

How the administration's open government plan can be more transparent



(AP Photo/Susan Walsh, File)

FILE – Office of Management and Budget director Shalanda Young, second from left, speaks during a briefing at the White House in Washington, May 16, 2022. The Biden administration is forecasting that this year's budget deficit will be nearly \$400 billion lower than it estimated back in March. "The President's top economic priority continues to be tackling the challenge of inflation, without giving up the historic economic gains we've made over the past 18 months," said Young. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh, File)

Since the Biden-Harris administration's release of its [memo calling for a more modern regulatory review process](#), the U.S. government has taken important steps toward improving access to the data it produces. However, most of its policy analysis, including the [estimates quantifying the billions of dollars in benefits and costs related to last year's Inflation Reduction Act](#), remain largely opaque to the public and even to researchers like ourselves. We believe this can and should change.

In December, the Biden-Harris administration released a new [Open Government National Action Plan](#), signaling the administration's renewed commitment to a more "inclusive, responsive, and accountable government" by leveraging transparency. Given this commitment, we want to highlight some gaps in the new plan and identify opportunities for further progress in government openness.

The plan pledges to increase the transparency and reproducibility of government-funded research, and also seeks to increase engagement with the public through better access to data generated by the government. While we

laud these meaningful proposals, we believe the administration should also commit to increasing transparency of the analyses used in the estimates of the cost and benefits of major policies created by the federal government, such as those produced by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and performed internally in the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA), the two offices spearheading the plan.

Though policy analyses do not fall neatly into the separate bins of research or data, they share important similarities. First, like research and data, policy analyses are computationally intensive, limiting the ease with which they may be reproduced. Standards for open science have risen in recent years, improving reproducibility. (see, for example, the most recent [data and code availability policy from the American Economic Association](#)). It is time for governmental policy analysis to follow suit.

Second, the administration's plan rightly connects more accessible data with a more inclusive government. We agree that American citizens should have a say in how to use and interpret data generated by their government. This freedom should also characterize the assumptions and modeling choices behind the government's policy analyses, like those in major pieces of legislation such as the Inflation Reduction Act. Increasing access to the materials underpinning these studies, such as statistical analysis code and documentation, would allow the public to critically appraise the analyses performed by government agencies and offices, like the OMB, improving transparency as well.

Currently, the credibility of many analyses produced by such agencies can, at best, be evaluated by a small elite of external analysts, and this opacity renders them vulnerable to differential judgments depending on which political party holds power. We believe that broadening access to these analyses can play an important role in ensuring a rigorous and transparent public assessment of the costs and benefits of government policies.

The value of this transparency isn't just theoretical. In 2018, the Trump administration attempted to adjust the federal CAFE standards that govern fuel economy for new cars and trucks using a [flawed cost-benefit analysis](#). While some of the errors were flagged by EPA staff, others were discovered by economists and members of the public. Accidental or not, shedding more sunlight on the rulemaking process by opening up the analysis and data would disincentivize similar errors in the future and encourage greater accountability.

We invite the authors of the new Open Government Action Plan and incoming OIRA administrator Richard Revesz to take action to incorporate greater

transparency into governmental policy analyses. In the short-run, one of the first acts should be to guarantee that all of the analyses underpinning the president's budget from OMB and OIRA's Reports to Congress are fully reproducible and accessible to analysts outside of the current administration, providing detailed instructions combined with all data, spreadsheets, and code scripts to obtain final estimates.

These analyses represent the U.S. government's best understanding of key facts underlying policy decisions. Opening them up to the public will be an important step in making them credible, especially in the current era of partisan polarization and fake news.

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