3. Evidence-based Policymaking

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Introduction

The phrase ‘evidence-based policymaking’ (EBPM) describes a political slogan rather than a feasible aim. As such, it is only useful academically when treated as an ideal-type or stylized vision to be compared to real world policymaking (Cairney, 2016a; 2019). In practice, researchers and practitioners often prefer the phrase ‘evidence-informed policymaking’ (EIPM) to signal a mixture of ambition and pragmatism (Nutley et al., 2013; Boaz et al., 2019; Mair et al., 2019, p. 8). For example, the European Commission promotes the use of evidence in policymaking via key units such as the Joint Research Centre (JRC), and the JRC (Mair et al., 2019, p. 7) ‘believes that evidence-informed policymaking results in better policies’.

This focus on evidence use has distinctive elements in relation to the EU policymaking context. On the one hand, the vague and rhetorical use of the general notion of EBPM is a distraction to analysis. Or, it is an example of a vague solution in search of a problem, and the policy problem may change over time. In the last decade, it has helped to: legitimize the work of a European Commission that has been less able to rely on elections for its authority, address concerns about populism and ‘post-truth’ politics, and foster a long term agenda on ‘better regulation’. On the other hand, the JRC is unusually well informed about the politics of EIPM and seeks to integrate public policy insights into its activities, such as to facilitate closer working relationships between EU scientists and policymakers and foster effective ‘knowledge management’ organizations. As such, its approach contrasts with popular and naïve descriptions of the ‘barriers’ between evidence and policy, which tend to describe politics getting in the way of the good use of evidence, and policymakers cherry-picking evidence. Key actors in the European Commission are willing and able to move beyond the use of EBPM as a political slogan towards thinking about its practical meaning and applying this thinking to training staff and informing EU policymakers.

This chapter describes this strategic approach of the JRC, and situates it within wider studies of the politics of EBPM. First, it introduces debates on what EBPM is and should be. It identifies a story of the ‘barriers’ to EBPM from the perspective of frustrated researchers, and its closest equivalent in studies of policy analysis and policy cycles. It then compares both to public policy research on the ever-present limits to evidence use in policymaking. Second, it relates evidence use to the EU context, highlighting its role in legitimizing Commission work, training EU scientists, and exploring the JRC argument that the ‘principle that policy should be informed by evidence is under attack’ (Mair et al., 201, p. 61). Third, it describes the JRC-led work on fostering new skills and agendas to encourage evidence use in EU policy, and promoting evidence-informed policymaking as an antidote to post-truth politics.

EBPM: key debates and perspectives

There is a literature dedicated to the pursuit of EBPM from the perspective of scientific researchers who engage in policy but do not study policymaking (Oliver et al., 2014a). Its general approach is to begin by identifying the importance of research evidence to policymaking and describe what it takes to turn their research into a proportionate policy response. In other words, begin with the research and then work out how policymakers can best use it (rather than beginning by understanding policy processes).

In that context, authors identify the perennial problem of evidence-policy gaps (Cairney, 2019) and the ‘barriers’ to research-use in relation to supply and demand (Oliver et al., 2014a; 2014b). Supply side problems include the need to produce more concise and accessible research, boost resources for dissemination, and find the right time to act. The main demand side problem relates to the pathology of political systems and failings of politicians, in relation to their lack of scientific research skills and/ or tendency to cherry pick evidence to suit their
policy agendas (Oliver et al., 2014a, p. 6; Cairney, 2016a, pp. 57-58). In most cases, these studies relay the frustrating experiences of researchers not familiar with policy theories. Indeed, the only frequent reference to a policymaking concept is to ‘policy cycles’ (Oliver et al., 2014b).

