

Federal Spending Should Be Based on Evidence

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Wisconsin can play an important role in helping our federal government achieve better results for Americans, more value for taxpayers, and a rare bipartisan win for good government.

How can the Badger State help achieve all that? The story starts in Congress in 2016, when Republican House Speaker Paul Ryan from Janesville and Democratic Sen. Patty Murray of Washington state launched a bipartisan commission on evidence-based policy.

The commission's goal: Find ways to help federal agencies use and build rigorous evidence about what works—and what doesn't—in important policy areas. That includes supporting small-business development, fighting poverty, improving Americans' health and more.

If that sounds academic, it's actually about bringing best practices from the private sector to government. Leading companies embrace disciplined innovation, subjecting every new product or business program to a rigorous test. In business lingo, they always run an A/B test.

That type of commitment and resources to test hypotheses is too rare in government, where policymakers are all too often left to rely on their intuition and hunches. Those guesses about what effects what, or what is effective, can be wrong.

Last year, several of the commission's most important recommendations were put into legislation, called the Foundations for Evidence-Based

Policymaking Act. The bill quickly passed the House last November, but has been awaiting Senate action. It is currently in the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, chaired by Wisconsin Sen. Ron Johnson.

Simply by moving the bill out of committee, Sen. Johnson, and therefore Wisconsin, could play a key role in putting these bipartisan recommendations into law.

What specifically would the legislation do? First, it would require strong privacy protections for using data for research purposes. It would also develop a streamlined process for researchers to securely access government data for approved research projects—projects designed to help the federal government improve its results.



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Moreover, the bill would establish the position of chief evaluation officer in major government agencies, helping them use program evaluation to learn what works. The bill also includes strong provisions on data transparency, requiring government to be open about how data are used by agencies and qualified researchers.

In short, the bill would catalyze more examples of agencies and policymakers using evidence to improve outcomes for Americans, such as the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program within the Department of Health and Human Services. It requires its largest grantees to use evidence-based approaches so that more low-income first-time mothers receive quality help to ensure that their children are healthy and ready to learn.

Another example is when the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Veterans Affairs shifted their strategy to prevent and end chronic homelessness among military veterans. That effort was based on rigorous research, resulting in thousands of homeless veterans leaving the streets and leading more stable and productive lives.

Of course, a fair question on the topic of evidence-based policy is this: whose evidence? Can't decision-makers cherry-pick data to advance their own beliefs and ideology? Can't researchers and evaluators use biased methods to argue a particular point?

Those are always valid concerns, but a hallmark of the bipartisan evidence-based policy movement, spanning several presidential administrations, has been a commitment to rigorous evidence based on valid, reliable research methods. It is a movement based on the idea that efficient

and effective government requires understanding how well current policies are working and identifying alternatives that can work better. That requires incorporating evidence into decision-making, whether it is from rigorous program evaluations, program monitoring, performance measurement, data analytics, statistics or other useful approaches.

The American public wants government to operate effectively and efficiently. It is a call that ties directly to Wisconsin and the spirit of Fighting Bob La Follette, the legendary progressive Wisconsin political leader of the early 1900s. To achieve that, policymakers need good information on which to base decisions. The Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act would improve the ability of researchers and decision-makers to securely use the data government already collects to better inform important policy decisions.

Maria Cancian is a professor of public affairs and social work at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and the incoming dean of the McCourt School of Public Policy at Georgetown University. She served in the Obama administration.

Andrew Feldman is a director at Grant Thornton Public Sector. A Milwaukee native, he served on the Evidence Team at the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in the Obama administration.

Robert Shea is a principal at Grant Thornton Public Sector. He served on the bipartisan Commission on Evidence-Based Policy and was the associate director for administration and government performance at OMB in the George W. Bush administration.