

EYES ON EVIDENCE

WHAT WE HEARD

Insights from federal and provincial discussions about the transparency of evidence use in policy announcements

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December 2022

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank all of the individuals who helped support the preparation of this report, especially Evidence for Democracy's Communications and Campaigns Coordinator, Nada Salem, and Executive Director, Rachael Maxwell. In particular, we thank members of the public service, as well as elected representatives and their staff, across the federal and provincial governments for engaging in open conversations and sharing their insights into policy-making. This work was made possible thanks to generous support from the Trottier Family Foundation.

Evidence for Democracy is the leading fact-driven, non-partisan, not-for-profit organization promoting the transparent use of evidence in government decision-making in Canada. Through research, education, and issue-based campaigns, we engage and empower the science community while cultivating public and political demand for evidence-based decision-making.



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Executive Summary

We all benefit when governments make policy decisions informed by the best available evidence. Importantly, recent years have seen an increase in the call for evidence from policy actors across all levels of government in the Canadian federation.

But conversations about evidence-informed decision-making tend to devote little focus to the public's ability to understand the relationship between evidence and policy decisions. Without transparency, the public cannot scrutinize the rationale behind government decisions and political commitments to evidence-informed decision-making remain difficult to assess.

In our Eyes on Evidence research series, we used an established framework to explore the transparency of evidence usage in policy-making across both federal and provincial levels of government. Simply put, the framework asks: can the evidence behind policy decisions be found by the public? Our assessment found that policies across the Canadian federation fare poorly when it comes to the transparency of evidence usage, meaning that it is difficult for someone outside government to find the evidence informing federal and provincial policies.

However, we recognize that the transparency framework is not a perfect measure and that transparency of evidence use in policy-making may fall short for reasons we can't see from the sidelines. As such, we met with public servants, elected representatives, and political staffers to discuss our findings and to better understand the internal challenges or barriers that impede transparency in policy-making.

In this report, we share key insights gleaned from federal and provincial discussions and reflect on whether government systems, structures, and resources are equipped to deliver on commitments to evidence-informed decision-making in a manner that is accessible to the general public.

KEY FINDINGS

There are challenges around public communication practices

- » Our findings often came as a surprise: many public servants had not realized how infrequently the evidence underlying policy is provided, or how inaccessible evidence can be to the public even if it does exist online.
- » There is uncertainty regarding whether there is public appetite for evidence and what the appropriate level of information is to share with the public so as to inform and not overwhelm.
- » When established guidelines for policy announcements exist, they tend to emphasize communicating government actions through simple key messages. Supporting evidence is typically not the focus in this medium, despite policy announcements often being the first opportunity the public has to encounter and assess policies.

There are challenges around government culture and processes

- » We were reassured of the chains of evidence that exist behind most policy decisions; however these often remain in internal documents. In some cases, legitimate needs for confidentiality, such as national security concerns will limit transparency.
- » Information around the testing and evaluation of policies may not be shared because the finer details are not always finalized at the time of announcement, or because of a reluctance to be specific about outcomes.
- » Public servants often lack the time and resources to analyze and synthesize policy-relevant evidence, as well as to conduct formal evaluations of policy outcomes.

- » In some cases, evidence may not be shared because a policy decision was driven primarily by overarching priorities or because of a government culture of risk aversion.

Public servants are interested in exploring ways to improve transparency

- » Public servants want to be held accountable and are interested in both exploring different mechanisms to share evidence and in learning about solutions to improve transparency in policy-making.



Background

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At Evidence for Democracy, our mission is to promote the transparent use of evidence in government decision-making in Canada. We believe that we all benefit when governments make policy decisions informed by the best available evidence, and that transparency in how evidence is being used is an essential part of the decision-making process.

Importantly, the call for evidence is also coming from policy actors across all levels of government, as public servants and elected representatives alike have leveraged the value of transparency and evidence. For example, under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, all mandate letters issued to Cabinet ministers in 2015, 2019 and 2021 were made public and included a commitment to the “use of science and evidence-based decision-making.”¹ There are also Open Government initiatives at the federal and provincial levels of government, such as Canada’s National Action Plan on Open Government,² Ontario’s participation in the Open Government Partnership,³ and the publication of tens of thousands of open datasets by the provincial governments of Alberta and British Columbia.^{4,5}

But efforts to improve evidence-informed decision-making don’t typically place much emphasis on the ability of citizens to understand the relationship between evidence and policy decisions.

