

Unpacking Climate Policy



A guide to assessing policy effectiveness and applying insights to climate solutions journalism in five steps.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Values and Power in Climate Policy 02

Climate Policy Reporting Guide

Step 1: Identify Policy Tools 03

Step 2: Navigate Regulatory Structures 04

Step 3: Question Evidence-Based Policy 05

Step 4: Pinpoint Policy Solutions 08

Step 5: Make Checklist 09

Climate Policy Storytelling

Application of Guide 10

Ongoing Learning 12

Introduction

Climate policy plays a key role in solutions journalism.

Policy can drive meaningful change or stall progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, transitioning to clean energy, and building resilience.

With more climate policies in place than ever before, journalists have an opportunity to uncover their effectiveness and limitations. Such accountability can move the tone of public discourse, revealing what is political rhetoric and what is real climate action.

Reporting on policy can lead journalists through a bureaucratic maze. This guide aims to serve as a road map for policy coverage in the United States, helping journalists navigate their solutions stories with clarity and confidence. It can also serve as a guide to exploring wider environmental and health policy.

Nested within elements of the solutions framework created by the Solutions Journalism Network, the guide offers targeted assistance to journalists covering the evidence for effectiveness and limitations of climate policy.

This guide outlines a five-step process to help reporters find impactful information, ask precise questions about it, and accurately convey answers to their audience in straightforward language. Before we launch into the steps, we take a brief look at why values and power matter in climate policy.

ELEMENTS OF SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM



The Response

Focuses on a response to a social problem — and on how that response has worked, or why it hasn't.



Insight

Shows what can be learned from a response and why it matters.



Evidence

Provides data or qualitative results that indicate effectiveness or lack thereof.



Limitations

Places responses in context; doesn't shy away from revealing shortcomings.



