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# How Transparency and Reproducibility Can Increase Credibility in Policy Analysis

## A Case Study of the Minimum Wage Policy Estimates

Fernando Hoces de la Guardia

APPAM Annual Conference  
November 5, 2016

Preliminary Version: Do Not Cite

# Motivation: Doing Good Policy Analysis is Hard

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“I would give a different answer today than I would have given five years ago [...]. Five years ago I would have said 'we have got to demand high standards for the evidence' otherwise we just say that we don't know. [...] What I try to do in my role as a policy advisor [is] two things (i) represent the evidence that was out there and (ii) give my take on it [on how confident one should be in the analysis].”

— Alan Krueger (Chairman of CEA, 2011-2013)  
Answering a question on how to think about  
the frontier of policy and evidence, 2016

# Policy Analysis Often Has Low Credibility

## [Manski, 2013]

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- **Diagnosis:** Little is known about the boundaries of the point estimates provided in policy reports.
- **Prescription:** In increasing order of desirability: (1) display standard errors; (2) bound estimated effects; (3) add [policy] decision criteria to the analysis (best).

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# Comparison of Low Transparency and Reproducibility (TR) in Research and Policy Analysis

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	Research	Policy Analysis
Output	Peer review publication	Policy report
Problems of low TR	Publication Bias. Specification Search (P-Hacking, Garden of forking paths). Data fudging.	Low credibility. Unclear connection between research and policy. Hard to improve systematically. Data fudging.
Common Solutions	Disclosure of key details. Open data and materials.	
Common Tools	Dynamic documentation. Distributed version control.	
Specific Solutions	Test for reproducibility; Registration of pre-analysis	Develop reproducibility; Systematic and continuous updating
Who increases TR	Researchers, Funders, Journals	<b>Not</b> the policy analysts (Policy schools? Think tanks? Discussion at the end)

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# We don't know how the sausage is made!

We don't know how the sausage is made!

Let's follow science, open up the kitchen.  
And publish the cook book with the recipe.

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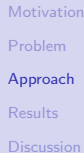
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# The TR Approach to Policy Analysis

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- ① Guidelines
- ② Dynamic document
- ③ Git (Github/Open Science Framework)

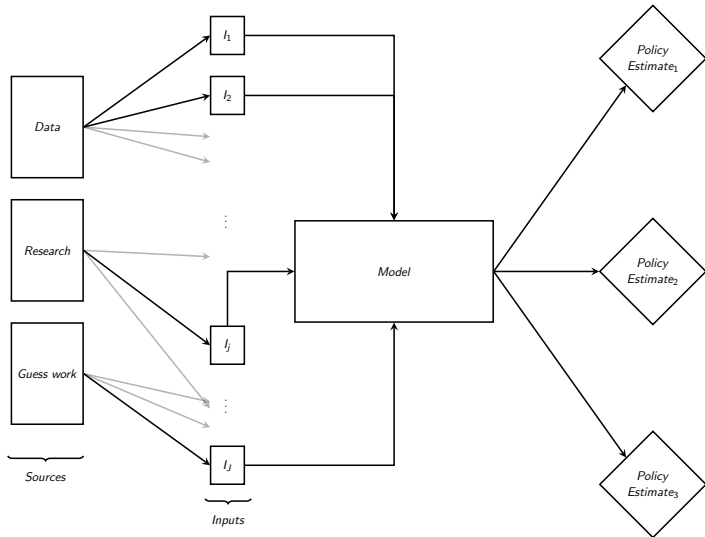
## Eight Standards at Three Levels

	Level 0	Level I	Level II	Level III
<b>Citation Standards</b>	Journal encourages citation of data, code, and materials, or says nothing	Journal describes citation of data in guidelines to authors with clear rules and examples.	Article provides appropriate citation for data and materials used consistent with journal's author guidelines	Article is not published until providing appropriate citation for data and materials following journal's author guidelines.
<b>Data Transparency</b>	Journal encourages data sharing, or says nothing	Article states whether data are available, and, if so, where to access them.	Data must be posted to a trusted repository. Exceptions must be identified at article submission.	Data must be posted to a trusted repository, and reported analyses will be reproduced independently prior to publication.
<b>Analytic Methods (Code) Transparency</b>	Journal encourages code sharing, or says nothing	Article states whether code is available, and, if so, where to access it.	Code must be posted to a trusted repository. Exceptions must be identified at article submission.	Code must be posted to a trusted repository, and reported analyses will be reproduced independently prior to publication.
<b>Research Materials Transparency</b>	Journal encourages materials sharing, or says nothing	Article states whether materials are available, and, if so, where to access them.	Materials must be posted to a trusted repository. Exceptions must be identified at article submission.	Materials must be posted to a trusted repository, and reported analyses will be reproduced independently prior to publication.
<b>Design and</b>	Journal	Journal articulates	Journal requires adherence to	Journal requires and enforces

Figure: Screen shot of TOP Guidelines

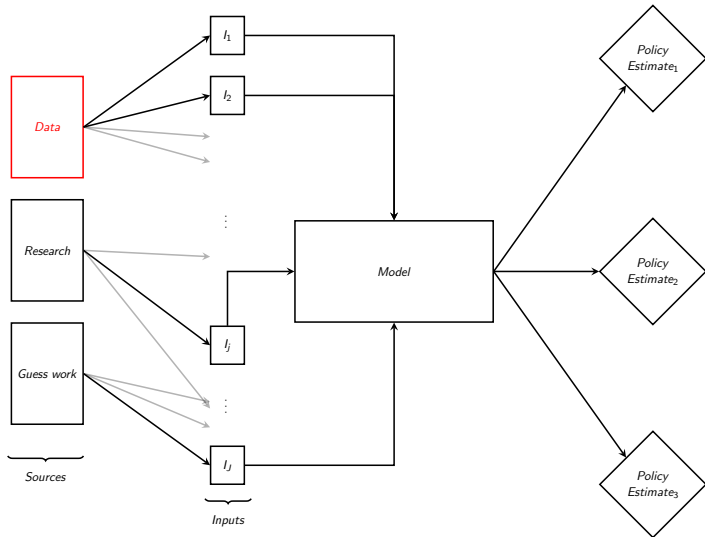
# Guidelines Goal: Map the complete policy analysis. Transparent & Reproducible

