Unique Methods in Advocacy Evaluation

Julia Coffman
Evaluation Consultant

Ehren Reed
Innovation Network

Evaluation methods define *how* data are collected. They are systematic approaches for gathering qualitative or quantitative data that can be used to determine whether a strategy is making progress or achieving its intended results.

Like all evaluations, advocacy evaluations can draw on a familiar list of traditional data collection methods, such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, or polling (see box at right for other common methods).

But because the advocacy process can be complex, fast-paced, and dynamic, which makes data collection challenging, and because advocacy efforts often aim for outcomes that are hard to operationalize and measure (e.g., public will or political will), new and innovative methods are being developed specifically for assessing advocacy and policy change efforts.

This brief describes four new methods (summarized in the matrix on the next page) that were developed to respond to advocacy's unique measurement challenges. All four methods have been tested in real-life evaluations, and were developed to be:

- *Relevant*—Useful for informing decisions about evolving advocacy strategy
- *Timely*—Able to be administered and analyzed relatively quickly so data can inform evolving advocacy strategy
- *Efficient*—Not burdensome to already busy advocates.

Common Advocacy Evaluation Methods

<u>Stakeholder Surveys or Interviews</u>
Print, telephone, or online questioning that gathers advocacy stakeholder perspectives or feedback.

<u>Case Studies</u>
Detailed descriptions and analyses (often qualitative) of individual advocacy strategies and results.

<u>Focus Groups</u>
Facilitated discussions with advocacy stakeholders (usually about 8 to 10 per group) to obtain their reactions, opinions, or ideas.

<u>Media Tracking</u>
Counts of an issue's coverage in the print, broadcast, or electronic media.

<u>Media Content or Framing Analysis</u>
Qualitative analysis of how the media write about and frame issues of interest.

<u>Participant Observation</u>
Evaluator participation in advocacy meetings or events to gain firsthand experience and data.

<u>Policy Tracking</u>
Monitoring of an issue or bill's progress in the policy process.

<u>Public Polling</u>
Interviews (usually by telephone) with a random sample of advocacy stakeholders to gather data on their knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors.

Summary of Unique Advocacy Evaluation Methods

Method (Developed by)	Synopsis	Conducted By	Type of Data Returned	Use This Method When
1) **Bellwether Methodology** (Harvard Family Research Project)	Evaluators conduct structured interviews with "bellwethers" or influential people in the public and private sectors whose positions require that they track a broad range of policy issues. At least part of the bellwether sample is "unconnected" to the policy issue of interest, and bellwethers are unaware beforehand that the interview will discuss the policy issue of interest.	External Evaluator	Qualitative	- Gauging whether an issue is on a federal, state, or local policy agenda and how it is positioned - Assessing political will as an outcome - Forecasting the likelihood of future policy proposals or changes - Assessing the extent to which advocacy messages have "broken through"
2) **Policymaker Ratings** (Harvard Family Research Project)	Advocates (or other informed stakeholders) rate policymakers of interest on scales that assess policymakers' support for, and influence on, the issue	Advocates or External Evaluator	Quantitative	- Assessing the extent to which policymakers support a policy issue and whether that support is changing over time
3) **Intense Period Debriefs** (Innovation Network)	Evaluators engage advocates in evaluative inquiry shortly after a policy window or intense period of action occurs	External Evaluator	Qualitative	- Advocacy efforts are experiencing high-intensity levels of activity and advocates have little time to pause for data collection
4) **System Mapping**	Evaluators or advocates visually map a system, identifying the parts and relationships in that system that are expected to change and how they will change, and then identifying ways of measuring or capturing whether those changes have occurred.	Advocates or External Evaluator	Qualitative	- The advocacy effort is trying to achieve systems change

➊ Bellwether Methodology

This method was developed by Harvard Family Research Project to determine where a policy issue or proposal is positioned on the policy agenda; how decision makers and other influentials are thinking and talking about it; and how likely policymakers are to act on it. The methodology involves structured interviews with “bellwethers” or influential people in the public and private sectors whose positions require that they are politically informed and that they track a broad range of policy issues. Bellwethers are knowledgeable and innovative thought leaders whose opinions about policy issues carry substantial weight and predictive value in the policy arena.

The bellwether methodology involves five main steps common to all key informant interviews. Two steps, however—selecting the bellwether sample and setting up the interviews—require a unique “twist” that sets this approach apart from other types of structured interviews.

1) *Select the types or categories of bellwethers to interview*. For example, categories might include policymakers, the media, funders, researchers/think tanks, the business community, trade associations, or advocates. Categories chosen should represent the types of individuals whose opinions are important or influential on the policy issue of interest.

