

On Being Important

Steve Pierson, ASA Director of Science Policy



Pierson

An obscure philosopher once asked, “If statisticians are important, but the public doesn’t know it, are they still important?” One of the philosopher’s students asked if it was sufficient to pronounce one’s importance to achieve importance.

As director of science policy for the ASA, one of my primary charges is to integrate statisticians into the policymaking process. While students of the philosophy of statistics may still argue the first question above, we know that demonstrating importance is more persuasive than proclaiming importance. For statisticians to demonstrate their importance, there are many avenues to take.

Policy Papers—Congress needs technical advice. As I heard one of our members say, “Statisticians are brokers of honest, unbiased information.” ASA policy papers would help bring statisticians’ expertise to policymakers.

Congress will be considering significant climate change policy legislation next year, no matter the party in the White House. Members of Congress and their staffs will be bombarded with information from various interest groups, much of which may be contradictory. With little technical background, they could be at a loss when deciding which material to trust. A short consensus paper by the ASA on select topics of climate change adaptation and mitigation would be a welcome and valuable resource.

Similarly, as we heard from Mark McClellan (former commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration and former administrator of the Centers for Medicare and

Medicaid Services) at JSM in Denver, health care policy reform will also be a prominent topic in Washington next year. A short ASA document would help policymakers wade through the myriad studies.

Visit Congress—There is no better way for statisticians to affect issues Congress is considering than to have their voices heard directly. To take advantage of JSM 2009’s location in Washington, the ASA will be organizing a Congressional Visits Day on Thursday, August 6, to advocate a topic of importance to statisticians (to be determined with input from the ASA Board of Directors). Mark your calendars now. (Most Hill meetings are with staff, so Congress being in recess during the visits will only minimally affect the value of our meetings.)

Participants will be briefed the evening before on the details of the issue we will advocate, as well as how to have an effective Hill meeting and how to navigate the

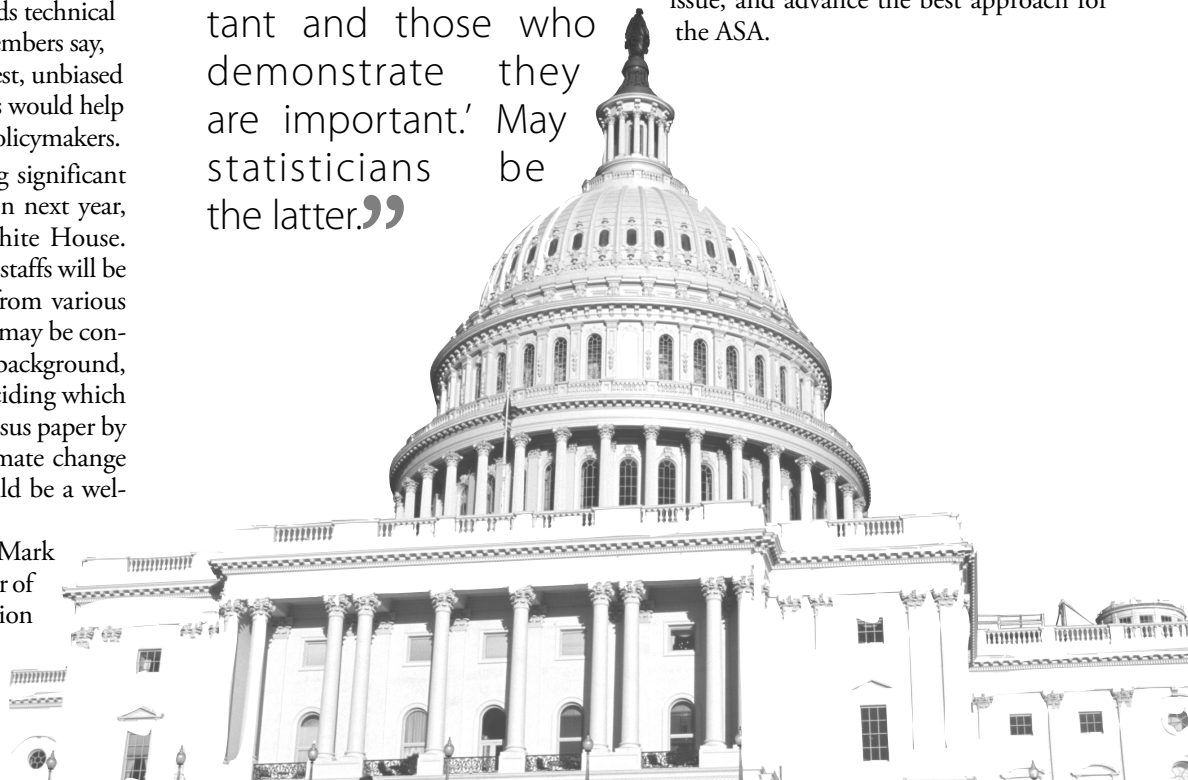
Hill. Of course, Washington isn’t the only place to visit with our elected officials or their staffs, and we shouldn’t do so only when JSM is in Washington. So, we also will be organizing campaigns for members to weigh in with local visits, calls, and other communications.