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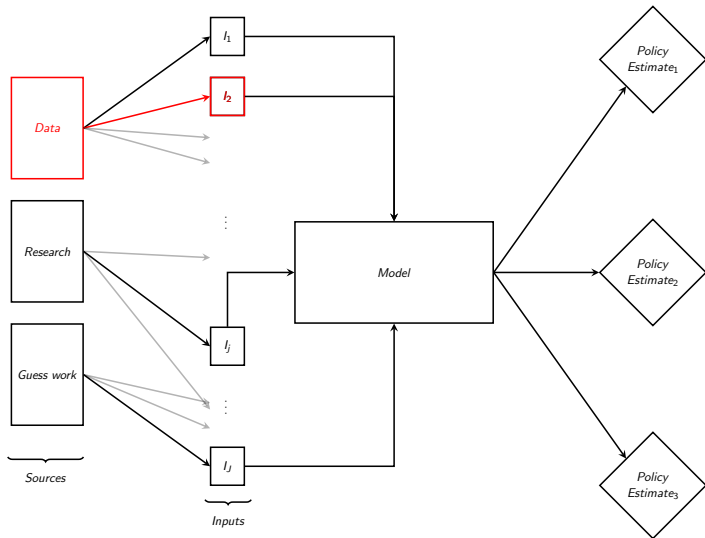
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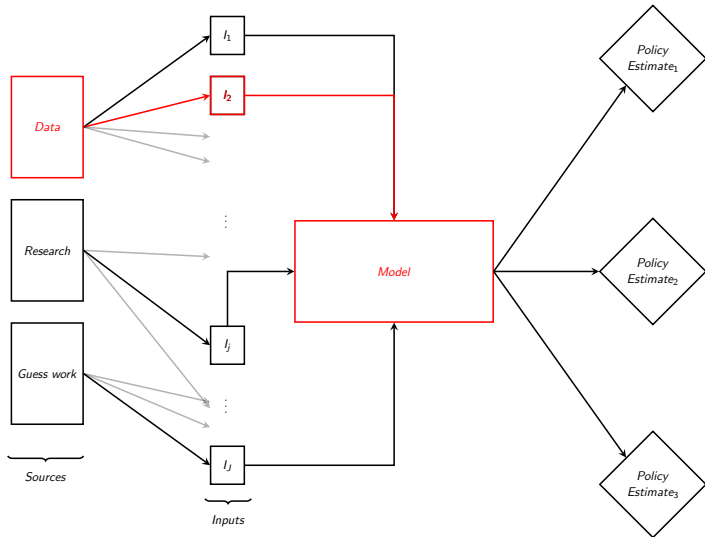
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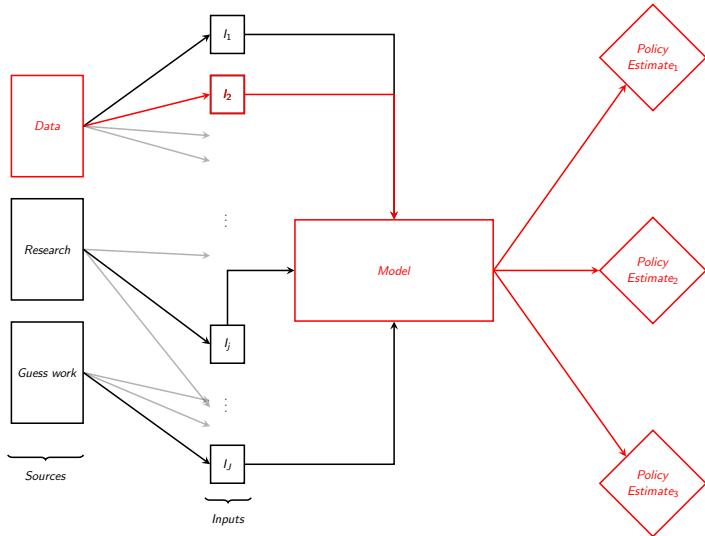
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# Guidelines Goal: Map the complete policy analysis. Transparent & Reproducible

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# Map the complete policy analysis. Example with Case Study

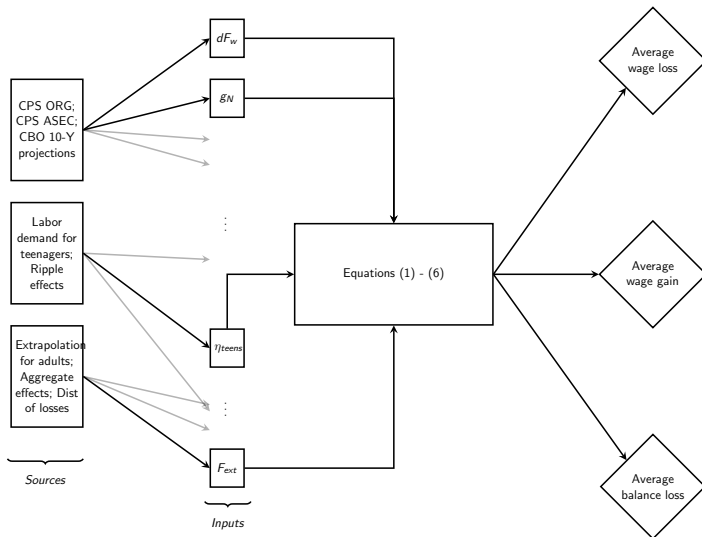
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From TOP guidelines [Nosek et al., 2015]

# Dynamic Documents and Git for Complete TR

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- **DD:** Reporting technology that combines narrative, mathematical, and computational components of an analysis [Knuth, 1992] implemented using R [Xie, 2015].
- **Git:** Distributed Version Control System, allows for multiple parties to work on same project in an open source setting, tracking changes and versions. User friendly version: Open Science Framework.

