Traditionally, the word ‘evidence’ has not featured strongly in studies of policymaking or governance, although there is an increasing focus on the problematic idea of *evidence-based policymaking*. In contrast, in the study of health or climate change, references to evidence or ‘the evidence’ often seem so frequent as to be taken for granted (Cairney 2016). This contrast highlights a fascinating comparison of perspectives, in which some exasperated researchers ask why policy and governance is not based on the evidence, and others wonder why anyone would think that ‘evidence-based’ policymaking could ever be a realistic or attractive possibility (Cairney 2020a: 235‒236).

In that context, researchers of policy processes and governance can offer a major contribution to the interdisciplinary study of the relationship between evidence and policy even if they would not ask its key questions routinely, that is: why is there a large evidence–policy gap, and how can we bridge it?

In particular, researchers could help distinguish between several different explanations that could inform putative solutions. A *policy-based evidence making* approach emphasizes the pathologies of politics and failings of politicians: policymakers do not use good research evidence whenever it provides inconvenient truths or goes against their beliefs or interests, or they cherry pick to identify the evidence that supports their position. As such, the commonly expressed solution is for politicians to do better, or for citizens to elect new politicians. A *policy theory* approach emphasizes the complexity of policymaking and the inevitable gap between what researchers require from political systems and what they can realistically expect, regardless of the sincerity and competence of policymakers. If so, the solution is for researchers to learn about and adapt to the policymaking systems they seek to influence, rather than bemoan the non-existence of their preferred model of governance. A *collaborative governance* approach emphasizes the benefits of thinking differently about evidence and governance: treat governance as a form of collaboration between many actors such as policymakers (rather than providing a single source of authority to which researchers can refer) and treat knowledge exchange as informing a process of deliberation that does not simply rely on research evidence from experts. In other words, studies of governance can help researchers think differently about an alleged evidence–policy problem.

This chapter addresses three key elements of governance that map onto this field of study. First, the evidence–policy gap often connects to the idea that there is a *governance problem*, and that the problem is a lack of central government competence and control. Ideal-type discussions of evidence-based policymaking (EBPM) connect strongly to the classic ideal-type of comprehensive rationality in which there is a single, authoritative and knowledgeable centre of government to which researchers can supply the evidence, which is then digested, operationalized and acted upon. Policy process research helps explain why this governance setup is impossible, and why the concept of ‘multi-centric policymaking’ is more instructive (Cairney et al. 2019).
Second, studies of models of governance help challenge the simplistic idea of an evidence–policy gap. The decision to assign more or less value to different types of knowledge is highly contested, and this contestation can play out in very different ways. For example, relatively centralized forms of governance appear to be the most conducive to evidence use based on a hierarchy of methods, with the systematic review of randomized control trials at the top. These methods require uniform policy solutions and fidelity to a precise intervention, which precludes more localized and collaborative approaches. In contrast, collaborative forms of governance are not as conducive to hierarchy. Rather, the main aim is to project respect for diverse forms of knowledge and to seek consensus rather than assert hierarchies. In one model, the evidence–policy gap relates to the lack of fidelity to policy and the unwillingness or inability of a central government to address it. In another, this pursuit of uniformity and fidelity is impossible and undesirable.

Third, the idea of good governance is a regular feature of interdisciplinary studies. In this case, scholars debate the principles that researchers and governments should use to ‘establish evidence advisory systems that promote the good governance of evidence – working to ensure that rigorous, systematic and technically valid pieces of evidence are used within decision-making processes that are inclusive of, representative of and accountable to the multiple social interests of the population served’ (Parkhurst 2017: 8). The issue here is that there are competing forms of good governance, producing different expectations about how the good governance of evidence would fit into a larger collection of rules on democracy and collaboration.

THE EVIDENCE–POLICY GAP AS A GOVERNANCE PROBLEM

Supporters of EBPM seem to imagine that there is a small group of powerful elected politicians at the heart of the centre of government looking for evidence that can help them in designing the right policy (Cairney 2019, 2021a). This vision for EBPM is akin to post-war hopes for ‘rational’ policy analysis based on a centralized process with few actors inside government, translating science into policy, to produce an ‘optimal’ solution from one perspective by analysing a policy problem and solution with one metric (such as via cost benefit analysis) (Enserink et al. 2013: 17–25). If so, the evidence–policy gap relates to the centre’s limited competence and understanding of the research evidence supplied by analysts, and can be addressed by the suppliers of evidence using new advances in methods and information technology (Botterill and Hindmoor 2012: 367).

