



Policymaking During Crises: How Diversity and Disagreement Can Help Manage the Politics of Expert Advice

Journal:	<i>BMJ</i>
Manuscript ID	BMJ-2020-059589.R1
Article Type:	Analysis
BMJ Journal:	BMJ
Date Submitted by the Author:	08-Sep-2020
Complete List of Authors:	Moore, Alfred; University of York, Politics MacKenzie, Michael; University of Pittsburgh, Politics
Keywords:	Policy, Expertise, Diversity, Disagreement, Politics

SCHOLARONE™
Manuscripts

Analysis

Policymaking During Crises: How Diversity and Disagreement Can Help Manage the Politics of Expert Advice

Alfred Moore¹

Michael K. MacKenzie²

¹ University of York, York, UK

² University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA, USA

Correspondence to:

Alfred Moore

Department of Politics

Derwent College

University of York

York YO10 5DD

Email: alfred.moore@york.ac.uk

Phone: +44 (0)1904 323988

Word count: 1877

References: 15

KEY MESSAGES

- **Political leaders drawing on expertise in a crisis face two temptations: one is to dismiss unwelcome expert claims as politically motivated; another is to mask expert disagreement altogether.**
- **We show that protecting and promoting open disagreement among diverse sets of expert advisers can both improve the epistemic quality of expert advice and make it harder for political leaders to blur the lines between expert advice and political judgments.**
- **We propose three possible ways of institutionalising norms and expectations of diversity and legitimate disagreement among experts in our political systems.**

Contributors and sources

In this Analysis article we draw on social science on deliberation and collective decision-making to suggest ways of reforming expert advice in political contexts. Alfred Moore, the lead contributor and guarantor of the article, has published widely in political philosophy and public understanding of science, and is the author of *Critical Elitism: Deliberation, Democracy and the Politics of Expertise* (Cambridge University Press, 2017). Michael M. MacKenzie has published widely in political science and democratic institutional design. We

1
2
3 have both contributed equally to the development of the article. None of the material in this
4 article has been published or is under consideration for publication elsewhere.
5
6

7 **Acknowledgements**

8 We would like to thank Michael Goodhart (Professor, Department of Political Science,
9 University of Pittsburgh), Andrew Lewis Lotz (Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Studies,
10 University of Pittsburgh), Anna Alexandrova (Professor, Department of History and
11 Philosophy of Science, University of Cambridge, UK), and Stephen John (Senior Lecturer,
12 Department of History and Philosophy of Science, University of Cambridge, UK) for giving
13 valuable comments on an earlier version of this article.
14
15

16 **Patient involvement**

17 No patients were involved.
18
19

20 **Conflicts of Interest**

21 We have read and understood [BMJ policy on declaration of interests](#) and have the following
22 interests to declare: None.
23
24

25 **Licence**

26 The Corresponding Author has the right to grant on behalf of all authors and does grant on
27 behalf of all authors, an exclusive licence (or non exclusive for government employees) on a
28 worldwide basis to the BMJ Publishing Group Ltd ("BMJ"), and its Licensees to permit this
29 article (if accepted) to be published in The BMJ's editions and any other BMJ products and
30 to exploit all subsidiary rights, as set out in [The BMJ's licence](#).
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

Policymaking During Crises: How Diversity and Disagreement Can Help Manage the Politics of Expert Advice

Standfirst

Alfred Moore and Michael K. MacKenzie argue that open disagreement among diverse sets of expert advisers can make it harder for political leaders to politicise expertise, and that we should reform expert advisory institutions to organise such disagreement.

Whenever scientists provide advice to political leaders they risk their expert authority being used in ways they cannot control in order to serve political ends. At one extreme, they are attacked on the grounds that they must be taking sides. When researchers at Columbia University showed that nearly 36,000 COVID-19 deaths could have been prevented if strict social distancing measures had been adopted in the United States one week earlier, President Trump responded: “Columbia’s an institution that’s very liberal. I think it’s just a political hit job, you want to know the truth” (1).

At the other extreme, expert authority is used to shield political leaders from responsibility. The UK government, for example, has repeatedly insisted that they have simply been “following the science” when making decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic, even though experts do not speak with one voice and scientific facts, alone, cannot determine how political (or ethical or moral) judgments should be made.

