



Penta Insiders

2026

Evaluating Credibility in Washington

How Federal Policymakers Assess
Information, Evidence, and Expertise

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READERS NOTE |

Every year, policymakers and senior staff across Congress, the Administration, federal agencies, and the broader policy community generously share their time and perspectives through Penta Insiders research. We are grateful to everyone who contributed to this year's study.

This report reflects what participants told us about the information environment they navigate every day—what earns their attention, what builds credibility, and what makes outside expertise genuinely useful in the policymaking process.

The findings are presented in aggregate and are intended to share the broader themes that emerged across thousands of responses. Individual perspectives are never attributed to participants or offices, allowing policymakers to speak candidly while ensuring every contribution remains confidential.

For those who participated, we hope this report demonstrates how your feedback contributes to a broader understanding of today's policymaking environment. For those considering participating in future research, we hope it offers a clearer picture of how confidential conversations help identify recurring patterns and inform the insights shared with the wider policy community.

At Penta Insiders, we believe the best research begins by listening. We are grateful to every policymaker and senior staff member who shared their perspective, and we hope this report reflects the value of those contributions.

-The Penta Insiders Team

METHODOLOGY |

This report draws on research conducted by Penta Group between February 3 and April 20, 2026, among 2,060 U.S. federal policymakers and senior staff across Congress, the Administration, federal agencies, and key opinion formers in the policy environment.

The research focuses primarily on senior policy professionals rather than elected officials, reflecting the central role these individuals play in shaping legislative and regulatory priorities, developing policy recommendations, advising decision-makers, and evaluating information from outside stakeholders. Participants include congressional staff (such as chiefs of staff, legislative directors, legislative assistants, and committee staff), executive branch officials (including political appointees, senior advisors, and agency leaders), and policy-facing leaders from think tanks, trade associations, corporations, and other organizations engaged in the federal policymaking process. Administrative, technical, and other non-policy roles are excluded.

Participants were recruited through Penta's proprietary policymaker network, developed through more than fifteen years of federal policy research. Recruitment methods included targeted email outreach, LinkedIn engagement, text messaging, referrals, in-person events, and broader email campaigns. The survey was administered primarily online.

Responses are analyzed in aggregate to identify recurring themes and patterns across policymakers and senior policy professionals. Individual responses are never attributed to participants, offices, or agencies. This approach enables candid participation while ensuring that findings reflect broader trends rather than individual viewpoints.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every day, federal policymakers evaluate information from companies, trade associations, advocacy organizations, researchers, academics, and other stakeholders. Drawing on insights from more than 2,000 federal policymakers and senior staff, this report examines how policymakers assess corporations, navigate the 2026 policy agenda, and determine which information sources deserve their attention.

The findings reveal five distinct patterns across the research:

Corporate credibility is tied closely to institutional behavior.

Policymakers place greater weight on business ethics, social responsibility, environmental stewardship, and research quality when assessing corporate reputation. Traditional engagement activities, including communications, executive visibility, partnerships, and lobbying, play a different role and are less closely associated with underlying credibility.

Credibility signals differ across political audiences. Democratic policymakers place comparatively greater weight on institutional factors such as business ethics, research quality, and social responsibility. Republican policymakers place relatively greater emphasis on engagement-oriented signals, including grassroots activity, third-party support, and traditional advocacy.

The economy dominates the 2026 policy agenda. 64% of policymakers identify the economy among the nation's three most pressing issues, ahead of healthcare at 46%, national security and foreign policy at 35%, and artificial intelligence at 33%. Among those prioritizing the economy, cost of living and inflation emerge as leading concerns.

Growth and regulatory scrutiny are advancing together. Policymakers expect significant growth across digital platforms, software, artificial intelligence, fintech, and energy infrastructure. Several rapidly evolving sectors also attract calls for greater oversight, while artificial intelligence ranks as the leading policy area identified for additional federal regulation.

Information habits reveal both common ground and important differences. News remains policymakers' leading resource for learning, with established outlets among the most trusted overall. Beneath those topline results, differences across political and institutional audiences reveal important variation in how policymakers navigate information.



