

# Consultations with Parliamentary Budget Office stakeholders

Nanos Research Presentation, December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016



**NANOS**



OFFICE OF THE  
PARLIAMENTARY  
BUDGET OFFICER  
BUREAU DU DIRECTEUR  
PARLEMENTAIRE DU  
BUDGET

CANADA



# Objectives and Methodology

In order to enable the PBO to evaluate its current practices, as well as to identify potential areas for improvement, it retained Nanos to conduct stakeholder consultations in the form of focus groups and elite interviews. The consultations had the overall objective of allowing the PBO to gauge a better understanding of drivers of satisfaction for its stakeholders with the products, reports and analyses it provides them, and thereby improve its service to parliamentarians and stakeholders.

The objectives of this research were the following:

- Firstly, to gain a better understanding of the current awareness and perceptions stakeholders have of the role and mandate of the PBO.
- Secondly, to seek clarity on the expectations stakeholders have of the future role and mandate of the PBO.
- Third, to explore views and ways of optimizing engagement and communications with its stakeholders, and the current level of engagement.
- And fourth, to improve knowledge of the needs and requirements of its stakeholders. This includes how products and services can be enhanced to better meet the needs and expectations of stakeholders.

Two focus groups (civil servants and political staff) and 16 elite interviews of MPs, Senators and Officers and Senior Government representatives were conducted between October 26<sup>th</sup> and December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016. In total 47 stakeholders participated in the research. Readers should note that focus group and elite interview research is qualitative in nature and should not be generalized to the target populations for the study.

# Impressions of the PBO





# Impressions of the PBO – Parliamentarians

## Question - First of all, how would you best describe the current role of the PBO?

Participants mentioned the role of the PBO as being an independent and third party office providing an essential service and products to Parliamentarians, such as monitoring government spending, and costing proposals. A few participants said the PBO is invaluable to MPs and the PBO is critical to interpreting the complexities of federal budgeting issues. One participant noted that while they feel the role of the PBO is to hold the government to account, they have not been used much for that purpose.

## Question - What words would you use to describe your relationship with the PBO over the past year?

Nearly all participants had positive descriptors for their relationship with the PBO over the past year, with several saying helpful, collegial, positive, businesslike and professional, proactive, and collaborative. Two participants noted their relationship has been non-existent, although both participants took responsibility for this, saying they have not reached out. A few participants said they have not had a direct relationship, but utilize the PBO's research and it is very helpful for their work.

## Question - What could be done to further enhance your current relationship with the PBO?

Participants offered a variety of ways to enhance their current relationship with the PBO, most commonly mentioning a need for improved outreach to parliamentarians, including providing an earlier draft of reports to MPs or seminars on what the PBO does. One participant mentioned that they are often surprised that the PBO seems to make decisions on the basis that they know what MPs want, without an investigating process. He suggests actually asking MPs what they want to know, and not doing reports on what they think MPs would like to know. One participant mentioned formalizing protocols for information requests, while several participants said the relationship is fine and needs no enhancement.

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*Very professional, I find the products are phenomenal, factual and easy to understand, as well as scientific in method. It is a fountain of information.*

*I am often surprised that the PBO appears to make decisions on the basis that they know what we want to know. There is no investigating process, they don't ask me what would be helpful. How do they know what to look at? I just get reports on what they think I want to know, but they should actually ask us because it may not be important to me.*

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# Impressions of the PBO – Political Staff and Civil Servants

## Question - First of all, how would you best describe the current role of the PBO?

Participants in the political staff group described the role of the PBO as being a third party oversight, and that it gives parliamentarians the tools to do their job in a neutral and objective way. One participant commented that the work of the PBO complements the work of the Auditor General.

Several civil servants said that the role of the PBO is unclearly defined, and one mentioned differing interpretations of the PBO's mandate potentially leading to that lack of clarity. A few participants also described the PBO's current role as controversial, and another said the PBO seems to use the media to influence others. One participant commented that the PBO is not sufficiently institutionalized and is too adhoc about the way it engages with the rest of the government.

## Question - What words would you use to describe your relationship with the PBO over the past year?

Political staffers also had mostly positive descriptors for their relationships, with participants describing their with the PBO relationship as enlightening, productive, informative, trustworthy, collaborative, and accessible. Participants noted the PBO has a team of efficient researchers, and that their expertise is critically important. One participant said they have minimal office contact with the PBO.

Participants in the civil servant group generally described their relationships with the PBO in positive terms, using words such as positive, collegial, constructive, and open communication. One participant noted it is less stormy than previously, and another says the relationship is inconsistent, saying there is a lot of variation in terms of who they interact with and the clarity and openness.

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*It's like a third party oversight that makes sure everything is in line. - Political Staffer*

*Their role is unclearly defined because it seems to be personality driven. It seems as though the way in which the topics of the reports are chosen and presented depends on "the flavour of the day" in addition to the MP's work. Although, this is just my personal view. – Civil Servant*

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# Impressions of the PBO – Political Staff and Civil Servants

## Question - What could be done to further enhance your current relationship with the PBO?

### Political Staffers

For the political staffers, there were several comments related to more proactive and ongoing outreach, especially to new parliamentarians. They also mentioned that the PBO should offer training sessions for new MPs and make their services and resources more known. Transparency was mentioned among the political staffers, with a few participants saying it would be helpful to know what they do for every other office, or to have a list of what resources they are working on every quarter for other offices. Also mentioned was having a central channel to refer people to the appropriate resource, including having the Library of Parliament refer people to the PBO when applicable.

### Civil Servants

Two themes emerged from this discussion with the civil servants: clarity and inclusiveness. Participants frequently commented on a need for clarity and transparency in terms of what the PBO is looking for and what they are trying to achieve, as well as needing clarification on the PBO's role itself, while also noting that it is hard to improve a relationship if they do not know what relationship they are trying to achieve. They mentioned that a lack of clarity on their role can lead to stepping on each others toes.

