



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

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## Analysis

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

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### 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

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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.  
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21 We have read and understood [BMJ policy on declaration of interests](#) and have the following  
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## Policymaking During Crises: How Diversity and Disagreement Can Help Manage the Politics of Expert Advice

### Standfirst

*Alfred Moore and Michael M. 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. But as Venki Ramakrishnan, President of the Royal Society, has pointed out “there is often no such thing as following ‘the’ science. Reasonable scientists can disagree on important points, but the government still has to make decisions” (2).

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 (3, 4), 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 organizing principles to guide the institutionalization of expert advice. The first involves ensuring that diverse disciplinary perspectives 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

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3 that these organizing principles might be integrated and institutionalized into our political  
4 systems.  
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### 8 **Organizing Principle 1: Inclusion of Diverse Disciplinary Perspectives**

9 The inclusion of diverse disciplinary perspectives is important for two reasons. First, diverse  
10 perspectives can improve the quality of collective judgments and help avoid epistemic  
11 pitfalls. Among those pitfalls are the tendency for some experts to become “prisoners of their  
12 preconceptions” in a way that leads to poor predictions, a refusal to acknowledge mistakes,  
13 and dismissal of dissonant evidence (4). Another risk involves failing to recognize and  
14 question implicit shared assumptions, leading to incomplete examination of policies,  
15 selective bias in identifying and processing information, and inadequate consideration of  
16 alternatives (6). More positively, including diverse disciplinary perspectives can lead to better  
17 inferences and more accurate predications (7). Inclusive deliberative processes can also  
18 help participants separate good arguments from bad ones and identify better solutions or  
19 more diverse options (8).  
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28 Second, the inclusion of diverse disciplinary perspectives can help legitimize political  
29 decisions and support compliance. Diverse groups are better able to identify affected — or  
30 potentially affected — interests and show how those interests may be adequately addressed  
31 when policy decisions are made. Unlike experts who must make issue-specific  
32 recommendations based on their own expertise, political leaders must balance many  
33 different, often irreconcilable, interests against each other. If political leaders take advice  
34 only from certain types of experts they may fail to adequately consider (or even recognize)  
35 how diverse groups of people will be affected by their decisions. The COVID-19 pandemic  
36 provides an example. Public officials have relied on virologists and epidemiologists to guide  
37 public policy during the pandemic but the advice provided by those experts should also be  
38 considered alongside input from many other experts such as economists, psychologists,  
39 sociologists, educators, and child-welfare advocates. These (and other) expertise are  
40 needed because the drastic actions that have been taken to limit the spread of the virus  
41 have consequences that reach well beyond the expertise of infectious disease specialists.  
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52 Furthermore, diversity is important not just with respect to subject expertise, but also with  
53 respect to social knowledge, lived experiences or ‘perspectival diversity’ (9). If those making  
54 judgments share certain characteristics, such as gender, home-ownership, or wealth, they  
55 may fail to recognize how the costs of policies (such as stay-at-home orders) are likely to  
56 affect those who do not share those characteristics; they might recognize those costs and  
57 consider them to some extent but they will not feel those consequences of their decisions.  
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3 The inclusion of diverse disciplinary and social perspectives can therefore help sharpen a  
4 sense of the stakes, which can, in turn, appropriately inform political judgment.  
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## 8 **Organizing 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 are kept secret. The assumption is that experts — when  
14 engaged in giving public policy advice — should not be open about their uncertainties: they  
15 need to project certainty and unanimity in order to maintain authority and trust in the eyes of  
16 the public. The evidence, however, suggests otherwise. A recent study found that providing  
17 people with precise, numerical estimates of uncertainty increased their awareness of the  
18 uncertainties involved in public policy decisions on topics such as climate change and  
19 immigration, but it did not lead to any appreciable reductions in levels of public trust or  
20 increased mistrust of the sources of the information (10).  
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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 (11).  
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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 it is clear that there is disagreement among experts on, say,  
52 the protective effects of wearing face-masks, who disagrees, why and on what evidence  
53 they disagree, political leaders will find it harder to use experts as a shield for unpopular  
54 decisions. Second, being open about disagreements among experts — and the levels of  
55 uncertainty that their judgments entail — can help political leaders to reverse course when  
56 necessary without seeming like they are being inconsistent or capitulating to political (and  
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3 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 (12). 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.  
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### 15 16 **Institutional Responses**

17 There are several ways that our two organizational principles might be institutionalized,  
18 departing less or more dramatically from established practices. Within existing expert  
19 committee structures, one option would be to introduce minority reports. Rather than  
20 publishing the deliberations of diverse expert committees — which could making experts  
21 reticent to express themselves honestly while increasing the likelihood of inaccurate  
22 information being disseminated — diverse expert committees might be required to publish  
23 carefully crafted statements from different minority perspectives. In this way, reasons both  
24 for and against particular pieces of policy advice could be made public but the risks of  
25 misinterpretation and misrepresentation would be minimized. Another option would be for  
26 experts to form collective judgments by voting. This is not as odd as it might at first appear.  
27 Expert committees of the US National Institutions of Health, vote, for instance, on whether a  
28 substance can be reasonably considered to be a carcinogen, and these processes have  
29 revealed disciplinary differences in tolerances of risk (13). Public debates and voting among  
30 experts would help communicate disagreements where they exist, reveal disciplinary  
31 tendencies (or biases) and keep potentially credible counterarguments alive in policy  
32 processes, all while helping to filter out less credible or extreme claims or considerations.  
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44 Another option would take the selection of relevant experts out of the hands of political  
45 leaders or executives. One way to do this would be to adopt standing committees of experts  
46 using legislative assemblies as a model. Such committees would be comprised of experts  
47 from many different disciplines, and their deliberations and voting processes would be  
48 public. Political leaders are typically free to choose to listen to whichever experts they wish  
49 and this often limits the diversity of the expertise they seek and receive. Power struggles  
50 between experts seeking influence can further limit the diversity of expert advice. A standing  
51 committee of experts would help solve these problems by empowering diverse and  
52 independent experts to speak and influence political leaders and publics *before* any  
53 situations arise where their expertise may be needed. On this model, the experts,  
54 themselves, would decide whether they have relevant expertise in any particular situations.  
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5 A third option would be to encourage competing groups of experts to contribute to policy  
6 debates in structured or organized ways. Many different types of experts have provided  
7 advice during the COVID-19 pandemic, but we have little idea of their influence or how  
8 different (often competing) pieces of advice should be weighed against each other. It would  
9 be possible to make these processes more cohesive using a tribunal model, where rival  
10 experts would be empowered to question each other directly before an audience of experts  
11 outside their own speciality (14). Expert claims might also be adversarially examined before  
12 lay publics on the model of the 19th century coroner's courts in the UK (15). This approach  
13 would help ensure that policy advice is sufficiently sensitive to the diverse lived experiences  
14 of affected publics.  
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## 22 Conclusion

23 The conditions of crisis create a powerful pressure both to limit the diversity of expert input  
24 into decision making, and to blur the boundaries of responsibility for political decisions. For  
25 this reason it is all the more important to think creatively about how we organise scientific  
26 expertise in our political systems. We cannot simply rely on individual leaders and experts to  
27 do the right thing, especially during moments of crisis when difficult — often life and death —  
28 decisions have to be made quickly in a context of deep uncertainty. We need to think about  
29 how to manage the politics of expertise *before* politicians come looking for that expertise.  
30 What we need are political institutions that establish norms and expectations of legitimate  
31 disagreement as part of the process of forming and communicating expertise within political  
32 decision processes.  
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