INTRODUCTION| How Policymakers Decide What Matters

Credibility in Washington is not determined by a single characteristic. Policymakers evaluate organizations and information within a broader context shaped by political perspective, policy priorities, and the decisions in front of them.

Our 2026 research illustrates how those judgments differ across the policymaking environment. When policymakers assess corporations, institutional characteristics such as business ethics, research quality, social responsibility, and environmental stewardship play an important role in perceptions of reputation. However, the weight placed on those signals varies across political audiences, demonstrating that corporate credibility is not evaluated uniformly.

What earns attention is also shaped by what is happening in Washington. The economy stands well ahead of other national concerns in 2026, while healthcare, national security and foreign policy, and artificial intelligence are also prominent priorities. At the same time, policymakers anticipate growth across technology-driven sectors while identifying many of those same areas for greater federal oversight.

Once an issue earns attention, policymakers still have to decide which information to use. News is the most widely cited resource for informing policymakers' perspectives, but trusted outlets and other sources vary across political and institutional audiences. AI is also becoming part of policymakers' research and drafting workflows, adding another dimension to how information is accessed and processed.

Taken together, the findings show that evaluating credibility requires understanding more than whether a source is trusted. It requires understanding who is evaluating the information, which issue is being considered, and what policymakers need from that information at that moment.





1. WHAT EARNS CORPORATIONS CREDIBILITY WITH POLICYMAKERS

Policymakers evaluate corporate credibility through more than what an organization communicates. Our 2026 findings show that some of the strongest contributors to corporate reputation are rooted in institutional behavior, how a company operates, the quality of the expertise it provides, and whether its actions support its stated positions.

Business ethics, social responsibility, environmental stewardship, and research quality emerge as particularly important indicators of corporate credibility. Each gives policymakers a different way to assess an organization's performance and conduct beyond its communications or advocacy.

Within our reputation framework, **business ethics** reflects perceptions of integrity in an organization's operations and decision-making. **Social responsibility** captures how an organization manages responsibilities beyond its immediate commercial interests, while **environmental stewardship** reflects perceptions of its approach to environmental responsibilities. **Research quality** assesses whether an organization contributes credible, evidence-based expertise that can withstand scrutiny.

Together, these measures highlight an important distinction in how policymakers assess corporations. The activities that put an organization in front of policymakers are not necessarily the same factors that strengthen its reputation.

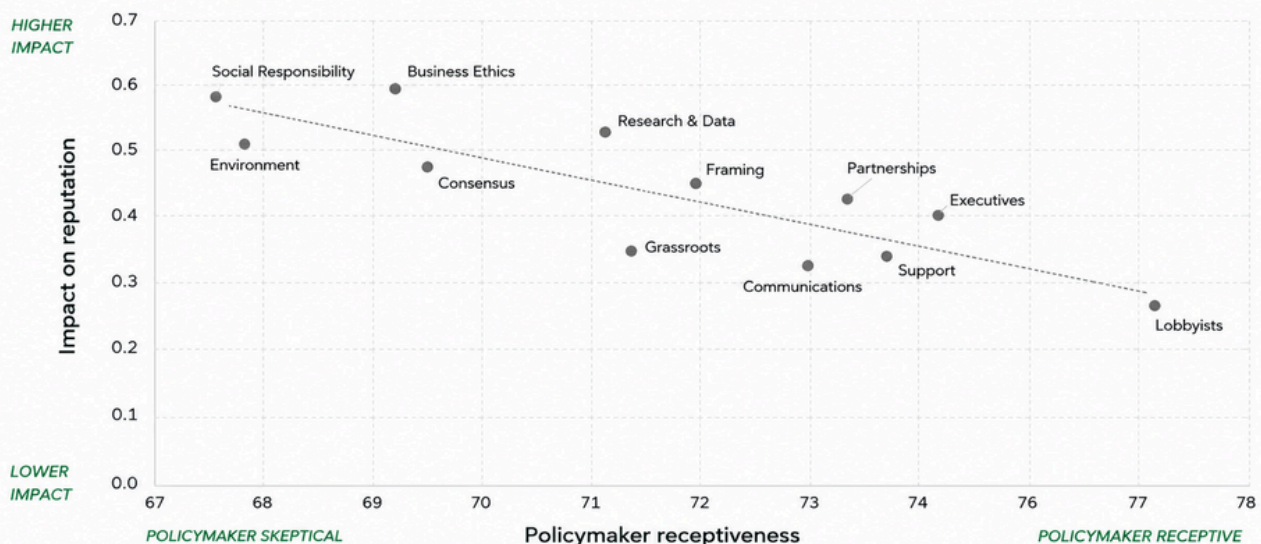
Traditional engagement activities, including executive visibility, communications, partnerships, and lobbying, can help organizations gain attention, but they are less strongly associated with reputation than institutional performance. **Visibility can help an organization be heard, but credibility is more closely tied to how it operates and the expertise it contributes.**

