

Engaging with policymakers

V. HOT TOPICS

by JEAN-PAUL BERTERMES

Politicians have the authority to make decisions that affect society – decisions in areas that are often complex, high-tech or research-intensive. With a view to evidence-based decision-making and the societal impact of science, it seems worthwhile for researchers to share their knowledge with policymakers. The pandemic has shown that close interaction between science and policy can be fruitful, but that it also presents many challenges. So what do you need to bear in mind when engaging with policymakers?

First consider who is really the best person to engage with. The members of parliament themselves, or will the impact be greater if you target the staff behind the scenes? Or is your local mayor the best person? Or a politician known for their commitment to a particular issue?

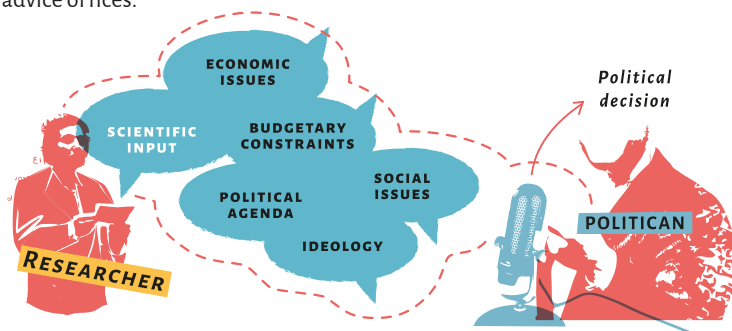
Secondly, it is crucial to focus on the needs of policymakers. Researchers and politicians work on very different timescales. While many research projects run for one or more years, politicians often have to react very quickly to current events. If a politician has to prepare a speech on an issue or is working on a piece of legislation, they may need scientific input on the issue – now or very soon, not in a few months. And while researchers are experts in a particular field, politicians often have to deal with a wide range of different issues. This makes it crucial to be on-point and relevant to the politician, otherwise you are likely to get ignored.

Thirdly, don't be naive. It is not the role of scientists to make political decisions. Nor is it the role of politicians to do exactly what scientists tell them to do. Ideally, politicians can take the scientific evidence on an issue into account before making a decision. But they also have other parameters to consider: budgetary constraints, their party's political agenda, economic and social issues, and even ideology. Also, in many cases, the scientific evidence is not that clear-cut, so science cannot dictate what exactly should be done from a political perspective. Or, the same scientific evidence

allows for different policy solutions. For example, to slow down a pandemic, epidemiologists and virologists may say it would be beneficial to vaccinate as many people as possible with a safe and effective vaccine, if available. But how do you ensure that enough people even *want* to get vaccinated? By providing transparent information, or by legally forcing them to? This is a political question – or, in scientific terms, a psychological or sociological question – and different parties may have different solutions to it, even if they are based on the same scientific evidence.

Lastly, it is crucial to be aware of the role you want to play when engaging with policymakers, and that there is a risk of being “used” for political reasons. You can take a very neutral position, simply explaining the data: what is known, what is not (yet) known. Or you can be more specific and offer options or recommendations. If you focus too much on the data alone, you may not really be responding to the needs of policymakers and you risk being ignored. If you lean too far towards making recommendations, you may leave your neutral role and interfere too much with the policymakers’ role. In the book “The Honest Broker”, the author explain different roles in policy advice.

Policy advice can be seen as a specific form of science communication for a specific target audience. There are many structures that specialise in policy advice, often staffed by former scientists or journalists. Examples include the research services of many parliaments or governments, whole networks of policy advisors (e.g. EPTA) or specialised NGOs, or even universities with dedicated policy advice offices.



Recommended reads:

- ♦ Pielke R.A.Jr. (2012), *The Honest Broker: Making Sense of Science in Policy and Politics*; Cambridge University Press. ISBN: 9780511818110, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511818110>