The complexity of the policy-making process is significant, but this does not obscure the need for transparency. In a democracy, citizens should have the opportunity to understand how policy decisions are being made, as well as what evidence is informing these decisions. This kind of transparency is especially important in times of increased uncertainty, when trust in government decisions is critical.

Importantly, without transparency, government commitments to evidence-informed decision-making remain difficult to assess. To address this, we launched our Eyes on Evidence research series to evaluate the transparency of evidence usage in policy decisions issued by governments across Canada.

In 2021, in *Eyes on Evidence I*,⁶ we adapted a transparency framework (**Appendix**)⁷ from the United Kingdom to evaluate the transparency of evidence behind public policy decisions in the Canadian context, and tested the framework on seven federal policy announcements. Simply put, our framework asks: can the evidence behind policy decisions be found by the public?

Next, in *Eyes on Evidence II* and *Eyes on Evidence III*, we applied the same transparency framework to assess a total of 100 policy announcements from the Government of Canada, and 133 issued by the provincial governments of Ontario, British Columbia and Saskatchewan, respectively.^{8,9} Overall, our assessments found that federal and provincial policies scored low on the transparency of evidence usage, meaning that it’s very difficult for people across Canada to find the evidence behind public policy decisions made by their governments.

Interestingly, federal and provincial policy announcements shared common shortcomings in transparency. They either mentioned none of the evidence underlying the issue or proposed intervention at hand, or failed to provide a reference or citation for any evidence mentioned. Policy announcements also rarely explored the merits of alternative policy options, or acknowledged any absent, weak or contradictory evidence. While properly citing and linking evidence is the first step, it is also important for policy-makers to critically assess the evidence they are using.

However, our transparency framework is not a perfect measure. If the evidence behind a policy decision cannot be found, it doesn't mean that the evidence doesn't exist, or that it wasn't considered in the policy-making process. There may also be cases where the transparency of evidence usage in policy-making falls short due to necessary confidentiality or crisis-time circumstances. But from outside the government, it is difficult for us to ascertain the internal barriers to implementing transparency in policy-making.

Therefore, following the release of our Eyes on Evidence series, we reached out to public servants, as well as elected representatives and their staff, across federal and provincial governments. Notably, we met with a wide range of public servants, from policy analysts to managers, directors and director-generals, and across various branches, including strategic policy, research and analytics, evaluation, and partnerships. In each meeting, we asked: what are the internal challenges or barriers which may impact transparency in policy-making that someone from outside the government may not be able to see?

1.1 Aim

In this summary report, we share key insights gleaned from our federal and provincial discussions exploring internal barriers to implementing transparency in policy-making, and reflect on whether government systems, structures and resources are equipped to execute the growing political commitment to evidence-informed decision-making.

We note that while this report reflects all views and perspectives that were expressed, it should not be considered a verbatim summary of all discussions, nor is the report structure an indication of the importance or chronology of the elements discussed. Instead, it is a synthesis of key insights shared by most, many, some, and few of the federal and provincial representatives that we spoke to.

In our report, labels such as “most”, “many”, “some”, or “few” are used to describe discussion participants. We followed the same approach outlined in the report by Canadian Heritage titled, *What We Heard: The Government's proposed approach to address harmful content online*.¹⁰ These labels are meant to preserve respondent anonymity, and to provide a rough understanding for the reader of how many discussants spoke about a particular theme. Intuitively, “most” indicates the largest number of respondents; followed by “many”; which means more than “some”; and finally “few”, which refers to the smallest number of respondents.

What We Heard

2.1 There are challenges around public communication practices

Our findings were often a surprise.

Many public servants remarked that an external perspective and assessment was useful as they had not deeply considered accessibility of evidence from the perspective of the public. Many initially thought that policy announcements provided enough evidence, but after discussing specific examples, most acknowledged that the level of information was not adequate for someone outside government to understand the rationale behind a policy action.