As such, these studies provide two instructive reference points. The first is a focus on functional requirements, or what policy actors need to happen to produce their preferred outcomes. In policy studies, this idea’s closest match is the policy analysis textbook that lists key steps for analysts to turn research into policy: use research to define the policy problem, identify feasible solutions, use values and goals to compare them, predict their outcomes, and make a recommendation to policymakers (Cairney, 2021, p. 12). However, while it makes sense for textbooks to centre the individual analyst, studies of analysts highlight their limited role – or the weak connection between their analysis and actual policy - in complex and competitive policy processes (Radin, 2019, Enserink et al., 2013; Brans et al., 2017). It clearly makes sense for policy analysts to develop a wide range of sophisticated skills. However, a disproportionate focus on their evidence and analysis provides a misleading image of policymaking. This image only serves to inflate researcher expectations and accelerate their disenchantment with politics.

The second is a focus on the linear stages through which policy must progress in an orderly policy cycle: define a problem, generate solutions, make and legitimise a choice, implement, and evaluate (Cairney, 2021, p. 55). A small number of textbooks still use this image to describe how to manage its ‘five vital activities: agenda-setting, formulation, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation’ (Wu et al., 2017, p. 9). However, most use a reference to stages as the first step towards a more useful conversation (Althaus et al., 2013), a pragmatic way to explore key dynamics such as agenda setting (Knill & Tosun, 2020), or treat the policy cycle as an ideal type to compare with real world policymaking (Cairney, 2020a). The latter approach helps to address some confusion regarding Lasswell’s (1971) famous aim to bring together policy analysis (analysis for policy) and policy process research (analysis of policy). In particular, while Lasswell (1956) identified key policymaking functions (in other words, requirements), it became common in the 1980s to describe them as actual stages in a cycle of policymaking (Weible & Cairney, 2019; Cairney, 2021, pp. 101-102). Subsequently, researchers unfamiliar with this history tend to refer to the policy cycle as something they would expect or like to see, and relate EBPM to that misleading image (Oliver et al., 2014b). As such, they envisage a well-ordered and predictable process in which researchers seek to supply evidence to define policy problems, underpin technically feasible solutions, and evaluate the results (Cairney, 2016a, p. 41).

The problem with such images of EBPM is that they do not offer a feasible way to describe or prescribe the use of evidence in policymaking. In that context, we can draw on policy theories to identify a more realistic description of the use of evidence in policymaking and relate it to different ways to imagine the ‘good’ use of evidence (see also Parkhurst, 2019).

**EBPM in the real world**

Descriptions of EBPM benefit from policymaking research insights in two main ways. First, to all intents and purposes, policy theories highlight the need for policymakers to ignore almost all policy issues and policy relevant information (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009; Baumgartner, 2017). The ideal-type ‘comprehensive rationality’ helps to identify the consequences of ‘bounded rationality’ (Simon, 1976). The former describes a mythical ability to process all issues and information and have an omniscient understanding of policymaking dynamics. The latter helps to identify the cognitive shortcuts that people use to process enough information to make choices: to set a small number of goals and rely on a small number of sources of information to inform choices; and, to use beliefs, habits, gut-level instinct, and emotion to come to quick conclusions (Cairney & Kwiatkowski, 2017). While government organisations
have more resources than individuals, they also develop standard operating procedures to limit their information searches (Koski & Workman, 2018). In each case, policymakers can use new evidence to reduce uncertainty. However, agenda setting is really about resolving ambiguity, or the ability to understand the same problem in different and often-contradictory ways (Zahariadis, 2007). Policy actors exercise power to draw attention not only to policy issues but also their preferred way to understand and address them. They do so with a combination of ‘empirical information and emotive appeals’ (True et al., 2007, p. 161), telling stories to exploit their audience’s beliefs (Jones et al., 2014).

Second, theories describe policymakers operating in an environment over which they have limited knowledge and even less control. The image of a policy cycle is of elite analysts feeding evidence and advice to a small number of powerful politicians at the heart of government (Cairney, 2021, pp. 51-55). In contrast, policymaking environments contain a very large number of policymakers, experts, and influencers spread across many levels and types of government. There are many policymaking ‘centres’ or venues for authoritative choice. Further, each venue has its own: institutions, or collection of formal and informal rules, networks, or relationships between policymakers and influences, dominant ideas, or beliefs about problems that constrain or facilitate the acceptance of new solutions, and context, such as the social and economic conditions that command policymaker attention and limit their impact (Cairney et al., 2019).