These two extreme responses — ostentatious dismissal of expert advice and ostentatious deference to it — work by denying the importance of legitimate disagreement and uncertainty. In the first case, disagreement is dismissed as being politically motivated. In the second, disagreement is masked altogether. Both temptations are strong when decision-makers come under pressure, as they do during crisis situations.

While many have (rightly) focused on the ethos and duties of experts in political contexts (2, 3), we focus on the role that political institutions can play in helping to more effectively and legitimately manage the politics of expertise. Drawing on findings from behavior research, we identify two principles to guide the institutionalization of expert advice. The first involves ensuring that diverse perspectives — both disciplinary and social — are adequately represented when expert advice is given and consulted. The second has to do with protecting, promoting, and normalizing disagreement among diverse sets of experts. We then propose three ways that these principles might be integrated and institutionalized into our political systems.

Principle 1: Inclusion of Diverse Perspectives

Expert advice should draw on diverse disciplinary specialisms and diverse social perspectives. Disciplinary diversity is important for two reasons. First, it can improve the quality of collective judgments and help avoid epistemic pitfalls. Among those pitfalls are the tendency for some experts to become “prisoners of their preconceptions” in a way that leads to poor predictions, a refusal to acknowledge mistakes, and dismissal of dissonant evidence (3). Another risk involves failing to recognize and question implicit shared assumptions, leading to incomplete examination of policies, selective bias in identifying and processing information, and inadequate consideration of alternatives (5). More positively, including diverse disciplinary perspectives can lead to better inferences and more accurate predications (6). Inclusive deliberative processes can also help participants separate good arguments from bad ones and identify better solutions or more diverse options (7).

Second, the inclusion of diverse disciplinary perspectives can help legitimize political decisions and support compliance. Diverse groups are better able to identify affected — or potentially affected — interests and show how those interests may be adequately addressed when policy decisions are made. Unlike experts who must make issue-specific recommendations based on their own expertise, political leaders must balance many different, often irreconcilable, interests against each other. If political leaders take advice only from certain types of experts they may fail to adequately consider (or even recognize) how diverse groups of people will be affected by their decisions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, political leaders in the United States and the United Kingdom have relied on advice primarily from medical experts (physicians, virologists, and epidemiologists), which is, of course, appropriate during a health crisis (8, 9). But advice from those experts should be considered alongside input from other types of experts such as economists, psychologists, sociologists, educators, and child-welfare advocates. These (and other) experts are needed because the drastic actions that have been taken to limit the spread of the virus have consequences that reach well beyond the expertise of infectious disease specialists.

Diversity with respect to social knowledge, lived experiences, and perspectives (10) is also important in the formation of expert advice. If those making judgments share certain characteristics, such as gender, age, race, home-ownership, or wealth, they may fail to recognize how the costs of policies (such as stay-at-home orders) are likely to affect those who do not share those characteristics; they might recognize those costs and consider them to some extent but they will not feel those consequences of their decisions. The inclusion of

1
2
3 diverse disciplinary and social perspectives can therefore help sharpen a sense of the
4 stakes, which can, in turn, appropriately inform political judgment.
5
6
7

8 **Principle 2: Open Disagreement**

9 The epistemic and political benefits of disciplinary diversity are widely recognized, if not
10 always practiced. The case for open disagreement among experts — especially during
11 crises — is more often resisted. In the UK, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies
12 (SAGE), for instance, includes people from many different disciplinary backgrounds, but its
13 membership and its processes have until recently been kept secret. The assumption is that
14 experts — when engaged in giving public policy advice — should not be open about their
15 uncertainties: they need to project certainty and unanimity in order to maintain authority and
16 trust in the eyes of the public. The evidence, however, suggests otherwise. A recent study
17 found that providing people with precise, numerical estimates of uncertainty increased their
18 awareness of the uncertainties involved in public policy decisions on topics such as climate
19 change and immigration, but it did not lead to any appreciable reductions in levels of public
20 trust or increased mistrust of the sources of the information (11).
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29

30 There are both epistemic and political reasons to encourage open, adversarial exchanges
31 among diverse experts in policy making processes. From an epistemic perspective,
32 diversity, itself, is not sufficient to develop and test strong arguments. Experts, like the rest of
33 us, need to have their arguments actively challenged if they are to avoid the cognitive pitfalls
34 associated with overconfidence. Disagreements among experts (and others) can help draw
35 out implicit value commitments, disciplinary assumptions, and blind spots. Disagreement —
36 even if it is only for the sake of disagreement — can also help support the thorough
37 exploration of rival positions. This idea, which was famously advanced by the philosopher
38 John Stuart Mill, finds support in recent research in behavioral science suggesting that
39 adversarial argumentation helps diverse groups do a better job of evaluating arguments both
40 for and against given propositions (12).
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48