In terms of inclusiveness, civil servants frequently said they are the providers of PBO information more than users of that information, and feel they should have a bigger role in the process. They mentioned that when they are not as included as they feel they should be, it leads to misunderstandings. Participants noted that PBO should include them in developing conclusions to their research, saying that often they give PBO historical data and are not given an understanding of the methodology or assumptions they are using, and it is not clear whether the PBO understands the programs of that department. Participants discussed a need for the system to be institutionalized like the Auditor General, where executives are brought the reports and allowed to review them for factual errors prior to release. Participants also expressed a desire for a change in the way the PBO releases reports, with one participant describing the approach as an “ambush” and saying reports are released without warning and suddenly they are on the receiving end of demands to formulate a rapid response. The participant feels this contradictory, to the purpose of a PBO report is a careful, reasoned analysis of an issue and which demands the same careful response, but they are not given that opportunity.

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*It goes back to that notion of clarity. It is hard to improve a relationship when we do not know what the relationship is trying to achieve.*

*I have a lot of confidence in the PBO, and indirectly used some of their services, but if we could know what they do for every office it would be helpful.*

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# Impressions of PBO

## Parliamentarians

*"I think it's limited in terms of the intent behind creation, and they are not being used much [...] Essentially it isn't used much for the purpose it was created for, which is to hold the government to account for financial decisions."*

*"Excellent, they are really helpful and they tried the best they could. There have been times in the past where they weren't able to help me because they couldn't obtain the information they needed from departments or elsewhere, so they have really been restricted by their mandate at times."*

*"All I want is more of him. Whenever he does costing it takes a lot of time because there is a lot of work and they're all asking a lot of him. My office places huge demands, and if others do too how can he do it?"*

*"It would be helpful to conduct a meeting with PBO, twice a year, to see what needs to be corrected, what needs to be done, etc."*

## Civil Servants

*"There seems to have been some differing interpretations on the mandate since the very beginning, in part due to different personalities and by the style of government at the time"*

*"The PBO seems to use the media to influence others. They will sometimes look for a scandalous element of the research or findings to put to the forefront."*

*"It's inconsistent; there is a lot of variation in terms of who we actually interact with, and in terms of the degree of openness and clarity."*

*"To enhance that relationship there would need to be transparency and a clear understanding in what the PBO is looking for and what they are trying to achieve. Not to say that the end products are bad, but the end products need a better understanding and discussion of what is needed."*

*"More inclusiveness in the actual development of those conclusions that the PBO is delivering to the public, because in some cases the credibility of PBO can be impacted by things we may have known and been happily ready to talk to and share with them."*

## Political Staff

*« I like the fact that it's non-partisan. It's not geared toward partisan politics but to objective analyses. »*

*« Trustworthy. »*

*"Expertise is very important, critical. There are assumptions that they make, but we don't have the time to do this kind of analysis."*

*"They should have more resources to do what parliamentarians ask them to do."*

*"Proactive outreach; let people know what's coming out and contact them."*

*"Ongoing session or ongoing outreach because new people don't know, it could catch more people."*

*"More independence, because if parties cooperate it works, but if they don't it becomes more complicated and it limits what they can do."*

# Module A: Analysis of the Nation's Finances







# Use and value of economic and fiscal outlook – Parliamentarians

**QUESTION - Thinking of the PBO's analysis of trends in the Canadian economy where it conducts a semi-annual economic and fiscal outlook including testimony to the House of Commons Finance Committee. Does your office or do you use this research?**

Six of 16 Parliamentarians said they do not use the semi-annual economic and fiscal outlook (six of 16), while five of the 16 participants said both they and their office use it, three said their office uses it, and two said they use this research themselves (10 of 16 total).

**QUESTION - Would you say that you find this PBO research valuable, somewhat valuable, somewhat not valuable or not valuable?**

Eleven of 16 Parliamentarians rated this research as valuable with one rating it somewhat valuable, and four choosing not to answer because they do not use the research.

**QUESTION - Why?**

Parliamentarians mentioned the research being a counterweight to both the press and the Finance Department, as well being an independent analysis, informative and a source of good, solid, factual information.

Use of PBO's research			
I use this research 2 of 16	My office uses this research 3 of 16	Both my office and I use this research 5 of 16	Research is not used 6 of 16

Value of PBO's research				
Valuable 11 of 16	Somewhat valuable 1 of 16	Somewhat not valuable 0 of 16	Not valuable 0 of 16	No Answer 4 of 16



# Use and value of economic and fiscal outlook – Political Staff and Civil Servants

**QUESTION - Thinking of the PBO's analysis of trends in the Canadian economy where it conducts a semi-annual economic and fiscal outlook including testimony to the House of Commons Finance Committee. Does your office or do you use this research?**

In terms of use of this research, while 10 of 19 political staff say both they and their office use the research, seven of 12 civil servant participants say the research is not used by them or their office.

**QUESTION - Would you say that you find this PBO research valuable, somewhat valuable, somewhat not valuable or not valuable?**

All political staff participants except for one said the research is valuable (nine of 19) or somewhat valuable (nine of 19), similar to the civil servants stream where eight in twelve said the research is valuable or somewhat valuable.

**QUESTION - Why?**

The most mentioned reason for their rating from political staff was it is a trustworthy third party/non-partisan/independent perspective and analysis (seven of nineteen mentions), followed by it is informative (three of nineteen mentions), as well as it having limited relevance to their position/office, the information being too high-level/macro, this is important to Canadians, and addresses issues directly related to their work (each with one mention).