As such, this image of effective governance relates strongly to the strand of policy theory that identifies a governance problem in relation to a lack of central government control (see Cairney 2020a: 131–136). The classic reference point is the idea of a policy cycle consisting of key functional requirements of a government’s centre: define a problem, generate solutions, make and legitimize a choice, implement and evaluate. It relates to two kinds of ideal-type. ‘Comprehensive rationality’ describes the ability of a policymaking centre to gather and analyse all relevant information to inform a set of consistent choices. ‘Perfect implementation’ describes the conditions that need to be met to ensure policy delivery from the top down, including: policymakers specify and communicate clearly their objectives, they are carried out by ‘obedient’ bureaucrats, and the implementation agency does not depend on others to fulfil those aims (Hogwood and Gunn 1984: 204–206).
However, the crucial difference is that EBPM supporters use these ideas to describe an ideal to seek, or what they would expect to see. If so, they conflate two very different problems: the potentially temporary poor use of evidence by individual politicians; and an ever-present governance problem in which the centre does not deliver on evidence-based policies because there is a gulf between the ‘appearance of central control and what central governments can actually do’ (Cairney 2020b). In contrast, policy theories use an artificial ideal-type to compare with real-world policymaking to explain why these expectations could never be met (regardless of the motivation and competence of individual politicians).

Policy theories draw on two main concepts to help EBPM proponents understand the governance problem that they are trying in vain to solve. First, ‘bounded rationality’ (Simon 1976) helps explain the need for policymakers to ignore most evidence. There is an almost infinite amount of information and a finite ability to pay attention to it (Baumgartner 2017). This limitation prompts people use two cognitive shortcuts, often described provocatively as ‘rational’ (such as using well-established rules to identify high-quality sources of information) and ‘irrational’ (such as using gut instinct, emotion and beliefs) (Cairney and Kwiatkowski 2017). These shortcuts help explain the selective use of evidence: policymakers define a policy problem and a feasible response in relation to their beliefs and their perceived ability to solve the problem, and both aspects determine the policy relevance of evidence. They might exclude some forms of evidence as inconvenient truths, but also ignore any evidence that relates to powers they do not possess. Or, they limit their attention to evidence by paying attention to a select few issues and delegating the rest to bureaucrats and other organizations. In turn, while policymaking organizations have more resources to process evidence, they too must develop standard operating procedures to limit their search for information to inform choice (Koski and Workman 2018). For example, bureaucrats rely on other actors for information and advice, they build relationships on trust and information exchange, and these policy communities process most policy beyond the centre of government (Jordan and Cairney 2013). In each case, central control in theory translates into decentred policymaking in practice (Cairney 2020b).

Second, ‘multi-centric policymaking’ (Cairney et al. 2019) helps explain the gap between perceived and actual powers of policymakers at a single centre. Many approaches – including studies of multi-level, polycentric and complex governance – describe explicitly the role of multiple authoritative or semi-autonomous venues, which cooperate, compete or operate independently to contribute to policy outcomes (Bache and Flinders 2004; Hooghe and Marks 2003; Ostrom et al. 1961; Ostrom 2010; Aligica and Tarko 2012; Feiock 2013; Geyer and Cairney 2015; Chapter 46 in this volume). Others describe a policymaking logic in which the centralization of power in one core organization is not possible (see Cairney et al. 2019: 28–30). A common story is as follows: there are many policymakers and influencers spread across many venues, and each venue has its own formal and informal rules and practices, networks of participants, and dominant understandings of policy problems and solutions. To some extent, this delegation or sharing power is a choice, in which written constitutions or collaborative regimes (described below) spell out the roles and responsibilities of each participant, and how they contribute to a greater whole. However, policy process research also identifies the necessity of such relationships in relation to the cognitive and organizational limits to central control (Cairney et al. 2019: 8–12). If so, to seek influence, policy actors need to find out where the (formal and informal) authoritative action is, learn the rules of the game and the currency of debate, and form alliances in more than one policymaking centre (ibid.: 53–5; as described by Cairney 2021b in relation to UK COVID-19 policy ‘guided by the science’).
These studies seem to suggest that EBPM enthusiasts should adapt to their task by treating this dynamic as a feature of policymaking rather than as a governance problem. However, there is one major caveat: many policymakers in many central governments do not take that advice, particularly in political systems in which there is a high expectation for singular authoritative government (such as in Westminster systems). A separate governance problem relates to a continuous and often futile process of dealing with the limits to central powers: ‘centralisation will be confounded by fragmentation and interdependence that, in turn, will prompt further bouts of centralisation’ (Bevir and Rhodes 2003: 6). Consequently, adaptation requires a more sophisticated strategy to engage with central government policymakers who either:

1. think they are more powerful than they are, and act accordingly, producing routine unintended consequences; or
2. might be pragmatic enough to recognize the limits to their powers and seek delegation and collaboration with others, but also see the political benefit of maintaining the fiction that they are in control (Hay 2009; Cairney 2020b; compare with Sørensen and Torfing 2009 on the tools of metagovernance).