These measures of institutional performance help policymakers assess whether a corporation's conduct and expertise support its public positions. Research quality adds another dimension, reflecting whether an organization contributes credible, evidence-based expertise that can withstand scrutiny.

Traditional engagement activities play a different role. Executive visibility, communications, partnerships, and lobbying provide channels for participating in policy conversations, but the data shows a weaker association with overall reputation. Policymakers may be receptive to an organization's engagement without assigning the same weight to it when assessing corporate credibility.

Impact vs. Policymaker Receptiveness

2026 data correlation between corporate average score on a driver and the impact on overall reputation



Note: Each point represents the average score for a driver.
Impact on reputation is measured on a 0 (lower impact) to 0.7 (higher impact) scale.
Policymaker receptiveness is measured on a 0–100 scale.

The relationship between corporate reputation and policymaker receptiveness reveals an important tension. **Several of the factors most strongly associated with reputation are also those receiving lower receptiveness scores.** Business ethics, social responsibility, environmental stewardship, and research quality all sit toward the higher end of reputation impact while receiving comparatively lower receptiveness scores.

These attributes reflect broader judgments about an organization's conduct, performance, and expertise rather than individual communications or interactions. Their position in the data suggests that the factors carrying greater weight in corporate reputation are not necessarily those policymakers are most receptive to. Instead, they represent areas where organizational performance itself plays a more significant role in shaping perceptions.

The factors associated with corporate credibility vary across party lines. **Democratic policymakers place greater weight on institutional indicators such as business ethics, research quality, and social responsibility. Republican policymakers, by comparison, place relatively greater emphasis on engagement-based signals, including grassroots engagement, third-party support, and traditional advocacy activities.** Business ethics represents the largest partisan difference, while lobbying is one of the few engagement activities that scores relatively higher among Republicans than Democrats.

These differences show that corporate credibility is not evaluated through a single set of signals. While institutional performance carries greater weight among Democratic policymakers, Republican policymakers are comparatively more responsive to indicators of engagement and external support. Understanding these differences provides a more precise picture of how corporate reputation is assessed across political audiences.





2. HOW POLICYMAKERS EVALUATE CORPORATE CLAIMS

The previous section shows that policymakers place significant reputational weight on institutional characteristics such as business ethics, research quality, social responsibility, and environmental stewardship. However in these areas, credibility depends on more than what an organization says, it also depends on the evidence behind its claims.

Policymakers assess claims about organizational conduct, expertise, and performance against what organizations can demonstrate in practice. Broad commitments carry less weight when they are not reflected in observable actions, measurable outcomes, or consistent behavior over time.

The more consequential the claim, the more important substantiation becomes. Statements about ethics, sustainability, responsibility, or expertise are evaluated in the context of what an organization can demonstrate through its behavior, results, and track record.

This does not mean policymakers dismiss corporate commitments. It means those **commitments are more useful when they help policymakers assess what an organization has actually done**, what evidence supports its position, and what experience it brings to the policy question at hand.

Credibility therefore depends not only on what an organization says, but on whether policymakers have enough evidence to evaluate the claim with confidence.