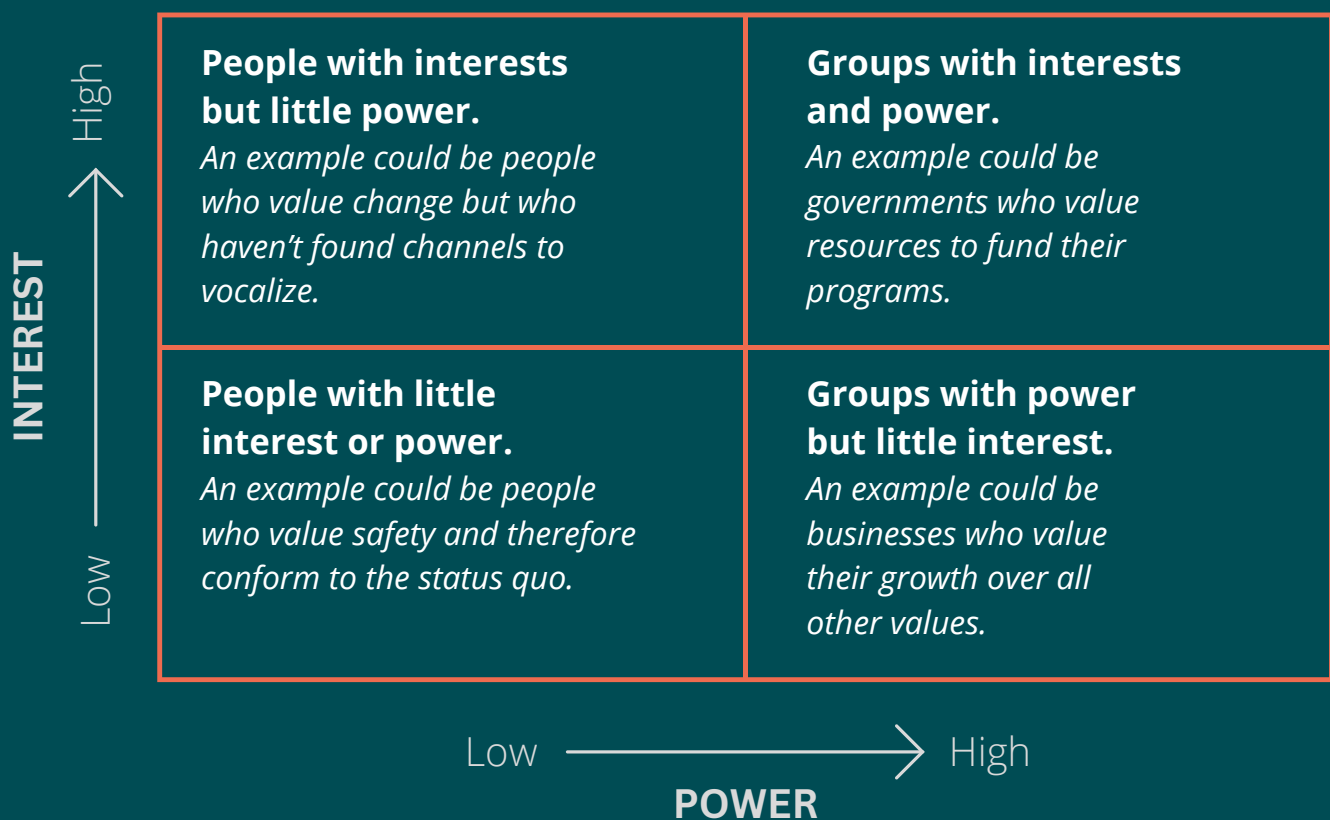
VALUES AND POWER IN CLIMATE POLICY

Policies reflect what the government prioritizes, but they don't always mirror societal values. Historically, the government excluded people of color, tribes, women, and individuals in the LGBTQIA+ community from positions of power.

Today, while many individuals from these groups are at the forefront of climate policy, there remains much work ahead to ensure equity and inclusion in decision-making processes.

Meanwhile, bias prevails in all forms of policy, and as journalists, we should be aware of the stereotypes or unconscious attitudes within it. Mitigating such biases starts with understanding how values vary across cultures and are shaped by an individual's lived experiences. To help sort through values and power dynamics, try simple charting to help unpack the relationships between everyday people, organizations, and governments.

Here's an example of mapping power and values between stakeholders.



Identify Policy Tools

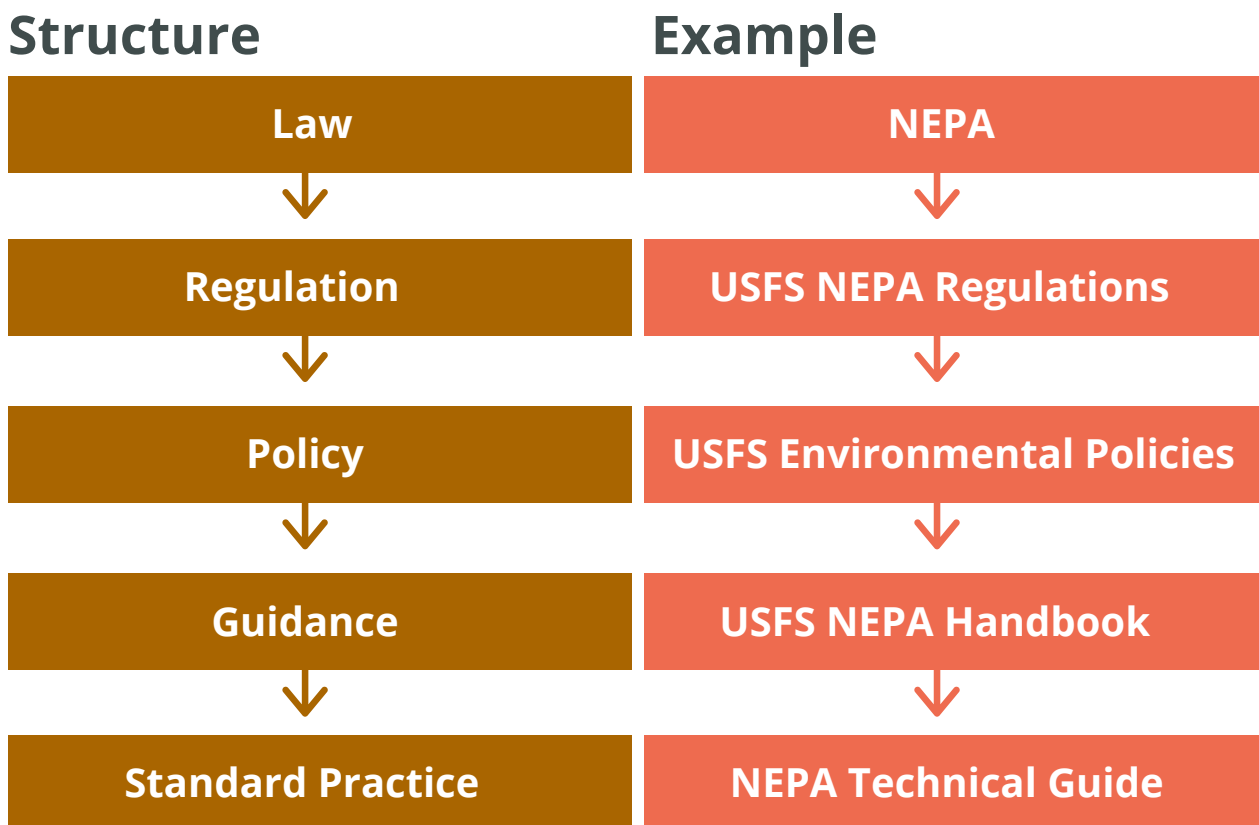
Public administrators generally work from four sets of tools to shape policy, often mixing and matching them to reach a desired outcome. The first step in understanding the effectiveness and limitations of a climate policy is to grasp the tools, because the tools set the boundaries of enforcement and process.

