

How Do Policymakers Update?

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Abstract

Evidence-based policymaking requires not only evidence, but also for policymakers to update appropriately based on that evidence. We examine how policymakers, researchers, and others update in response to results from multiple studies, using a unique opportunity to run an experiment on policymakers. We find evidence of “variance neglect”, a bias similar to extension neglect in which confidence intervals are ignored. We also find evidence of increased updating on positive results. This means that policymakers might be biased towards those interventions with a greater dispersion of results. We are also able to test how policymakers weigh different characteristics of a study when predicting the effects of a new program, such as where it was done and whether it was a randomized controlled trial (RCT). Finally, we examine whether policymakers update asymmetrically depending on whether the target program is in their country. We test several possible ways to mitigate the observed biases.

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