3. POLICY PRIORITIES SHAPE WHAT EARNS ATTENTION

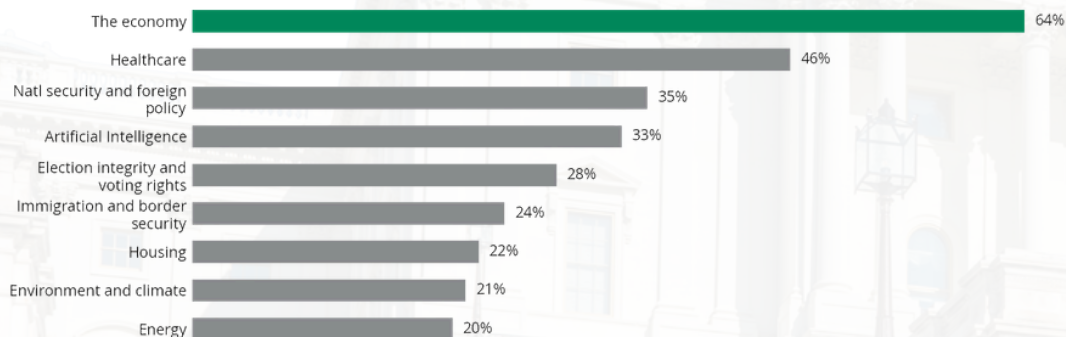
Economic Pressures Define the Policy Agenda

How policymakers evaluate outside information is only part of the picture. Whether that information is useful also depends on the issues competing for their attention. In 2026, policymakers' priorities provide important context for understanding where outside expertise may be most relevant.

The economy stands apart as policymakers' top national priority. Nearly two-thirds (64%) rank it among the three most pressing issues facing the nation, 18 percentage points ahead of healthcare at 46%. National security and foreign policy (35%) and artificial intelligence (33%) follow, showing that economic concerns lead an agenda that also spans geopolitical and technological challenges.

Most Pressing National Issues

Which of the following do you view as the most pressing issues facing the nation?
Percent of respondents who placed the issue in their top three



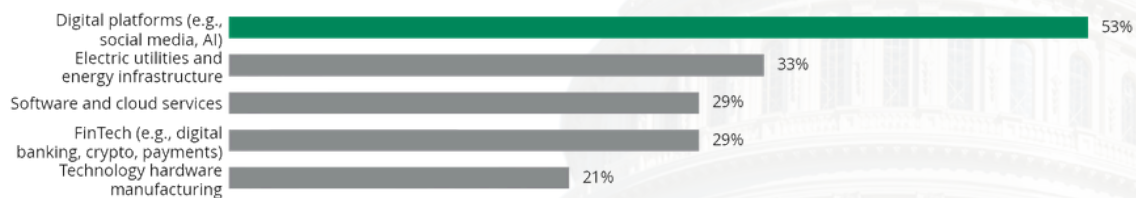
Affordability sits at the center of policymakers' economic concerns. Among those who identify the economy as a top priority, cost of living and inflation rank as the leading issue. Tariffs and trade, federal spending and the national debt, workplace disruption, and taxation also rank prominently, showing that policymakers' economic concerns span both household affordability and broader fiscal and economic pressures.

Growth Brings Regulatory Scrutiny

Policymakers' national priorities show where attention is concentrated today, but expectations for sector growth offer a view of where policy attention may build next. As industries expand and new technologies develop, they can also create new questions for policymakers around oversight and regulation. The findings show that several of the sectors expected to grow most rapidly are also among those viewed as needing greater federal regulation.