Public servants expressed that they were committed to an “open by default” way of working, but also acknowledged that there are persistent challenges in determining the appropriate level of information to share with the public.

We often heard concerns around how to transparently communicate evolving information while maintaining public trust. Several public servants expressed that it is important to get a sense of the level of evidence that the public actually wants to see in a policy announcement. As messages can get lost, there is a balance to achieve here when it comes to being transparent about evidence usage in policy-making, while avoiding overwhelming the public.

In some cases, the evidence does exist online but is difficult to find or navigate.

Many public servants referenced initiatives, like Open Data and Open Government, as ongoing efforts towards improving transparency. However, public servants agreed that these initiatives can sometimes present additional problems if information is provided in a way that lacks the curation to facilitate meaningful accessibility (i.e., it can become a ‘firehose’ of data). For example, some public servants acknowledged that the public often has to navigate through multiple webpages or previous announcements, that data repositories are often not directly linked to policies, and that it is not ideal that the public has to dig through different sources to find the underlying evidence. These publicly available databases could be better shared, or in some cases, efforts could be made to create interfaces that are more user-friendly.

A few public servants shared that some policy announcements are more targeted towards certain stakeholders who already have an understanding of the specific issues, whereas the broader public simply doesn’t have access to that information or context (unless specified in a policy announcement). Certain stakeholders, especially those with a pre-existing long-term relationship with the government (such as advocates or researchers), are already aware of how to request the evidence underlying a policy decision (e.g. from the departments themselves, or from Statistics Canada).

The challenges associated with improving transparency in policy-making involve both policy-making units and communications teams within the public service.

Many public servants stated that despite sharing underlying evidence behind a policy change with communications teams, all of the details don't always make it to the final policy announcement. Policy announcements tend to follow previously established guidelines, which involve fixed structures, seek to provide only the minimum amount of information, and highlight key messages. However, some mentioned that the communications teams won't include evidence that isn't explicitly provided, so policy teams could make an effort to provide more evidence. One public servant noted that additional information is often prepared internally in a Q&A format in anticipation of potential questions, but these are not proactively shared.

Public servants noted a distinction between policies and policy announcements.

Some public servants expressed that the policies assessed in the Eyes on Evidence series were primarily considered to be media releases, and that Ministers often used these policy announcements as a medium to share the work that the Government of Canada is doing, and interact with constituents. As such, the format of policy announcements prioritizes what action(s) the government is taking first and foremost, as opposed to providing the rationale, which may have contributed to low transparency scores. Nevertheless, almost all public servants agreed that the assessed policy announcements were the first and most common way that the public encountered the policy and had the opportunity to assess the underlying rationale and evidence used to make the decision.

Throughout our Eyes on Evidence series, we have defined a policy as a "specific intervention to change the status quo at a level that is intuitively characterized as 'a policy' by the public, politicians and the media".^{6,7} This includes both primary and secondary legislation, including bills, regulations, funding announcements, and more. Using the Canada Gazette, and the news section of each federal department and agency and provincial ministries, we assembled all eligible policies (i.e., policies which met our criteria). Examples of policies that were excluded included calls for proposals (funded proposals, rather than a call for applications for funding, represent a change from the status quo), job appointments (unless for example, a position was created) and report releases (unless accompanied by a change in policy).

2.2 There are challenges around government culture and processes

A chain of evidence can exist behind a policy decision yet remain internal to government.

Most public servants and political staffers reassured us that evidence and accountability exist in the form of internal briefs, impact reporting, and mandate trackers. Upon reflection, many acknowledged that these

do not typically reach the public because proactive disclosure is not standard practice. A political staffer remarked that they are often so heavily immersed in the available evidence that it's easy to forget that not everyone has that level of access to the same information.