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Adapted from TOP guidelines

## Example: Verifying dis-employment by looking for elasticity values in report. **Before**

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Steps taken to verify the analysis & employment variation  $(\widehat{\Delta E} \times 1000)$  at each line<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Assuming target population  $\approx 22$  million,  $\overline{\Delta w_{w \leq MW'}} \approx 14\%$ , and non-compliance  $\approx 15\%$

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Steps taken to verify the analysis & employment variation ( $\widehat{\Delta E} \times 1000$ ) at each line<sup>1</sup>

- 1 Find an elasticity: -0.1 (page 25):  $\widehat{\Delta E} \approx 300$

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Steps taken to verify the analysis & employment variation ( $\widehat{\Delta E} \times 1000$ ) at each line<sup>1</sup>

- 1 Find an elasticity: -0.1 (page 25):  $\widehat{\Delta E} \approx 300$
- 2 What about adults?  $\eta^{adults} = \frac{1}{3}\eta^{teens}$  (page 28):  
 $\widehat{\Delta E} \approx 100$

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- 3 What about the adjustment?  $\widetilde{\eta_{w \leq MW}^g} = \frac{\eta_{lit}^g}{p_{w \leq MW}^g} \times \frac{\% \Delta MW}{\% \Delta w^g}$   
(page 26-28 + 2 papers):  $\widehat{\Delta E} \approx 1,100$

---

<sup>1</sup>Assuming target population  $\approx 22$  million,  $\overline{\Delta w_{w \leq MW'}}$   $\approx 14\%$ , and non-compliance  $\approx 15\%$

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(page 26-28 + 2 papers):  $\widehat{\Delta E} \approx 1,100$
- ④ The adjustment factors  $\frac{1}{p_{w \leq MW}^g} \times \frac{\% \Delta MW}{\% \Delta w^g} = F_{adj}^g$  are not computed from the data (3.2 teens, 19.5 adults). Instead:  
 $F_{adj}^{teen} = F_{adj}^{adult} = 4.5$  (page 28)  $\widehat{\Delta E} \approx 500$

*Steps 2-4 took several days of work!*

<sup>1</sup>Assuming target population  $\approx 22$  million,  $\overline{\Delta w_{w \leq MW'}}$   $\approx 14\%$ , and non-compliance  $\approx 15\%$



# Dynamic Document

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DEMO .

# Clear Display of Policy Estimates: Step 1/3

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Figure: Gains and losses. Different Units

# Clear Display of Policy Estimates: Step 2/3

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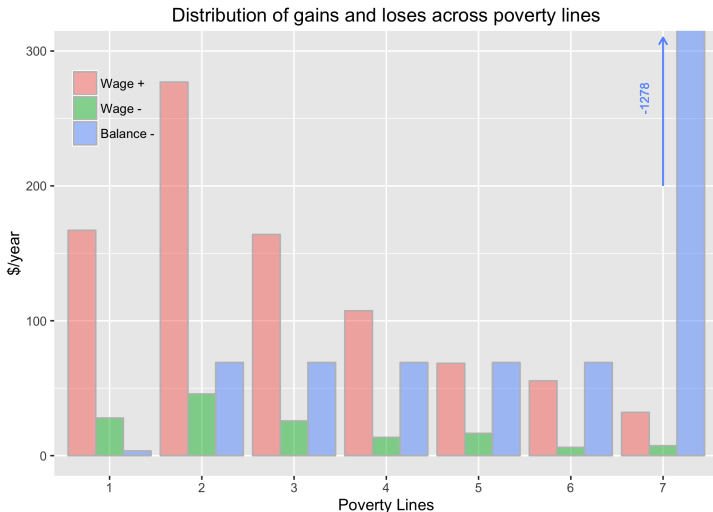


Figure: Gains and losses. Different Denominator

# Clear Display of Policy Estimates: Step 3/3

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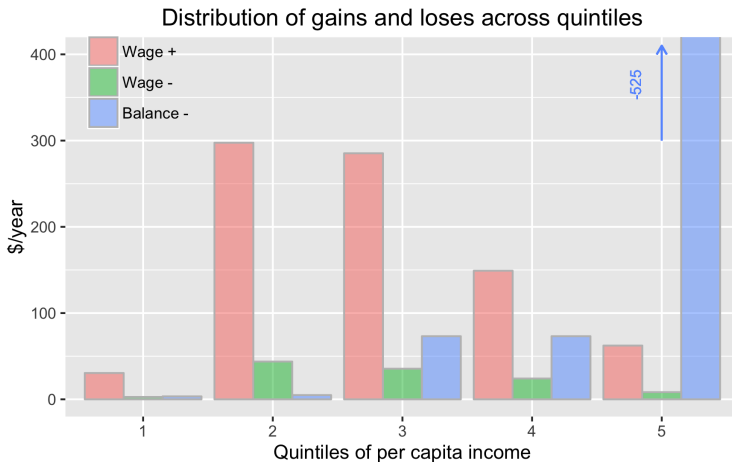


Figure: Gains and losses. Same units and denominator

# Sensitivity Analysis: Status Quo

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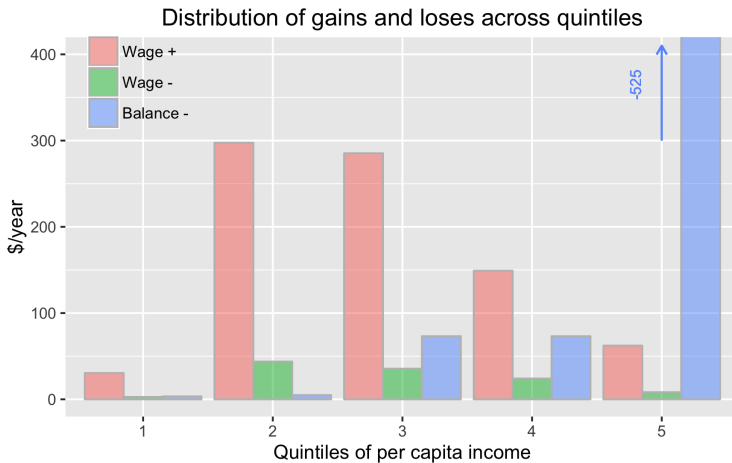