TOOLS	EXAMPLES
Mandates	
Governing bodies create rules to enforce compliance and regulate behavior. Rules are designed to ensure individuals, organizations, and businesses adhere to their obligations under government policies.	Regulation under the decades-old National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which mandates agencies like the U.S. Forest Service to conduct environmental impact statements for climate stressors.
Inducements	
Agencies, informed by their economists, craft incentives or disincentives to influence behavior or decision-makers. These may include subsidies, tax breaks, or penalties.	California's cap-and-trade program incentivizes companies to invest in cleaner technologies, reducing pollution over time by rewarding emission reduction efforts.
Capacity Building	
Government investments bolster the abilities of people and organizations to implement new or revised policies. This can include financial support like grants, technology like clean energy, or public engagement like consultations.	The Biden-Harris Administration's Justice40 Initiative invests in disadvantaged communities disproportionately affected by climate change, empowering them through community grants.
System Change	
Politicians, movement organizers, or policymakers enact reform and reshape institutional frameworks and governance structures to achieve transformative goals. These changes may occur in legislative authority or governance processes.	The Clean Energy Transformation Act in Washington State establishes targets for transitioning its utility sector away from fossil fuel-based energy generation, aiming for a complete shift to 100% clean energy by 2045.

Navigate Regulation

Climate policies and programs are frequently nested in broader environmental legislation, and their guidance is buried deep within regulatory frameworks. And often, these policies and programs may not explicitly mention "climate" in their descriptions, despite addressing a climate issue.

By pinpointing where in the regulatory structure their questions lie, journalists can frame more targeted questions when engaging with government sources. This leads to succinct reporting about policy impacts while sparing your audience from wonky details. This flowchart illustrates the layers of a regulatory framework and includes an example: The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) through the United States Forest Service (USFS).



When a law is enacted, decision makers create rules for regulations. Regulations get their implementation directives from policies, which provide guidance and standard practices for government workers.

NEPA mandates agencies like USFS to assess environmental impacts of proposed actions. A handbook offers NEPA guidance and standard practices for climate projects like carbon sequestration.

Tip

Ask about the status of guidance and standard practices to gauge a policy's implementation progress, resulting in a more focused evaluation of operational effectiveness rather than a broad assessment.