Sectors Expected to Grow

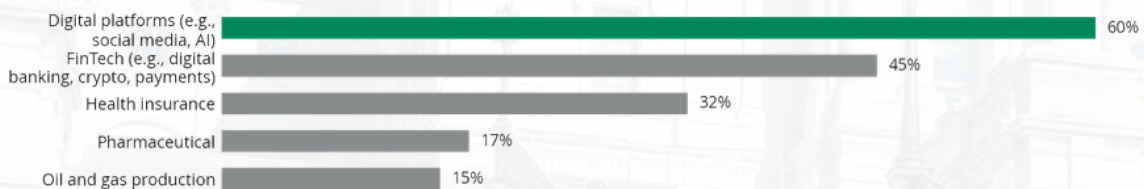
Which sectors do you think will experience the greatest growth over the next three years?
Percent of respondents who placed the sector in their top three



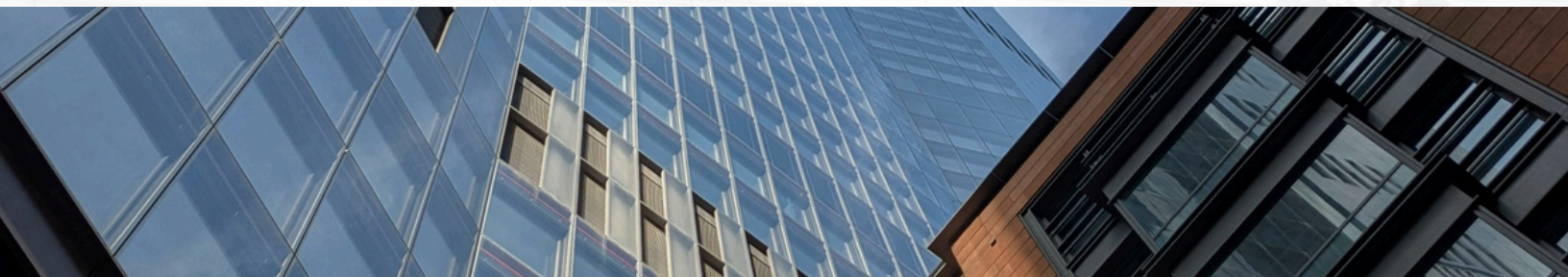
Digital platforms lead expectations for growth, followed by electric utilities and energy infrastructure, software, FinTech, and technology hardware manufacturing. Many of these sectors sit at the center of rapidly evolving policy debates around innovation, infrastructure, and emerging technologies.

Sectors Needing Additional Federal Regulation

Which sectors do you think are in the greatest need of additional federal regulation?
Percent of respondents who placed the sector in their top three



The overlap between growth and regulation is particularly notable. Digital platforms rank first for both measures, while FinTech also features prominently among sectors expected to grow and those viewed as needing additional oversight. This suggests that some of the areas attracting the greatest expectations for growth may also face increasing policy and regulatory attention.

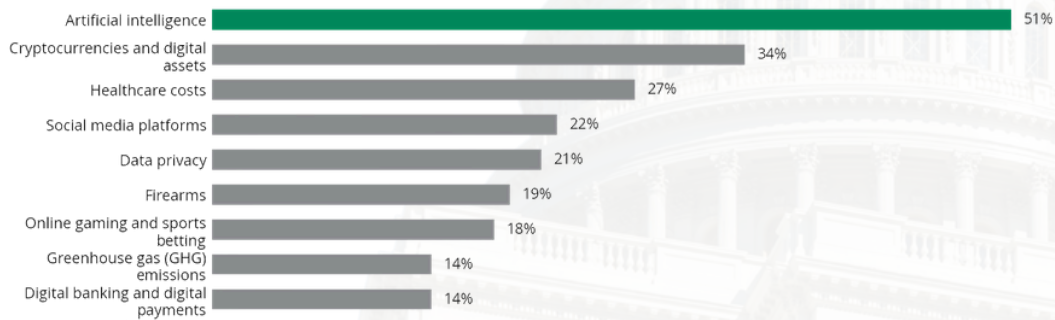


AI Leads the Regulatory Agenda

The focus on regulatory scrutiny becomes even clearer when policymakers consider specific policy areas. Artificial intelligence stands apart as the leading priority for additional federal regulation. More than half of policymakers (51%) place AI among their top three areas requiring additional oversight, ahead of cryptocurrencies and digital assets (34%) and healthcare costs (27%).

