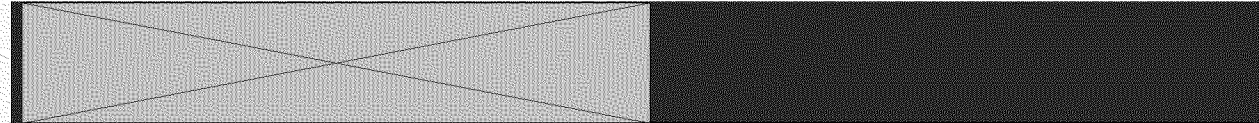


To: Jackson, Ryan[jackson.ryan@epa.gov]
From: The Washington Post
Sent: Fri 9/8/2017 4:00:35 PM
Subject: Federal Insider: Panel pushes Trump, Congress for better use of confidential evidence in policymaking



Panel pushes Trump, Congress for better use of confidential evidence in policymaking

By Joe Davidson

The U.S. Capitol (Aaron P. Bernstein/Bloomberg)

There's sweet irony in a federal blue-ribbon panel dispatching a report on the need for evidence in policymaking to a president known for prevarication.

Yet without sarcasm or irony, the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking sent its findings to President Trump and congressional leaders Thursday.

In their cover letter, the 15 commissioners, who unanimously adopted the report, said the panel "envisions a future in which rigorous evidence is created efficiently, as a routine part of government operations, and used to construct effective public policy ... while simultaneously providing stronger protections for the privacy and confidentiality of the people, businesses, and organizations from which the government collects information."

"Traditionally, increasing access to confidential data presumed significantly increasing privacy risk," the report says. "The Commission rejects that idea."

Commissioners did more than call for the obvious. We shouldn't need a commission to make the case for evidence in policymaking. The panel made nearly two dozen well-considered recommendations, tools for better use of data, in four areas — "improving secure, private and confidential data access," "modernizing privacy protections for evidence building," "strengthening federal evidence-building capacity" and "implementing a National Secure Data Service."

The data service would be housed in the Commerce Department and would

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“maintain a searchable inventory of approved projects using confidential data.”

This would assist policymakers who “must have good information on which to base their decisions about improving the viability and effectiveness of government programs and policies,” the report begins. “Today, too little evidence is produced to meet this need.”

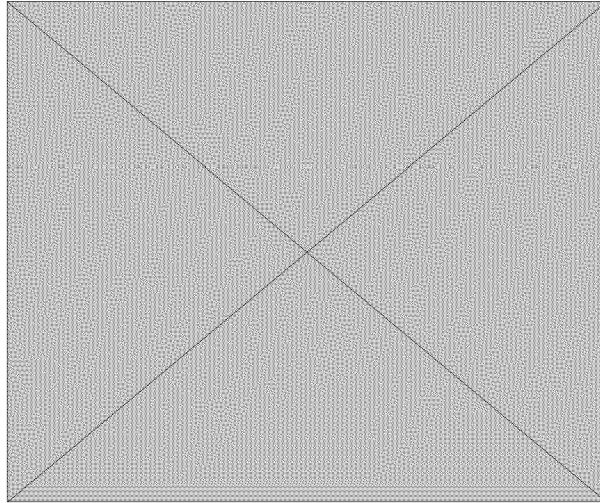
To get the needed information, commission members recommended revising “laws authorizing Federal data collection and use ... but only under strict privacy controls.”

Presentation of the report at a Capitol Hill news conference was an almost joyous event for a dull but important topic. Speaker Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.) and Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.), who both worked to create the commission, joked about Sunday’s football game between the Green Bay Packers and Seattle Seahawks and the infrequent nature of bipartisan agreement before praising the commission.

Ryan called the report “phenomenal ... impressive and important work ... for an efficient and effective federal government.”

Murray said that “no matter what any of us think about government in general — and no matter what we may think about programs or investments in particular — surely we should be able to agree that we should all do everything we can to make them work as well as possible. Not just by wishing for it, and not just letting blind ideology or partisanship guide the way or undermine policies that help people — but by using evidence, facts, science — making sure our policies are aligned with what we know works — and what we know doesn’t.”

The call for increased use of confidential data comes as companies invade our privacy by collecting information on our buying and recreational habits so they can sell us more. Facebook and Google can creep too deep into our lives. Equifax, the credit reporting agency, said Thursday that personal information on 143 million Americans was hacked. Still fresh is the memory of the 2015 Office of Personnel Management data breach, which resulted in the theft of personal information, including Social Security numbers, belonging to more than 22 million people.



Even non-confidential data could be used in a way

It is interested in anonymous administrative and survey information that could be used to improve programs, if not for roadblocks. For example, census data are available “only for the narrow purpose of improving Census Bureau programs,” the report said, yet that information, without names or identifying information, could be used to enhance any number of agency efforts.

The commission’s emphasis on evidence is particularly welcome during a period when the nation is beset with a president renown for lies, deceptions and dissimulation. Since Trump’s inauguration, he was made an average of nearly five false or misleading claims a day, according to The Washington Post’s Fact Checker.

The commission was created through legislation enacted last year. The members were appointed by then-President Barack Obama and the Republican and Democratic leaders of the House and Senate.

Privacy is a driving concern throughout the report. It urges the adoption of “modern privacy-enhancing technologies for confidential data used for evidence building.”

Marc Rotenberg, president of the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC), welcomed the report, saying, “Smart public policy requires good information.”

But his email cautioned that some government “data sets, such as census

~~More from Federal Insider~~ personal privacy. There the key is to adopt new 'Privacy Enhancing Techniques' that minimize or eliminate the collection of personally identifiable information. The Commission endorsed PETs, which EPIC has long supported. But federal agencies must also demonstrate that these techniques successfully safeguard privacy.

"That is the big test ahead."

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government policy, panel says

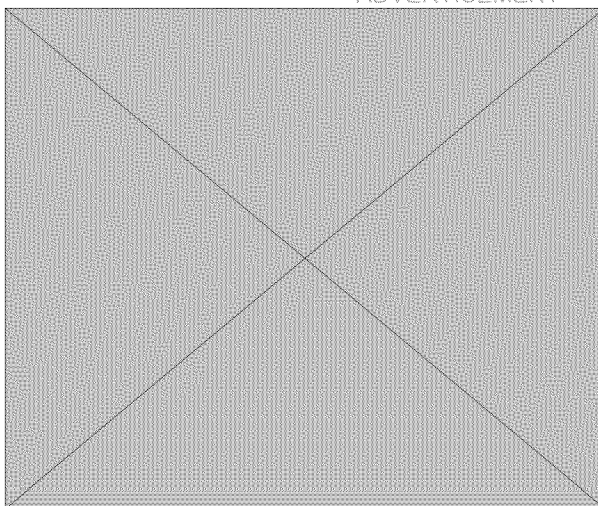
Strict privacy controls should remain, but commission says good information is vital resource in decision-making.

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