Question Evidence-Based Policy

Policymakers rely on evidence to evaluate policy effectiveness, with researchers using methodologies such as qualitative studies (focus groups, surveys) and quantitative approaches (advanced statistics, experimental research). Journalists can usually access this research through public records or peer-reviewed studies in scientific databases. Here are some examples of how to critically examine and question evidence.

Asking experts about methodologies before presenting findings is critical, because research hinges on judgment calls and available data.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR	WHAT TO ASK
<p>Sample Size</p> <p>The number of individuals or data points included in a study. How the sample is selected matters, because the sample may not be true to the real population of people or subjects within an area.</p> <p>→ <i>Sample size is often represented as "n." So, if the sample size is 10, it may be represented as "n=10" to indicate the number of participants or observations in the research.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the sample size sufficient to draw meaningful conclusions? • Was the sample size adjusted during the study because of unexpected challenges? • How serious are the concerns about underrepresentation or sampling bias? • How was the sample collected?
<p>Precision Indicators</p> <p>Margin of error represents the range within which true population parameters are likely to lie based on sample data. It helps assess the reliability of estimates derived from sample data. A confidence interval reflects the likelihood a result will repeat.</p> <p>→ <i>The margin of error may be expressed within ranges. For example, if a study reports an estimated temperature of 75°F ± 2°F, then the average temperature could range from 73°F to 77°F.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the margin of error acceptable for the study's objectives? • Why is the margin of error [narrow or wide]? • How does the margin of error affect the reliability and interpretation of the study's results? • How does the confidence interval affect the reliability and interpretation of the study and its correlations?

WHAT TO LOOK FOR	WHAT TO ASK
<p>Statistical Significance</p> <p>Indicates whether a result observed in the study reflects a real-world effect or is a random occurrence due to the variables and sample size.</p> <p>→ <i>In the social sciences, researchers often use the probability value (p-value) to determine significance in studies. If the p-value is less than 0.05 (5%), the results are typically considered significant; if it's greater than 0.05, they're considered insignificant.*</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How was statistical significance determined in this study? • Were any corrections made for biases or errors in the data that could affect statistical significance? <div data-bbox="1002 636 1417 1048" style="border: 2px solid #8B4513; border-radius: 50%; padding: 15px; text-align: center; margin: 10px auto; width: 80%;"> <p>*P-values and R-squared measurements are just two among several factors when researchers assess the validity of calculations. For further reading, see the "Ongoing Learning" section.</p> </div>
<p>Goodness of Fit</p> <p>A statistical test assessing how well the researcher's model fits the observed data, helping to determine the accuracy of predictions based on the model's fit to the data.</p> <p>→ <i>Assessing a model's fit involves considering various factors, including its R-squared value, which ranges from 0 to 1. A higher R-squared indicates a better fit for the model.*</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the goodness of fit affect the reliability of the results? • Were any adjustments made to improve the model's fit? • How does the goodness of fit factor into the overall interpretation of the model's results?
<p>Correlation</p> <p>Correlation is a number that measures the linear relationship between two variables and how changes in one variable may correspond to changes in the other variable.</p> <p>→ <i>A positive correlation between the two variables would imply a positive association between the policy implementation and improved outcomes.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was the relationship between variables statistically significant? • What are the limitations of your correlation analysis? • How might the correlation impact policy decisions or public perception?

Considerations and practical tips for unpacking evidence-based policy.

CONSIDERATIONS:

- **Correlation does not mean causality** between a policy and an outcome. Consider the limitation of data and complexity of data science before citing a study as conclusive evidence of a solution.
- **Research is just one avenue** for quantifiable information that can influence policy. For example, a benefit-cost analysis offers insights into the economic feasibility of policies by evaluating their potential costs and benefits. Leverage these documents to consider trade-offs between policy options, prompting deeper investigations into decision-making processes and the equitable distribution of policy outcomes.
- **Data and model manipulation** can skew the representation of relationships between variables. These types of bias may be particularly hard to discover in AI-generated results.

