

Science Policy News

Connecting ASA Members to Policymakers

Steve Pierson, ASA Director of Science Policy

The ASA has terrific potential to influence science policy because its members are involved in issues ranging from health studies and election auditing to climate change and census counts. You—the members—have expertise that is invaluable to policy decisions. My role is to facilitate connections between you—the experts—and the policymakers. To accomplish this, I need your help.

How does one become a science policy person? For me, it started six years ago when I spent my sabbatical from Worcester Polytechnic Institute with the Washington Office of the American Physical Society. I never imagined myself as a lobbyist (nor was it ever my aspiration). But, I quickly assumed the responsibilities of advocating for federal funding needed for basic research in the physical sciences.

I enjoyed the challenges of determining effective methods and choosing the right knobs to turn. I had to consider messaging, grassroots support, media angles, vehicles for channeling support, partnerships, coalitions, VIP support, and the list goes on. With 535 U.S. senators and representatives and a large federal bureaucracy, I needed criteria for determining to whom to advocate. I also needed to find ways to convince physicists that visiting and/or communicating with Congress was effective and, therefore, worth taking the time out of their busy schedules to do.

With the ASA, I will still be advocating for federal support of basic research funding within agencies important to ASA members. But, my charge also is to ensure statistics plays a larger role in policymaking. The latter is a broad mandate, the first step of which is to determine the issues on which to focus, being careful not to choose so many that the ASA has no effect on any. I will work with ASA members, leadership, staff, and committees to determine possible topics on which to work. The criteria to winnow down the list will include importance to ASA members, vehicles (bills, agency mandates, panel or committee appointments, etc.) to accomplish the objective, the role statistics plays, the amount of support (or opposition) from other groups, and the benefit to the ASA.

My role is not to be the person who injects statistics into science policy, but rather the facilitator, with you—the members—as the “injectors.” The ASA will accomplish much more in science policy this way. In order to become the facilitator for the ASA’s science policy, I will spend my initial time learning about the ASA, its members, and the playing field.

I need your help in learning about potential policy matters, statistics, the marketing of the ASA and statistics, and the federal or state agencies with whom—or for whom—many of you work. Being a firm believer in the effectiveness of grassroots activity, I also will need your help advocating for policy change.

I recognize many of you are already influencing science policy. I wish to learn from you and help to amplify your efforts. If you have recommendations for policy matters on which the ASA should act, please email them to me. I am already aware of members working on election audits, data sharing for health studies, federal funding for research, and climate change issues. Similarly, please send me examples of instances in which you have played a role in influencing policy using your statistics expertise.

To convince policymakers to listen to statisticians, or to convince the federal government to fund more statistics research, we will have to educate them about what statistics is and how it benefits society. I referred to this above as marketing the ASA and statistics. I would appreciate your help in this marketing effort if you would provide concrete examples of statistics benefiting society.