

I have a bit more sympathy for politicians than most. I mean, it's a tough gig, right? They're asked to solve some of the world's most complex problems. And, generally, they don't have an extensive background in the particular issue confronting them. It is understandable, then, that they frequently turn to other people for guidance.

Indeed, it is safe to say that modern decision makers sit at the centre of a complex web of advice. This advice doesn't only come from within the public sector. Rather, it is also provided by what researchers call "knowledge actors" – people who conduct research into social issues, and then use that knowledge as the basis for policy recommendations. In common parlance, we might call them "experts". Typical examples include consultants, think tanks, or social scientists.

### **Knowledge is political, anyway**

In difficult or complex circumstances, knowledge becomes critical. Policymakers want to ensure they can make the "best" decision, at least cost, and with minimal unintended consequences. They thus seek out information as a way of resolving issues in a technical (or non-political) manner. "We must make evidence-based decisions!" they cry. "We must free ourselves from the usual ideological quagmires!" Experts are in a key position to meet this need.

Perhaps.

A [rich line of research](#), dating to at least the mid-1970s, provides another view. That is, [we cannot magically divorce knowledge actors](#) from the same kinds of ideological influences that permeate the rest of the political world.

Fundamental to this argument is the notion of a "worldview". Put simply, a "worldview" is a set of assumptions that people use to simplify (and thus understand) complex situations. These worldviews can include beliefs, values, general principles, etc. Worldviews are how we all understand and structure our individual realities. For instance, you might say that current political stoushes about climate change involve competing assumptions on the relationship between humanity and the climate. Alternatively, they might involve value-based distinctions between the economy and the environment. Either way, it involves conflicting worldviews.

Experts, of course, are people too. They too have a worldview. This worldview ultimately shapes the interpretations that they make, not only about their world, but also about their data and methods. We forget that what we call “knowledge” often relies on inference and assumption – both of which leave open sufficient room for different interpretations. Moreover, where data is insufficient, people are forced to rely on their personal assumptions, theories and ideas about how the world works. In addition, a person’s worldview can influence the choices they make about which issue(s) they will focus on, and how findings are reported.

Moreover, it is not just expert knowledge itself that is fraught with these issues, but the use of that knowledge as well. In an insightful [study of the implementation of nuclear power in Austria](#), Helga Nowotny, Professor Emeritus of the Social Studies of Science, shows that experts may just reproduce ideological arguments from both sides of the political spectrum. Indeed, experts don’t necessarily make policy decisions any simpler. Just the opposite might actually be true.

### The power of knowledge?

Professor of Public Affairs Hugh Heclo argued many years ago that [politicians don’t just “puzzle” over complex problems, they also “power”](#). To put it another way, both power and knowledge are the domain of politics. Indeed, those in a position to supply knowledge to policymakers are also in a position to exercise power over those same policymakers. To a point.

Writers in this area argue that there are some key restrictions on the ability of knowledge actors to exercise power. First and foremost, the knowledge those actors produce must be convincing. In line with this, my own PhD research suggests that, to be convincing, management consultant reports must have an internal logic (i.e. the conclusions follow from the premises). They must also resonate with the particular worldview of policymakers – so a consultant that says something completely outrageous or fanciful (according to their client) will be less influential.

### Experts create reality - just not as they wish

Knowledge has a fundamental role to play in both politics and policy, particularly in our hyper-rational age. Because of this, it is necessary to be vigilant about which versions of reality should influence the policy process.

While expert knowledge often has the veneer of legitimacy, we need to be mindful that it represents a particular worldview, and is written for a particular purpose. Though this may

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suggest some kind of conspiratorial manipulation of those in key positions of power, there are clearly limits to the extent to which expert versions of the world can shape how policymakers think (and, thus, how society is structured). In this way, [and as Professors of Political Science Emanuel Adler and Peter Haas argue](#), experts “create reality, but not as they wish”.

*Martin Bortz does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.*

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