PRACTICAL TIPS:

- **Interview** researchers who are responsible for the study results or consult with independent analysts to gain deeper insights into the methodologies, assumptions, and potential biases underlying the research findings.
- **Simplify** the results of the study for your audience through plain language without sacrificing accuracy. You can do this by asking your data experts.
- **Contextualize** the study with your own interviews and other government documents such as financial reports and strategic plans.

Pinpoint Solutions

Policy evaluators often use problem statements to specify gaps or issues in policy. Journalists can do this too, not only to highlight challenges but also underscore progress. When crafting statements, evaluators synthesize findings — obtained through methods described in this guide — and formulate a concise sentence or two describing the problem. Here's an example of how to set up a statement and use it for questioning in your interviews.

STATEMENT TEMPLATE

The [POLICY TOOL(S)] overseen by [GOVERNMENT AGENCY] is [EVIDENCE] but [LIMITATION].



Alternatively, [GOVERNMENT AGENCY] could leverage [POLICY TOOL(S)] to address [LIMITATION] supported by [EVIDENCE].

EXAMPLE

The [cap-and-trade program] overseen by [the California Air Resource Board] is [generating revenue] but [still does not have enough funding to invest in clean energy infrastructure for all overburdened communities].



Alternatively, the [California Air Resources Board] could leverage [capacity building through a federal grant and expand resources] to build additional clean energy infrastructure supported by [a case study in a neighboring community].

QUESTION REFRAME

Could the [California Air Resources Board] leverage [federal grants or other funding opportunities] to expand resources and build more clean energy infrastructure in overburdened communities?



Is this [case study] an example of [an approach that could scale] to all overburdened communities?

Tip

Indicators and inputs differ from outcomes in policy contexts, as they measure resources applied during policy implementation or in a program. Try asking about how the inputs influenced the outcomes.

Make Checklist

While not every aspect of this guide may directly apply to your story, a checklist can assist you in identifying the steps necessary to outline meaningful and applicable solutions. Here's a checklist to pick and choose from.

1

-
- IDENTIFY POLICY TOOLS**
- Which tool or tools are being used to implement the policy? How?
 - How is the tool being used in the policy? Are they the best tools?
 - What tools could agencies be better leveraging?
-

2

- NAVIGATE REGULATION**
- Where in the regulatory structure is the policy tool being used?
 - Who is overseeing the policy?
 - What is the standard practice the governing body uses to execute the policy?
 - How is that standard practice working or not working?
-

3

- QUESTION EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY**
- Does research show the effectiveness of a policy?
 - Do agencies have that research?
 - Have advocates commissioned it?
 - Are peer-reviewed studies available from universities?
 - What does research show about the successes and limitations of a policy?
 - Is the data used responsibly in the calculation of results or have they been cherry picked?
 - What evidence from this research adds value in the published product?
 - Is the data a lead to find stronger evidence?
 - Is the data strong enough to report on as evidence?
-

4

- PINPOINT SOLUTIONS**
- How can I succinctly state the policy problem, progress, or solution?
 - Did I verify my solution with sources?
 - Have I asked different stakeholders with diverse values about the solution?
 - Is my solution strong enough to share with my audience or do I need more evidence?

About This Guide

Ashli Blow is an independent journalist who developed this guide as part of her graduating capstone project at the University of Washington, where she earned a Master's of Public Administration in Environmental Policy. She piloted the guide's effectiveness by applying its steps to her own reporting (Appendix A), as shown in the following case study.

Case Study

The cleanup of Superfund and toxic sites is an overlooked but critical facet of climate adaptation, enabling sustainable land reuse and enhancing community resilience. However, redevelopment can lead to unintended consequences, such as displacement. Ashli used a blend of traditional reporting tactics with steps from the guide to tell a holistic story about how community-led development can thwart this kind of environmental gentrification.

In Seattle, the lower Duwamish River, a 5-mile Superfund site, is finally undergoing significant cleanup efforts. Ashli initially mapped stakeholders and conducted community interviews to highlight themes like affordable housing and community trusts, which are desired but lacking complements to the cleanup process.