Areas Requiring Additional Federal Regulation

Which of the following areas do you think are in the greatest need of additional federal regulation?
Percent of respondents who placed the issue in their top three



Together, these findings show how the 2026 policy environment moves from broad national priorities to specific areas of regulatory attention. Economic pressures dominate the immediate agenda, while growth in technology sectors is accompanied by greater scrutiny, with AI emerging as the clearest regulatory priority.

4. HOW INFORMATION EARNS POLICYMAKER TRUST

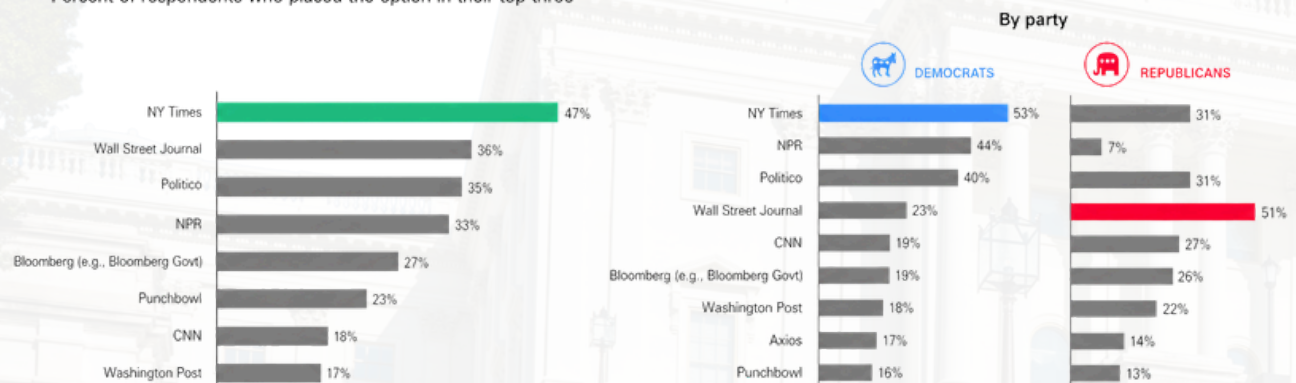
Trusted Sources Reveal Division and Common Ground

News plays a central role in policymakers' information environment, but trust in individual outlets differs sharply by party. **Democrats place the greatest trust in The New York Times (53%), NPR (44%), and Politico (40%), while Republicans place The Wall Street Journal first (51%), followed by Politico (31%), Punchbowl (27%), and Fox News (26%).**

The differences are particularly pronounced for NPR and Fox News, illustrating how partisan information environments can diverge. Yet the findings also reveal meaningful common ground. The Wall Street Journal, Politico, and Bloomberg attract trust from policymakers on both sides of the aisle, suggesting that some institutions are able to carry credibility across partisan boundaries.

Overall: News sources

Which of the following sources do you consider the most trusted sources of news information?
Percent of respondents who placed the option in their top three



Learning and Opinion Formation Draw on Different Sources

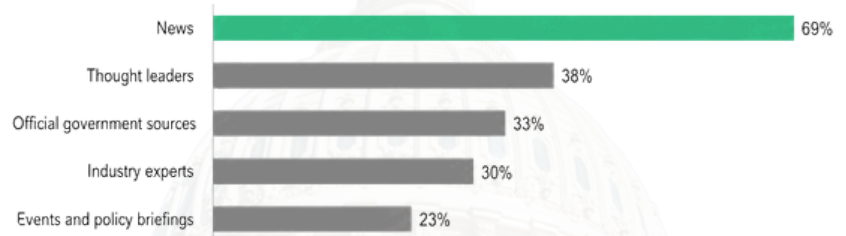
Where policymakers place their trust is only one part of how information shapes their thinking. The findings also show a distinction between the sources policymakers use to learn about an issue and the types of content they find most useful when developing a perspective.

News is the leading resource for learning, cited by 69% of policymakers, well ahead of thought leaders (38%), official government sources (33%), and industry experts (30%). This suggests that news often provides the first layer of context policymakers use to understand an issue.