Figure: Default settings

# SA: Change in Elasticity of Labor Demand

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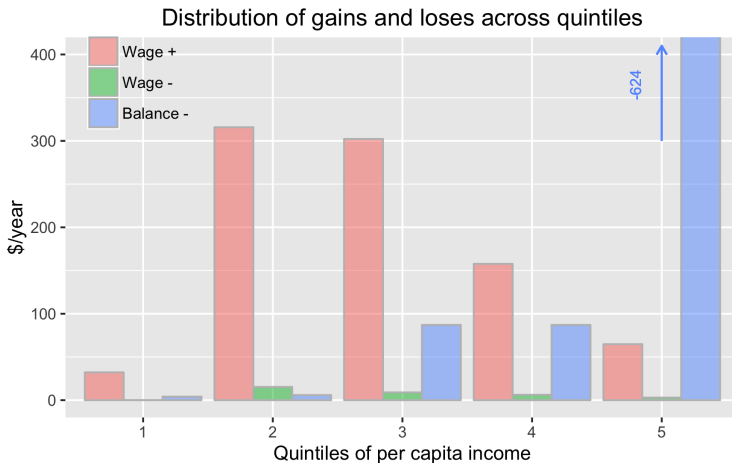


Figure: From  $\eta_{lit}^{teens} = -0.1$  to  $\eta_{lit}^{teens} = -0.01$  ( $\Delta^{-90\%}$ )

# Sensitivity Analysis: Status Quo

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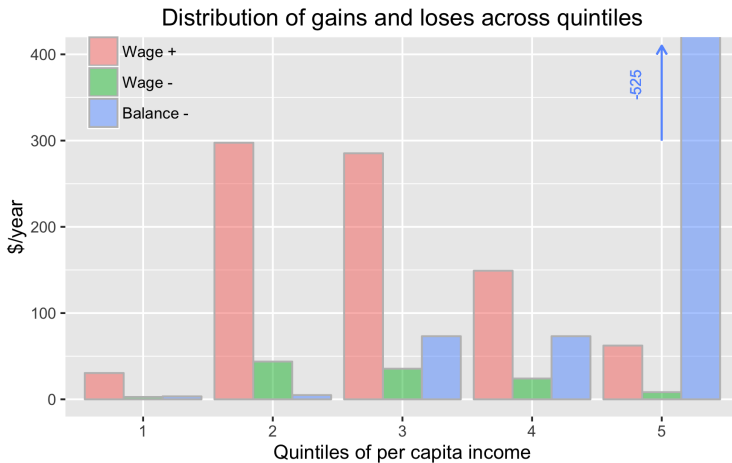


Figure: Default settings

# SA: Change in Distribution of Balance Losses

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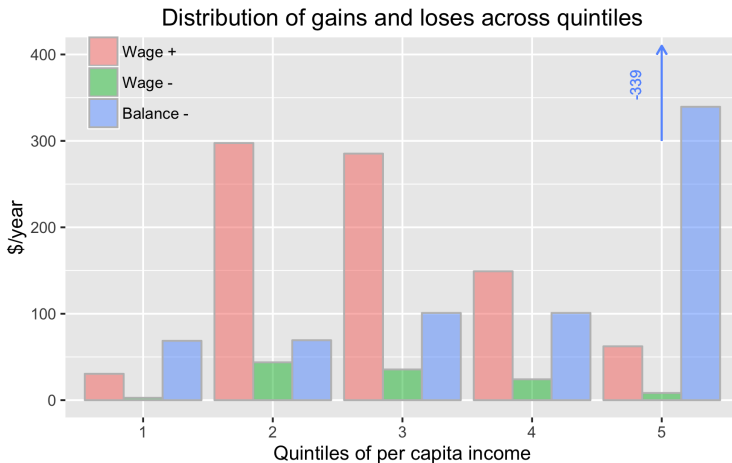


Figure: From (1PL, 6PL)  $\sim$  (1%, 29%, 70%) to (20%, 40%, 40%)



# Discussion

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- Who should work on this:
  - Analytic reviewers of report; Research division within agencies; Study Commissions (“MWSC or MSWC?” [Card and Krueger, 2016])
  - Public policy schools.
  - Think tanks; Bank of knowledge [Clemens and Kremer, 2016].
- Two type of contributions (~software development):
  - Short term: Within a given time period the model should be taken as given. Less freedom, but direct impact on the policy analysis.
  - Long term: Structural revisions occur in parallel and are incorporated in future cycles of the analysis.
- Let's assume this becomes the new status quo.
  - Costs of producing the next report on effects of min wage will be very small.
  - Every additional effort will imply improvements on the “state of the art” report (e. g.  $dBL$ ;  $\eta(MW)$ ,  $\alpha_1(MW)$ )
  - Much easier to have a substantive and normative policy debate (next step: [Shiny App!](#))

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Thank you.

<https://fhoces.github.io>

Back-up slides

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# Snapshots of DD.

