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Communicating Research to Policymakers

Ronald C. Wimberley · Libby V. Morris

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Abstract This piece offers suggestions based on some things we expected to learn and from some things we did not expect to learn about communicating research to congressional policymakers. Some of these are insider discoveries from working as a professional staff member for a joint committee of the US Senate and the US House of Representatives. Other things we learned came largely as surprises from attempts to provide basic information and issue awareness about socioeconomic conditions in the Southern Black Belt directly to the Congress as well as indirectly through public interest and grassroots groups. One of the surprising discoveries, working professionally both on the inside of Congress and on the outside as social scientists, is how well social interaction actually works. And there were other surprises as well.

Keywords Communicating research results · Southern Black Belt · Congress · Policymakers · Grassroots groups · Interest groups

When asked to be a panelist in the American Sociological Association's annual meeting and professional workshop on "Communicating Research to Policymakers," I asked myself, "What have I learned from working in and with the Congress?"

Some of my answers surprised me.

I expected to find that I had learned how congress works from the inside and how to work through staff members who produce their elected members. Yes, produced.

This article is based on an August 16 panel presentation by the first author at the 2003 meeting of the American Sociological Association in Atlanta. The panel was organized by Larry Burmeister of the University of Kentucky. Material written in the first person singular in the first section of this article, "From the Inside," is from the first author's experiences. Later, portions of the text beginning with the subhead, "On the Outside," and stated in the first person plural are by both authors.

R. C. Wimberley (✉)
Department of Sociology and Anthropology, North Carolina State University,
Raleigh, NC 27695-8107, USA
e-mail: Wimberley@ncsu.edu

L. V. Morris
The University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA

Each day, the elected members of the Senate and House are heavily scheduled and often highly scripted by their staffers. This is the kind of thing I expected to learn from the inside, and I did. The surprises came mostly from the outside.

We hope these brief case experiences in the politics and persistence of informing public issues will be helpful to others who work to connect social scientific research with public policymaking.

From the Inside

On leave from my university job, I once worked with the Joint Economic Committee of both houses of the Congress. The Joint Economic Committee is the economic think-tank of the Congress much like the Council of Economic Advisors is for the Executive Office. Each house had its own staff on the JEC. When I worked on the staff, there was a Senate Republican side and a House Democratic side reflecting the majority party in each body. I—although a sociologist and a Democrat—worked on the senate side under the official job title of economist and with the committee's senate-side Republican staff.

We worked on issues that were still at the issue definition stage and not far into the solution stage. That meant that the Reps and Dems could agree on most things. That is, elected members could at least agree, for the most part, that there were problems and what these problems were. Had the emphasis been on operationalizing specific legislative solutions, however, there would have been more opportunities for partisan differences.

Social interaction! I learned that getting to know staffers is the key to getting anything accomplished with congress. That is a sociological thing, by the way. Social interaction works. And I often believe sociologists will be the last to discover the power of social interaction and the practical implications of that proposition.

I learned that staffers are typically young, very bright, hard working, and fresh out of college with excessive energy and unclouded commitment. I also learned that a few staffers are there because the elected member owed their parents a favor. But these do not usually last long on the job. They cannot if the member is to succeed.

Harder to win? Several things I learned come under the category of, "Do not do things that make it harder to win."

For example, I learned that as a staffer yourself, you do not ever embarrass your member no matter how ridiculous he or she might sound or act. Fortunately, I learned this symbolically rather than through personal experience. I was told of staffers who left their offices quickly after doing something that reflected poorly upon their members. All appeared normal in the morning; their desks were clear in the afternoon, and they were not to be seen again. In academic life, of course, that rarely happens.

I learned that members will do the strangest things to get re-elected. They will serve the pressing needs of their constituents! Our research and expertise can often

help them to do this when both member and scientist feel comfortable with the arrangement. Of course, our research and expertise can be used by a member's opponents as well. Or by their electorate of constituents. Indeed, we need a better informed electorate in order to get better candidates into office or to keep them there.

I learned that it is fun to write sections of members' speeches. That is part of the process of producing your member and committee members. This is particularly enjoyable when the member ad libs in the speech and says, "This is something I really believe is important," and then reads something you wrote. It is even more fun when the member is a Republican and is reading your Democrat-inspired lines.

Therefore, from my own personal partisan perspective, I learned that it is better to write Republican speeches as a Democrat than to let some Republican write them. But do not embarrass the member. As a scientist, of course, and regardless of your own partisan views, your message should be written consistently and appropriately for use by members of any party.

I also learned that neo-Marxist and related political–economic pitches do not work with members of the US Congress. Just watch an academic try that in a congressional hearing. It is policy baggage that you do not want to be caught holding.

Making the creative link. Perhaps most importantly, I learned that there is an art to plugging the findings of science and academics into the policymaking process. There are talented academics, and there are talented staffers. But rarely do they form an effective link to connect the best of both. Basically, there is a great energy resource in science and scholarship, and there is a big policymaking machine in congress. But few academics and staffers can plug it together so that the research information helps to make effective policies.

These inside answers are what I expected to learn from working with a congressional committee staff. Little of this surprised me.

On the Outside

What I did not expect to learn gives us even greater hope for getting the results of scientific research into public policy. And I did not learn this from working on the inside of a congressional staff. Rather, I learned it from working on the outside of congress in efforts to get legislation in place.