Civil servants mentioned it having limited relevance for their position/office, the information being too high-level/macro, providing a third party perspective, occasionally using the research for context, and essential to plan for fiscal framework, with one mention each. Also mentioned by one participants was that the research is redundant and confusing, because the private sector already provides similar data, and another noted the PBO is reporting information that has been taken out of context.

## Use of PBO's research (Political Staff)

I use this research  
2 of 19

My office uses this research  
3 of 19

Both my office and I use this research  
10 of 19

Research is not used  
5 of 19

## Value of PBO's research (Political Staff)

Valuable  
9 of 19

Somewhat valuable  
9 of 19

Somewhat not valuable  
0 of 19

Not valuable  
1 of 19

No Answer  
0 of 19

## Use of PBO's research (Civil Servants)

I use this research  
1 of 12

My office uses this research  
4 of 12

Both my office and I use this research  
0 of 12

Research is not used  
7 of 12

## Value of PBO's research (Civil Servants)

Valuable  
3 of 12

Somewhat valuable  
5 of 12

Somewhat not valuable  
0 of 12

Not valuable  
1 of 12

No Answer  
3 of 12



# Reason for value rating

## Parliamentarians

*"It's important on the fiscal side that there's an independent source of information for parliamentarians to work with and ask questions of the government."*

*"It's informative and independent, it's needed."*

*"It is often presented in an accessible way and I can understand it. I get most of my economic information from media, but I find it to be a great counter weight to the press."*

*"The research provides information independent from that found in the Government budget."*

*"It provides independent analysis on what the trends are, what is going on with the economy and what to look for."*

*"It's good, solid and factual information."*

## Civil Servants

*"Most of us do not use it in our department."*

*"If it is used for my department I have found it somewhat useful."*

## Political Staff

*"The Finance Department as a non-partisan thing is really just dumping information. The PBO reports are better at explaining why money went certain places. It's much more accessible."*

*"The information that they provide, and the fact that they make it public it is critical. They can do work for you but then it's open to everyone."*

*"That neutral, impartial third party is critical, but it is only as good as the information as they are given[...]"*

*"It is also a very authoritative opinion, second only to the Department of Finance. You can always look at the economists but PBO has the real information."*

*"From my experience, seeing things from both sides, it is more valuable when you are in the opposition. When you are in government there are many other resources at your disposal."*

# Suggestions for the Research

Civil Servants	Political Staff	Parliamentarians
One participant each mentioned shifting the focus on causes and consequences of economic determinants, and working alongside departments to better understand the content. Also mentioned was that the research needs to be re-organized in order for it to be useful for departments, and the PBO should produce analysis based on a range of assumptions.	A couple of participants suggested that the PBO simplify and clarify the language in the reports, while one each mentioned showing new employees the resources available to them, providing more information on its use and value, and another suggestion was to leave things as they are. Also mentioned by participants was doing this research more frequently, offering additional information sessions about the report, and providing more details on individual government initiatives (one mention each).	The majority of participants had no suggestions related to this research, however one participant suggested providing a product with graphs to see the trends. Another mentioned that they usually default to the Department of Finance or the Bank of Canada for this research, and they don't see much need for the PBO to do this. One participant mentioned that as long as their premises and assumptions are efficient and upfront, there should not be any problems, and one participant said they would prefer to be able to ask the PBO questions about the report.

**QUESTION** - Do you have any suggestions related to this research? [Open-ended]

# Module B: Analysis of the Government's Spending Plans







# Use and value of Quarterly Expenditure Monitor – Parliamentarians

**QUESTION - Our next topic is about the PBO's work on the analysis of Government Spending Plans which is an analysis of the Budget and Main and Supplementary Estimates known as the quarterly Expenditure Monitor. Does your office or do you use this research?**

The majority (eight of 16) of Parliamentarians said neither they nor their office use the Quarterly Expenditure Monitor, while four said both them and their office use it, two said their office does, and two use it themselves.

**QUESTION - Would you say that you find this PBO research valuable, somewhat valuable, somewhat not valuable or not valuable?**

Despite most saying they do not use the research, the majority of participants still rated the research itself as valuable (eight mentions) or somewhat valuable (three mentions). Five participants who do not use the research elected not to answer.

**QUESTION - Why?**

Asked why they gave it that rating, several participants mentioned that it provides information and insight into the government's positions, as well as shows the juxtaposition between what is said and what the government wants to say. Also mentioned was it being a counterweight to the Finance Department who may be influenced by the Minister they serve, and that the research helps indicate where to "follow the money" in terms of any discrepancies between their public statements and the spending of the funds. One participant noted they were not previously aware the PBO did this research, and will likely use it from now on.

## Use of PBO research

I use this research 2 of 16	My office uses this research 2 of 16	Both my office and I use this research 4 of 16	Research is not used 8 of 16
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## Value of PBO research

Valuable 8 of 16	Somewhat valuable 3 of 16	Somewhat not valuable 0 of 16	Not valuable 0 of 16	No Answer 5 of 16
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# Use and value of Quarterly Expenditure Monitor – Political Staff and Civil Servants

**QUESTION - Our next topic is about the PBO's work on the analysis of Government Spending Plans which is an analysis of the Budget and Main and Supplementary Estimates known as the quarterly Expenditure Monitor. Does your office or do you use this research?**

Just over half of the political staffers said both they and their office use the Quarterly Expenditure Monitor (10 of 19 participants), with a majority using it in some way (three said they use it, three said their office uses it). Three participants do not use the research.

The majority of civil servants do not use the Quarterly Expenditure Monitor (eight of twelve participants), while two participants each said either their office uses it or both they and their office use the research, respectively.

**QUESTION - Would you say that you find this PBO research valuable, somewhat valuable, somewhat not valuable or not valuable?**

Eighteen out of nineteen political staffers feel this research is valuable or somewhat valuable, with one participant saying it is somewhat not valuable. Eight of 12 civil servants said the research is valuable or somewhat valuable, while one said it is not, and three did not answer.

