

Expertise, Policy-making and Democracy

Johan Christensen
Cathrine Holst
Anders Molander

First published 2023

ISBN: 978-0-367-61776-9 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-367-61787-5 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-10655-5 (ebk)

Introduction

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

DOI: 10.4324/9781003106555-1

The funder for this chapter is CAS Oslo



ROUTLEDGE

Routledge

Taylor & Francis Group

LONDON AND NEW YORK

Introduction

During the coronavirus crisis, the presence of experts in policy-making was on vivid display. Experts stood side by side with ministers during weekly – sometimes daily – government press briefings, giving us facts and estimates, but also telling us what to do and not to do (“stop hugging”, “stay home from school”, “do not leave your country”). Before the pandemic, the British politician Michael Gove famously claimed that people had “had enough of experts”.¹ During the crisis, most politicians rather emphasized that “we need to listen to the experts”. Across the world, a plethora of government agencies, research institutes and expert groups provided governments with analyses and recommendations about how to contain the spread of the virus and manage the social and economic consequences of the pandemic.

The corona situation *was* extraordinary. Experts are often less visibly present in political life and in the public sphere in normal times, and it is well known how experts are consulted more, and more easily rise to power, in times of crisis. When things are confusing and uncertain, it may be tempting to leave priorities and decisions to the presumably most knowledgeable.

Still, also during ordinary times, public policies and decisions often rely heavily on experts and expert knowledge. In many respects, the coronavirus crisis was *not* that exceptional. We can also see it as a powerful reminder and illustration of how policies are normally made, or at least how contemporary policy-making increasingly takes place.

A plethora of experts are asked for policy advice all the time, and not only on corona and other health issues. Political processes leading up to decisions about tax and pension reforms, new environmental policies, educational policies, family policies, or policies in almost any other domain are often crowded with people with expert knowledge. They may be lawyers, economists or other social scientists, medical specialists, natural scientists and engineers, depending on the policy area and issue.

2 *Introduction*

They may be university professors or researchers at institutes or bureaux who are involved in policy-relevant research, in science advice or in expert committees. They may be civil servants in ministries or agencies, or specialists working for interest groups or civil society organizations, in think tanks or consultancy firms. Most often they have a higher academic degree, and many even have a PhD.

To be sure, during the coronavirus crisis, we also saw how politicians do not always follow experts' advice. In some countries, politicians dismissed expert warnings as alarmist and took a laxer approach than advised by experts. This was not only true for populist leaders such as former US President Trump and Brazil's President Bolsonaro. Many governments were at times unwilling to endorse expert calls for radical measures such as lockdowns or school closures, including in countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands that were hard hit by corona. In other countries, such as Norway and Denmark, politicians opted for stricter lockdown measures than recommended by epidemiologists and expert authorities.

That political leaders do not always listen to experts is not surprising. Research reports, science-based analyses and expert advice may be put aside because politicians disagree with or dislike the approach or conclusions, find the advice irrelevant or unimportant, do not understand or are unaware of what the experts are saying, or find the timing to be wrong or the societal or political costs to be too high. Experts may recommend this or that measure, a reform, a new piece of legislation – but in the end, politicians may want or need something different.

In other cases, the policies adopted are more in line with expert analyses and advice. It is often said with Francis Bacon that “knowledge itself is power”. Experts may possess knowledge that enables them to set a new agenda, shape how a societal problem is conceived, and define specific solutions. Politicians may lack both clear ideas about what the problem is and strong views about how to address it, and in such cases, they may easily go along with what experts propose. In economic policy, there are several examples of how economists and financial expert authorities have successfully pushed for policy change at odds with the initial priorities of both politicians and interest groups. But this dynamic is also visible in other areas, and most recently during the coronavirus pandemic, when public health experts were given immense agenda setting power and influence over governance and social planning.

Furthermore, experts are not only more or less powerful political advisors; they may also be delegated decision-making power. Many countries have delegated decisions over interest rates to independent central banks, and a range of other more detailed policy decisions in

numerous policy areas have been left to semi-independent agencies and other expert bodies. Similar powers have been given to international and transnational expert institutions that are even further removed from citizens, such as the European Central Bank and the more than 40 agencies of the European Union (EU). In addition to executive organizations comes the power of the legislative expertise of national and international courts. Parliaments legislate, but laws must be interpreted. And the more indeterminacy concerning the application to specific cases, the more power to jurists and judges.

Some argue that even more decisions should be left to experts. During the pandemic, some observers called for the suspension of politics so that medical experts could make the right decisions about public health measures. Similarly, some environmentalists think that the decisions needed to “save the planet” should be left to panels of climate scientists rather than to short-sighted politicians, while some economists argue that decisions about tax policies should be delegated to councils of economic experts to ensure sound policies and a stable economic environment for businesses and individuals.

For others, extensive delegation to experts raises the question of whether experts have too much political power. During the coronavirus crisis, we saw protesters rally against experts and the measures they imposed, urging people to listen less to experts and rather trust their own judgment.

