

State of ASA's Science Policy

Steve Pierson, ASA Director of Science Policy, pierson@amstat.org

March marks the one-year anniversary of the creation of the ASA's science policy office. The office is in ramp-up mode, but progress is being made—I hope you have noticed the activity! I would like to use this month's column to review some of the activities of the past year. As a reminder, the guiding principle for ASA science policy is to integrate statisticians into the policymaking process. We also are active advocates for statistics research funding and the federal statistics agencies.

Active in the Community

During this first year, the ASA science policy office became active in numerous communities that share ASA interests. Such connections are important because it seldom happens that a single group can achieve its policy objectives alone. On basic research funding, the ASA became active in coalitions that support funding for NIH, NSF, NCHS, the Decennial Census, and STEM education. As ASA President Sally Morton mentions in her column this month, we have signed numerous letters involving this and other issues. These letters can be viewed at www.amstat.org/outreach/scipolicyletters.cfm.

We also became active with other groups in promoting risk-limiting vote tabulation election audits, advising Congress and policymakers on climate change issues, supporting federal statistics agencies, and fostering communication and partnerships on human rights among scientific associations and with human rights communities.

Followers of the ASA Board meetings will have noticed an increase in the number of statements and science policy actions since 2007. The board issued statements on climate change, election integrity, and disclosure risk. It also endorsed a set of election auditing principles and a bill to make the U.S. Census Bureau independent, as well as give its director a fixed, five-year term.

The process for board statements has evolved in the last year. It begins with assembling a team of ASA experts whose charge is to examine an issue and develop a recommendation for the board. That group may conduct its business through conference calls and emails, tap the ASA's extensive network of experts, or request outside perspectives. Once a group reaches consensus on both content and



Statistical Significance (StatSig) series

method for conveying a message, the group presents its recommendation to the board. If you have a topic on which you think the ASA Board should make a statement, please contact me.

Building Infrastructure

Another aspect of science policy activity at the ASA could be characterized as infrastructure building. What aspects of what statisticians do are most useful for policymakers? Which accomplishments should we publicize? What are the options we should use?

One of the projects in this category is a series called Statistical Significance (StatSig), whose purpose is to demonstrate to Congress and other policymakers the importance of statistics to our country and, to a lesser extent, to educate this audience about what statistics is. The plan is to have a StatSig on a variety of themes, including economy, health, environment, defense and national security, agriculture, and government statistics. StatSig prototypes on the economy, health care, and agriculture are available at www.amstat.org/outreach/pdfs/StatSignificancePrototypes.pdf and others

ASA Science Policy Actions

ASA signs letters in support of funding for NIH, NCHS, FDA, and other health programs

ASA urges quick appointment of U.S. Census Bureau director and signs letter in support of the bureau's independence

JSM Congressional Visits: Sign-Up Begins April 20

To take advantage of JSM being in our nation's capitol, the ASA Science Policy Office invites ASA members to be part of visits to the offices of their congressional representatives during the last day of JSM, Thursday, August 6. Participants will be prepped on how to conduct successful meetings with Hill staffers and the requests we will be making (as determined by the ASA Board in an upcoming meeting.) Participants also will be provided with materials to explain and support the ASA requests. Participants will schedule the meetings in advance, with support and instructions from the ASA Science Policy Office. To sign up, go to www.amstat.org/meetings/jsm/2009/index.cfm?fuseaction=capitolhill beginning April 20.

are under development. As one example of their use, StatSigs will be included in the packets to be delivered during meetings with Capitol Hill staffers.

To encourage StatSig contributions, the ASA Scientific and Public Affairs (SPA) Committee is sponsoring a competition for all 2009 JSM poster presenters. (See the announcement on Page 17 of the March issue of *Amstat News* and at www.amstat.org.) Contributions from others to the Statistical Significance series also are welcome.

I would also characterize this column as part of the ASA's infrastructure building because I view it as a means to inform ASA members about science policy opportunities and developments. Followers of this column will notice I use guest columnists to better achieve this end, and I welcome any suggestions.

ASA Member Activities

To illustrate some of the more significant activities of the first year, let me discuss a few topics. A group led by Amy Braverman and Mark Berliner has been examining ways to productively advise Congress (or at least congressional staffers) on climate change issues. As their interest in advising Congress is broader than this issue, they view their work as a pilot project for statisticians. The group has been meeting with congressional staffers, both by phone and in person, to discuss the contribution statisticians can make and to hear the staffers' advice. They have found the staffers to be receptive to the contributions statisticians can make, but generally unaware of the ASA and the role statisticians can play. The group will report on its progress, experience, and findings during JSM 2009.

The ASA also has a group of members working to improve vote tabulation audits. In such an audit, a sample of paper ballots is counted and that tally is

compared to the machine tally for those same ballots. Statisticians can help election officials select the ballot batches so the risk of an incorrect outcome is minimized and the efficiency of the audit is maximized. Statisticians and the ASA have been involved in developing and endorsing principles and best practices for such audits, advising election officials in Colorado about how to improve their elections, developing methods for risk-limiting audits, and commenting on administrative rules for existing laws.

Supporting Statistical Agencies

The ASA science policy office also has been building capacity to better support federal statistics agencies. For example, the ASA agreed to become a partner with the 2010 Census, endorsed the bill to make the U.S. Census Bureau independent, and urged a speedy appointment of a census director. We've also produced a short report to inform the work force about issues federal statistics agencies face, and we're exploring ways to better support these agencies.

ASA Member Opportunities

The ASA continues to be active in nominating its members for various positions and advisory committees, including those with the NSF MPS AC, NSF EHR AC, NSF SBE director, National Assessment Governing Board, FDA Science Board, and the Census Advisory Committee on the Hispanic Population.

Looking ahead, having JSM in Washington, DC, is an excellent opportunity to showcase the contributions statisticians can make. A large part of this will be through the congressional visits that 50 of you will make on Thursday, August 6. (See sidebar and please check online to sign up.) This effort will be an excellent opportunity to discuss with congressional staff the role of statistics. There also will be a number of policy talks at JSM along the theme of "Statistics: From Evidence to Policy."

The current environment in Washington is favorable to statisticians. President Barack Obama mentioned statistics early in his inauguration speech, after referring to our economy, health, education, energy, and environment challenges: "These are the indicators of crisis, subject to data and statistics." We've also heard how this administration's approach will be evidence-based and data-driven. As I've said previously, it is incumbent upon us to take advantage of this. We must reach out to this administration and educate other policymakers about our role; this will be one of the top priorities for the ASA science policy office in year two. ■