A few public servants also shared that in order to increase transparency in policy-making, evidence has to be carried all the way up to decision-makers. But briefing notes don't always retain references: as briefing notes are passed up the chain, the amount of evidence included within starts to fall off. There is rationale for this: the higher up the decision-making chain that you go, the more the focus turns to the proposed intervention or outcome, rather than the evidence that justifies the intervention. This is based on trust: there is an assumption that the policy-makers responsible for evaluating the underlying evidence have done their work thoroughly, allowing decision-makers (such as Deputy Ministers) to focus on the outcomes of the policy instead.

There are legitimate reasons why the evidence used in decision-making may not be shared transparently.

Almost all public servants shared several reasons why there may be opaqueness in policy-making, such as confidentiality associated with crisis-time circumstances and humanitarian issues. For example, sometimes the underlying evidence or rationale must remain confidential at the time of the announcement due to the stakeholders involved, or for the sake of safeguarding intellectual property or national security. Confidentiality can also reduce the amount of information available to be put in a policy announcement — not because the information itself is confidential, but because it is attached to a confidential government decision or Cabinet memo.

There are numerous and complex reasons why policies might score poorly for testing and evaluation.

Several public servants mentioned there are limited resources for conducting formal evaluation, and that it can take decades to see results in some policy areas (e.g., environmental action). Many public servants also shared that at the time of a policy announcement, the finer details of a policy may not be finalized for several months or years, and that sometimes there is also reluctance to be specific about outcomes, especially when it comes to the private sector or development of intellectual property. Finally, there are often internal reports and documents that will house relevant details, but they are not posted publicly, as there is an assumption that interested stakeholders already know about the policy evaluation involved, or that the outcome measures are not ones that the general public can easily understand.

In some cases, public servants noted that the rationale behind a policy decision may not be primarily evidence-driven, and often pointed to overarching priorities.

Several public servants often referred to mandate letters and the Speech from the Throne as key documents which provided the rationale behind policy decisions. Some public servants expressed that this is the way government functions, and that amid policy-making, they frequently have to balance delivering on priorities outlined in their department's mandate, and the available data (which may be limited). One public servant expressed that there are important relationships that their government must foster, so some decisions are more about keeping a balance and maintaining relationships, and possibly not as much on evidence.

There are cultural and structural reasons that may also explain low transparency.

Some public servants described a culture of risk aversion, and that there are structural disincentives which impede transparency in policy-making. For example, public servants need the time and dedicated attention to collect and analyze evidence that is relevant for policy-making, and they often do not have this capacity. One public servant remarked that governments don't have the capacity to systematically create public-friendly evidence summaries too. There are also certain departments, agencies, and ministries that are less data-centric, while others are more evidence-driven due to the nature of their work.

The sentiment of risk aversion was also shared by political staffers, who added that there is a concern that increased transparency will expose weaknesses and may be used by the opposition to take down policies. One elected representative agreed that there is a tendency to view releasing less information as a means to "manage" criticism. They also noted that a lack of transparency reduced their ability to scrutinize and debate policy decisions, which in their view increases the risk for poor or inadequate policy outcomes.

2.3 Public servants are interested in exploring ways to improve transparency

Public servants are interested in exploring different mechanisms for sharing evidence and learning about best practices.

In our discussions with public servants and political staffers, we noted widespread interest

in being held accountable and improving transparency in government policy-making. Almost all public servants expressed an interest in receiving a toolkit which could be referred to when crafting policy announcements.

Many public servants were also actively looking for data-driven strategies to complement their work and were interested in reading about success stories or case studies that demonstrate the benefits of increased transparency of evidence usage in policy-making. Some of the questions posed to us were:

- » Which countries are performing well when it comes to communicating evidence to the public? What works and what doesn't?
- » What is the level of effort required to improve transparency and meet the public's appetite for transparency? How do we strike a balance between achieving these potential incremental benefits and not overwhelming the public with too much information?
- » In what format(s) could evidence be delivered to accompany policies, such that they can be easily produced by policy and communications staff (given existing time and resource constraints), and still be useful and accessible to the public?
 - One public servant suggested developing an "Evidence Sheet" (similar to a Backgrounder) for members of the public interested in learning more. Is this an effective format to explore?
 - There are sections within internal documents where public servants must specify the evidence behind policy options. How can this information be shared more broadly and effectively?
 - Could the core communications principles behind policy announcements be updated, with an eye towards improving transparency?

