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Editorial: The politics of expertise: Understanding interactions between policy advice, government, and outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Editorial on the Research Topic

[The politics of expertise: Understanding interactions between policy advice, government, and outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore the deeply contentious politics of expertise. Until recently popular discontent with technocratic elites and attacks by populist politicians significantly undermined the trust in experts as many were seen as elitist establishment figures. The pandemic notably reversed this trend ([Wellcome Trust Gallup Inc., 2020](#)). The need for sound scientific advice became painfully obvious. Yet, government reliance on expert advice has varied greatly ([Cook et al., 2020](#)). Some governments heavily drew on epidemiologists, virologists, ecologists, and economists, while others ignored or even marginalized them. Furthermore, the pandemic exposed naïve beliefs in the existence of consensus among experts. While some divergences owed to modeling choices, others were due to the politicization of science by various groups employing favored models to advance their agenda. Moreover, the crisis highlighted the long-standing tensions between technocracy and democracy ([Sánchez-Cuenca, 2017](#); [Bertsou et al., 2020](#)). Finally, a large variation in the quality of expert advice became apparent largely after the exponential growth in pseudo-experts—COVID-19 influencers and “armchair epidemiologists”—managed to mislead millions of people ([Starbird et al., 2020](#)).

This Research Topic aims to provide one of the first systematic empirical investigations of the politics of expertise during the COVID-19 pandemic. The contributions offered in this collection provide in-depth and interdisciplinary case studies from advanced industrialized democracies to cast light on several pressing questions. First, when did governments listen to experts? Specifically, under what

conditions did governments demonstrate openness in soliciting, competence in managing, and effectiveness in channeling expert policy advice on COVID-19 and its impacts? Second, when was expert advice conducive—or not—for effective government response? How much did this depend on who was listened to? How much did the usefulness of their input depend on the institutions of government? When did experts facilitate or when did they delay decision-making? What role did other societal actors play in the context of these interactions? Finally, what can we learn from these interactions about the origins, politics and effectiveness of expert advice in tackling similar challenges ahead?

The article by Cairney argues that understanding how the UK government pro-actively delimited the space of scientific advice and classified expert groups is key in understanding the (slow) timing and (low) substance of its response to COVID-19 outbreak. The cabinet's classification of expert groups reflected its beliefs regarding their influence on different segments in the public, their support of government's narrative, and their ability and willingness to follow the "rules of the game" (e.g., limit participation, present modest demands). The cabinet listened to core advisor and specialist groups who successfully pursued an insider status, accepted its parameters, and followed its COVID-19 narrative of gradual measures, protecting the economy, and encouraging rather than enforcing compliance. It ignored peripheral insiders and outsiders who struggled to navigate the political landscape. Contrary to conventional "evidence-based policymaking" models, the production and use of evidence was embedded within a political process where "status, power, and strategies [...] mattered more than 'the evidence.'"

Andersson et al. explain Sweden's exceptionalism in the management of the pandemic through the prism of relations among experts, government, and voters. Swedish government not only listened to experts but delegated policy exclusively to them, even when their advice contradicted international practices. Why? The authors highlight two features of Sweden's political system: the government's high level of policy delegation to public agencies (in this case, Public Health Agency/FMS), and high level of trust among Swedish voters toward political and public institutions. Exceptional policy delegation to the FMS stemmed from the highly decentralized, fragmented political system where policy is implemented at national and subnational levels plus 341 autonomous public agencies, effectively disabling the government in coordinating an immediate response to the pandemic outbreak. Furthermore, combined with the assertiveness of the FMS director, the minority government's probable fear of electoral costs resulted in hesitation to "politicize the response."

Piper et al. examine the role of scientific evidence and expertise in Canada's border management policy during COVID-19. Through path dependency lens, they demonstrate

the politicized context of claims and counterclaims on science and policy in the discourse on travel measures. They show how political and economic influences quickly filled the evidence gap on travel measures and shaped subsequent testing and quarantine measures for travelers. Findings highlight *ad-hoc* solicitations of expert policy advice, struggles to integrate evolving expertise into policy, along with lack of transparency and narrow definition of scientific expertise when it comes to decision making. This case study highlights the need for stronger data infrastructure across different levels of governance and greater transparency in evidence-based policy.

Schmeisser et al. investigate an essential mechanism through which expertise impacts policy outcomes: experts' influence on public perceptions and actions. Using the case of Sweden, they find that trust in health experts has an essential mediating effect. Three personality traits had an impact on trust in the FMS, which in turn implied higher compliance. Thus, public trust in experts for encouraging compliance is critical, but the impact of experts on the public varies across individuals depending on their personality. The varied level of public trust in experts shapes the political incentives that governments face in relying on experts and making that reliance visible. While public-facing reliance on experts may have political benefits, it is also a potential political risk, depending on public trust in experts.

Pandemics are rare events. But they present unprecedented opportunities for getting insight into critical factors that may lie dormant during "normal times" but have tremendous effects once they act. Furthermore, understanding when and how governments solicit and constructively engage sound scientific advice is crucial for preparing for other probable pandemics. While our conclusions are bound to be tentative as the pandemic is still continuing, we can capitalize on—and add to—the growing multi-disciplinary body of knowledge on the politics of policy advice, technocracy, populism, outbreak management, and international cooperation across different fields of knowledge.

Author contributions

AA, DA, MC, and KM each summarized one of the articles in the Research Topic for the editorial and reviewed the draft editorial. AA drafted and finalized the editorial. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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