Overall, the use of scientific or research evidence is not straightforward or predictable. Rather, the evidence is contested and scientists provide one of many sources, while its selective use is a political act to resolve ambiguity. This choice takes place in an environment containing many influential actors in many venues. Evidence use occurs in networks with “their own rules on who and what sources of evidence to trust, and often a ‘monopoly’ on how to understand problems”, with a tendency for policymaker attention - to issues and evidence - to ‘lurch unpredictably, as events prompt policymakers to shift their focus quickly’ (Cairney, 2016a, p. 42). In the place of a single centre to process all policy relevant information, we witness a decentralised and uncoordinated environment to process information selectively. While it is tempting to relate any evidence-policy gaps to problematic politicians, or the pathologies of particular political systems, these general policymaking dynamics exist regardless of who is ostensibly in charge.

Normative visions of EBPM

These fantasy versus real world images of policymaking feed into the question of how to respond, and how to relate that response to visions of EBPM:

1. The governance question. Should governments seek to centralise to restore order to policymaking (a frequently-pursued but impossible task), or decentralise to share power, either as a pragmatic response to their limits or a positive attempt to make policy in a collaborative way (Ansell & Gash, 2007; Ansell & Torfing, 2021)?

2. The value of evidence question. Should governments adhere to a so-called ‘hierarchy’ of evidence based on research methods, in which the systematic review of randomised control trials (RCTs) is at the top? Or, should they give more respect to a wider range of sources for policy-relevant knowledge, including not only research expertise but also practitioner knowledge, stakeholder and user feedback, and local community wisdom (see Nutley et al., 2013; Boaz et al., 2019; Althaus, 2020)?

Different answers to these questions help us identify a spectrum of EBPM visions (Cairney, 2017a; 2022). At one extreme is highly centralised governance and hierarchical evidence production to aid relatively exclusive EBPM, in which central governments use RCT evidence to roll out policy uniformly. At the other is decentralised governance and evidence sharing, in
which there is not an assumption that central (or any) government necessarily takes the lead, and many actors share knowledge and co-create policy. These visions represent ideal-types at the extreme ends of a spectrum, and many possibilities exist within it. However, it retains value as a way to prompt more attention to the possibilities and their contradictions. For example, EBPM advocates often seem to want to pursue a centralised and hierarchical process and remain open to more decentralised and collaborative arrangements, but the former precludes the latter (and vice versa).

Key developments and contemporary challenges

Three key developments or challenges help to situate current efforts to improve evidence use in the EU.

1. The duality of accepting complexity and projecting order

The language of policy cycles and EBPM retains high political value even if it does not describe policymaking well. Governments face a continuous duality in this regard. On the one hand, they may seek to be pragmatic to recognise the limits to their powers in complex systems over which they have limited knowledge and control. On the other, they feel the need to project order and control (Cairney, 2015). In Westminster systems such as the UK, these contradictory requirements help explain why governments necessarily operate pragmatically to decentralise responsibility and maintain a story of concentrating power in the hands of a small number of powerful ministers (Cairney, 2020b).

In the EU, the European Commission equivalent has been to project the sense that evidence-based policy is made via stages in an orderly policy cycle. This image has allowed it to project policymaking order and legitimise its activities, with reference to process-driven legitimacy in the historic absence of political legitimacy via elections (and the recent failure of the spitzenkandidat process to address this problem – de Wilde, 2020). At the same time, organisations such as the JRC have increasingly recognised the sense that EU and Commission policymaking is not described well by these projections. This duality is still apparent within the Commission and indeed the JRC itself, which still describes two very different images of policymaking:

1. Normative: the pursuit of EBPM and an ‘integrated policy cycle’. Listorti et al. (2020) describe the pursuit of EBPM to support the Commission’s Better Regulation agenda. The latter adapt the policy cycle image to describe its proposed policy process via ‘policy design and preparation; adoption; implementation; application; evaluation and revision’ (2020, p. 1561). They also use explicitly the phrase ‘evidence-based policymaking’ to describe the pursuit of ‘a sound use of evidence for all policymaking activities’, albeit while noting the absence of clear and transparent guidance on which research methods to favour, and how to select and present evidence, as well as the lack of specialist staff to carry out such tasks (2020, pp. 1564-1565).

