing relationships with policymakers takes time. First, university scholars need to get on their radar, and setting up an introductory meeting is often the first step. Depending on the policymaker, these meetings can occur in Washington, in a state capitol building, in a legislator’s district office or other local venue, or in a conference call. Although a personal meeting with the elected official is ideal, a lot of the groundwork is done at the staff level. Many people clamor for policymakers’ time, and an introductory meeting with key staffers can be just as productive as a brief encounter with the principal legislator or official.

The objectives of an introductory meeting are to begin to form a collegial relationship, to gain a clear sense of a policymaker’s priorities, and to give the policymaker or staffers a clear sense of what you might be able to offer and exactly how a fruitful collaboration could proceed. That last point is particularly important. Although policymakers want the help of scholars, they often are not sure just how they can get such help or form a fruitful relationship.

Before any meetings with policymakers, SSN members can get tips by consulting the “10 Dos and Don’ts of Meeting with Lawmakers” in this manual. In addition, members can consult Linda Naval for specific ideas and advice. And when any SSN member is headed to Washington DC, he or she should check in with Linda to see if it makes sense to arrange any meetings.

Explain Data and Policy Issues

Policymakers value learning from scholars. SSN members have briefed top White House and agency officials and federal and state lawmakers and their staff on issues including implementation of the Affordable Care Act, data collection problems in the criminal justice system, the efficacy of various kinds of voting rights reforms, higher education accountability measures, and many more topics. Policymakers are not interested in random information or highly general background. They typically want knowledge that is relevant to the issues and decisions they must soon face, or about topics they could usefully take on in the near future. For example, several SSNers wrote a widely-used memo comparing and contrasting the House and Senate immigration reform bills so that Members of Congress felt better prepared to discuss the topic at events in their districts.

Offer Policy Ideas

SSN members may want to pitch a policymaker on becoming the champion for a particular policy in an area they have studied in detail. Lawmakers, especially new ones, are always looking for specific policy niches in which they can lead and advocate new ideas – by sponsoring a bill or chairing a caucus addressing the issue. When other legislators have already staked out issues over the years, finding a unique policy niche can be difficult for a rising newcomer, and that creates an opening for SSN members. Offering a new policy hook could be extremely welcome, especially if the idea is accompanied by an offer to provide continuing support and assistance.

Provide Materials for Floor Speeches

In state capitols and in Congress, elected officials “speak on the floor” – that is, give speeches in the well of their legislative chambers – about pending legislation and other issues of the day. SSN briefs can be used to support arguments made in these speeches. For example, in a February 2014 floor speech on climate change, Senator Sheldon Whitehouse cited research by SSN members Robert Brulle, Aaron McCright, and Riley Dunlap documenting opulently funded propaganda campaigns to discredit climate science and block urgent U.S. reforms.

Write Joint OpEds

A great way to build a relationship with a policymaker is to offer to write a joint OpEd. The OpEd should be about an issue that both you and the policymaker know well. It could comment on a big news story such as minimum wage reform efforts, or draw attention to an issue on which you and the policymaker are establishing leadership, such as a health reform issue or a civil rights concern. Given how busy policymakers and their staff members are, the best way to make such an OpEd happen may be for the SSN member to work with national staff to develop a first draft that can be offered to the legislator for consideration.

Plan an Issue Briefing or Public Event

SSN events often include policymakers from the federal, state, and local level as co-hosts or speakers. Doing this can help an SSN working group or chapter nurture an ongoing relationship with the policymaker. And it is also an excellent way to raise the public profile of the event, increase attendance, and attract media attention. This also works well for policymakers themselves, who get the opportunity to speak to constituents or broad audiences about issues they care about without too much effort from their own staff.

Because of their expertise on pressing issues, SSN working groups are well positioned to join forces with policymakers to host briefings in Washington – as the criminal justice working group has done in cooperation with Representative Bobby Scott and the Congressional Black Caucus. When traveling to Washington for a briefing, scholars can set up other meetings as well.

