

CORRESPONDANCE

Public support for science might worsen policy

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Abstract: Evidence-based policy has become the gold standard for trustworthy governance, yet the relationship between trust and trustworthiness in science-policy interactions is more complex than commonly assumed. This letter argues that increased public trust in science may undermine policy quality because of policy-based evidence-making – the selective use of scientific evidence to justify predetermined political decisions. Drawing on political science literature and Britain’s experience with evidence-based policy, it is argued that high trust allows policymakers to obscure necessary value judgements behind scientific authority. Efforts to increase trust in science, such as the National Academy of Sciences Sri Lanka’s recent initiative to restore trust in science, must therefore consider these perverse incentives to avoid inadvertently compromising evidence-informed policymaking.

Keywords: evidence-based policy; policy-based evidence-making; public trust in science; cherry-picking; values in public policy.

The last thirty years have witnessed an explosive rise in evidence-based policy, driven particularly in the United Kingdom by the Blair Government (1997-2007). It’s now widely recognized that good policy must be rooted in scientific evidence, whether that means grounding social policy in social science or anchoring public health policy in epidemiology. This is what makes policy trustworthy, which is why the editor of this journal has, quite rightly, reiterated the importance of applying scientific knowledge to public policymaking.

However, trust and trustworthiness are not synonymous, and their relationship is far more complex than typically assumed. There’s growing evidence of perverse incentives and unintended consequences at the intersection of these concepts. Increases in trustworthiness

can sometimes decrease trust. For instance, honesty and transparency – qualities that all theorists agree enhance the *trustworthiness* of science – have in some cases been found to diminish public *trust* in science.

Perhaps more troublingly, increases in trust can decrease the trustworthiness of policy. The use of evidence in policymaking is inherently political, and political scientists have long recognized that scientific evidence is often deployed merely to justify decisions already made rather than to inform deliberation. The mechanism behind this is cherry-picking, and the result is policy-based evidence-making. When the public expresses high levels of trust in and support for science, this doesn’t necessarily encourage policymakers to engage more genuinely with evidence-informed policy. All it means is that they need to ensure that their policies are seen to be supported by science. Realistically, this means that policymakers will selectively invoke scientific authority to legitimize their predetermined policy positions.

The United Kingdom, from where I write, maintains a world-leading institutional commitment to evidence-based policy. What this “British experiment” has demonstrated is that policymakers have become adept at adhering to the *letter* of the law of evidence-based policy while systematically violating its *spirit*. One Chief Scientific Adviser recently wrote about his experiences in government, documenting how science is transformed in the “politics factory”. His account of the challenges involved in navigating the politics of evidence has been echoed by scientific advisers worldwide, suggesting this is a systemic rather than an isolated problem.

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High trust in science might therefore only reinforce existing patterns of selective evidence use. One way of looking at this is that the system won't be improved by increased public trust, but it won't be worse off either. However, there are distinct dangers introduced by increased public trust that might worsen public policymaking. Namely, not all policy decisions can be reduced to empirical questions; many involve irreducible value judgements. High public trust in science can have deleterious effects on policymaking insofar as it enables policymakers to evade necessary value-laden discussions by hiding behind "the science" they've strategically selected.

Consider as an illustrative example the medical fact that smoking shortens your life and, by any health measure, is a bad thing. It's very easy for policymakers to claim that "the evidence" unambiguously supports banning smoking because it harms health, but this framing ignores crucial non-health values that must be taken into account by the policymaker. A reduction in smoking increases longevity and older populations are significantly more expensive to look after due to the incidence of age-related illnesses. For nations with state health services like Britain and Sri Lanka, cost is an important consideration. Bioethicists have also argued that smoking has some social and moral benefits and can be personally valuable to individuals. To criminalize smoking requires an assessment of these economic and social values as well as the obvious health disbenefit that's established by the scientific literature. When trust in science is high, such value trade-offs become easier to obscure behind the veneer of scientific authority.

This has implications for the programme to increase trust in science launched by the National Academy of Sciences Sri Lanka and the Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science. This initiative is timely, emerging in a context where many believe we're facing a global "crisis of trust" in institutions that's been worsening for at least forty years. However, their inquiry must avoid the simplistic assumption that both policymakers and the public are fully rational actors making considered judgements about scientific evidence. A substantial body of political science literature suggests otherwise. It should consider the potential perverse effects that increased trust in science may have on the trustworthiness of science, and vice versa. Without such consideration, well-intentioned efforts to rebuild trust may inadvertently undermine the very goals of evidence-informed policymaking they seek to advance.

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