

SOCIOLOGISTS IN ACTION

LINDSAY OWENS

Using Sociological Training in Government Policy Work

I work as a policy adviser for a senator in the United States Congress. Certain aspects of my job appear, at first, to be wildly incompatible with my sociological training. For one, I am tasked with being an expert on hundreds of topics—from how payroll taxes are allocated between the two Social Security trust funds, to whether a big parent company has legal obligations to the employees in one of its franchises, to how securities regulation differs for fixed and variable annuities. In academia, I would not be considered an expert on any of these topics. I have not written a peer-reviewed article on them, given a colloquium talk on them, or covered them in a course lecture.

Senate offices, however, particularly the offices of relatively new members, are small. As a result, each policy expert covers an enormous range of topics. When an issue in one of the areas I am responsible for bubbles to the surface—because there is legislation on the floor, a committee hearing, or a constituent matter back in our home state—I have to get up to speed immediately. I do not have 3 months to dive into the academic literature. Instead, I rely on my sociological training to find information fast. I have to figure out quickly where I can get trustworthy information. I talk to experts—sometimes academics, sometimes Senate committee staff, and sometimes the Congressional Research Service—and then I read as much as I can as rapidly as I can and recommend a course of action. Although this was initially nerve-racking, I now find the intellectual challenge stimulating and rewarding.

The legislative process, by design, is slow and incremental, and the details of a legislative proposal—how much it costs, how it will be implemented, and how it interacts with current laws—can quickly overshadow larger policy aims. I find that my ability as a sociologist to step back and look at the big picture can be critically important.

My sociological training also leads me to ask certain key questions: What are the potential unintended consequences of this policy? Will the intended effect of the policy be stymied by firmly entrenched structural constraints? Will the effects of this policy differ for men or women, for people of color, or for people at different income levels? Sociologists bring a unique perspective to policymaking—a perspective that complements the extraordinary political and legal expertise of my colleagues.

I am not sure how long I will stay on the Hill, but I know that this experience will make me a more insightful scholar and teacher, and I know that my sociological training has made me a more effective policymaker. Above all, it is humbling and gratifying to be able to help a member of the U.S. Senate make a tangible difference in the lives of Americans.

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Lindsay Owens is currently an economic policy adviser in the U.S. Senate for Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.). She received her PhD from Stanford in 2014.