

We use cookies to personalize content and ads, to provide social media features and to analyze our traffic. We also share information about your use of our site with our social media, advertising and analytics partners. [Privacy Policy](#)

> [Cookie Settings](#)

✓ Accept Cookies



SCIENTIFIC
AMERICAN®

Subscribe



Observations

.....

Care about Science? Demand a Better Democracy

We won't get science-based policies unless our political system permits them

.....

By Gretchen Goldman on January 18, 2019



U.S. House of Representatives chamber. Credit: Wikimedia

ADVERTISEMENT

Think science should inform policy? Then I'm here to tell you why you should care about democracy reform. We don't get science-based policies unless our political system allows for it. And we don't get policies that protect people unless decision makers have our interests in mind. Right now, that political system is broken. Voters have been disenfranchised. Moneyed interests have drowned out science and evidence in policy debates. And much of this is happening behind closed doors.

But we can fix it. One of the first bills introduced by the new House of Representatives this January tackles this crucial issue. House Resolution 1 (H.R. 1) is a bill focused on addressing the corruption of this administration and restoring several important pillars of our democratic system: voting rights, money in politics, and ethics. We need everyone on board who cares about evidence in policy decisions. Here are three reasons the scientific community should support H.R. 1:

WE NEED POLICY DEBATES INFORMED BY SCIENCE, NOT MONEY

ADVERTISEMENT

ADVERTISEMENT

Policy decisions should be informed by science and evidence. Unfortunately, scientific information often gets drowned out by moneyed interests in what should be science-informed policy conversations. Large industry-funded groups can inject misinformation into policy debates with little accountability for who funds them.

This didn't happen by accident. The Supreme Court's Citizens United decision, issued nine years ago this week, opened the floodgates to allow trade groups and politically active "social welfare" groups to pour unlimited amounts of money into political activities. And alarmingly, the public doesn't know where the funding for these groups comes from. This leaves no accountability for the individuals and companies responsible for any misinformation being spread. And this isn't just a hypothetical scenario. Science policy debates have been sidelined by money in politics on multiple occasions.

Take Initiative 1631, Washington State's carbon fee proposal from last year. The "No on I-1631" campaign, sponsored by the fossil fuel industry trade group the Western States Petroleum Association, ran ads opposing the proposal with misleading information and unclear funding sources. Altogether, the fossil fuel industry, through companies and trade groups like the American Fuel and Petroleum Manufacturers, poured nearly \$30 million dollars into defeating the measure, making it the most expensive ballot measure the state has ever seen. The proposal was defeated in November.

Or take Chicago's soda tax proposal. There is scientific evidence that sugar-sweetened beverage consumption is linked to metabolic diseases. One policy idea to address this public health threat that has shown promising effectiveness so far is taxing sugar-sweetened beverages. The soda industry, led by the American Beverage Association, which represents Coca-Cola and PepsiCo among others, poured tremendous amounts of cash into defeating Chicago's proposal and similar ones in other cities, funding ads designed to mislead the public.

Science, of course, doesn't tell us that we need carbon fees or soda taxes specifically. But science does tell us about the severity and urgency of threats to public health and safety, like climate change and the obesity epidemic. And science can point us towards solutions, like reducing greenhouse gases and disincentivizing sugary beverage consumption. Communities and their decisionmakers should have the freedom to use science to propose and debate policy solutions in a transparent way, without the injection of misinformation and waves of cash from anonymous sources. When the public is left in the dark on who is influencing policy decisions, we risk a system that is more responsive to special interests than the public interest.

ADVERTISEMENT

ADVERTISEMENT

The solutions proposed in H.R. 1, which builds on previous proposals, would shine a light on corporate political activities and help ensure science and evidence isn't overtaken by the outsized influence of shadowy, industry-tied groups. The bill provisions include the perennially introduced Democracy Is Strengthened by Casting Light On Spending in Elections (DISCLOSE) Act, which would increase the (prompt) disclosure of money in politics and eliminate foreign political spending. Also, in the bill is a provision for the Securities and Exchange Commission to enact a political disclosure rule—a rule that has received the support of more than a million people and would require public companies to disclose more about their political activities to their investors and the public. Finally, a separate provision would require government contractors to disclose their political spending. These provisions help to unveil some of the dark money that currently influences our nation's decisionmakers.

