

Welcome to the first piece in our new occasional series Zoom Out. Here we offer authors a slightly longer essay format to widen their focus, and explore key ideas in science and technology in the broader context of society and humanity.

Should expert knowledge be limited to providing a servant role in democracies, or elevated to that of a partner?

Most of us respond with ambivalence to this question. We desire expert input into democratic deliberation and decision-making, but not so much as to dominate the discussion. As a result, most of us are tempted by the quest for a Goldilocks principle that establishes “just enough” expertise.

But it can be unclear whether the servant or the partner role offers the best chance of achieving that Goldilocks principle. In our populist times, many are attracted to the servant role because it promises to keep a kind of watertight compartmentalisation between expertise and democracy, and thus safeguard democracy from technocracy.

But I suggest only the partner role truly works to attain a serviceable Goldilocks principle of “just enough” expertise.

Read more: [Who are you calling 'anti-science'? How science serves social and political agendas](#)

We are ambivalent about experts

One reason we all struggle to know how much is “just enough” expertise is that none of us is

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perfect. We tend to move from loathing to liking experts through the middle ground of admiring technical skill but not social application.

Consider three stories about expertise in democracy that illustrate this ambivalence: the global nuclear debate, the South Australian Nuclear Fuel Cycle Royal Commission and the fallout from a storm-induced state-wide blackout in South Australia.

The nuclear debate has become so infected by [technocratic](#) expert reasoning that even [climate scientists](#) are prone to swallowing the feel-good nuclear pill.

Nuclear experts persist in claiming nuclear power could be a cheap and easy solution to climate change – but deny broader social concerns that nuclear power is a [poor social return on investment](#).

Nevertheless, the debate continues, because pro-nuclear experts [marginalise public concerns](#), [cherry-pick their data](#), dissemble the [real status](#) of a dying nuclear industry and implicitly undermine the democratic influence of citizens.

Further, that groaning nuclear industry needs to bury its nuclear waste problem or kiss goodbye any hope of politicians or accountants signing off on new reactors.

While the technology and technique of [deep geological disposal](#) is admirably skillful and possibly courageous in its ambition, even the best efforts (Canada's) have been mired in a [history of subverting democratic discussion](#).

Read more: [*Australia's snub to Nobel Peace win is major break from ambiguous nukes policies of past*](#)

The [South Australian Nuclear Fuel Cycle Royal Commission](#) of 2016 inherited that same technocratic bent. The Commission's [final report](#) recommended pursuing nuclear reactors and waste disposal, because the former could provide a lower-carbon method for electricity generation and the latter could be done ethically.

Untouched by the social reality – [over-blown claims](#) about the commercial viability of nuclear power and [unethical practices](#) in waste disposal efforts – there was technocracy at work here.

A few engineering and economic hypotheses were argued to be a firm foundation on which to base public discussion, compared to well-grounded public misgivings about how nuclear actors have historically behaved.

But sometimes we wish the experts would be heard more. After a storm in South Australia on September 28, 2016 led to a state-wide blackout, conservative parliamentarians [blamed wind power](#) for the blackout and appeared to make up energy policy on the spot.

The blackout was said to be a [wake-up call](#) to the apparent fact that renewable power is an unreliable curse on energy security.

We now know that those same conservative parliamentarians had [been advised](#) by the Australian Electricity Market Operator (AEMO) that the problem was not wind power.

Despite [many experts dispelling the myth that wind power equals blackouts](#), the complexity of the [final AEMO](#)

[report](#) was caught up in the [misrepresentation of technical details](#) in a context of political [buck-passing](#).

[Australia's energy policy](#) apparently suffers from a dearth of expert common sense.

What we have in these stories is nothing new. Plato suggested we leave complex things to experts and Aristotle suggested we leave them to the people.

That tension has carried through to debates about whether [knowledge professions](#) are sources for the common good or for monopoly power. Most of us intuitively grasp that [experts might be dangerous because of the same autonomy that conditions their utility](#).

The servant role for experts

If experts can be dangerous, we have good reasons for limiting their role in democracy, and none of those reasons rely on worrying that science cannot “know reality” with absolute certainty.

The first reason is because of the threat of the [“scientisation” of politics](#). Too much expert input can narrow the scope of democratic discussion, because scientific analysis and technical planning take prominence in setting agendas and determining social choices.

By this model, our mechanisms of political decision-making become [mere agents of a scientific intelligentsia](#).

The second reason is that [experts can endanger democratic civility](#) because of information asymmetry. Experts can persuade other experts and non-experts. But non-experts struggle to

persuade experts, leaving ordinary citizens susceptible to being the losers in the game of scientising politics.

Read more: [*No science minister, and it's unclear where science fits in Australia*](#)

The third reason is that experts disproportionately define what counts as reality for political purposes. Examples include the nature of hazards, the capacity of machines, and the relevant consensus about a technical question upon which political discussion might be grounded. This expert influence over “the real” is a [source of power in democracies](#), and all power should be held accountable.

Based on such reasons, you could conclude that experts should be conceived of as [delegates](#). This is because someone needs to watch the watchers, and experts appear to be like a failed institution in need of [saving from themselves](#) by being held accountable to democratically determined goals.

The descent into populism

Unfortunately, it is just a short hop from there to a more radical and populist position.

The radicalism relies on the insinuation that experts and citizens represent [poles of a spectrum from technical to sociocultural reasoning](#). Experts are painted as limited to an abstract and impersonal kind of reasoning.