2) *Select the bellwether sample*. After sample categories are determined, criteria are developed for selecting individual bellwethers. At least half the sample should include bellwethers who do not have a special or specific connection to the policy issue being explored. This approach increases the probability that issue awareness or knowledge detected during interviews can be linked to advocacy efforts rather than personal experiences or other extraneous variables. Other selection criteria might include, for example, bipartisanship, or gender, ethnic, and geographic diversity. Once selection criteria are developed, subject matter experts nominate bellwethers who fit those criteria.

3) *Set up interviews.* Interview setup is critical. Bellwethers must be unaware before the interview begins that the interview will focus on the specific policy issue of interest. They are informed about what the interview will generally cover, but do not receive specific details. This approach helps to ensure that bellwethers’ responses are authentic and unprompted.

4) *Conduct the interviews.* Interview questions determine what bellwethers know and think about the policy of interest. For example, the interview might start by asking bellwethers what issues they think are at the top of the policy agenda. Their responses (which will be unprompted because they do not know beforehand which specific policy issue you are exploring) indicate whether the advocacy issue of interest shows up on that list, and if so, where, and along with what other issues. Later questions can get more specific and ask about bellwethers’ familiarity with the issue of interest and probe on what they know, allowing later content analysis to determine whether advocates’ messages surface in

bellwether discourse about the issue. Questions also might ask bellwethers to predict whether they think the issue will advance in the near future or longer term.

5) *Analyze and use the data to inform strategy.* The bellwether methodology returns both summative and formative data. Summatively, bellwether data can indicate how effective, according to this audience, advocates have been in communicating their messages and whether they have been successful in moving their issue either onto the policy agenda or at increasing its importance. Formatively, bellwether data can inform advocates about specific gaps in bellwether knowledge about how their messages are playing with this audience. This method is repeatable over time if the advocacy strategy takes place over multiple years.

Sample Bellwether Interview Questions

1. Currently, what three issues do you think are at the top of the [state/federal/local] policy agenda?
2. How familiar are you with [the policy of interest]?
3. What individuals, constituencies, or groups do you see as the main advocates for [the policy]? Who do you see as the main opponents?
4. Considering the current educational, social, and political context, do you think [the policy] should be adopted now or in the near future?
5. Looking ahead, how likely do you think it is that [the policy] will be adopted in the next 5 years?
6. If [the policy] is adopted, what issues do you think the state needs to be most concerned about related to its implementation?

Example application

Harvard Family Research project developed the bellwether methodology for its evaluation of the David and Lucile Packard Foundation's Preschool for California's Children grantmaking program (it has since been used in other contexts). This 10-year grantmaking program was designed to establish a universal preschool policy in California. Bellwethers in this case represented a group of leaders not funded by the Packard Foundation, whose positions required that they track state-level issues and politics. They included policymakers from the Governor's office, administration, Senate, Assembly, and other policy offices; and leaders from business, the media, academia/think tanks, advocacy, and philanthropy. Bellwethers were selected for their diversity on content knowledge, geography, and political affiliation (for policymakers). Interviews were conducted with 40 bellwethers in 2005. The methodology was repeated in 2008 with more than 70 bellwethers (adding 30 at the local level).

Bellwether interviews examined bellwethers' familiarity with efforts to promote universal preschool, their perceptions of the likelihood that California would establish universal preschool in the near future, and whether bellwethers saw universal preschool as a priority on California's policy agenda. The methodology resulted in lessons that contributed to real-time learning and informed Packard Foundation and preschool grantee strategy and messaging.

❷ Policymaker Ratings

This method also was developed by Harvard Family Research Project. It is a method for gauging political will or support for a particular advocacy issue or proposal among a defined group of policymakers (e.g., legislature, council, etc.). The approach was developed in response to the perceived inadequacy of indicators commonly used to gauge policymaker support on issues (e.g., number of bills introduced on the issue, number of bill co-sponsors or co-signers, number of votes for or against specific bills). This method takes a different tact to measuring such support and capitalizes on advocates' insider knowledge about individual policymakers' stances on policy issues. It does not create extra work for advocates, but instead usefully transfers what they already know through their regular intelligence gathering and outreach.

With this method, advocates rate policymakers of interest on a series of three scales that assess (see the scales on page 6):

> *Policymaker level of support*—Individual policymaker support for an issue based on his or her public behaviors or actions on behalf of the issue.
>
> *Policymaker level of influence*—Policymaker influence on the policy issue of interest (similar to the idea of a power analysis). Ratings are based on criteria that research shows relate to policymaker influence.
>
> *Rater level of confidence*—Confidence in the accuracy of ratings on the first two scales.