Refer



## 1 Introduction

### 2 Employment effects

#### 2.1 Data, wages, and forecast

#### 2.2 Get the $N$

#### 2.3 Get the $\eta \times \Delta w$

#### 2.4 Other factors

#### 2.5 Computing effects on employment

### 3 Distributional effects

#### 3.1 Computing Family income

#### 3.2 Imputing policy effects

#### 3.3 Computing family income under status quo and minimum wage increase

#### 3.4 Other considerations

## 4 Results

# Reader Companion for CBO report on Min Wage (Preliminary Version. Do Not Circulate)

*Fernando Hoces de la Guardia + (hopefully) a lot more people*

*Last edit: 2016-10-16*

## 1 Introduction

The role of policy analysis is to connect research with policy. Because of heavy time constraints, policy analyses are typically ambiguous regarding the details of how the analysis was carried out. This creates three problems: (i) its hard to understand the connection between research and policy, (ii) allows policy makers to cherry pick policy reports, and (iii) hinders systematic improvement and/or automation of parts of the analysis. In this document we demonstrate the use of a reproducible workflow to reduce the ambiguity in policy analysis.

Here we attempt to contribute to the policy discussion of the minimum wage. The minimum wage is a contentious policy issue in the US. Increasing it has positive and negative effects that different policymakers value differently. We aim to add clarity on what those effects are, how much do we know about them, and how those effects vary when elements of the analysis change. We select the most up-to-date, non-partisan, policy analysis of the effects of raising the minimum wage, and build an open-source reproducible analysis on top of it.

In 2014 the Congressional Budget Office published the report titled "[The Effects of a Minimum-Wage Increase on Employment and Family Income](#)". The report receive wide attention from key stakeholders and has been used extensibly as an input in the debate around the minimum wage<sup>1</sup>. To this date we consider the CBO report to be the best non-partisan estimation of the effects of raising the minimum wage at the federal level. Although there was disagreement among experts around some technical issues, this disagreement has been mainly circumscribed around one of the many inputs used in the analysis, and we can fit the opposing positions in to our framework.

Our purposes are twofold: First, promote the technical discussion around a recurrent policy issue (minimum wage) by making explicit and visible all the components and key assumptions of its most up-to-date official policy analysis. Second, demonstrate how new scientific practices of transparency and reproducibility (T & R) can be applied to policy analysis. We encourage the reader to collaborate in this document and help develop an ever-improving version of the important policy estimates<sup>2</sup> (re)produced here.

## 4 Results

# Snapshots of DD

Ref-----

## 2 Employment effects

### 2.1 Data, wages, and forecast

#### 2.2 Get the $N$

#### 2.3 Get the $\eta \times \Delta w$

#### 2.4 Other factors

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## 3 Distributional effects

#### 3.1 Computing Family income

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#### 3.3 Computing family income under status quo and minimum wage increase

#### 3.4 Other considerations

## 4 Results

performed using the CPER ORG data base.

The weights used in our analysis will be `orgwgt/12`

### 2.1.1.1 Code to load the data

R

```
call.cps.org.data <- function(){
  data_use <- "CPER_ORG"

  # Using CPER ORG data
  if (data_use == "CPER_ORG") {
    # Checking if working directory contains data, download if not.
    if ( !("cepr_org_2013.dta" %in% dir()) ) {
      # create name of file to store data
      tf <- "cepr_org_2013.zip"

      # download the CPS repwgt's zipped file to the local computer
      download.file(url = "http://ceprdata.org/wp-content/cps/data/cepr_org_2013.zip", tf, mode
= "wb" )

      # unzip the file's contents and store the file name within the temporary directory
      fn <- unzip( zipfile = tf, overwrite = T )
    }
    df <- read.dta("cepr_org_2013.dta")
  }

  # Using NBER ORG data
  if (data_use == "NBER_ORG") {
    # Checking if working directory contains data, download if not.
    if ( !("morg13.dta" %in% dir()) ) {
      # Downloading data 53mb
      df <- read.dta("http://www.nber.org/morg/annual/morg13.dta")
    }
    df <- read.dta("morg13.dta")
  }
}
```

# Snapshots of DD.

## References

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## 2.5 Computing effects on employment

Putting all elements together we get:

$$\widehat{\Delta E} = \sum_{g \in \{A, T\}} \left( \widehat{N}_g^{final} \times \widehat{\eta}_{w \leq MW}^g \times \widehat{\% \Delta w^g} \right) - \widehat{OF}$$

### 2.5.1 Code to compute each component

R  
Stata

Components of Elasticities

	Adult	Teen
$\eta_{lit}$	-0.03	-0.10
$\eta_{w \leq MW'}$	-0.23	-0.13
$F_{adj}$	4.50	4.50
$\% \Delta w$	13.81	16.65
$\widehat{\eta}_{w \leq MW}$	-0.15	-0.45

Using all the components described above we get  $\widehat{\Delta^- E} = -478$  thousand jobs. The report however computes  $F_{adj}^g$  in a different fashion and gets a value of 4.5 (when computing the values of  $F_{adj}^g$  from the table below - as oppose to using historical values - we get  $\widehat{\Delta^- E} = -321$  thousand jobs).

## 3 Distributional effects

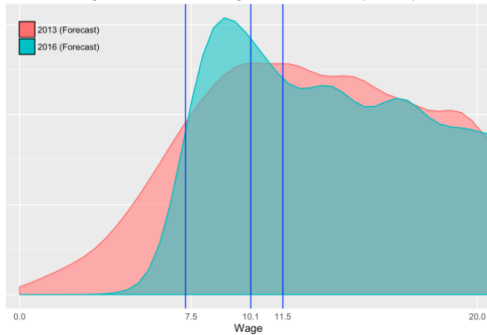
In the first step towards obtaining the policy estimates presented in the [introduction](#) we concluded with

# Snapshots of DD.

## References

R  
Stata

Figure 4: Distribution of wages in 2013 and 2016(forecast)



Comparison of 2013 and 2016 under the status quo

	2013	2016: status quo
Salary workers	122,593,557	129,545,571
Median wage	17.76	20.56


## References

## Policy estimates in CBO report and Replication Results

[Learn more](#)

# Hinders automation and/or systematic improvements of reports

- Large effort (Res. & PA) to quantify the effects of policies. Effort tends to end with the publication (of paper or report).
- Policy estimates are insensitive to variations in key parameters after publication (interest rate, important prices, cost of technology, etc.).
- We are learning that even the best of analysts, with negligible time constraints, have important biases in their work [Azoulay et al., 2015, Feenberg et al., 2015, Mullainathan and Shafir, 2013].•

A set of small, light-blue navigation icons typically found in Beamer presentations, including symbols for back, forward, search, and other navigation functions.