Reflections

As we reflect on our discussions with federal and provincial public servants and political staffers, there are several thoughts that come to mind.

First, we repeatedly heard the assumption that increased transparency will result in the public being overwhelmed with information. We want to challenge this assumption. For example, despite the evolving information and messy nature of policy-making in the COVID-19 pandemic, Canada has one of the highest vaccination rates in the world, pointing to public capacity to understand and evaluate the evidence underlying policy decisions. This is an extraordinary circumstance, but it demonstrates that the government can and should trust the public with more information. The public calls to reform the strained and underperforming Access to Information program further attest to the Canadian public's appetite for information underlying government decisions.^{11,12}

Second, our conversations frequently shifted to existing displays of transparency (primarily the federal and provincial budgets, the Throne Speech, and mandate letters), or initiatives on Open Government and Open Data. While these are great examples of government transparency, it can be very challenging for the public to connect government priorities in overarching documents, such as a provincial budget, to specific policy actions. Similarly, the ability to access a dataset does not mean the user can then connect the data to a policy decision. Meaningful transparency requires evidence to be provided in user-friendly formats that make it clear how the evidence supports a specific policy action.

Finally, based on our transparency assessments and the insights gleaned from our discussions, it appears that, despite the well-intentioned efforts of the federal and provincial public service, government systems, structures, and resources are failing to deliver on the political commitment to evidence-informed decision-making in a manner that's accessible to the public. Notably, our work suggests that governments across the federation face similar barriers to implementing transparency in policy-making. We appreciate that the transparency of evidence use in policy-making may also fall short due to necessary confidentiality or crisis-time circumstances, but this needs to be an exception rather than the default when it comes to policy-making.

We believe the Canadian federation is capable of doing better, and our discussions with public servants and political staffers make it clear that we are not alone in thinking so.

With these initial insights, we are beginning preparations to host a multistakeholder roundtable to collaboratively explore ways to improve the transparency of evidence use in policy-making within governments across Canada. This open dialogue will inform the development of a toolkit that will include best practices to improve transparency in ways that are practical to both policy-makers and citizens as end users.

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Appendix

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Diagnosis: What do policymakers know about the issue (e.g. causes, effects and scale)?	<i>Can you see what evidence has been used and the role it has played?</i>	Not enough for level 1.	Evidence is mentioned, with explanation of how it has been used	As in level 1, but the supporting evidence is linked to the relevant parts of the policy, properly cited, and able to be found.	As in level 2, but the evidence base is also assessed, with consideration of uncertainties and contradictory information.
Proposal: What is the government's chosen intervention and why was it chosen?	<i>Can you see what evidence has been used and the role it has played?</i>	Not enough for level 1	Evidence is mentioned, with explanation of how it has been used	As in level 1 but the supporting evidence is linked to the relevant parts of the policy, properly cited, and able to be found.	As in level 2, but the evidence base is also assessed, with consideration of alternate options, uncertainties, and contradictions
Implementation: How will the chosen intervention be rolled out and why was this method chosen?	<i>Can you see what evidence has been used and the role it has played?</i>	Not enough for level 1	Evidence is mentioned, with explanation of how it has been used	As in level 1 but the supporting evidence is linked to the relevant parts of the policy, properly cited, and able to be found.	As in level 2, but the evidence base is also assessed, with consideration of alternate options, uncertainties, and contradictions
Testing and evaluation: "How and when will we know if the policy has worked?"	<i>Can you see what evidence will be provided and when it will be provided?</i>	Not enough for level 1	Success measures (or process for developing them outlined), with no plans for testing/evaluation (or explanation for why inappropriate)	As in level 1, but with plans for testing/evaluation, including timetable (or explanation for why inappropriate)	As in level 2, with explanation of why these testing/evaluation methods are chosen, with linked evidence properly cited and able to be found.

Figure 1: The transparency framework consists of four categories (diagnosis, proposal, implementation, testing and evaluation), and assesses whether the evidence used to inform a policy is clear, as well as how it was used, on a scale from 0-3 based on criteria.