At least 3-5 advocates (the more the better) participate in the rating process. Advocates either rate policymakers as a group (arriving at a consensus group rating), or rate policymakers independently and then average their ratings.

Once ratings are complete, composite ratings are computed and aggregated across policymakers. Data, such as individual policymakers' party affiliation, district representation, committee membership, or caucus membership, can be added to enable different ways of looking at the analysis. Like the bellwether methodology, this method is repeatable over time to determine whether and how indicators shift.

Example Application
This method was developed for the evaluation of an advocacy strategy designed to achieve a state-level policy change.[1] Because the strategy focused on both state and local outreach and engagement, advocates rated policymakers at both levels. At the state level, the sample included all policymakers in both legislative houses. At the local level, the sample included key leaders in communities where advocacy was taking place, including county superintendents, sheriffs, and big city mayors. Data on political party, region/district representation, caucus and

[1] The advocates and funders involved requested that the evaluation' specific details and context not be revealed.

committee membership, and gender were included in the data set and used in the analysis. Policymaker ratings occurred annually, allowing changes in support to be monitored over time.

Sample Policymaker Rating Scales

Scale	Rating	Definition
1) Support	1 Not at all supportive	No evidence this person has spoken or taken any action in support of the policy issue (includes opposition)
	2 Somewhat supportive	Has indicated being favorably disposed to the policy issues (e.g., expresses support for the issue or mentions it in one-on-one or small group conversations)
	3 Supportive	Occasionally takes action either publicly or behind the scenes beyond voting in support of the policy issue (e.g., speaks out at public hearings, gets quoted in the media, includes it in speeches, assigns bills to a power legislator, encourages colleagues to support policies, plays a role in budget negotiations)
	4 Extremely supportive	Has a well-known reputation for being a champion of the policy issue and regularly takes leadership on advancing it (e.g., makes it a key part of his or her platform or agenda)
2) Influence Criteria 1. Majority party member 2. Relevant content expertise 3. Seniority/experience (record of public service) 4. Reputation/respect (e.g., has been able to exercise some power/leadership in the legislature) 5. Key committee member 6. Formal leadership position (chairs a key committee or is a Senate or Assembly leader)	1 Not very influential	Meets none or only 1 criteria
	2 Somewhat influential	Meets at least 2 criteria
	3 Influential	Meets 3 or 4 criteria AND/OR is on a key committee
	4 Extremely influential	Meets 5 or 6 criteria AND/OR holds a formal leadership position in the legislature or AND/OR chairs a key committee
3) Confidence	1 Not very confident	Ratings are a guess based on 3rd-hand, unverifiable, or unreliable information about the policymaker and his or her related (or lack of related) interests. (e.g., the policymaker or her staff saying they "love the issue" in a small meeting where they feel pressure to speak positively).
	2 Somewhat confident	Ratings are a fairly informed guess. For example, advocates have picked up consistent information from more than one source, but sources may not be 100% verifiable or reliable; or the information collected is somewhat vague.
	3 Extremely confident	Ratings are based on advocates' direct contact with the individual or information from a trusted and reliable source.

❸ Intense Period Debriefs

This method, developed by Innovation Network, engages advocates in evaluative inquiry shortly after a policy window or intense period of action occurs. Many advocacy efforts experience periods of high-intensity activity. While those times represent critical opportunities for data collection and learning, advocates have little time to pause for interviews or reflection. The unfortunate consequence is that the evaluation is left with significant gaps in data during times in the advocacy cycle when those data are particularly valuable.

This method recognizes this kind of situation as a common advocacy reality and adapts to it. Shortly after a policy window or intense activity period occurs, it convenes either a focus group of or individual interviews with advocacy stakeholders and uses a "debrief interview protocol" to capture data about advocates' recent experiences. The method functions somewhat like an "after action review" and captures:

- The public mood and political context during the policy window;
- What happened and how the campaign members responded to events, especially as related to actions that occurred behind closed doors;
- Perspective on the outcome(s) achieved or not achieved;
- How strategies might be adjusted in hindsight.

Sample Intense Period Debrief Questions

1. What events triggered this intense period?
2. How was the organization's response determined? Who was responsible for that decision? How was that decision communicated to other partners and allies?
3. Which elements of the organization's response worked well? Which elements could have been improved?
4. What was the outcome of the intense period? Was the result positive or negative?
5. What insights will you take away from this experience that might inform your strategies going forward?