In contrast, ordinary citizens are pictured as capable of much more communally sensitive reasoning – something that is better equipped to handle uncertainty, the unanticipated and value judgements.

Experts are thus treated as a kind of class prone to infect any communicative exchange into which they enter, with their supposed [dogmatism](#) making experts like a disease of the body politic.

Read more: [***Distrust of experts happens when we forget they are human beings***](#)

This radicalised version of the servant role for experts devolves quickly into populism. If democracy is about popular sovereignty and majority rule, and the “liberal” part of liberal democracy consists of additional provisions for independent institutions (like the judiciary and the free press) and the protection of rights (be they civil, economic or cultural), then populism can be thought of as a challenge to the pluralism of liberal democracy.

[Populism](#) is anti-elitist, anti-pluralist and appeals to the general will of the people. It is also a [thin-centred ideology](#) that inserts itself into more specific policy proposals.

Anti-pluralism refers here to a strong challenge to the legitimacy of independent institutions within democracy. Populists are wary of power drifting away from the people. So, they advise a [watertight compartmentalisation](#) between authority structures and the people, supposedly keeping the people safe from those unrepresentative and out-of-touch institutions.

If you imagine experts as collectively comprising a loosely structured, independent institution within democracies, then a strict servant role advises us to sustain a separation between expertise as an institution and democracy as a forum for citizen deliberation. So, the servant role supports the anti-pluralism of populism.

Read more: [***The pathologies of populism***](#)

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We can see this in an unexpected place. Both populists and the servant conception of experts tend to reduce democratic action to the opening up of issues.

Of course, there is variation in how marginalisation is addressed according to each of these conceptions. Those advocating a servant role for experts do have a point that power asymmetries can generate marginalisation of people and issues.

As some wisely point out, [vested interests and constrained imaginations](#) can act to close down issues that ought to have their complexities revealed and opened up for broader democratic scrutiny.

But democracy has another side, whereby it closes issues down deliberately. Australia recently closed down the debate about whether same-sex couples could legally marry, progressively voting “[yes](#)”. The rhetoric of democracy as all about “opening up” glosses over the democratic value of closing some things down.

For every asbestos case where [experts under-estimated risks](#), we can find cases like Rachel Carson’s [Silent Spring](#) where experts revealed risks.

For every [ozone-hole](#) case in which experts missed the risk to public detriment, we can find [to bacco cases](#) in which experts revealed the risks to no political avail.

For every [nuclear case](#) in which experts blunder into democratic deliberation and smother citizen input, we can find [climate changes cases](#) in which experts have given a good account of why we should act, but citizens are stuck filtering through politically expedient filibustering.

Read more: [Can we trust Big Tobacco to promote public health?](#)

The partner role for experts

Conceptions of a servant role for experts thus threaten to devolve into populism – if experts are treated as an infectious class, and/or the populist's anti-pluralism is implicitly replicated, and if a reduction of democracy to just “opening up” also hitches along for the ride.

If we are to treat experts as partners in democracy, we must of course avoid devolving into technocracy. This can be achieved by holding on to the cautions of the servant model.

The risks of the scientisation of politics, and the incivility lurking in the information asymmetry between experts and citizens, must be always born in mind.

But a partner role for experts differs from a servant role for experts in four crucial ways.

One, a partner role for experts explicitly resists the insinuation that experts are a dogmatic class akin to a disease on the communicative and deliberative capacities of the body politic. Failure to resist that insinuation is the path to populism.

Two, experts as partners commits us to thinking through the positive functions that expertise plays in democracy. As some [political theorists](#) and [social analysts of science](#) have argued, expertise is instrumentally useful in a pluralised, complex world. It informs deliberation and empowers collective will once it has coalesced to some politically actionable degree.

Expertise is also useful as a negative power, capable of acting as a countervailing institution to State, corporate or citizen (majoritarian) attempts at either coercive action or passive inaction. In each case, expertise is to be thought of as a special case of the various functional roles institutions play in liberal democracies.

Read more: [Climate scientists and policymakers need to trust each other \(but not too much\)](#)

Three, partner conceptions of expertise explicitly deny that authority relations trade-off against citizen autonomy. Servant conceptions of the role of expertise, especially as they become radicalised and slip into the anti-pluralism of populist politics, struggle to let go of the trade-off assumption. Saving citizens becomes implicitly identified with marginalising experts.

By contrast, partner roles for expertise adopt a different [model of authority relations](#). Experts are justified over time by the contestation and criticism to which they are subjected – and within an overall institutional context of the constant possibility of scrutiny and challenge.

Citizens are not marginalising experts when they contest and criticise their information and advice, any more than experts are marginalising citizens when asking them to accept information or advice in a context of potential scrutiny and challenge. Both are making use of each other within the pluralised institutions of liberal democracy.

Fourth, whereas the servant role for experts is extremely anxious about the way authority relations can impact citizen autonomy (and thus hopes for some kind of watertight compartmentalisation between experts and citizens), the partner model adopts a complacent attitude.

A partner role for experts in democracy tolerates some “leakage” across functional domains. That leakage operates both ways, with experts influencing citizens and citizens influencing experts, leaving room for mutual persuasion in a way that the handmaiden role struggles to do.

The partner role for experts in democracy is thus the only viable candidate to form the basis for a Goldilocks principle of “just enough” expertise.

Darrin Durant does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or

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organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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