MODELS OF GOVERNANCE IN RELATION TO EVIDENCE USE

This focus on more-or-less central control helps us understand the politics of evidence use in relation to models of evidence-informed governance. First, consider three commonly used solutions to the sense that elected policymakers are not in control of their policymaking environments and are unable to prevent or solve complex policy problems (Cairney and St Denny 2020):

1. Centralize. Try to assert or enforce centralization, to project the sense that you know who is in charge and who to blame.
2. Localize. Delegate responsibility and blame to other authoritative venues.
3. Collaborate. Encourage forms of collaborative governance (Ansell and Gash 2008), in which politicians show leadership by encouraging many venues and actors to cooperate to produce and share innovative solutions to complex problems (Torfing and Ansell 2017).

Second, consider often highly contested debates about what counts as good evidence. In research fields such as health and public health, it is common to refer (albeit often critically) to a hierarchy of evidence quality based on the methods to produce it and communication primarily via publication in high-profile scientific journals after peer review. The systematic review of randomized control trials (RCTs) is at the top of this hierarchy, expert opinion is at the bottom, and there is no apparent role for other forms of knowledge via experience or practice. In contrast, many fields – such as social work, social care, policing and education – are more likely to entertain or prioritize the experience of service users and practitioners, often informally and via storytelling. The former relates to the idea that we can generalize from common experience, while the latter emphasizes the complexity and uniqueness of each case and diversity of experience (Boaz et al. 2019; Dobrow et al. 2006; Fleming and Rhodes 2018; Nutley et al. 2013; Stoker 2010; Petticrew and Roberts 2006: 57–68). Or, the latter relates explicitly to the politics of knowledge production and use, to criticise a narrow scientific
Table 22.1  Three ideal-type models of evidence-informed governance

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<td>The main story</td>
<td>Evidence-based policy requires a single central government to roll out interventions based on the systematic review of randomized control trials (RCTs).</td>
<td>Policy learning requires central governments to identify promising evidence, train practitioners to use improvement methods, and experiment with local interventions.</td>
<td>Knowledge-informed policy requires widespread collaboration across many centres, informed by participants telling stories of their policy relevant knowledge.</td>
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<tr>
<td>How should you gather evidence of effectiveness and best practice?</td>
<td>With reference to a hierarchy of evidence and evidence-gathering methods.</td>
<td>Identify promising interventions, encourage practitioners to adapt interventions to their area, and gather comparable data on their experience.</td>
<td>With reference to principles of collaboration, knowledge-sharing and deliberation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How should you ‘scale up’ from evidence of best practice?</td>
<td>Introduce the same model in each area. Require fidelity, to administer the correct dosage and measure its effect.</td>
<td>If your practice is working, keep doing it; if it is working better elsewhere, consider learning from their experience.</td>
<td>Tell stories based on your experience, and invite other people to learn from them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What aim should you prioritize?</td>
<td>To ensure the correct administration of the same active ingredient.</td>
<td>To train local practitioners to experiment and learn how best to turn evidence into practice.</td>
<td>To foster key principles, such as collaboration and respect for the knowledge of participants.</td>
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Sources: Adapted from Cairney (2017, 2020b) and Cairney and Oliver (2017).

view of evidence as exclusionary and contributing to the further marginalization of vulnerable groups (Althaus 2020; Smith 2012).

In practice, there are many different approaches to governance and evidence. Policymaking systems contain confusing mixes of approaches, and many commentators seem to promote a pragmatic ‘let a thousand flowers bloom’ attitude to the value and use of knowledge in policymaking. Therefore, we can identify simple models of evidence-informed governance to compare them in abstract terms, but recognize that few policy participants do so.

Table 22.1 summarizes the key distinctions between three very different ideal-types of evidence-informed governance. They do not connect perfectly to the central–local–collaborative distinction above (approach 3 is also local, and approach 2 is often described as a compromise between 1 and 3), but they do highlight the underlying political tensions in relation to evidence hierarchies.