2. Descriptive: EIPM in a complex policymaking system. Since 2017, JRC and Commission staff have used a very different image of policymaking, in which they superimpose an image of complexity and disorder onto the traditional cycle image (Figure 3.1). It is difficult to overstate the size of the rhetorical shift, with an organisation famous for seeking and projecting policymaking order also describing the lack of order in their system. For example, note in Figure 1 that the lines are largely metaphorical or notional. They project the sense that not only do we need to describe a messy reality but also we do not know exactly how it works in practice. Further, the same unit in the JRC prefers to refer to EIPM than EBPM: “Evidence-informed policy”
is more accurate to “evidence-based policy” as it makes clear that evidence is an input to the political process and not the ultimate authority. The role of evidence in the policy debate is often challenged not because of general objections to evidence but because of the specific evidence used to inform particular decisions. The choice of scientific evidence and its use to inform political decisions is normative’ (Mair et al., 2019, p. 8).

Figure 3.1: The JRC’s new image of political complexity

Note. From a tweet based on JRC image, by R. Davies (@r0bdavies), 2017, Discussing the challenges of evidence based policy including complexity of the landscape @OECD #evidence4gov, 26 June (https://twitter.com/r0bdavies/status/879239843011862528). Permission to use the image granted by the JRC via Milena Raykovska on 11.11.2019.
2. To close the evidence-policy gap

The JRC describes an ironic challenge to its activities (Topp et al., 2018). Despite its awareness of policymaking complexity, and employment of around two thousand scientific/research staff to inform EU policy, its staff face the same ‘barriers’ to the use of evidence for policy. Its knowledge management for policy agenda, and subsequent refinements, recognise the need to harness new insights on policymaking to overcome these barriers associated with ‘key differences in the practices, expectations, incentives, language, and rules of researchers and policymakers’ (2018, p. 2).

3. To protect evidence-informed policymaking from existential threats

It is common in JRC-hosted evidence events to identify and address key threats to EIPM. For example, the JRC annual conference in 2016 provided a forum to discuss the principles of science advice to policymakers while worrying about the implications of victories for President Trump and the UK’s exit from the EU (Cairney, 2016b). The 2017 conference – ‘EU for facts: evidence for policy in a post-fact world’ – continued the concern with the idea of ‘post-truth’ politics, the role of ‘populist’ politicians in generating distrust of scientific elites, and the idea that a person’s emotions or firmly held beliefs would make them immune to persuasion with evidence (Cairney, 2017b). More recently, the JRC (Mair et al., 2019, p. 11; pp. 61-62) describes its attempt to address an existential threat to EIPM from multiple sources, including: ‘the manipulation of public opinion through social media platforms is a very real threat’ and ‘The principle that policy should be informed by evidence is under attack’, particularly in highly ‘polarised’ political systems in which ‘partisanship’ undermines the role of independent scientific bodies.

Overall, organisations like the JRC describe (1) a normative focus on improving relationships between scientists and policymakers and the use of scientific evidence, and protecting EIPM from threats, while recognising that (2) the evidence is contested and often politicised, in a policymaking environment that is not amenable to centralised control. As such, it connects to other policymaking principles even if their connections are not explicit or clear in practice. For example, the European Commission’s support for the ‘precautionary principle’ suggests that policymakers should: (1) act decisively in key areas – such as to reduce climate change - even when there is not enough scientific evidence to reduce uncertainty (and when policy problems remain ambiguous and contested), and (2) explain how their actions relate to current scientific evidence (Tosun, 2013; Monaghan et al., 2012; Lofstedt, 2014). In such cases, when the evidence only takes policymakers so far, the Commission may establish policymaking principles (and associated procedures) to act nevertheless. In each case, the interpretation and application of such principles are subject to intense contestation, prompting continuous efforts to re-establish their value.

