From research to policy impact: a case study on electric vehicles

Effective public policy must be based on sound science and data, but connecting the best and latest research with the policy process is often easier said than done. A recent trip by representatives of the UC Davis Plug-in Hybrid and Electric Vehicle (PH&EV) Center to the Pacific Northwest provides an excellent example of how to bridge the gap between research and practice.

Introduction

The PH&EV Center’s activities include tracking the introduction and commercial success of different types of electric vehicles (EVs) in California and the broader United States. Findings are used to help policymakers design programs that effectively and cost-efficiently help EVs break into new markets. The PH&EV Center also hosts the International Electric Vehicle Policy Council, a group of 25 experts from North America, Europe, and Asia who work together to develop policy briefs backed up by empirical data. The briefs produced by this council summarize research from expert sources around the globe, providing key information for policymakers.

The PH&EV Center in Washington State

In January 2018, researchers from the PH&EV Center joined representatives from Forth—an Oregon-based advocacy group focused on smart mobility and transportation innovation—in traveling to Olympia, Washington. The purpose of the trip was to meet with Washington state legislators about best practices for accelerating EV adoption. The trip was timely because Washington’s active state incentive for EVs was set to expire in the second quarter of 2018, and because legislators were considering introducing a zero emission vehicle (ZEV) sales mandate in the state, similar to the mandate already in place in California.

Over the course of the trip, the researchers had one-on-one meetings about these topics with five state senators, six members of the state House of Representatives, and state legislative staff. Shortly after the meetings, Washington State did indeed take important steps to support EVs and ZEVs. On February 1, the Washington House Committee on Environment passed a bill that would enact a California-style ZEV mandate, and on February 6, the bill passed the House Committee on Appropriations as well. On February 27, 2018, the Washington House of Representatives voted 86 to 12 to pass a bill extending the Washington state EV incentive, sending the bill to the state Senate.

“Having a good evidence base to inform our policy making is crucial and can sometimes be difficult in an emerging field such as that of ultra low emission/electric vehicles. The work of the EV Policy Council is important in giving us this information, particularly around questions of consumer incentives for vehicles, and the relative performance of different types of electric vehicles such as battery electric vs. plug-in hybrid.”

—Phil Killingley
Deputy Head, Office for Low Emission Vehicles, Department for Transport, UK
Key Takeaways

As the prevalence of shared, electric, and automated vehicles increases, more and more policymakers are looking for assistance in unlocking the full potential and avoiding adverse consequences of these “3 Revolutions” in transportation. Years of persistent effort and strategic investments have positioned the PH&EV Center as a go-to source for expert advice. The PH&EV Center’s reputation for delivering credible, clear, and actionable insights led to the opportunity for PH&EV Center representatives to meet with legislators at a critical juncture for Washington State’s transportation policy. The PH&EV Center’s success in Washington underscored several key takeaways that organizations working to bring research into policy processes should keep in mind.

Takeaway 1: Be timely

Issues come and go in terms of policy interest, while research tends to progress at a more measured pace. Researchers need to be ready to act quickly when their area of focus comes up in the policy sphere. This requires foresight: researchers must try to anticipate future policy needs, and direct current research agendas accordingly. Researchers also need to be aware of relevant legislative and regulatory calendars and deadlines, since these will define the nature and urgency of policy interest. For example, a researcher could share work with key legislative staff during bill development and provide background to the relevant committees as bills are being considered. Finally, researchers should strive to be proactive, not reactive, in developing policy briefs and similar materials. Some adjustment and updating will almost always be necessary before materials can be distributed to inform a particular process, but having strong drafts on hand enables rapid response. More concretely,

Takeaway 2: Be credible and clear

Experts constantly grapple with balancing credibility and clarity. Peer-reviewed journal articles and similarly technical research papers maximize credibility but generally prove impenetrable to policymakers. Conversely, oversimplified summaries may lose the factual truth of the research or abandon critical context. Einstein said, “It can scarcely be denied that the supreme goal of all theory is to make the irreducible basic elements as simple and as few as possible without having to surrender the adequate representation of a single datum of experience.” This statement, by virtue of its complexity, fails its own test. More useful is the common misquote of Einstein’s insight: “Everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler.” Such is true in policy outreach.

Takeaway 3: Be actionable, humble, and persistent

Policy recommendations should be designed with the capabilities and interests of a particular policy audience in mind. Even the most well-meaning government employee will not be able to increase funding for a program if she or he lacks budgetary authority, and elected officials will be most receptive to suggestions for policies that deliver direct benefits to their constituents. Researchers must consider: “What levers can they [my audience] pull?” and “What do they want to accomplish?” Findings can then be expressed in a way that clearly aligns with the mission of the target audience, and references specific actions they have the ability to take. It is also essential to remember that research, while important, isn’t the only thing that matters in setting policy. Public perception, fairness and equity, competing interests, and a host of other considerations also come into play. Persistent engagement in policy processes is needed to ensure that research complements buts does not get crowded out by other factors.

Takeaway 4: Find partners

Other organizations with relevant missions can act as amplifiers, increasing the likelihood that quality research will be integrated into decision making. Well-regarded nonprofits and advocacy groups can connect researchers to key policymakers, and use summary materials like policy briefs in their outreach.