RESTORING VOTING RIGHTS PROMOTES EVIDENCE-BASED POLICIES

All Americans should have the ability to vote. When people can exercise their right to vote, their representatives better reflect their interests. Conversely, when groups of people are disenfranchised, policymakers are less beholden to their constituents. This leads to fewer policies that use evidence and reflect the interests of the people. One recent study found that nearly two thirds of the congressional districts with above-average levels of air pollution had below-average voter turnout in 2016.



Sign up for *Scientific American's* free newsletters.

Sign Up

Communities should have a say in policies that affect their daily lives. Automatic voter registration, increased ballot access, and creating nonpartisan, proportional election districts would encourage voter participation, which in turn would put pressure on elected officials at the local, state and federal level to pay more attention to their constituents and pay less attention to special interests and any misinformation being pushed on them. The bill addresses many of these issues and counters many of the voting rights protections lost in the recent Supreme Court decision on the Voting Rights Act.

WE DESERVE ACCESS TO TAXPAPER-FUNDED REPORTS

ADVERTISEMENT

ADVERTISEMENT

The public should have access to information produced by the federal government. One important element of the bill would mandate that all Congressionally mandated reports would be made public. This is a no-brainer. It would allow the public to better watchdog the degree to which members of Congress are relying on evidence to make decisions, and to understand what federal agencies are working on. When the public has better access to the same information that Congress does, we can better assess whether our decision makers are using science and acting in the public interest.

Care about science? Demand a better democracy

In science, we trust the results of scientific studies if we trust the data and methods used. In our democracy, we need a system we can trust if we expect to get policy makers and policies that follow the science and serve the public interest. Let's fix the system.

Join me in expressing support for H.R. 1, the For the People Act of 2019, by signing this petition and spreading the word. We can't afford a government that doesn't use science to work for the people.

The views expressed are those of the author(s) and are not necessarily those of Scientific American.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

Gretchen Goldman

Gretchen Goldman is the research director for the Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists, where she leads research efforts on the role of science in public policy. She holds a Ph.D. and M.S. in environmental engineering from the Georgia Institute of Technology, and a B.S. in atmospheric science from Cornell University. Previously, Dr. Goldman was a researcher at the Georgia Institute of Technology, studying statistical modeling of urban air pollution for use in epidemiologic studies of acute human health effects.

Recent Articles

Scott Pruitt Will Restrict the EPA's Use of Legitimate Science
Putting the Public at Risk

LATEST NEWS

NATURAL DISASTERS

As Fires Choke Utility, the Question of Who Pays for Warming Emerges

January 21, 2019 — Benjamin Storrow and E&E News



BEHAVIOR & SOCIETY

Is Only-Child Syndrome Real?

1 hour ago — Corinna Hartmann



BIOLOGY

The Myth of Genetic Superbabies

2 hours ago — Jim Kozubek



MENTAL HEALTH

Cypher's Choice: Painful Reality or Pleasant Delusion?

18 hours ago — John Horgan



COGNITION

In the Nature–Nurture War, Robert Plomin Is Fighting a Losing Battle

21 hours ago — Scott Barry Kaufman



SPACE

Lunar De-Light! How to View 2019's Sole Total Eclipse of the Moon

January 20, 2019 — Lee Billings



NEWSLETTER

Sign Up

READ MORE

PREVIOUS



Why a Scientist Is Running for Seattle City Council

By Emily Myers on January 18, 2019

.....

NEXT

A New Way to Help Manage Parkinson's

By David Blum on January 18, 2019



Expertise. Insights. Illumination.

Subscribe Now!

FOLLOW US



SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN ARABIC

[Store](#)

[About](#)

[Press Room](#)

[More](#)

Scientific American is part of Springer Nature, which owns or has commercial relations with thousands of scientific publications (many of them can be found at www.springernature.com/us). Scientific American maintains a strict policy of editorial independence in reporting developments in science to our readers.

© 2019 SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN, A DIVISION OF NATURE AMERICA, INC.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.