The pursuit of new solutions to the threat to EIPM

The two most recent examples of JRC work sum up its ambitious but pragmatic attempts to foster EIPM within EU policymaking

1. Knowledge management for policy (KMP)

Topp et al (2020, p. 33) address the irony of JRC’s evidence-policy gap with a ‘skills framework’ to help design effective knowledge management organisations. They relate the eight main skills to a vision for EIPM:
“Policymakers justify action with reference to the best available evidence, high scientific consensus and citizen and stakeholder ‘ownership’. Researchers earn respect, build effective networks, tailor evidence to key audiences, provide evidence-informed policy advice (without simply becoming advocates for their own cause) and learn from their success” (Topp et al., 2020, p. 33).

**Figure 3.2: Eight skills for ’Better Evidence-Informed Policies’**

![Figure 3.2: Eight skills for ’Better Evidence-Informed Policies’](image)

Note. From “Knowledge management for policy impact: the case of the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre,” by Topp et al., 2018, *Palgrave Communications*, 4(87), p. 3 (https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-018-0143-3). Reproduced under Creative Commons license

Topp et al (2018, p. 2-3; 2020, pp. 34-35) visualise these eight skills in Figure 3.2, and describe them as follows:

1. ‘Synthesising research’. If there is an almost infinite amount of information, but policymakers have a finite capacity to process it, adapt to the cognitive shortcuts they use. For example, provide a concise and authoritative synthesis of policy relevant information tailored to the questions that policymakers are asking (2018, pp. 3-4; 2020, pp. 35-36).

2. ‘Managing expert communities’. Most policy problems are complex or multi-faceted and beyond the understanding of single disciplines or experts. Therefore, find ways to ‘join up’ multi-disciplinary perspectives and harness the ‘wisdom of crowds’ (2018, p. 4; 2020, p. 36).
3. ‘Understanding policy and science’. Reject the idea of a well-ordered and linear policy cycle in which the role of evidence and expertise is straightforward. Research organisations should use policy theory insights to (a) explain how policymakers demand evidence, and (b) find effective ways to adapt to policymaking dynamics:

A general strategy is to engage for the long term to learn the ‘rules of the game’, understand how best to ‘frame’ the implications of evidence, build up trust with policymakers through personal interaction and becoming a reliable source of information, and form coalitions with people who share your outlook (2018, pp. 4-5).

4. ‘Interpersonal skills’. Reject the old image of senior scientists as arrogant and driven by ego and hubris, and of policymakers as self-interested cherry pickers of evidence. In its place, encourage the kinds of social skills that facilitate collaboration with policymakers, including trying to see the world through another’s eyes, communicating frequently and respectfully, remaining flexible, and adapting to new problems or contexts (2018, p. 5; 2020, pp. 37-38).

5. ‘Engaging with citizens and stakeholders’. Reject the idea that EIPM relies solely on scientific or research evidence. Instead, seek ways to co-produce research and/or policy with stakeholders, and encourage the sharing of knowledge between academics, practitioners, and citizens via participative and deliberative fora (2018, p. 5; 2020, p. 38).

6. ‘Communicating scientific knowledge’. Adapt to policymaking dynamics by presenting crucial evidence in a clear and concise manner, tailored to the needs, beliefs, or current attention of policymakers (2018, p. 6; 2020, p. 39).


8. ‘Advising policymakers’. Recognise that the principles of science advice to policymakers, from the perspective of scientists, do not match the requirements of policymakers. The former often emphasise principles such as independence from government, transparency via publishing data and declaring interests, integrity by limiting your role to providing evidence rather than advice, and accountability via professional standards and peer review (Cairney, 2016b). The latter often require researchers to work closely with policymakers (in a way that reduces the former’s independence) and provide advice on request: ‘to present oneself as an objective and aloof researcher is to be of limited use to policymakers’ (Topp et al., 2018, p. 7).