**QUESTION - Why?**

Four political staffers said this is because it is a trustworthy third party/non partisan perspective and analysis, while two participants each made note that the reports provide estimates and not a clear snapshot, and that the language of the reports should be clarified/simplified. Participants also mentioned that the information is valuable when relevant to topics of interest at their office, that it gives transparency to an opaque system, and that it is difficult to draw conclusions from the research.

Civil servants mentioned the Quarterly Expenditure Monitor increases transparency, provides a bigger picture of spending development, is useful information for the public, but also that it is too high-level/macro. Also mentioned was the information is valuable for Parliamentary committee appearances, and that the PBO reports information that is taken out of context.

## Use of PBO's research (Political Staff)

I use this research  
3 of 19

My office uses this research  
3 of 19

Both my office and I use this research  
10 of 19

Research is not used  
3 of 19

## Value of PBO's research (Political Staff)

Valuable  
7 of 19

Somewhat valuable  
11 of 19

Somewhat not valuable  
1 of 19

Not valuable  
0 of 19

No Answer  
0 of 19

## Use of PBO's research (Civil Servants)

I use this research  
0 of 12

My office uses this research  
2 of 12

Both my office and I use this research  
2 of 12

Research is not used  
8 of 12

## Value of PBO's research (Civil Servants)

Valuable  
4 of 12

Somewhat valuable  
4 of 12

Somewhat not valuable  
0 of 12

Not valuable  
1 of 12

No Answer  
3 of 12



## Reason for value rating

### Parliamentarians

*"We use all that information really to get a better sense of all the government's positions. I look at a lot at work not just the PBO, but we take the information into account for our decisions."*

*"I find this PBO research valuable because it is clear and understandable. It sets up juxtaposition between what is said and what government wants to say."*

*"I find these help indicate where to "follow the money" and see any discrepancies between the public statements and the actual spending of the funds."*

*"It becomes part of the macro discussion on economy. No one in my riding asks about it on a monthly basis so it's not useful in that way."*

*"It gives us a counterweight to the Finance Department, as they report to a Minister. They're honest people, but are no doubt influenced by the Minister they serve."*

### Civil Servants

*"The reality is that a lot of parliamentarians don't understand the technical documents, so the PBO research is valuable to me and it takes our brick and cuts it down to six or seven pages. It is helpful."*

*In terms of the value to me and the public at large, there is not a lot of information on government wide trends and developments in spending and what have you [...] For lack of a better alternative, PBO documents are useful."*

*"It's not interesting. The public accounts, those are our documents. Why would I look at the PBO research? Sometimes they do not understand the context, so they are missing information."*

### Political Staff

*"It's very hard to link what you see in the quarterly expectations versus the actual budget. It's had to draw conclusive conclusions. I find the semi-annual report is much better."*

*"Do you start to put a PBO staff member in every committee? That's impossible. They should be everywhere but they can't be."*

*"I think people in general think the PBO does a lot more than they do. PBO is not tracking program expenses, but people think that is the case. While they can't do everything, there's perhaps something to be said for them doing more."*

*"In a committee a program was assessed and it seemed very wrong, so an MP had to flag it. When the PBO reviewed it they agreed, but they were not in the room to notice that too. So, I think the MPs have to work closer with the PBO to identify such issues, because the PBO can't be everywhere."*

# Suggestions for the research

Civil Servants	Political Staff	Parliamentarians
Participants mentioned taking measures to improve efficiency, working alongside departments to understand the nature of their work, and sharing the reports with EMS to alert departments of any discrepancies beforehand.	Two participants each mentioned the PBO should show how spending items in the budget fit into the fiscal framework, and better explaining major programs in each department. Also mentioned was enacting legislation to make the PBO more fully independent, offering a condensed/shortened version of the report, and additional briefings on the report and topics (one mention each).	One parliamentarian suggested making the language in the report more clear, while another suggested adding more details and simplifying them so that MPs can understand and comment on specific details of budgets for departments. Another participant mentioned that people should pay more attention when reports are released.

**QUESTION** - Do you have any suggestions related to this research?

# Module C: Analysis of the Nation's Fiscal Sustainability







# Use and value of the Fiscal Sustainability Report – Parliamentarians

**QUESTION - Thinking of the PBO's Fiscal Sustainability Report, which is published annually in July and provides an assessment of the fiscal sustainability of Canada's federal government, subnational governments and public pension plans. Does your office or do you use this research?**

For this research participants were a bit more divided in terms of use of the Fiscal Sustainability Report, with five of 14 saying the research is not used, and four of 14 saying they use the research. Three participants said both they and their office use the research, while two said their office uses the research.

**QUESTION - Would you say that you find this PBO research valuable, somewhat valuable, somewhat not valuable or not valuable?**

Once more the majority of participants said the research is valuable (nine mentions), or somewhat valuable (two mentions). The remaining three participants chose not to answer the question.

**QUESTION - Why?**

A frequently mentioned reason for their value rating is that this is an independent analysis, which participants say is very important. Participants also noted the research is informative, it helps them do their jobs, and is well written.

## Use of PBO research\*

I use this research 4 of 14	My office uses this research 2 of 14	Both my office and I use this research 3 of 14	Research is not used 5 of 14
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## Value of PBO research\*

Valuable 9 of 14	Somewhat valuable 2 of 14	Somewhat not valuable 0 of 14	Not valuable 0 of 14	No Answer 3 of 14
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\*Two participants were not asked this module



# Use and value of the Fiscal Sustainability Report – Political Staff and Civil Servants

**QUESTION - Thinking of the PBO's Fiscal Sustainability Report, which is published annually in July and provides an assessment of the fiscal sustainability of Canada's federal government, subnational governments and public pension plans. Does your office or do you use this research?**

Eight of the 19 political staff participants said both they and their office use the fiscal sustainability report, while six participants said this research is not used. Two individuals use the research, and three said their office uses the research.

