

# Local economic data encourages legislators to open emails—but only Democrats

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Personalizing outreach to legislators to include the local economic impact of an issue can increase engagement with research among Democratic, but not Republican, legislators.

The findings, published in the journal *Implementation Science*, support including economic evidence when communicating with legislators, but also signal the value of tailoring communication by political party.

Legislators make policy decisions that influence public health, and effectively sharing scientific research with them can increase the likelihood that their decisions align with research. However, little is known on how to best communicate research to policymakers.

"We have very little evidence to help guide us on, for instance, which data to include in a policy brief or emphasize in emails to elected officials and their staff," said Jonathan Purtle, associate professor of public health policy and management at NYU School of Global Public Health and the study's lead author.

Purtle and his colleagues hypothesized that including economic and local data would increase legislators' engagement with materials about evidence-supported policies—in this case, policies specific to adverse childhood experiences, including child maltreatment and community violence, which are risk factors for behavioral health issues in adulthood. State legislators are in a unique position, the study's authors say, to make policy decisions that reduce children's exposure to these adverse

experiences, including introducing and expanding programs that reduce caregiver stress and increase economic security.

To test their idea, the researchers conducted a study in which they emailed information about adverse childhood experiences and behavioral health to 6,509 state legislators from all 50 states (nearly 90% of state legislators). Two emails were sent to each legislator two weeks apart.

The legislators were randomly assigned to three groups: one that received state-specific data about the prevalence of adverse childhood events and state-specific data on the economic impact of adverse childhood events on public systems, a second that received state-tailored prevalence data but no [economic data](#), and a third "control condition" that received national prevalence data and no economic data. The email subject lines, text, and policy brief content were tailored to each of the three groups.

The researchers then measured the rates of email views, policy brief link clicks, requests for consultation with the researchers, and mentions of child maltreatment terms in legislators' social media posts after the emails went out.

The researchers found that including local economic data significantly increased engagement with the emails—meaning emails that included "economic impact" in the subject line were more likely to be opened. However, this was only true for Democrats. In contrast, including economic data had no effect on Republican legislators, who were more likely to engage with emails that included national data on adverse childhood events than state-specific data. Democratic legislators were overall more likely to engage with the emails, and while they were the most likely to open those with localized economic data, they were still slightly more likely than their Republican counterparts to open emails with national data.

Among all legislators, the view rate for the first email was 42.6% higher in the first group that included both state-tailored data and economic data than in the second that included state-tailored data but no economic data and 20.8% higher than the third group that only included national data and no economic data. This shows that state-specific data on the prevalence of adverse childhood experience did not increase engagement compared to national data.

In addition, the local and economic data had no effect on how many legislators clicked on the policy brief link or requested consultations with the researchers. The tailored data had a mixed effect on social media posts from legislators depending on how the researchers analyzed the terms used in social media posts.

"Our results provide concrete guidance to inform disseminating research to legislators, but also highlight a need for future research that tests the effects of tailoring materials for [legislators](#) by political party," said Purtle, who is also the director of policy research at NYU's Global Center for Implementation Science.

Additional study authors include Katherine L. Nelson, Luwam Gebrekristos, and Félice Lê-Scherban of Drexel University Dornsife School of Public Health and Sarah E. Gollust of the University of Minnesota School of Public Health.

**More information:** Partisan differences in the effects of economic evidence and local data on legislator engagement with dissemination materials about behavioral health: a dissemination trial, *Implementation Science* (2022). [DOI: 10.1186/s13012-022-01214-7](https://doi.org/10.1186/s13012-022-01214-7)

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