Finally, all SSN member scholars can offer to serve as speakers at policy-focused events hosted by public officials

Contribute to Committee Hearings

In state capitols and in Washington, legislative committees hold hearings to delve into policy issues by listening to expert witnesses. Although various state governments operate differently, at the federal level, hearing witnesses are selected by committees through a careful vetting process. When SSN members meet with policymakers or staffers on a committee dealing with topics related to their expertise, it is appropriate to ask for SSN experts to be kept in mind when witnesses are needed. SSN's policy team can help guide members through the process, including the preparation of testimony.

Even if not selected to testify, SSN members or working groups can still offer input for hearings by providing briefs and other information that committee members could use for opening statements or to frame questions of witnesses during hearings. SSN experts might even want to send research-based suggested questions to a staffer who works for a committee or to the office of a legislator who sits on the relevant committee.

Provide Feedback and Help Shape Policy

When drafting legislation or regulations, policymakers want to hear from advocacy groups and experts. Scholar feedback is particularly valued as it is viewed as independent and based on research. Scholars may be contacted to provide specific ideas or thoughts on draft legislation or regulations. However, individual SSN members, chapters, and working groups can also proactively weigh-in on policy in several ways. This can be done by sending a comment on a proposed regulation, or by writing a letter to a legislator to recommend certain principles, policies, or language that should be included (or not) in a bill.

Support Work Policymakers are Already Doing

Many times policymakers are already working on legislation and other efforts to advance policies supported by scholars and their research findings. Scholars can bolster these efforts by writing letters of support, referencing sound legislative efforts in a positive matter during public speeches, discussing good legislation in OpEds, or offering themselves as media sources to speak about the worth of the initiative. If a scholar finds it appropriate to provide support in one of these ways, he or she can let the policymaker know. This is an excellent way to open doors for further relationships. Of course, scholars may also want to speak or write in a critical way about regulations or legislation that does not make sense based on their expert knowledge and research.

Ask Policymakers How You Can Help Them

While it is important to propose concrete ways to collaborate with policymakers, it is also wise simply to ask what they would like to hear from scholars. For example, before setting out on the “Improving America’s Schools” spotlight, SSN members solicited feedback from the relevant congressional committees on brief and research topics that could be useful. Of course, scholars

have their own priorities, but it does not hurt to find out what policymakers could use, out of all that scholars know or learn about in their research.

No Policy is Set in Stone

The most exciting and hopeful part of the public policymaking realm is that nothing is entirely set in stone. If scholarly research finds a piece of legislation or regulation to be harmful, it is possible to work with policymakers to change it. For example, Sara Goldrick-Rab of the University of Wisconsin found that a 2006 Housing and Urban Development regulation was unintentionally exacerbating housing instability for college students. Now she is cooperating through SSN with a group of U.S. Senators to try to fix the rule.

Changes may not happen overnight, but offering an idea backed by research and scholarly credibility can hasten improvements.

Windows of Opportunity

Influencing the policymaking process may require quick action to take advantage of predictable windows of opportunity. For example, major pieces of legislation often have expiration or renewal dates, when lawmakers have the chance to update and improve the law. Known as reauthorizations, these updates present opportunities for SSN members and groups to look ahead and propose well-considered reforms. Similarly, Congress and state legislatures regularly vote on budget and other spending bills. Other ways to predict opportunities include keeping an eye on the news, tracking committee hearings and floor debates, and monitoring implementation of recently enacted laws.

Identifying Champions and Collaborators

Once SSN members have some ideas and principles for engaging with policymakers, the challenge is to identify to whom they should reach out, taking several considerations into account. Is an idea or initiative most relevant at the local, state, or national level, and is legislation or a regulatory approach appropriate? Who is in charge of gathering information and devising policy at the appropriate venue – and are there policymakers who have a history of interest in sound policies, who could serve as champions or supporters of ideas scholars may have? Do they have a good reason to listen – for example, because scholars are their constituents or because personal ties or alumni ties connect scholars to the policymaker? Personal connections often matter more than any other routes for getting policymakers' attention.

Questions? Need support? Traveling to DC or planning state-level meetings? E-mail Linda Naval, SSN's National Deputy Director & Director of Public Policy and Legislative Affairs at lindanaval@fas.harvard.edu.