Our attention focused on the persistently poor socioeconomic conditions of a large US subregion we identify as the southern Black Belt. Our serious efforts toward changing the historic course of impoverishment in the Black Belt South began with a recommendation (Wimberley et al. 1991) made at Tuskegee University's annual conference in December of 1990. We recommended that a regional commission be created for the lower South—the Black Belt South that stretches across the 11 Old South States—and analogous to the Appalachian Regional Commission that serves the upper South and Northeast.

Armed with a slide show, overheads, and an assortment of demographic and socioeconomic maps, the authors of this article began making presentations on the

issue. In 1993 and 1994, we gave several seminars to House committee staffers and had sessions with their members.

Issues first, then research. Our experience began to teach us that journal articles the holy grailware of scientists did not get much notice by staffers or their members. We did not need to use correlation matrices and big regression models. We could have carried briefcases full of correlation and regression coefficients through the halls of congress and never gotten any attention. Rather, we soon found we were more successful when we focused on the issues instead of our research. Once the issues were out front, we could then show how our research informed the issues.

The congressional response to our presentations was quick and solid. Using our research and the general framework of the Appalachian Regional Commission as our model, HR 3901, a 1994 Bill entitled the Southern Rural Development Commission Act, was drafted to address human, community, and economic needs of the poor and mostly rural places in the Black Belt South. But unfortunately, and despite much congressional interest and backing, that Bill never got out of committee. It came at a bad time. It came at the beginning of the Gingrich revolution. Instead of spending the better part of their time pursuing the greater and longer-term goal for a better quality of life in the Black Belt South, many of the supporting members had to protect their backsides and attend to more immediate matters as they geared up for re-election. Looking back, however, we should have realized that bad time could have been the best year we would get.

Colorful, visual. In addition to having colorful, visual presentations, we also learned we needed a product to symbolize the issue a memorable calling card to leave with congressional contacts and interest group leaders backing the Black Belt issues. We needed to give them something tangible that would carry our message in a quick, powerful way that would capture and hold their attention and in a form that they would want to share with others.

So, we got funding together to produce two items. One was a map—actually a slick poster-sized map—similar to the computer generated map we had been using along with other maps and graphics and frequently requested after our presentations. The poster/map, *The Southern Black Belt in National Perspective* (Wimberley et al. 1996), was just that: a brief text and a US county map showing several color-coded percentage levels of African-American population spatially concentrated almost entirely in the 11 Old South states.

This poster/map now hangs in at least one art gallery, we are told, and in many government offices, interest-group offices, law offices, faculty offices, and homes across the South and in Washington DC.

The other item was a brief book that makes a case for doing something about the longstanding impoverishment of the Black Belt South. This report, *The Southern Black Belt: A National Perspective* (Wimberley and Morris 1997), visually and colorfully lays out the region and maps its socioeconomic conditions. It is not your typical sociology book nor was it intended to be. It is a slick publication; it is a quick read. Fortunately, we found a publisher who was willing to get behind it and

promote it i.e., give away a lot of copies while keeping it cheap for those who bought the book and sometimes bought it by the case.

Surprisingly, the short volume did everything we expected and more. People looked at its maps; they read it; they became more fully aware of the scope of the issues; and they saw our suggestions for solutions. Universities bought into the effort. Extension and outreach programs were built from it. Agencies based programs around it. Small foundations used the book as a justification for their proposals to larger foundations and granting agencies.

What was more surprising has been the interest generated in grassroots groups across the South. For many, the poster became a must-have symbol of the issues; the book became a must-read for those in the movement. Indeed, *The Southern Black Belt* became an original text for the emerging social movement.

The indirect approach. Even more gratifying is that by 2004, there were three bills in congress to establish regional commissions for the Black Belt South—S527, HR678, and HR141. By 2007, S1865, HR20, HR5082, HR66, S503, and HR2403 had also been introduced for a 1994 to 2007 total of 10 bills in all. We have not worked with any of these bills to the extent that we developed our original HR 3901. Nor do we agree with all the details in these newer Bills. But each Bill has been at least initially inspired and guided from our research, by our presentations, through the book, and by the map of the region the poster portrays. Our research and ideas are still there. We have discovered that our research on conditions and prospects of the Black Belt provides a university-based legitimacy that is highly desired by grassroots and interest groups. But now, others are making our case for us. Yes, they will claim credit, but that is okay because they have earned it too.

We do not know that revisions of any of these bills will ever pass and eventually get funded at a sufficient level, fail outright, or again be reintroduced in future congressional sessions. Year after year we still hear, "This is not a good year," and, "The budget is too tight." Quite unfortunately, there are again big new issues which command the attention of congressional members and compete for congressional appropriations. But we must remember that while each year of the effort may be the worst in a long time, it could still be the best chance such legislation may have for many years to come.

The Surprises

Much of what we have learned about communicating research to policymakers through the Black Belt issues came as surprises to us. The main surprise is that sociologists and other social scientists can make their research available to the Congress, and it will be used if we first focus on the issues and then make the relevant research understandable and meaningful to congressional staffers and the elected members.

And there is a second surprise in what we have learned. It is that sociologists and other scientists do not have to promote their work to congress on their own. If our work is understandable and attractive to the public and to issue-interest groups, they will promote our ideas and recommendations for us.

Again, social interaction works, both directly and indirectly. We can directly communicate with the staffers and members. Or, we can indirectly communicate our research to policymakers by effectively communicating it to their constituents—issue-interest groups and their leaders—who in turn will communicate our research to the policymakers for us. Sociologists and other social scientists can work through public constituencies to get our scientific work plugged into social policy solutions.

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