In particular, relatively centralized forms of governance appear to be the most conducive to evidence use based on a hierarchy of methods (model 1). These methods require uniform policy solutions and fidelity to a precise intervention because the RCT evidence relates to a specific solution whose impact is measured multiple times (elsewhere, to develop its international reputation, and domestically, to track its effect in a new setting). This condition seems to precludes most localized or collaborative approaches (models 2 and 3).

Collaborative forms of governance are not as conducive to centralization and uniformity, partly because key aims are to project respect for multiple sources of knowledge and seek consensus rather than assert hierarchies based on a claim to superior authority (model 3). For example, Emerson et al.’s (2012) framework describes the establishment of a ‘collaborative governance regime’ to foster action based on ‘principled engagement’ characterized by fairness and deliberation ‘informed by the perspectives and knowledge of all participants’, ‘shared
motivation’ based on mutual understanding and trust and commitment, and ‘capacity for joint action’ facilitated by the rules co-produced by participants. In theory, a collaborative approach could be used to define a problem and select a uniform solution for a large population – such as via design thinking to develop prototypes – but their emphasis is on developing solutions continuously in light of new knowledge and deliberation.

Table 22.1 also outlines one type of pragmatic compromise (model 2), establishing a strong central role but also delegation to allow local actors to experiment and learn in their own context. However, in practice, many such models exist because there is a clear trade-off in key stages, such as when introducing an evidence base on which to build initial experimentation, and when setting the parameters for freedom to experiment during training. In other words, there are centralized and localized, and evidence-heavy and evidence-light versions of this compromise (Cairney and Oliver 2017).

Overall, these models of evidence-informed governance help us rethink the idea of an evidence–policy gap. In model 1, it can relate to the too-limited use of RCT evidence to inform policy and/or the limited fidelity to specific interventions. In model 3, this rationale is non-existent and the identification of such gaps make little sense. Indeed, models of collaborative governance often do not use the word ‘evidence’ at all, preferring to discuss the ‘knowledge’ of participants, many of whom would not be seen as useful or legitimate sources of evidence in model 1. Or, as in model 2, approaches may describe ‘learning’, or gathering new information to update knowledge and skills (see also Dunlop and Radaelli 2013, 2017).

In each case, the comparison shows us that we should not consider the status and use of evidence in a vacuum, separated from wider considerations of governance. A strict hierarchy of evidence may make sense to the narrow requirements of actors operating in relative isolation in a specific profession, but not to a wider set of actors involved in using evidence to inform policy in the real world.

GOOD GOVERNANCE AND THE GOOD GOVERNANCE OF EVIDENCE

These insights inform debates on the appropriate relationship between evidence production and use. In particular, we can view Parkhurst’s (2017) aim – to promote the ‘good governance of evidence’ – as addressing the aims of EBPM and collaborative governance enthusiasts.

For EBPM enthusiasts, good governance requires us to address the problem of technical bias, when: organisations produce bad evidence; some parts of government cherry-pick, manipulate or ignore good evidence; and some politicians misinterpret the implications of evidence. Politicians do it strategically for political gain or because their cognitive biases affect their analysis. For example, they can seek evidence that confirms their position, and/or only believe the evidence that confirms it. For enthusiasts of collaborative governance, it requires us to address issue bias, when some actors use the mantra of ‘evidence-based policy’ to depoliticize issues or downplay the need to resolve conflicts over values, and/or seek to focus on the problems most conducive to study via RCTs. In other words, methodological rigour trumps policy relevance and simple experiments trump the exploration of complex solutions. So, we lose sight of the unintended consequences of producing the ‘best’ evidence to address a small number of problems (while downplaying political choices about the allocation of research
resources and attention). Again, this action can be strategic or not, since researchers are not immune to cognitive bias.

To address both problems pragmatically, Parkhurst (2017: 8) identifies two key principles or practices ‘to ensure that rigorous, systematic and technically valid pieces of evidence are used within decision-making processes that are inclusive of, representative of and accountable to the multiple social interests of the population served’.

First, produce ‘good evidence for policy’:

1. Relate evidence more closely to policy goals.
2. Modify research approaches and methods to answer policy relevant questions.
3. Ensure that the evidence relates to the local or relevant context.

Second, produce the ‘good use of evidence’ by combining:

1. Input legitimacy, to ensure democratic representative bodies have the final say.
2. Throughput legitimacy, to ensure widespread deliberation.
3. Output legitimacy, to ensure proper consideration of the most systematic, unbiased and rigorously produced scientific evidence relevant to the problem.