26/22

- ## Hinders automation and/or systematic improvements of reports
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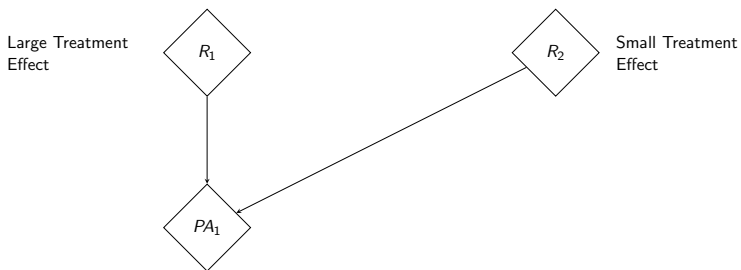
# Hinders automation and/or systematic improvements of reports

## References

- Large effort (Res. & PA) to quantify the effects of policies. Effort tends to end with the publication (of paper or report).
- Policy estimates are insensitive to variations in key parameters after publication (interest rate, important prices, cost of technology, etc.).
- We are learning that even the best of analysts, with negligible time constraints, have important biases in their work [Azoulay et al., 2015, Feenberg et al., 2015, Mullainathan and Shafir, 2013].●

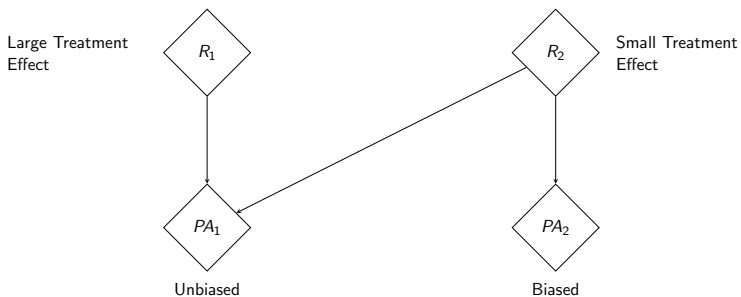
# Threatens the credibility of the policy estimates

## References



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## References



# Threatens the credibility of the policy estimates

## References

Large Treatment  
Effect



Small Treatment  
Effect



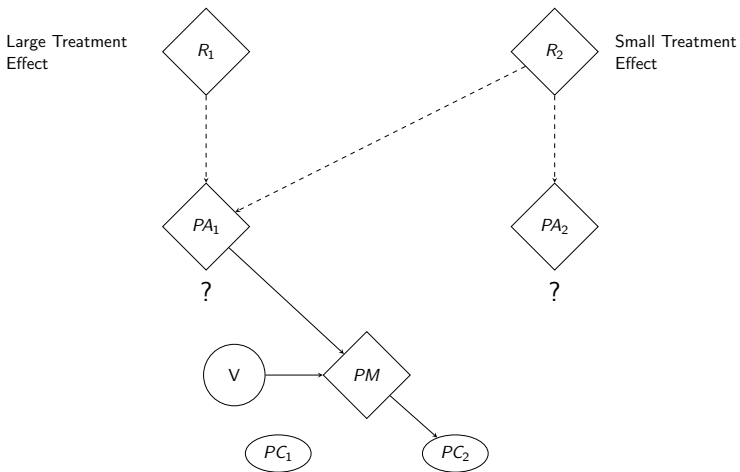
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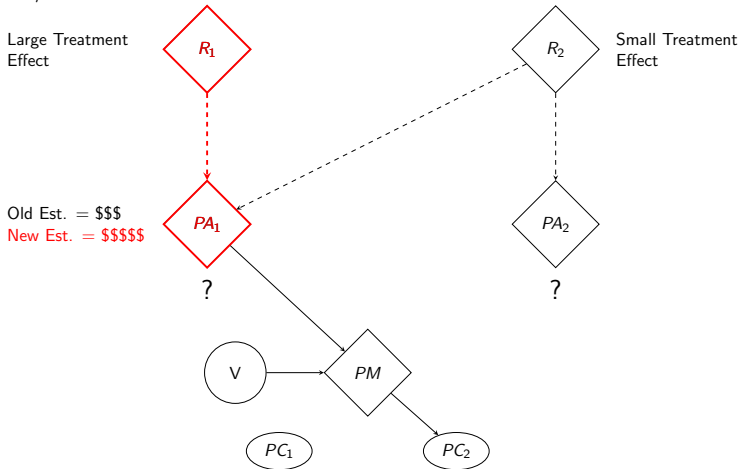
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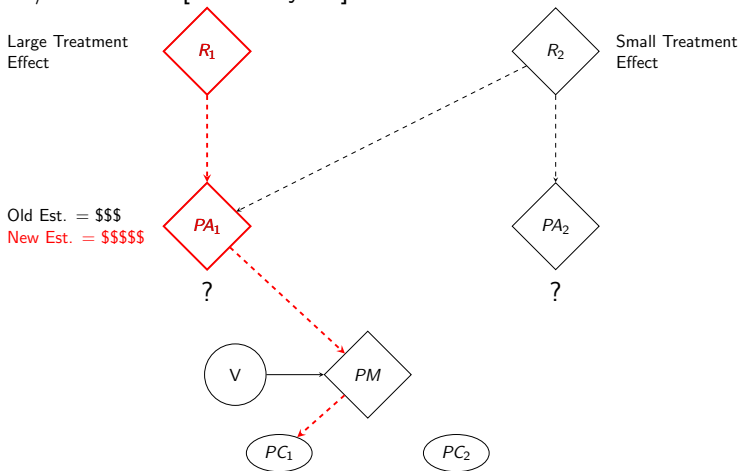
“When the facts change, \_\_\_\_\_. What do you do Sir/Madam?”



