Institutional Barriers to Non-Partisan Research Evidence Use in State Health Policymaking: Perspectives from the California State Legislature

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Background

- Research evidence is widely underutilized in state health policymaking decisions.
- Effectively addressing the translational gap between research evidence and health policy in state legislatures requires understanding the systematic barriers to non-partisan research evidence use.
- Limited perspectives on what institutional-level barriers within state legislatures might account for research evidence underutilization in health policymaking.

Objectives

- To identify perceived institutional barriers to research evidence use in state health policymaking.

Methods

- **Sample:** 22 semi-structured interviews with California state policymakers and legislative staff.
- **Interview guide**: professional role, perceived use of research evidence in health policymaking, and perceived barriers to and solutions for research evidence use in health policymaking.
- **Analysis:**
  - Interview transcripts coded in Dedoose software to identify emerging themes about non-partisan research evidence use in state health policymaking.
  - Second round of coding to identify institutional barriers to non-partisan research evidence use in the state legislature. Barriers coded as "institutional" if they related to the infrastructure of the California state legislature itself (e.g., hiring qualifications, salary structure, organizational structure).
  - Findings were debriefed and validated with two experts outside of the study team.

Results

- Institutional barriers to non-partisan research evidence use were grouped into the following concepts: Accessibility, Bias, and Capacity (ABCs).

Accessibility Barrier	Representative Quotes
Lack of training for staff on how to access and interpret research evidence	*Staffers' lack of research skills leads to reliance on lobbyists*: We're supposed to be experts on the process, but there are times where we're not experts on the issues. So that's when we rely on different non-profits and different outside interest groups who can bring that knowledge to us.
Insufficient infrastructure to facilitate knowledge transfer between the legislature and academia	*Limited communication between researchers and the legislature empowers lobbyists to influence legislative agendas*: I wish that a lot more of policy ideas were based on policy recommendations that were provided by some sort of research institution because we'd have more of a background as to why we're running a certain agenda and then we can come back when opposition groups come out and say "why are you running this bill" and say "Hey, this study supports this" and why.

Capacity Barrier	Representative Quotes
Lack of funding to support staff who conduct research within the legislature	*Budget cuts led to the downsizing of research staff and overreliance on lobbyists*: The CRB used to be much bigger. We used to be 3x, 4x as large in terms of staff...one of the impacts of the staff reductions are lobbyists now are often times filling that role [fact-checking] instead.
Term limit policies that result in high staff turnover	*High staff turnover curtails institutional knowledge and knowledge transfer*: When the CRB was first created, we didn't have them [term limits] at all...So you had staff there that had worked with the same member for decades, for years and years and years. And the function of the way things changed when we got term limits, there was increased staff turnover as well...so institutional knowledge could be lost more easily...They wouldn't know about us [CRB] if they were just coming from having worked as a city council staff.
Insufficient number of staff for the volume of bills to research	*Too many bills and not enough staff leads to reliance on lobbyists for research*: Let's say an organization wants to do a bill...I've got enough stuff to do in managing her [policymaker's] bill load and her committee workload and her leadership workload that a lot of times it falls to the sponsor of the bill to provide the research.

Bias Barrier	Representative Quotes
Lack of non-partisan knowledge-brokers throughout the policymaking process	*Legislative support bodies' staff are appointed and paid by the dominant party that appoints them*: The Legislative Analyst Office prides itself on being the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst Office. The legislative analyst who runs the Legislative Analyst Office is appointed by the Senate which is right now 29 to 11...So, my 20 years-experience working with the LAO, the LAO is a left-leaning think tank.
Committee structure contributes to research evidence being perceived as biased	*Committee structure gives individual policymakers excessive influence over expert testimony*: The problem that I've experienced in the past is that the staffer who works on the select committee is working for the Chair of the select committee, and the Chair of the select committee tends to be a Democrat. And I don't want to be Negative Nancy, but they tend to stack the testimony in favor of the direction that they want to go.

Summary

- Institutional barriers to non-partisan research evidence use limit knowledge transfer between state policymakers and researchers in California and increase the legislature's reliance on lobbyists throughout the policymaking process.
- Although participants widely recognized how lobbyists presented cherry-picked research evidence without competing perspectives, most had accepted lobbying as a reality of politics and felt that they had developed better relationships with lobbyists than with the researchers who could provide more balanced contributions.
- Findings suggest that pursuing institutional-level solutions may likely be feasible and worthwhile.

Acknowledgments