Parkhurst (2017) suggests that these aims can be pursued in many ways, which raises the possibility of a variety of – potentially contradictory – models of the good governance of evidence even if they pay lip service to all three forms of legitimacy. For example, an EBPM-driven model might prioritize output legitimacy to focus on producing the best possible evidence (from a particular scientific viewpoint) and making sure that it is incorporated into a well-functioning democratic system. A collaborative model might prioritize throughput legitimacy to focus on producing a well-functioning collaborative regime built on engagement, trust and co-produced rules, and incorporating scientific evidence into one part of that regime. While these models might seem at first to be complementary, they prioritize very different problems and they leave unresolved: (1) whose evidence and knowledge counts; and (2) who should be in charge of doing something about it. In other words, even in theory, we will always face inescapably political choices, reflecting different preferences on evidence and processes. Further, they remain as models rather than actual practices, and the design of new ways of working usually seems less realistic than adapting to or refining the practices that already exist.

CONCLUSION

Research on policymaking helps us move beyond the slogans – evidence-based policymaking versus policy-based evidence making – that sum up a political position rather than a coherent and well-informed approach to governance. A policy-based evidence-making approach highlights some commonly expressed and reasonable concerns about governance: policymakers do not use good research evidence whenever it goes against their beliefs or interests, or they cherry-pick the evidence that supports their position. However, it also tends to conflate two problems relating to: (1) the conduct of individual politicians; and (2) the dynamics and rules of the policymaking systems or environments in which they operate. In the absence of a more sophisticated understanding of multi-centric policymaking, these accounts will not be able
to identify and respond to the inevitable gap between researcher requirements and actual policymaking processes. In the absence of insights from collaborative governance, they will miss the benefits of thinking differently about the relationship between evidence, policy and policymaking.

The problem of seeing politics through an EBPM lens relates initially to a misplaced expectation for centralized policymaking. From the perspective of researchers, seeking to identify an authoritative audience for their evidence, centralization may seem like an attractive prospect. The idea of comprehensive rationality involves getting as close as possible to a powerful central government that is able to gather, process, understand and act upon the best available evidence. The idea of a policy cycle gives researchers a clear sense of when and how to engage: gather evidence about the size and urgency of a policy problem, generate evidence-informed solutions, use evidence from previous applications to model or predict their effects, and evaluate the results using well-established research methods.

Insights from multi-centric policymaking highlight two key reasons not to expect a powerful centre to deliver evidence-based outcomes. First, policymakers need to find cognitive shortcuts and organizational rules to ignore most evidence and make choices. Second, they do so in a policymaking environment over which they have limited knowledge and even less control. Combined, these insights suggest that even the most ostensibly powerful central governments must – by necessity, as well as choice – pay attention to a few issues and delegate responsibility for the rest. Necessity and choice help explain why there are many policymaking centres, each with their own formal and informal rules, networks and ways to interpret problems. Further, this outcome has profound implications for EBPM enthusiasts: adapt to the ways in which policymakers understand and use evidence, and to the rules, networks and dominant understandings in the venues you seek to influence; and accept the level of uncertainty that comes with such engagement.

Insights from collaborative governance suggest that a powerful centre, delivering evidence-based outcomes, is not something to which research enthusiasts should aspire. Centralization is conducive only to a model of EBPM that emphasizes a narrowly defined hierarchy of evidence related to a small number of scientific methods. It fosters the sense that researchers can generate the best evidence of successful interventions, to be delivered uniformly and with fidelity to their dosage. As such, this narrow view of what counts as ‘evidence-based’ contrasts heavily with the collaborative forms of governance that identify: (1) a tendency for policy problems to be too complex to be addressed simply via RCTs and a single source of authority; and (2) different principles on which to base democratic and knowledge-informed policymaking. These principles include an appeal to fairness and deliberation built on including knowledge and perspectives from all participants, supported by co-produced rules and norms and the development of trust via regular respectful interaction.

Both insights help us rethink what we might mean by ‘good governance’ in relation to the alleged gap between the supply and use of evidence in policymaking. In one vision, an evidence–policy gap arises whenever a small group of policymakers, at the centre of government, fails to use the best research evidence to define and solve policy problems. In another, we would not want or expect to find a single centre of government or insist on such a narrow view of what counts as good, policy-relevant knowledge. ‘Policy-based evidence-making’ is a catchy slogan, in keeping with current concerns about the pathologies of politics in many political systems. However, ‘evidence-based policymaking’ does not offer a realistic or desirable vision of how to address such concerns.
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