The majority of civil servant participants (nine of 12) said this research is not used. Two said they use it, and one said their office uses the fiscal sustainability report.

**QUESTION - Would you say that you find this PBO research valuable, somewhat valuable, somewhat not valuable or not valuable?**

The majority of political staffers said the Fiscal Sustainability Report is valuable (eight of 19 mentions) or somewhat valuable (six of 19 mentions), similar to civil servants, among whom seven in 12 participants said the research is either valuable or somewhat valuable, while one said it is not valuable.

**QUESTION - Why?**

In terms of the reason for their value rating, five political staff participants mentioned it provides financial/fiscal depth/context to the budget and spending, while six participants said the research is not relevant to their office. Three participants said the information is very useful/good quality, while one participant each mentioned it is important to have an independent watchdog, and that no one else does this research.

For the civil servant participants, three participants mentioned it has limited/no relevance to their position/office, while two said it is a useful source of information, and one participant said the information should point out short, medium and long forecasts.

## Use of PBO's research (Political Staff)

I use this research 2 of 19	My office uses this research 3 of 19	Both my office and I use this research 8 of 19	Research is not used 6 of 19
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## Value of PBO's research (Political Staff)

Valuable 8 of 19	Somewhat valuable 6 of 19	Somewhat not valuable 3 of 19	Not valuable 2 of 19	No Answer 0 of 19
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## Use of PBO's research (Civil Servants)

I use this research 2 of 12	My office uses this research 1 of 12	Both my office and I use this research 0 of 12	Research is not used 9 of 12
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## Value of PBO's research (Civil Servants)

Valuable 3 of 12	Somewhat valuable 4 of 12	Somewhat not valuable 0 of 12	Not valuable 1 of 12	No Answer 4 of 12
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# Reason for value rating

## Parliamentarians

*"I find this PBO research valuable because they are compelling in argumentation and they write well."*

*"It has value and strengths. Again, it's knowing that you are getting information without spin. The office has integrity and credibility, it's so important."*

*"Once again for its independence, it's information that can't be found elsewhere."*

*"It is valuable because it's there and you can access the information if someone asks. If someone challenges the government, it's there as an independent analysis to show that the government is not cooking the books."*

*It allows us to determine if there's an issue with the spending trajectory, if it's affordable.*

## Civil Servants

*"It's unique because it presents the totality of government spending: it's interesting to see that most of our spending is statutory transfers. It gives a good big picture. Looking ahead, it helps us identify ways to get back to a sustainable picture."*

*"It paints a comprehensive picture and a broader health check of finances. It wraps up the sustainability of the finances of all levels of government."*

## Political Staff

*"If you want something ignored, you put it out in July. The date should be changed. Nobody is in the House. Theoretically this should be one of the most important things the PBO does."*

*"It's contingent on your portfolio. It could be very useful to MPs who carry portfolios related to that, but maybe less to others."*

*"They do excellent press conferences when they release the report and they are accessible to explain things. They answer all questions."*

*"I think it's very good for high level programs, but the level of granularity could be explained better, what points are moving in what directions and we should have a better sense of the assumptions."*

*"Knowing where all the players are at is good to know, helps deal with specific issues."*

# Suggestions for the research

Civil Servants	Political Staff	Parliamentarians
Participants had no suggestions for this research.	Two of the 19 political staff participants suggested that the PBO offer a greater level of detail on the major trends, while one participant each suggested that a condensed/shortened version of the report be offered , and providing a breakdown of the provinces. One participant said they are unsure why the report is released in July.	Participants did not have many suggestions for this research. One participant mentioned making the language clearer, while another noted that staff should be made more aware when research is released. Two participants mentioned that the PBO should keep it up and that they are confident in their work. One participant suggested they release the report in September saying it goes unnoticed in the summer, and the participant also recommended conducting meetings between the PBO and Parliamentarians.

**QUESTION** - Do you have any suggestions related to this research? [Open-ended]

Confidential



# Module D: Estimation of the financial cost of proposals within Parliament's jurisdiction







# Use and value of estimations of financial cost of proposals – Parliamentarians

**QUESTION - Thinking of the PBO's research which estimates the financial cost or magnitude of liability of proposals within Parliament's jurisdiction requested by parliamentarians. Does your office or do you use this research?**

The majority of participants said the estimations of financial costs of proposals are not used (nine of 16 mentions), while five participants said both they and their office use the research.

**QUESTION - Would you say that you find this PBO research valuable, somewhat valuable, somewhat not valuable or not valuable? Why?**

Eight of 16 participants said the research is valuable, while two said somewhat valuable and six elected not to answer as they do not use the research.

Participants commented overall that the research is helpful for decision making and demonstrating the financial impact of various projects, and that it is good to have someone who can do this research when needed. One participant noted the research would be more valuable if it was more independent and based on their own research – to avoid veering into auditing and the role of the Auditor General.

Use of PBO research			
I use this research 1 of 16	My office uses this research 1 of 16	Both my office and I use this research 5 of 16	Research is not used 9 of 16

Value of PBO research				
Valuable 8 of 16	Somewhat valuable 2 of 16	Somewhat not valuable 0 of 16	Not valuable 0 of 16	No Answer 6 of 16



# Use and value of estimations of financial cost of proposals – Political Staff and Civil Servants

**QUESTION - Thinking of the PBO's research which estimates the financial cost or magnitude of liability of proposals within Parliament's jurisdiction requested by parliamentarians. Does your office or do you use this research?**

Ten of 19 political staff participant said both they and their office use the estimates of financial costs of proposals, while four said their office uses it and three use it themselves. Two participants said the research is not used. The majority of civil servants said the research is not used (eight of 12), while two said both they and their office use it, and two use it themselves.