Yet, the simplest answers to questions regarding expert power are not very instructive – and this was seldom more obvious than during the pandemic. To put it bluntly: in a pandemic, when a disease is spreading and a growing number of people get sick and die, most people understand that it may be a good idea to lend an ear to those who study diseases. However, this does not imply that epidemiologists and virologists, or medical experts generally, know more about all things than most other people. Even when it comes to epidemic diseases and measures to contain them, there is a lot a medical expert has little knowledge about, such as the consequences for the economy, children’s welfare, mental health or socially disadvantaged groups, or how to weigh economic and social costs and restrictions on civil liberties against disease and mortality rates. Yet, epidemiologists have more substantive knowledge than most on how a virus spreads, and on how to stop or contain its diffusion.

Those who tried to read reports on the coronavirus from expert groups or authorities, and who consulted the scientific studies and research articles on which these reports were based, will probably have seen that the expert knowledge in question may be quite esoteric, technical and sometimes counterintuitive. It can be hard to immediately understand

4 *Introduction*

what these studies say, and a Google search or casual reading may not be of much help. Of course, we may have come across a virologist who is a brilliant communicator, and felt that we understood more of how a virus spreads listening to her, but irrespective of experts' communication skills, and how clever we are, and whether we have higher education or not, most of us will not be able to directly assess the validity of a virologist's explanations and judgments since we are not ourselves experts in the field.

Still, we are often told that we should scrutinize what experts say critically and independently, and we may want to do this, and we should definitely do it when we can. However, it is not always easy. To judge arguments based on expert knowledge, you often have to be an expert yourself. Obviously, we can look for indications that make it more likely that a putative expert is in fact a "real" expert. For instance, if someone has a position at a well-reputed research institute or has written articles in peer-reviewed journals, this increases the person's trustworthiness as an expert. At the same time, if you are not yourself an expert on the issue in question or familiar with the relevant research, you will often have a hard time distinguishing good from not-so-good scientific journals and reputed from not-so-well-reputed research institutes. On this inadequate basis, we still need to decide whether the expert in question is a reliable expert or not, and whether he or she is worth listening to as someone especially knowledgeable.

It gets even trickier when a different expert that also seems to have the right merits gives advice that points in a completely different direction. Expert disagreements of this kind were common during the pandemic: where one professor recommended heavier lockdown policies, another called for a more liberal approach. That still other professors wrote petitions or made campaigns advising us to listen to some experts and not to others, did not make our situation easier.

Thus, to simply subscribe to giving "more power to experts" does not bring us very far, and a general advice of just "doing what the experts tell you" is rather unwise. Also, the difficulty lies not only in identifying and listening to the "real" experts (instead of amateurs or quasi-experts). Even experts with the right kind of merits and skills can be biased and mistaken. For instance, they may let their recommendations be determined by the preferences of politicians. The experts who advised the British prime minister Boris Johnson to postpone the lockdown in spring 2020 were criticized for being too concerned with what the politicians wanted and with polls showing that people did not want hard measures instead of relying on their best expert knowledge.

Experts may also be so locked into their disciplinary culture that they fail to see the limitations of their own intellectual perspective or the value of competing approaches. Consider, for instance, the response of epidemiologists to mass demonstrations during the pandemic: such gatherings were potential super-spreader events and should therefore have been prohibited. By contrast, legal experts emphasized demonstrators' fundamental rights to freedom of expression and association, while some political scientists saw the demonstrations as an important form of democratic participation and voice.

We also see how expert advice can vary between countries, even between countries with similar political culture and social institutions. For instance, in the Nordic countries, the Swedish expert authorities recommended markedly softer measures than their counterparts in Denmark, Finland and Norway during the first phase of the pandemic. And while many expert authorities promoted mask-wearing, the Dutch public health agency was for a long time skeptical about the effectiveness of face masks, partly based on the argument that people wearing masks would be less careful about social distancing. To be sure, public health experts probably agreed on a lot regarding the coronavirus and corona measures, irrespective of nationality. Still, expert recommendations varied across nations during all phases of the pandemic, with significant effects on the spread of disease and on people's lives and livelihoods. If the advice is simply "do as the experts tell you", which national experts are we wise to put our trust in?

In the end, even if experts' knowledge about the coronavirus and its effects developed with impressive speed, their models, predictions and recommendations were shaky because we dealt with a pandemic no one had experienced before. Even in the fourth or fifth wave of the pandemic in Europe, the forecasts of some public health agencies about the pressure on intensive care hospital beds were way off the mark.

When all is said and done, we are stuck with listening to these experts, even when they have limited knowledge and disagree, and we inevitably depend on their specialist competence when we make decisions and develop policies, whether we like it or not. And "we" in this case are all of us as citizens. Under a democratic rule where free and equal citizens themselves are supposed to authorize collective decisions, there are limitations on how many big decisions can be delegated to experts without undermining the project of self-government. Even in times of crisis, there are limits to such delegation. In fact, crises raise a range of genuinely *political* questions, meaning questions that involve the use of coercive power and where there are conflicting concerns. In a democracy, we would typically want our elected representatives to assess and

6 Introduction

weigh these concerns, and as citizens we want to have a voice in political deliberations ourselves as well.