The intense-period debrief gathers in-depth and real-time information in a targeted, practical, and respectful way. As the method's developers note: "The idea of the debrief grew out of the need to have a forum that encouraged participation from key groups and individuals engaged in different layers or 'spheres of influence' surrounding decision makers. It … [is] particularly useful for providing a way for individuals in the 'inner circle' of those spheres…to tell the story of what happened behind the scenes." [2]

Example Application

Innovation Network developed this approach for its evaluation of the Coalition for Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CCIR)—a collaborative of immigrant advocacy, grassroots, and religious groups, labor organizations, and policy leaders on Capitol Hill and throughout the

[2] Bagnell Stuart, J. (2007). Necessity leads to innovative evaluation approach and practice. *The Evaluation Exchange*, 13(1), 10-11.

U.S. CCIR was working to enact federal immigration reform that included a path to citizenship; family reunification; worker protection; effective enforcement of the rule of law; and civic participation to facilitate the integration of newcomers in local communities.

The intense period debrief developed in the spring of 2006 when a legislative policy window opened following a bipartisan compromise in the Senate, and mass demonstrations occurred in cities across the country with hundreds of thousands of immigrants and supporters. During this intense period, Innovation Network found it unthinkable to conduct interviews with coalition leaders. The result, however, was gaps in their data, especially regarding coalition interactions with policymakers and their staff. The intense period debrief emerged as a solution that both was respectful of coalition staff and ultimately allowed Innovation Network to get the evaluation data it needed.

❹ System Mapping

System mapping is useful for advocacy efforts aiming for systems change. For example, such efforts may be trying to change or improve an organization; create collaborative relationships among organizations or actors; or change the context or environment in which policies play out or in which social change occurs. With these types of efforts, outcomes relate to changes to or within a system.

This method involves the visual mapping of a system, identifying the parts and relationships in that system that are expected to change and how they will change, and then identifying ways of measuring or capturing whether those changes have occurred. Used in this way, systems maps function much like theories of change; they illustrate where changes are expected to occur and help frame and guide evaluations. They also serve as powerful illustrations when presenting results to evaluation stakeholders. System maps offer a useful alternative to most conventional theories of change and logic models, however, which tend to be linear and have difficulty capturing intended changes in relationships or connections in a complex system.

The system mapping process can occur in various ways. It may, for example, involve key informant interviews with individuals within that system designed to capture what the system looks like and how it is functioning. Or, it might use a process such as network analysis and mapping, a technique that explores whether connections or relationships exist between people, groups, or institutions, as well as their nature and strength, and then examines the relationships between them using mathematical algorithms.

Example Application
Innovation Network used system mapping in an evaluation for the humanitarian aid organization CARE. CARE engaged in a project to improve the organization's *systems*—both globally and in the countries where CARE is located—for gathering, storing, and communicating evidence about CARE's work and impact. The project was designed to change CARE's evidence-related systems for the purpose of generating better data and information that could then be

used more effectively in CARE's advocacy efforts. The project introduced several "interventions" to create the desired systems changes.

CARE's system maps were developed based on internal document reviews and semi-structured interviews with CARE principals and key informants. A series of maps were created that depicted a) the system at baseline; b) where interventions would be introduced in the system; and c) the system post-intervention. Just like theories of change, the mapping process added value by helping to clarify and further focus CARE's systems change efforts. Once the system maps were produced, they were used to help set data collection priorities and to guide data collection planning.

References

Bagnell Stuart, Jennifer (2007). Necessity leads to innovative evaluation approach and practice. *The Evaluation Exchange*, 13(1), 10-11.

Blair, Elizabeth (2007). Evaluating an issue's position on the policy agenda: The bellwether methodology. *The Evaluation Exchange*, 13(1), 29.

Bloom, Paul & Dees, Gregory (2007). Cultivate your ecosystem. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 47-53.

Patton, Michael Q. (2008). *Utilization-focused evaluation (4th edition).* Los Angeles: Sage.

Acknowledgement
This brief was developed with generous support from The California Endowment.

About the Authors
Julia Coffman is a Washington, D.C.-based consultant who specializes in evaluation and strategy development for advocacy and policy change efforts. Since 1996 she has worked with the Harvard Family Research Project, a research and evaluation organization that helps foundations, nonprofits and policymakers develop and evaluate strategies to promote the well-being of children, youth, families and their communities.

Ehren Reed is a Senior Associate at Innovation Network where he designs and oversees program planning and evaluation initiatives with nonprofit organizations and foundations. He also leads trainings and workshops in advocacy evaluation, logic model development, evaluation planning, data collection, and data analysis and reporting. For the past several years, Ehren has been deeply involved in efforts to develop and advance the advocacy evaluation field.