Finding out how these changes could be implemented through policy would be challenging, given the notoriously complicated state and federal brownfield processes. **To unravel it, she turned to Step 1: identifying the policy tool. In this case, two policy tools were used: capacity building and system change.**



Community-led cleanup along the Duwamish River that Ashli joined to build relationships with the people who live and work in South Seattle.

Read the published story on [The Urbanist](#).

In Step 2, Ashli navigated the regulatory structure in a simple table (shown right) for Superfund sites, regulated under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA).

This helped her find guidance and standard practices for land reuse and environmental justice, revealing that capacity building tools can be integrated to support community-led development.

Law	Comprehensive Environmental Responses and Liability Act (CERCLA)
Regulation	Superfund Enforcement
Policy	Environmental due diligence is conducted to evaluate the environmental condition of the property and to meet the requirements for all appropriate inquiries (AAI) as defined in Section 101(35)(B) of CERCLA.
Guidance	The Revitalization-Ready Guide explains that land use controls may consist of institutional controls or engineering controls used alone or in combination to ensure protection of human health and the environment. Superfund environmental justice guidance outlines tools, strategies and approaches for site teams to consider while addressing environmental justice concerns throughout the cleanup and redevelopment process.
Standard Practice	Derived from above guidance: Cross-agency collaboration, building community capacity, early engagement.

This navigation led to the discovery of a lesser-known grant program offered by the Washington State Department of Ecology, supporting affordable housing on remediated land. Through Steps 3 and 4, Ashli critically examined the evidence and limitations of this program, pinpointing the integration and funding of community-led development in the cleanup process as a viable solution.

The screenshot shows a web browser interface with the URL 'The Urbanist'. The article title is 'Community Development Counters Eco-Gentrification from Duwamish Valley Cleanup' by Ashli Blow, dated May 1, 2024. Below the title are social media sharing icons for Facebook, X, Reddit, LinkedIn, Email, and Print. A photograph shows volunteers in kayaks collecting debris from a riverbank. A caption reads: 'During low tide, River Access Paddle Program volunteers collected litter, ranging from small pieces of styrofoam to large marine debris. They paddled it to a drop-off location for the City of Seattle to pickup and dispose. (Ashli Blow)'

Ashli discussed this solution with Superfund manager Laura Knudsen from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), asking about its federal applicability. Knudsen went on record saying that the solution is something that the EPA could feasibly consider within its existing public engagement processes. She also emphasized the importance of solutions journalism in influencing EPA decision-makers.

"Now with the environmental justice strengthening of the EPA, this work you are doing is really important to get [justice] even more integrated into those discussions," said Knudsen.

Editor Doug Trumm collaborated closely with Ashli on a story for The Urbanist, an independent publication in Seattle dedicated to informing and influencing both the public and their leaders. Packaging deep-dive pieces can be challenging, but they found the integration of storytelling and visuals effectively set the stage for a solutions-focused analysis.

"The piece did a great job of connecting and examining some complicated issues and brought some welcome coverage of environmental racism and eco-gentrification to our site," said Trumm.



ONGOING LEARNING

Solutions Story Tracker

Read how other journalists are approaching solutions journalism through the Solutions Journalism Network's curated database of rigorous reporting on responses to social problems at storytracker.solutionsjournalism.org.

Resources

The following resources were used to inform the development of this guide and are available for further reading and viewing.

Gail Johnson

Research Methods for Public Administrators (2014)

Kathryn E. Newcomer

Practical Program Evaluation (2015)

Kathryn Thier

Identifying Major Components of Solutions-Oriented Journalism: A Review to Guide Future Research (2023)

J. Patrick Dobel

Mapping: Understanding Who Can Influence Your Success (2016)

J. Kingdon

Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies (1994)

SciLine

Stats Essentials for Math-Averse Reporters (2024)

National Research Council

Using Science as Evidence in Public Policy (2012)

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