49 Open disagreement also has at least two positive political functions. First, open
50 disagreement can make it harder for political leaders to blur the lines between expert advice
51 and political judgments. When there is disagreement among experts, on, say, whether to
52 mandate the wearing of face-masks, political leaders will find it harder to use experts as a
53 shield for unpopular decisions if those disagreements — and their justifications or rationales
54 — are made public. Second, being open about disagreements among experts, and the
55 levels of uncertainty that their judgments entail, can help political leaders to reverse course
56 when necessary without seeming like they are being inconsistent or capitulating to political
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 and thus unscientific demands. When political leaders openly discuss counterarguments and
4 acknowledge the legitimacy of minority judgments, it helps keep alive reasons both for and
5 against particular decisions, and this can make it easier for political leaders — and the
6 publics they serve — to justify revising or reversing previous policy decisions (13). The
7 possibility of justifying policy reversals is important at the best of times, but it is crucial during
8 rapidly evolving crises — such as the COVID-19 pandemic — that are characterized by
9 deep uncertainties.
10
11
12
13

14 15 16 **Institutional Responses**

17 There are several ways that our two principles might be institutionalized, departing less or
18 more dramatically from established practices. Within existing expert committee structures,
19 one option would be to introduce minority reports. Rather than publishing committee
20 deliberations — which could make experts reticent to express themselves honestly while
21 increasing the likelihood of inaccurate information being disseminated — expert committees
22 might be required to publish carefully crafted statements from different minority perspectives.
23 In this way, reasons both for and against particular pieces of policy advice could be made
24 public but the risks of misinterpretation and misrepresentation would be minimized. Another
25 option would be for experts to form collective judgments by voting. Expert committees of the
26 US National Institutions of Health, for instance, have held votes on whether a substance can
27 be reasonably considered to be a carcinogen, and these processes have revealed
28 disciplinary differences in judgments about risk (14). Public debates and voting among
29 experts would help communicate disagreements where they exist, reveal disciplinary
30 tendencies (or biases) and keep potentially credible counterarguments alive in policy
31 processes, all while helping to filter out less credible or extreme claims or considerations.
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41

42 Another option would take the selection of relevant experts out of the hands of political
43 leaders or executives by adopting standing committees of experts, using legislative
44 assemblies as a model. Such committees would comprise experts from many different
45 disciplines, and their deliberations and voting processes would be public. Political leaders
46 are typically free to choose to listen to whichever experts they wish and this often limits the
47 diversity of the expertise they seek and receive. A standing committee of experts would help
48 solve this problem by empowering diverse and independent experts to speak and influence
49 political leaders and publics *before* any situations arise where their expertise may be
50 needed. On this model, the experts, themselves, would decide whether they have relevant
51 expertise in any particular situations, but in contrast to standing bodies designed to report
52 expert consensus (15), this body would serve to pluralise credible expert input.
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 A third option would be to encourage competing groups of experts to contribute to policy
4 debates in structured or organized ways. Many experts have provided advice during the
5 COVID-19 pandemic, but we have little idea of their influence or how different (often
6 competing) pieces of advice should be weighed against each other. It would be possible to
7 make these processes more cohesive using a tribunal model, where rival experts would be
8 empowered to question each other directly before an audience of experts outside their own
9 speciality (16). Expert claims might also be adversarially examined before lay publics on the
10 model of the 19th century coroner's courts in the UK (17). This approach would help ensure
11 that policy advice is sufficiently sensitive to the diverse lived experiences of affected publics.
12
13
14
15
16
17
18

19 **Conclusion**

20 We have argued that creating institutions that establish norms and expectations of legitimate
21 disagreement as part of the process of forming and communicating expert advice would make it easier
22 for experts to stay true to their expertise and harder for politicians to hide their judgments behind 'the
23 science'. The principles and institutions we discuss in this article are, of course, not a magic bullet:
24 their effectiveness will depend to a large extent on the political environments into which expert advice
25 is inserted. At the same time, they would help make those political environments more receptive to
26 expert advice by minimizing the opportunities that political leaders would have to distort that advice
27 or simply defer to it for their own partisan purposes. Our proposals can thus be seen as one step
28 towards enhancing the quality of public deliberation and, ultimately, political judgment, in our
29 political systems by encouraging an attitude not of blind deference to the science but of allegiance to
30 the norms of science itself: a respect for diversity of opinion and the value of disagreement in
31 processes of inquiry.
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42