2. The ‘Enlightenment 2.0’ project

This practical focus on skills forms part of a wider concern about the use of evidence for policy. As the JRC’s (Mair et al., 2019) main report title suggests, it seeks to harness interdisciplinary insights to understand ‘our political nature’ and use these insights to ‘put knowledge and reason at the heart of political decision-making’. This work began with the project title ‘Enlightenment 2.0’, with the JRC (2018) describing a ‘call for experts in Life Sciences, Social & Behavioural Sciences and Arts & Humanities’ to help it understand how ‘facts, values and social relations affect political behaviour and decision-making … at all levels of the political system, from the individual voter, policymaker or politician; to groups such as political parties and civil society organisations; up to the organisational and institutional level, including national governments’. As such, the main report draws on multiple reports (including Cairney et al, 2018 which covers the ‘EBPM in the real world’ section above), but with a strong focus on using psychological and behavioural insights to examine ‘how and why emotions, values, identity and reason affect how we think, talk and take decisions on political issues’ (Mair et al., 2019, p. 4). The aim is to help policymakers: deal effectively with ‘false news’; harness emotions, values, and
intelligence to improve collective and collaborative policy processes; protect EIPM from threats such as polarisation and partisanship; and, work more closely with scientists to co-produce research and policy (Mair et al., 2019, p. 4; pp. 61-65).

**Conclusion**

The phrase ‘evidence-based policymaking’ should be seen as a rhetorical device rather than an accurate portrayal. It is akin to the ideal type of ‘comprehensive rationality’ and is often used in tandem with a focus on orderly policymaking via a policy cycle’s stages. As such, *bounded rationality* helps explain why policymakers have to use cognitive and organisational shortcuts to ignore almost all evidence, while *complex policymaking environments* help explain why policy outcomes are out of their control. The idea of an exclusive club, consisting of small number of analysts supplying evidence to powerful policymakers at the centre of government, is replaced by the image of a crowded and contested environment and the selective use of evidence by many authoritative actors spread across political systems.

Still, EBPM remains important as a political slogan to project policymaking order and technical or process-driven legitimacy. The European Commission still uses it frequently to signal its commitment to ‘better regulation’. It also remains a popular phrase among the many scientists that: seek the better use of their research by policymakers, and/ or criticise policymaker action as ‘policy based evidence making’ (Cairney, 2020b).

In that context, there are signs that some EU policy actors are embracing the phrase ‘evidence-informed policymaking’ to signal a more sophisticated discussion based on insights from policy theories (Topp et al., 2018; Mair et al., 2019, p. 8). There remains the same commitment to EIPM as a vehicle for ‘better’ policymaking: to close the evidence-policy gap and defend the EU’s use of evidence from existential threats associated with polarisation and politicisation. However, there is also the recognition of the need to adapt to policymaking environments out of their control, and to foster a set of skills based on embracing the decentralisation of policymaking. On the whole, the EU may still project policymaking order and rationalism, but the ongoing skills agenda also highlights the need for more pragmatic scientists and policymakers and the potential for more deliberative and participatory forms of EIPM. This approach takes us some distance from naïve descriptions of the ‘barriers’ between evidence and policy, which describe politics as a problem to solve.

Still, it would be unrealistic to describe this new agenda as transformative, for two main reasons. First, policy processes contain actors pursuing multiple and contradictory aims. As such, the meaning of one agenda only makes sense in relation to many others. The EU pursues EBPM *and* EIPM. It seeks to foster rationalist and centralised processes *and* deliberative and decentralised processes. Therefore, each agenda contributes to a complex policy mix rather than a new trend. Second, policy theories may provide ‘practical lessons’ for practitioners (Weible & Cairney, 2021) but they do not solve policymaking problems. They highlight the policymaking dynamics to which actors need to adapt, present dilemmas rather than solutions, and encourage policy actors to recognise the trade-offs between multiple aims (Cairney et al., 2021). In that sense, a new skills agenda is about encouraging normatively defendable ways of working (such as to be more inclusive of people presenting policy relevant knowledge) rather than a solution to the barriers between evidence and policy.
References


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