We have reason to value expertise, but also to fear expert power. So, where are we to draw the line? How much expert power is in our interest? This is a problem that democracies have to face, as Carr-Saunders and Wilson drastically put it already in 1933 in their book *Professions*: “Unless the modern world works out a satisfactory relationship between expert knowledge and popular control the days of democracy are numbered” (Carr-Saunders and Wilson 1933, 486).

The content of the book

The role of experts in policy-making in a democratic society is precisely the topic of this book. More specifically, we ask: *which problems does the involvement of experts in policy-making raise for democracy and good governance, and how can they be addressed?*

In examining these questions, the book marries high theory with a discussion of the on-the-ground reality of expert involvement in policy and democracy. The presence of experts in governance and decision-making raises fundamental questions of political philosophy and democratic theory. But the central role of expert knowledge in present-day policy-making is also a salient real-world phenomenon, under intense investigation in empirical research, and a topic for public controversy and debate. It is demanding to bring these different research frontiers and levels of abstraction into conversation. Yet, we believe it is worthwhile, and even essential, at a time when normative political theory and empirical scholarship seem to be drifting further apart.

Our contention is, on the one hand, that philosophical interrogations can give structure, standards and accuracy to empirical investigations and ongoing debates about expertise, policy and democracy. There is a lot of talk in contemporary political discourse and study about the problem of governance by “elites” and “experts” and driven by “evidence”. Something vital seems to be at stake, but what precisely is there to worry about? Wherein lies the deeper urgency? For instance, public policy scholars have become increasingly concerned with the democratic problems raised by evidence-based policy-making. Yet, they have made limited headway in analyzing these problems, since they seldom root their normative assessments and prescriptions in philosophical discussions on expertise and democracy. Our book seeks to fill this gap.

On the other hand, empirical knowledge about how expertise is actually incorporated into policy-making can make philosophical debates about expertise and democracy more politically relevant. Philosophical

inquiries that do not take basic features of our political reality into account will easily end up being beside the point. We therefore seek to contribute to the philosophical literature by anchoring normative debates in actual institutional arrangements and practices: what are the concrete problems posed by current patterns of expert involvement in policy-making, and what can be done to mitigate them?

Chapter 1 sets out the fundamental premise of the book, namely that well-functioning modern democracies can simply not do without expert knowledge and expert arrangements. We refer to this as “the fact of expertise”. Not only do decision-makers nowadays draw extensively on expert advice; relying on expert knowledge also seems to be a condition for *good* political decision-making in today’s complex and specialized societies. The chapter outlines our idea of expertise as a “fact” and clarifies the terms “expert” and “expertise”.

Chapter 2 describes what this strong and growing expert reliance looks like in practice. Drawing on a broad range of empirical literature on expertise and policy-making, the chapter provides an overview of the manifold channels, mechanisms and arrangements through which expert knowledge is incorporated into political decision-making in contemporary democracies. The chapter also discusses how patterns of expert involvement in policy-making vary across national governments and key international organizations.

Chapter 3 elaborates central contributions in political philosophy on the role of knowledge and the knowledgeable in political rule, but zooms in on recent discussions in normative political theory about “epistemic democracy”: the idea that democracy is not only about fair procedures of decision-making, but also about the quality of decisions. Some worry that this outcome-oriented approach to the justification of government might pave the way for “epistocracy”, a rule of the knowers. However, rather than contrasting democracy and epistocracy as political regimes along the lines of recent exchange in political philosophy, we are concerned with expert arrangements *in* contemporary democratic societies. We argue that the fact of expertise is something any adequate theory of democracy must take seriously.

Democracies’ dependence on expert arrangements creates a deep and genuine problem for democratic legitimacy, and in Chapters 4 and 5, we survey different types of objections to a large role for experts in policy-making. We group them into epistemic and democratic concerns. The first type of objections focuses on the nature and limits of expert knowledge, and how this may endanger policy and decision quality. The second type of objections sees expertization as a threat against democracy itself, understood as the self-rule of a community of equal citizens.

8 *Introduction*

We outline the different concerns conceptually, but also illustrate the objections and worries with examples from the real world of experts in politics. Our illustrations draw on a wide range of empirical studies, including our own original research.

Finally, Chapter 6 discusses measures against expert misrule and to mitigate democratic worries, relying on a rich set of examples. How can expert arrangements, but also the broader polity, be organized so as to ensure epistemic quality of policies and decisions while at the same time adhering to democratic standards? We present three types of measures that are essential to ensure experts' epistemic performance – measures that target experts' behavior, their judgments, and the organization of expert bodies and advice. In response to the democratic worries, we discuss proposals for “democratizing expertise”, but also requirements to a political system that is organized so as to safeguard both democratic and epistemic credentials.

Note

- 1 The full quote is: “I think people of this country have had enough of experts from organisations with acronyms saying that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong” (June 3, 2016).