

How to navigate the ‘how to’ literature on influencing policy

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- There are few empirical studies about how scientists can influence policy and create impact, and yet, how-to literature on this topic abounds.
- The one-size fits all model in much of this how-to literature privileges scientists with time, access, resources and confidence.
- Researchers wishing to make policy impact may spend their time more wisely by reading less how-to articles, and instead clarifying, alongside with their universities, their purpose, goals and available/required resources.

Ali is a newly appointed chair for an important government committee, and has just put a 4-year-old and a 6-year-old to bed. Exhausted, and yet knowing they cannot go to bed themselves until they have better prepped recommendations for a critical policy meeting the next morning, Ali stares at the hundred-page documents on their desk, the multiple tabs open on their laptop, researchers’ rolling Twitter feeds announcing new results, and the ever-present inbox, bursting at its seams. And sighs a deep sigh.

In another time zone, at another desk, Imani is similarly overwhelmed. Having just had perhaps the most significant scientific paper of their life accepted in their favourite journal, they want the findings to influence policy, to lead to new changes, to make an impact! Imani’s laptop is similarly littered with open tabs. These though are all how-to articles, giving advice to researchers for how to navigate the world of influencing policy. The articles paint the picture of an accessible-anytime scientist, brassy and bold. Yet Imani is untenured, on the brink of a burnout, with sick parents to look after, and is feeling none of these things. Another deep sigh escapes into the void.

The gap between policy making and scientific work is well documented. The desire to close this gap seems urgent, leading to an abundance of how-to articles in recent years advising scientists on ways to influence policy. Yet sociologist Kathryn Oliver and political scientist Paul Cairney, co-authors of a 2019 article in *Palgrave Communications* on this topic, express caution over the one-size fits all recommendations espoused in this literature. They suggest that too often advice is based on the perspectives of those who consider themselves successful at influencing policy. Using a method called a systematic review - a technique for synthesising a lot of different evidence that addresses a clear problem - the authors analysed 86 how-to articles (mostly blogs, editorials and commentaries) carefully. They compiled the how-to tips, then compared these alongside more theoretical and empirically informed literature on evidence use and policy making. Oliver and Cairney found the how-to advice to be vague, at times contradictory, easily misinterpreted and not informed by practical realities of either scientists or policy makers.

In offering suggestions for more productive ways forward, one of the main messages from this article is that there is no easy way to link research evidence to policy makers’ needs. Researchers are currently being asked to go beyond the scope of most of their abilities with unrealistic expectations for success. Imani, the recently published scientist, could do better to understand more about Ali’s work and the contexts in which policies are made (and vice versa). But both need help from the institutions within which they work too. This is not an

individual concern. It takes time; for seeking opportunities for impact that may never arise. And for the brilliantly successful and impactful scientists writing these how-to articles? A kind request: please situate your suggestions better in the context from which you write!

Article reviewed:

Oliver, K., Cairney, P. The dos and don'ts of influencing policy: a systematic review of advice to academics. *Palgrave Commun* 5, 21 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-019-0232-y>