43 **References**

- 44 1. Colvin J. Donald J. Trump lashes out at scientists whose findings contradict him.
45 *Associated Press*. 2020 May 22. Available at:
46 <https://apnews.com/30b35bfadcc9e827c81986e86ced4b15>. Accessed 4 June 2020.
47
48
- 49 2. Pielke RA Jr. *The honest broker: making sense of science in policy and politics*. Cambridge:
50 Cambridge University Press; 2007.
51
- 52 3. Horton R. How can any scientists stand by this government now? *The Guardian*. 2020
53 May 27. Available at
54 [https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/27/scientists-ministers-](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/27/scientists-ministers-dominic-cummings-advisers-government-coronavirus)
55 [dominic-cummings-advisers-government-coronavirus](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/may/27/scientists-ministers-dominic-cummings-advisers-government-coronavirus). Accessed 4 June 2020.
56
57
- 58 4. Tetlock P. *Expert political judgment: How good is it? How can we know?* Princeton, NJ:
59 Princeton University Press; 2005: 163.
60

- 1
2
3 5. Sunstein CR. *Going to extremes: How like minds unite and divide*. Oxford: Oxford
4 University Press; 2009: 84.
- 5
6 6. Page SE. *The difference: How the power of diversity creates better groups, firms, schools,*
7 *and societies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 2008.
- 8
9 7. Landemore H. *Democratic reason: Politics, collective intelligence, and the rule of the many*.
10 Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 2013: 96.
- 11
12 8. Facher L. 'A number of new stars': The definitive guide to the Trump administration's
13 coronavirus response team. STAT. 2020 March 20. Available at:
14 [https://www.statnews.com/2020/03/20/guide-to-trump-administration-coronavirus-](https://www.statnews.com/2020/03/20/guide-to-trump-administration-coronavirus-response-team/)
15 [response-team/](https://www.statnews.com/2020/03/20/guide-to-trump-administration-coronavirus-response-team/). Accessed 28 August 2020.
- 16
17 9. Sample I. 'Who's who on secret scientific group advising UK government?' *The*
18 *Guardian*. 2020 April 28. Available at:
19 [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/24/coronavirus-whos-who-on-secret-](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/24/coronavirus-whos-who-on-secret-scientific-group-advising-uk-government-sage)
20 [scientific-group-advising-uk-government-sage](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/24/coronavirus-whos-who-on-secret-scientific-group-advising-uk-government-sage) Accessed 3 September 2020.
- 21
22 10. Bohman J. Deliberative democracy and the epistemic benefits of diversity. *Episteme*.
23 2006;3(3):175-191, p.178.
- 24
25 11. van der Bles AM, van der Linden S, Freeman ALJ, Spiegelhalter DJ. The effects of
26 communicating uncertainty on public trust in facts and numbers. *Proceedings of the*
27 *National Academy of Sciences*. 2020;117(14):7672-7683.
- 28
29 12. Mercier H, Sperber D. Why do humans reason? Arguments for an argumentative
30 theory. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*. 2011;34:57–111.
- 31
32 13. Beatty J, Moore A. Should we aim for consensus? *Episteme*. 2010;7(3):198-214.
- 33
34 14. Guston D. On consensus and voting in science: From Asilomar to the National
35 Toxicology Program. In: Frickel S, Moore K, editors. *The New Political Sociology of*
36 *Science*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press; 2005, p. 378-404.
- 37
38 15. Collins H, Evans R. *Why Democracies Need Science*. Cambridge: Polity Press;
39 2013:84-86.
- 40
41 16. Turner S. *Liberal democracy 3.0: Civil society in an age of experts*. London: SAGE
42 Publications; 2003: 125.
- 43
44 17. Pamuk Z. The people vs the Experts: A Productive Struggle. In Moore A, Invernizzi-
45 Accetti C, Markovits E, Pamuk Z, Rosenfeld S. *Beyond populism and technocracy:*
46 *The challenges and limits of democratic epistemology*. *Contemp Polit Theory*. 2020;
47 online first. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-020-00398-1>.
- 48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60