Statements, Letters, Other

Advocacy—The ASA Board of Directors has issued statements or endorsed documents having to do with climate change and election integrity issues at its last three meetings and is considering statements on other topics. These are an important way to be part of the policy debate. Further, as one will see on the ASA Science Policy web page (www.amstat.org/scipolicy), the ASA president sends letters and signs onto group letters in support of issues important to our members. The ASA staff also perform a variety of advocacy activities, including visiting congressional and administration offices, developing materials, and organizing member efforts.

Fundamental to any ASA policy activity is my job to monitor the policymaking process on a variety of issues and provide input on the ASA’s stance, seek allies on the issue, and advance the best approach for the ASA.

“ ‘There are those who say they are important and those who demonstrate they are important.’ May statisticians be the latter.”



ASA Science Policy Actions

ASA endorses Election Auditing Principles

Election Issues Resource page launched, www.amstat.org/scipolicy/index.cfm?fuseaction=earesources

ASA helps connect statisticians with election officials and voting advocate groups

ASA signs letters in support of funding for NSF, NIH, 2010 Census, and NCHS

ASA joins other groups in submitting comments about proposed changes to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act

ASA endorses H.R. 6314, "Fulfilling the Potential of Women in Academic Science and Engineering Act of 2008"

ASA organizes briefing for congressional "Blue Dog" science staffers with help of Task Force on the American Innovation

For details, see www.amstat.org/scipolicy.

Speak Out: Media—ASA staff members frequently hear from members about stories in the press that might be lacking statistical soundness or are in contradiction to statistical reasoning. While I encourage you to continue pointing these out, I would challenge you to take additional steps, which might include a letter to the editor, an op-ed, or a private communication to the author of the article.

Such pieces would be most effective if they were constructive in purpose. For example, in addition to data or studies on the topic, share with the intended reader the sorts of reasoning or questions a statistician would bring to the issue. This approach would move the discussion in a positive direction and help readers appreciate what statisticians do and bring to the table. Feel free to contact me for guidance, and certainly let me know of your actions.

The ASA maintains a list of topic experts for the media and is a valuable resource for reporters seeking technical input. Providing an opinion, technical explanation, or background on a topic is an excellent way to affect a writer's article. If you are not listed and are interested in participating, please go to www.amstat.org/news/index.cfm?fuseaction=asaseeksmediaexperts.

Speak Out: Testimony, Comments—

There are many steps one can take to influence policy other than communicating with policymakers. Legislators hold hearings to gather information for their

bills, and administrators seek comments as they develop their regulations. While being invited to testify at a hearing is, in fact, infrequent, providing comments in the rulemaking process is straightforward. The ASA will strive to alert members of such comment opportunities and I invite you to alert us.

As a side note, I would like to keep a catalog of our members who have testified before Congress. If you have done so, please send me a link to your testimony, the committee holding the hearing, and the date.

Be Involved: Fellowships, Public

Office, Causes—The need for technical input is a prominent theme of any science policy program. The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) tackles the issue head on by sponsoring PhD scientists to spend a year working in a congressional office or federal agency (see <http://fellowships.aaas.org>). Statisticians would be well qualified to work on any of the listed topics: energy, environment, agriculture, natural resources, health, education, human services, national defense, global security, and diplomacy. The deadline for the 2009–2010 fellowship is December 15.

Having a statistician on the inside of the policymaking process is a means to short-circuit the process of trying to influence policymakers. As you read in the August issue of *Amstat News*, the ASA has at least four members who are elected

public officials. Also, the ASA is part of The Campaign Project (<http://sharp.sefora.org/campaign-training>), an effort to encourage scientists and engineers to seek public office by providing resources and support.

Statisticians could play an invaluable role in a variety of causes, not only for providing technical input, but for the cachet a statistician's involvement can bring. As an example, there are many ASA members involved in election auditing principles and seeing those principles adapted at the local and state levels. (See Page 6) <http://electionaudits.org/principles>. These members are providing statistical advice to ensure a sound implementation of post-election audits.

We also have ASA members addressing global health policy issues on such topics as HIV/AIDS, job safety, tobacco use, and prostitution. We know from our understanding of the federal statistical system that accurate statistical information is fundamental to sound policy formulations.

Advisory Committees—There are roughly 1,000 advisory committees in our federal government system whose purpose is to advise officials in the executive branch. The National Science Foundation has roughly 17 advisory committees, the National Institutes of Health has 145, and many of the federal statistical agencies have at least one. ASA members already serve on many of these committees, but there are advisory committees that would benefit by adding a statistician.

Because the advisory committee channel is two-way, I would welcome input to guide the ASA's science policy activities from ASA members who have served on advisory committees.

In summary, there are many ways for ASA members to affect policy, and the methods listed here don't make up an exhaustive list. I welcome your input, especially if you could share your experiences influencing policy at the local, state, federal, or international levels.

Fundamental to the ASA affecting policy is our action. As a descendant of the aforementioned ancient philosopher once said, "There are those who say they are important and those who demonstrate they are important." May statisticians be the latter. For more information, contact ASA Director of Science Policy Steve Pierson at pierson@amstat.org. ■