# Threatens the credibility of the policy estimates

## References

“When the facts change, **I change my mind**. What do you do Sir/Madam?” [J.M. Keynes]





# Threatens the credibility of the policy estimates

## References

“When the facts change, **I change my facts!**. What do you do Sir/Madam?” [?]

Large Treatment Effect



Small Treatment Effect



Old Est. = \$\$\$

New Est. = \$\$\$\$



?

Old Est. = \$\$\$

New Est. = \$\$\$



?



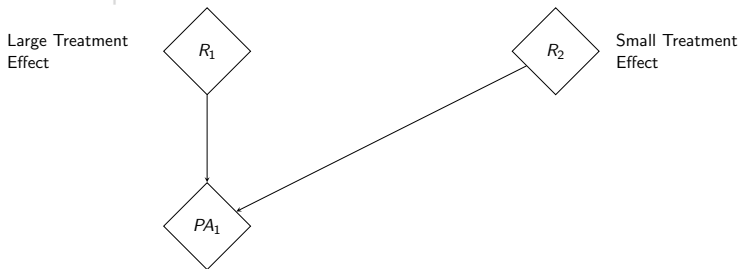
# Hard to understand what is the impact of research on policy estimates

## References

What is the impact of  $R_1$  on policy analysis? Can we separate it from a change in inputs? What about  $R_2$ ?

With the final policy estimate and citations to original research, we can only speculate of impact.

If we see only the final policy estimate, nothing can be said about impact.



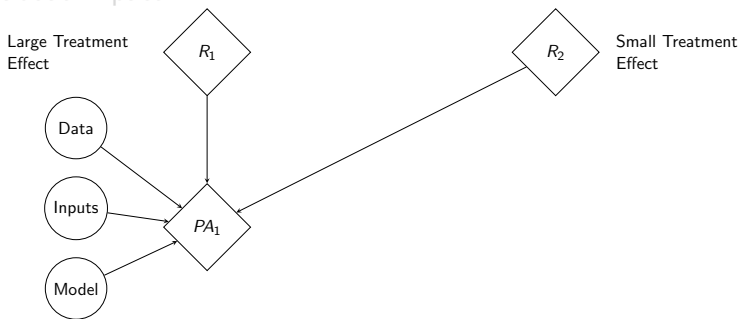
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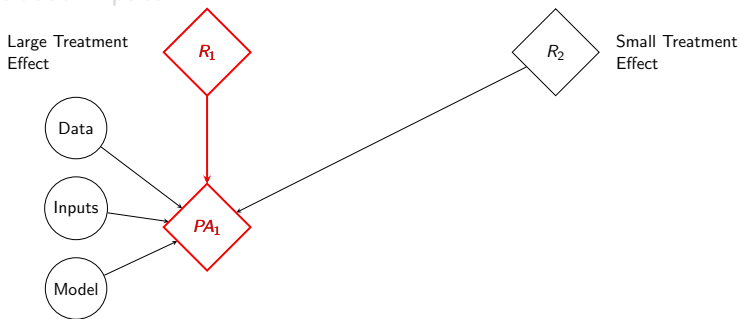
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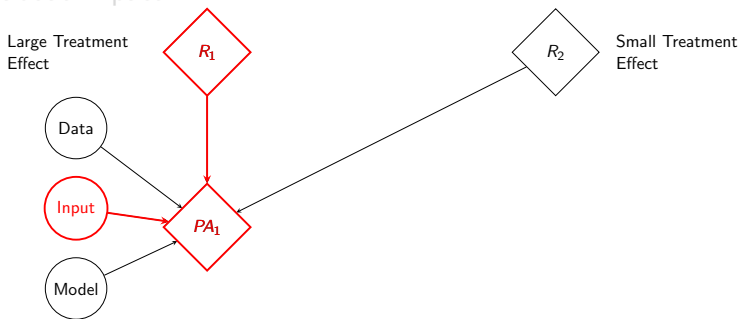
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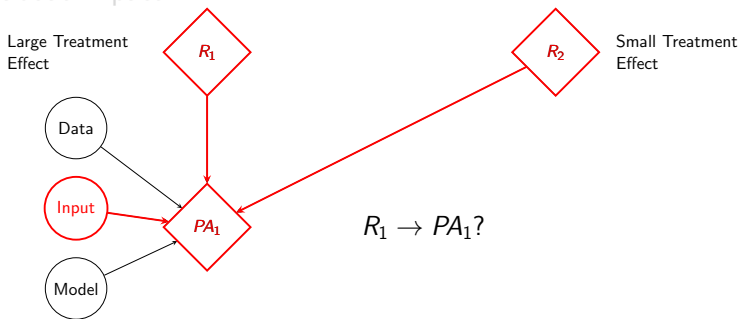
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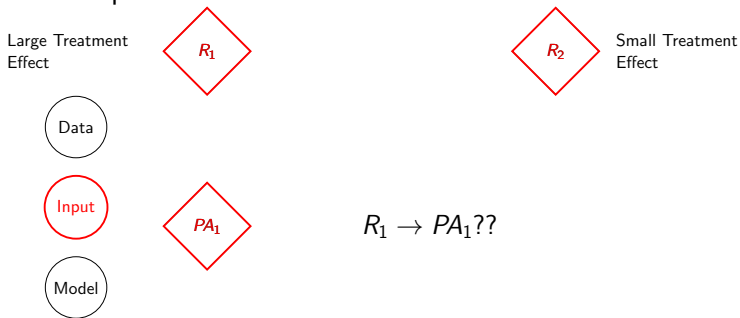
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# Why so little evidence on the role of evidence? •