**QUESTION - Would you say that you find this PBO research valuable, somewhat valuable, somewhat not valuable or not valuable?**

The majority of political staffers said the research is valuable (12 of 19 mentions), with four who say it is somewhat valuable. Two participants said the research is somewhat not valuable. Five of 12 civil servant participants said the research is somewhat valuable, while three said it is valuable, one said it is not valuable, and three elected not to respond.

**QUESTION - Why?**

Of the 19 political staff participants, six mentioned that the research provides a necessary third party/independent perspective, followed by helps guide decisions (three mentions), and what I have read is executed well/helpful, provides context/bigger picture, provides reassurance and challenges my assumptions, and is an essential service to parliamentarians for review of the budget/legislation (one mention each).

There were a number of different reasons mentioned by civil servant participants, including it provides valuable info to Parliament/the public, provides credible third party perspective, the research has limited use, the methodology is somewhat flawed, and it depends on the subject (one mention each). Also mentioned was the research is not directly related to my position/office (one mention).

## Use of PBO's research (Political Staff)

I use this research  
3 of 19

My office uses this research  
4 of 19

Both my office and I use this research  
10 of 19

Research is not used  
2 of 19

## Value of PBO's research (Political Staff)

Valuable  
12 of 19

Somewhat valuable  
4 of 19

Somewhat not valuable  
2 of 19

Not valuable  
0 of 19

No Answer  
1 of 19

## Use of PBO's research (Civil Servants)

I use this research  
2 of 12

My office uses this research  
0 of 12

Both my office and I use this research  
2 of 12

Research is not used  
8 of 12

## Value of PBO's research (Civil Servants)

Valuable  
3 of 12

Somewhat valuable  
5 of 12

Somewhat not valuable  
0 of 12

Not valuable  
1 of 12

No Answer  
3 of 12



# Reason for value rating

## Parliamentarians

*"It could be more valuable if the research was more independent and based on their own data/research. They veer into auditing work, which is the AG's job."*

*"It is good to have someone that can do this when needed."*

*"This is stuff we need to know, so it's necessary. We need to know the cost of proposals."*

*"It helps me with my decision making."*

*"A lot of people have ideas; the PBO tells us the cost of those ideas."*

*"It is very valuable. It helps us with issues by showing us the financial impact of various projects and programs."*

## Civil Servants

*"Sometimes scary, their opinion is sometimes very strong in terms of their cost estimates and I am not sure who is being served by that. Parliamentarians and Canadians are left wondering what is to be done in response to this."*

*"Not particularly useful because of the cost estimates themselves, but it gives a good idea of what kind of questions we would expect to get."*

*"It is useful because I was an analyst for costing of DND acquisitions, so it was useful to receive another opinion on cost, but I will reserve judgment on what I think of their estimates. That's why I think it's somewhat valuable. "*

## Political Staff

*"No one has access to Departmental costing, because of Cabinet confidentiality. Even if the PBO's model isn't precise, it still starts the conversation and forces people to explain the costing."*

*"They are the only ones who do this. Very important, evaluates the work done and ministers have lost their jobs over what has been done, it has a significant impact across the country."*

*"This provides nice neutral information on bills that people may disagree on. "*

*"It forces the government to be more diligent because they know the PBO is there and it cuts out the false information. "*

*"If you're coming in and disagreeing with the PBO, it's harder to do because of their neutrality."*

*"If you're in the government it shows you that you are on track, if you're in the opposition it provides a check."*

*"The discussion is based on facts so it's good for our democracy."*

# Suggestions for the research

Civil Servants	Political Staff	Parliamentarians
Only one of the 12 participants had any suggestions for the research; they mentioned that the PBO should always disclose their assumptions and use a similar methodology to the past so the information is comparable.	Two of the 19 political staff participants mentioned they want a greater volume of this work, while another mentioned they want longer term projections of future reports, and that more resources and capacity should be given to the PBO. Also mentioned was allowing a greater flexibility in the models, shifting focus to specific departments with worse records, continuing to hire competent staff, and offering a quicker turnaround period (one mention each).	Parliamentarians had few suggestions for this research, with two participants saying they are satisfied and the PBO should simply keep it up. One participant suggested the PBO become more independent to offer a better product, while another mentioned they were unaware of this research prior to the interview and will ensure they make use of it in the future. One participant said they find it difficult to perform committee work with so few resources, and suggests looking into making studies more efficient.

**QUESTION** - Do you have any suggestions related to this research? [Open-ended]

# Module E: The future of the PBO







# Preferred way of receiving PBO research

## Question - How would you prefer to receive research conducted by the PBO? [Open-ended]

While participants overall generally express a desire to receive PBO research online or via email, there is definitely still a desire for the hardcopy reports, with some participants expressing a want for both. A few Parliamentarians mentioned that emails are often lost in their inbox, so they would like to have a paper reminder as well. Some Parliamentarians mentioned that they would want a direct notification through email, another recommends sending reports directly to MPs.

Participants also mention wanting to receive the reports in advance when possible, according to one civil servant participant this is so they may contribute constructively. A political staff participant mentioned that PBO should engage MPs and their staff proactively when releasing research and explain to them why it is important.

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*For my job, I would like to see it in advance of the media. That's how we work with the AG, although I'm not sure they'd like it. We would just like to see what the analysis is and what their research is leading to. This would be valuable to us, rather than responding to the media.*

*Colleagues would agree that we are flooded with information over email all the time. The email copy of the research won't get as much attention that a hard copy will get. It would be helpful to receive a reminder that research is coming out in a way that differs from other emails that we receive.*

”



# The future of the PBO – Parliamentarians

Our last few questions are about the future of the PBO. As you may know, there have been discussions about changing the mandate of the PBO to make the office truly independent of government, properly funded, accountable to Parliament (not the government), and to add costing of party platforms to the mandate.