News provides an important entry point, but policymakers build understanding through a broader mix of sources. Thought leaders, government sources, industry experts, and policy briefings provide additional context and specialized knowledge that can help policymakers assess the implications of an issue and develop a more complete view of the policy question in front of them.

Overall: Resources for learning

Which of the following resources are most helpful for informing your perspective on a topic?
Percent of respondents who placed the option in their top three



AI Emerges as Part of the Information Workflow

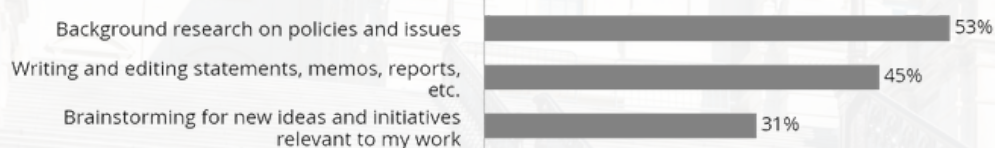
The tools policymakers use to work with information are also evolving. AI is being used most often for background research on policies and issues (53%), followed by writing and editing statements, memos, and reports (45%) and brainstorming new ideas and initiatives (31%).

These use cases position AI primarily as a tool for gathering, organizing, and developing information. As AI becomes more integrated into policymakers' workflows, the credibility and quality of the information being processed remain important inputs into how useful that technology becomes.

Overall: AI usage

How do you use AI in your daily work?

Percent of respondents who placed the option in their top three



Policymakers rely on trusted institutions to navigate issues, draw on expertise to deepen their understanding, and increasingly use AI to process information more efficiently. For organizations seeking to contribute to policy discussions, providing credible information is only part of the challenge. It must also align with the sources, formats, and workflows policymakers use to understand complex issues.



5. WHAT THE FINDINGS MEAN FOR OUTSIDE ENGAGEMENT

Across our research, policymakers consistently place greater value on information they can trust, that reflects the issues they are focused on, and that helps them navigate complex decisions. For outside organizations, meaningful engagement depends less on how much they communicate and more on whether what they provide is credible, relevant, and useful.

Evidence Strengthens Credibility

Policymakers place greater weight on claims supported by credible research, measurable outcomes, and demonstrated experience. Assertions alone are less persuasive when policymakers cannot evaluate the evidence behind them.

Relevance Determines What Earns Attention

Credible information is most useful when it connects directly to the issues policymakers are actively considering. The policy environment shapes what receives attention, making timely and issue-specific expertise more valuable than broad messaging.

Complexity Should Be Acknowledged

Policy questions rarely have simple answers. Information that recognizes competing priorities, implementation challenges, and tradeoffs can provide policymakers with a more useful basis for evaluating an issue.

Credibility Is Built Over Time

Policymakers assess organizations through more than a single interaction. Consistent expertise, reliable information, and demonstrated institutional behavior contribute to credibility over time.



6. CONCLUSION

Earning policymakers' attention is only the first step. Earning their trust determines whether an organization's information carries weight. Policymakers operate with limited attention while the volume of information competing for it continues to grow. Across this research, credibility emerges as something organizations earn through the quality, relevance, and consistency of what they bring to policy conversations.

That credibility is shaped by both substance and context. Policymakers consider an organization's conduct, expertise, and support for its claims, while the issues dominating the policy agenda determine where that expertise is most relevant. These judgments can also differ across political audiences, meaning credibility is not built in exactly the same way with every policymaker.

The information environment adds another dimension. Policymakers draw on news, government sources, experts, briefings, and increasingly AI as they research issues and develop their perspectives. These sources and tools serve different purposes, but each ultimately depends on the quality of the information policymakers encounter.

For organizations seeking to contribute to policy conversations, the implication is clear. Credibility is built through consistency between what an organization says and does, the expertise it brings, and the evidence supporting its claims. It also depends on providing information that helps policymakers understand the issues they are working to address. Organizations that get those connections right are better positioned to make their expertise count.

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