Complex issue

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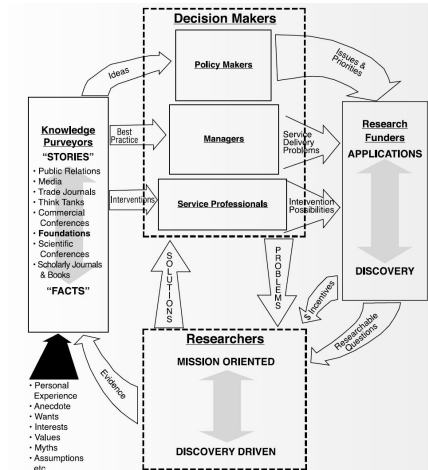


Figure: Reproduced from Nutley et al. [2007] citing CHSRF (2000)



# Why so little evidence on the role of evidence? •

## Complex issue

### References

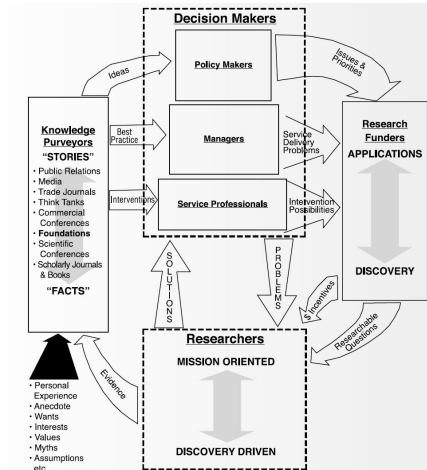
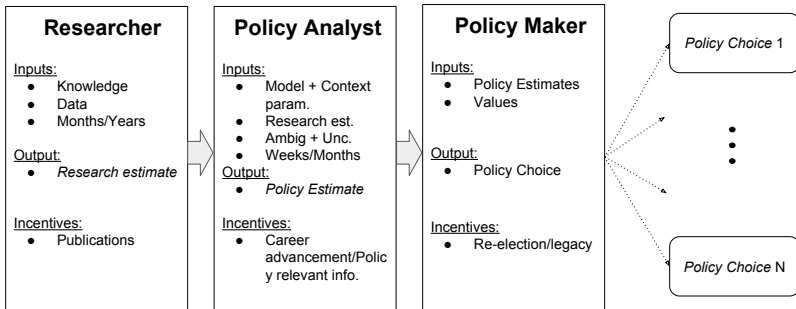


Figure: Reproduced from Nutley et al. [2007] citing CHSRF (2000)

# Simpler conceptual model

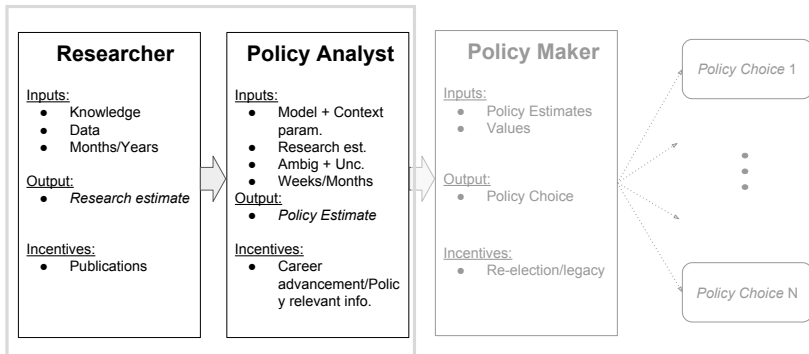
## References



# Simpler conceptual model

## Simpler question:

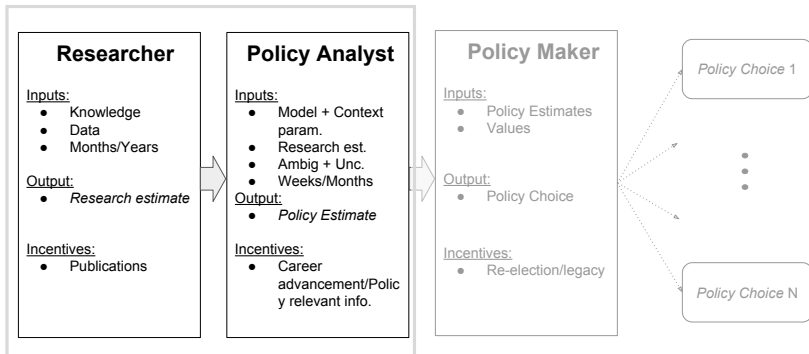
How does research affect policy analysis?



# Simpler conceptual model

## Simpler question:

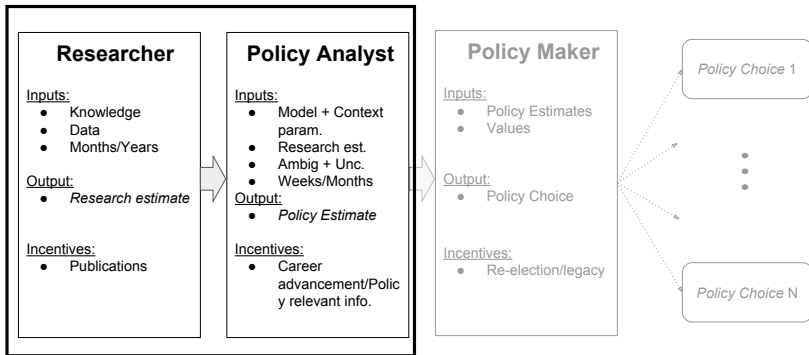
How does research affect policy analysis?



# Simpler conceptual model

## Simpler question:

How does research affect policy analysis?



# Reasons for Selecting the Case Study•

## References

- *Scalable*: CBO's reputation: among the most transparent and rigorous policy analysis offices. Lessons from TR that apply to CBO should apply also to most agencies. Additionally the policy issue is widely known which facilitates parallels.
- *Recurrent*: This policy analysis will be conducted again in the future. The case study can be directly used in future calculations.

# Reasons for Selecting the Case Study

## References

- *Feasible*: available data, good description of the analysis, and only one policy lever to analyze.
- *Relevant*:



Figure: Google Search Intensity of “Minimum Wage”