## Question - What are your thoughts about those proposed reforms?

There is consensus among Parliamentarians in terms of the majority of the proposed reforms to the PBO's mandate. All Parliamentarians said they support the PBO being truly independent of government, being properly funded and being accountable to Parliament. Many participants emphasized the importance of a truly independent PBO, saying it will enhance their credibility and free them from the budgetary whims of the government. In terms of being accountable to Parliament, all participants agreed with this and one mentioned they should report to Parliament but be properly resourced in a way that would make the government responsible for funding.

The costing of party platforms is not supported by most of the participants, with the majority expressing varying degrees of opposition to the reform. A few were not opposed to the idea outright, but said they have reservations in terms of how it would work, having the correct resources, and maintaining a non-partisan approach. Those opposed to the costing generally feel that it would be unnecessary and should not be the responsibility of the PBO. Several mentioned that costing is the jobs of the parties, and not the PBO and felt it would open the PBO up to very difficult scrutiny and potential tension with the political parties. Several participants mentioned that Canadians are more than able to listen to all the platforms and decide for themselves what is realistic, while another participant said the parties themselves should know if their platform works. One participant mentioned fears that this could influence future elections.

Confidential

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*I'm opposed to costing platforms because it's a part of election commitments. Parties who are not in government may not know the state of nation's finances and the PBO doesn't have the information. I think it would be an unnecessary hindrance to the campaign. The public hears the platforms and they judge them, they know what is realistic and what it isn't so I don't see the need for the PBO to get involved.*

*The platforms would bring the PBO under a difficult type of scrutiny. Will others be doing the same analysis as well? I'm not sure it's the best use of public tax dollars, so I'd prefer they don't engage in that.*

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# The future of the PBO – Political Staff

Our last few questions are about the future of the PBO. As you may know, there have been discussions about changing the mandate of the PBO to make the office truly independent of government, properly funded, accountable to Parliament (not the government), and to add costing of party platforms to the mandate.

## Question - What are your thoughts about those proposed reforms?

There was a pretty strong consensus among political staff participants in terms of the reforms, with the most being in favour of independence, being properly funded, and being accountable to Parliament. However, a few participants raised concerns and mentioned that while they believe PBO should be independent, that “independent” needs to be defined in that context, and they need clarity on what the PBO would have access to. Another participant mentioned that they disagree that the PBO should have full access, saying that access should be timely enough to give bureaucrats time to make decisions. One participant commented they are concerned about the mandate expansion and wondering where it would end.

In terms of costing political platforms, there is strong consensus of opposition among participants, with only one participant voicing support for the proposed reform, saying that if it is to form government then it should stand up to scrutiny. Participants commented that this is not the role of the PBO, and one participant mentioned concerns that the PBO would begin giving advice to some parties, and another said there isn’t sufficient specificity in the platforms for the PBO to cost them. One participant mentioned that they feel it is not important to cost the party platforms, and instead they should evaluate the government’s finances so that Canadians can know what those platforms are based on, and if the money is there.

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*There are two things: one is the operational problems around doing this, you have to submit your platform before the actual elections. We don’t want the changes from the PBO to transform which parties are campaigning or not. Secondly, they’re privileging the PBO to do the costing of platforms. The PBO is not always a neutral third party it has its own judgments. It’s reasonable for a party to have their own private analysis when it comes to costing their platforms. If you say PBO is costing the platform you don’t have that healthy relationship.*

”



# The future of the PBO – Civil Servants

**Our last few questions are about the future of the PBO. As you may know, there have been discussions about changing the mandate of the PBO to make the office truly independent of government, properly funded, accountable to Parliament (not the government), and to add costing of party platforms to the mandate.**

## **Question - What are your thoughts about those proposed reforms?**

Participants were generally supportive of the reforms that would make the PBO truly independent of government, properly funded and accountable to Parliament, however they still had some concerns. One participant raised concerns about the accountability of the PBO, saying if they are truly independent then does their responsibility lie with Parliament or to the public of Canada. Another mentioned that the basis of all potential reforms should be a constructive and collaborative relationship, while one mentioned once more the need to clarify the relationship with PBO and Parliament. Another participant stated that the OAG has a clearer process and working relationship, and until the PBO can clarify its relationship and role, it will continue to be misconstrued.

In terms of the political platform costing, the majority of participants are opposed with many expressing opposition, and a few participants saying they are not opposed but have reservations. One participant said they were ambivalent towards the idea, and noted that if the PBO were to undertake costing they would have to be very prescriptive in the guidelines for the process. Participants mentioned that it depends on the assumptions that are applied to the platforms by the PBO, and one mentioned that applying neutral assumptions would be a large challenge for the PBO to overcome. In general, participants voiced opposition and commented that substantial costing of a platform is just not feasible and would likely be inaccurate, with a civil servant mentioning the issue of PBO assuming the role of advising the public on platforms and not on serving Parliament. One participant raised the potential issue that could arise if their Minister was running for reelection and they had to provide the PBO with information that could contradict or have repercussions for them, leading to tensions in departments.

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*I can only imagine the sort of perverse situation that the PBO could be put into – like what's happening in the US. The independent government organization doing costing on how much it takes to build a wall, think of the damage that can pose to the credibility of an organization.*

*They're political statements – WE turn them into policy. We uncover the options based on what the party wants, and what the mandate is. Over months and months, changes occur. This sends us back to the drawing board of costing; changing one thing can change the assumptions. And yet, you're still within that mandate statement.*

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# Opinions of proposed reforms

## Parliamentarians

*"Overall, I think it should report to Parliament, but resourced in a way that government is responsible for funding it. Costing platforms is outside of the PBO's mandate and it should not be their job."*

*"They have to be independent because it enhances their credibility. They can't depend of budgetary whims of government..."*

*"That's all good. There's a lot there. I want them to be fully funded, to have the resources that they need and it's also important that they be independent. Costing party platforms is also good but they need the resources to do it."*

*"I am not sure about adding costing of the party platforms to the mandate. I just think of the US election. A report can come out and can skew the whole thing. I don't think that's up to the PBO, it's up to the parties."*

*"The reforms will make things a lot more transparent. The work that the PBO does needs to be very well done. There should not be room for multiple partisan interpretations, as it can result in cynicism in the public."*

## Civil Servants

*"Everything very much depends on the assumptions applied. I can see it being a challenge to apply neutral assumptions across the board, because parties have different views."*

*"Over the long term, would the mandates be made clearer because they would be subject to this costing methodology?"*

*"In terms of the costing of party platforms, there is so much uncertainty as to what actions will be taken that it is impossible to predict the future. It would be widely inaccurate if it were attempted."*

*"You cannot do substantial costing at the point that a commitment is made in a political platform."*

*"Why would the PBO assume the role of advising the public on what platforms cost? We are fueling more fire to the press."*

*"I can only imagine the sort of perverse situation that the PBO could be put into – like what's happening in the US."*

## Political Staff

*"I agree with all. I think the costing of platforms should be explored because that is what is to form the government so it should stand up to scrutiny."*

*"I think the PBO should have independence. I think that the way the PBO has been conducting itself, has been aggressively anti-government and helping the opposition, which may have been damaging to the relationship with the government. The independence is important but the balance to the relationship is more."*

*"This may mean that the PBO would start expanding the mandate, and where would that stop?"*

*"Balance is key. We need to catch the big things, without paralyzing the system by nitpicking everything. We need to find the middle ground."*

*"Although, we mostly agree on independence being a good thing, but we need to define exactly what independence means and what information they have access to."*



# Module F:

## Additional Comments





## Additional comments

### Parliamentarians

*"My relationship has been excellent, they're quick to reply and they give very detailed responses. They'll ask to offer clarification and they give follow-ups. It has a great professional staff. My service has been tremendous."*

*"No, I am just grateful to have an officer at arm's length to government. It's great that they offer an unbiased perspective. It is a good principle to follow."*

*"My general comment is that mandate changes would be good. The most important is the use of independence in a mature fashion. The AG is a good model with protocols for sharing information and drafts without indirectly influencing the final outcome. With the PBO everything is done through the media; I don't think this is a mature way to go about it."*

*"All of these roles are delicate and we end up with a bit of a public platform. There's always dangers of it becoming about an individual and not the institution"*

*"We need to know that there is a reliable office we can turn to. It is important for our democracy."*

### Civil Servants

*"If their role is to increase trust in government transactions but the PBO is inconsistent in its reporting, then it causes confusion and does not succeed in its role. If they are to increase trust, the contradictory reports do not help. "*

*"The problem is that they're right in being distrustful. There may be instances when the contradicting view is the right view. To me, the primary objective is providing credible and truthful information, and then trust will be there."*

*"If the PBO is going to continue, we need clarity. We welcome PBO to engage with departments, beyond the senior executive level, where there is an understanding of what their role is. Then we can have a dialogue to determine how we can assist them."*

*"They have to lay down a very clear process when they engage in a cost estimate that falls within the jurisdiction of a particular department. They have to engage the stakeholders, identify terms of reference, the timeline and the plan moving forward. "*

### Political Staff

*Participants had no additional comments.*

**Question** - Are there any other comments you would like to share?



# What we learned

1. **Participants want the PBO to be independent and properly funded** – There is a consensus among all streams of support for the other reforms – being independent, properly funded, and accountable to Parliament.
2. **There is a consensus among participants that PBO research is valuable or somewhat valuable** – Even for types of research that parliamentarians and civil servants report not using, the majority of participants across all streams rated the different forms of PBO research as either valuable or somewhat valuable because the PBO is an independent third party, trusted source and a good counterweight to the government and the media.
3. **There is a consensus among all participants in terms of opposition to election platform costing** – The majority of all participants voiced their opposition for the PBO adding election platform costing to its mandate. Many participants said that this is not the role of the PBO, rather the PBO should serve Parliament. In general, participants feel it is not needed and not feasible.
4. **Participants, especially civil servants and political staff, want the PBO to provide reports in advance** – Political staff and civil servants frequently mentioned wanting their office or department to either receive PBO reports in advance, or be consulted on them in some way prior to media release.
5. **Civil servants want more inclusivity in the PBO's research process** – Civil servants also want to be more included in the research process, with participants noting that they are often unsure of what methodology and assumptions the PBO is utilizing for the research which makes it difficult for them to assist. They say that the PBO sometimes takes information out of context, and does not have an understanding of their department or what they are looking at.
5. **Civil servants want clarity on the role of the PBO** – One of the main complaints from civil servants was a perceived lack of clarity on the role of the PBO, especially in relation to the OAG and the Departments. Participants mentioned they are often unclear on what the role is, and so they don't have much of a relationship with the PBO.



# What we learned

5. **Political staff and parliamentarians are more likely to report using PBO research** – Parliamentarians and political staff most often reported they and/or their office using PBO research such as the semi-annual economic and fiscal outlook, Quarterly Expenditure Monitor, Fiscal Sustainability Report, and the estimates of financial cost of proposals. Civil servants most often said the research is not used.
6. **Semi-annual outlook is the research most used by parliamentarians and civil servants** – The research most used by civil servants and parliamentarians is the semi-annual economic and fiscal outlook, while political staff most often reported using the estimation of financial cost of proposals and the Quarterly Expenditure Monitor, but still had high reported use of all the research.