

# The influence of experts on public policy (INFLUEX 2023-2027)

## 1. Excellence

### 1.1 State of the art, knowledge needs and project objectives

During the coronavirus crisis, the presence of experts in policy-making has been on vivid display. Across the world, research institutes and expert groups provide governments with analyses and recommendations. Experts stand side by side with ministers during government press briefings and are invited to TV studios to explain and advise. Politicians repeat that we need to ‘listen to the experts’. Yet, commentators increasingly debate whether the reliance on experts is really democratic and actually contributes to better policies.

The coronavirus crisis is only the latest example of the substantial presence of experts in contemporary governance. Experts are seemingly ‘everywhere’ nowadays, providing advice on everything from economic policy to climate change. But do they make a difference? While politicians sometimes embrace expert advice, they may also ignore expert recommendations or control experts in ways that limit their independence and influence. To what extent do providers of expert advice actually influence public policies? How does influence vary between different types of expert actors, and under what conditions are different expert actors influential? And what are the implications of experts’ influence on public policy for democracy and good governance?

Existing empirical scholarship on expertise and policy-making has failed to tackle the question of expert influence (Christensen 2020). The reasons are partly theoretical and conceptual. For example, the literature on evidence-based policy-making speaks of experts ‘informing’ policy (Head 2015), which obscures how experts are also political actors who seek to influence public policies. Another literature focuses on the different ways in which knowledge is used in policy-making, e.g. to solve problems or for more symbolic reasons (Boswell 2008), yet with unclear implications for the actual influence of experts. But the reasons for the gap are also methodological. While research on the influence of actors such as interest groups (Dür 2008; Klüver 2009; Collins et al. 2013), central banks (Baerg 2020) and political parties (Wilkerson et al. 2015) has seen major methodological advances in recent years, there has been little innovation of methods in studies of expert influence. Alas, scholars who are interested in studying the policy influence of experts will find very little guidance about possible methodological approaches and sources of data.

The normative theory literature on expertise and democracy has similar limitations. To the extent that recent normative discussions among political theorists on ‘epistocracy’ (Estlund 2008) or expert rule at all relate systematically to empirical social and political research (Holst & Molander 2019), the actual influence of experts is typically left un-scrutinized. For instance, in debates about the proper role of experts in governance, both those who see experts as ensuring more ‘evidence-based’ policy-making (Sunstein 2016), and critics who worry that ‘expertization’ leaves us with ‘façade democracy’ (Streeck 2014), tend to assume that experts are influential when present. It is rarely considered whether or under which conditions this is actually the case, and what varying patterns of influence implies from a normative perspective. This is puzzling since it seems likely that assessments of the consequences of experts’ presence in policy-making will depend decisively on which expert actors we are talking about, whether these actors are influential, when, and on what.

**Objectives:** INFLUEX will address these blind spots in existing scholarship by advancing a novel research agenda on expert influence. The project formulates four interlinked objectives:

(1) To *conceptualize* the influence of experts on public policy. A broad range of actors provide decision-makers with expert advice (Craft & Howlett 2013; Campbell & Pedersen 2014). This includes researchers at universities, research institutes and government research agencies, expert professionals in ministries, international organizations or consultancies, and even lay experts or ‘experts by experience’ (Grundmann 2016; Krick 2021). The project offers a novel concept of expert influence that can be applied to study the influence of this whole range of different expert actors. It defines expert influence as the ability of expert actors to shape policy decisions in line with their preferences. Expert influence can be direct, when experts provide information and advice directly to decision-makers that is subsequently incorporated in policy decisions, or indirect, by shaping discussions and setting the agenda in public debate and political discourse.

(2) To *measure* the policy influence of different expert actors. First, the project develops an innovative methodological agenda for studying expert influence. Drawing on advances in quantitative text analysis, it argues that traditional approaches for studying expert influence, such as process-tracing and interviews, ought to be complemented with new techniques like citation analysis and text reuse analysis. Second, the project applies these approaches to analyze new and unique data on the role of experts in Norwegian policy-making. Using self-compiled datasets with information both on the advice produced by various expert actors (e.g. expert commission reports and research agency publications) and on the use of expert advice in white papers,

parliamentary speeches and social media discussions, our studies aim to contribute with new empirical insights on the direct and indirect policy influence of experts.

(3) To *explain* under what conditions different types of expert actors are influential. INFLUEX argues that the influence of different kinds of expert actors depends both on features of the policy area/issue, e.g. technical nature or political salience, and on the government's political orientation. The project makes a novel explanatory contribution by systematically testing these arguments about the conditions for expert influence.

(4) To *assess* the normative significance of patterns of expert influence. The project advances normative debates on experts and policy-making by evaluating the consequences for democracy and good governance of the influence of different expert actors under varying conditions. It thereby responds to calls for political theory that is less 'ideal' and more rigorously linked to empirical research and real-world challenges.

## 1.2 Research questions and hypotheses, theoretical approach and methodology

The project objectives will be pursued through a study of expert influence in Norwegian policy-making, which relies on a range of methodological approaches and combines empirical and normative analysis. The project poses the following research questions:

- To what extent do different types of expert actors influence public policy-making in Norway?
- Under what conditions do different types of expert actors influence public policy?
- What are the consequences of the patterns of expert influence for democracy and good governance?

### *Theoretical approach:*

*Conceptualizing expert influence.* Questions of power and influence are at the very center of studies of politics, as they concern the fundamental question of who decides over public policy. Existing work has conceptualized and examined the policy influence of various types of actors, such as interest groups (Dür 2008; Klüver 2009), and political parties and politicians (Wilkerson et al. 2015). However, the influence of expert actors has received little systematic attention in the literature (Christensen 2020).

By focusing on expert influence, the project distinguishes itself subtly but significantly from existing scholarship on expertise and policy-making. First, in contrast to rationalist work on evidence-based policy-making which sees experts as 'informing' policy-making about what the best policy is from a position outside or above politics (see Newman 2017), the notion of influence implies that experts are conceived of as one type of actor among others vying for influence (Haas 1992). Second, the project shifts the focus from the ways in which expert knowledge is used to whether or not experts are influential. Scholarship on knowledge utilization in policy making has distinguished valuably between the problem-solving, enlightenment, symbolic, and political-strategic uses of knowledge (Weiss 1979; Boswell 2008). Yet, this typology has partly obscured the question of experts' influence, as the implications of the different types of knowledge utilization for influence are not straightforward: e.g. experts appointed for symbolic reasons may or may not have policy influence

The project defines expert influence as *the ability of an expert actor to shape a policy decision in line with its preferences* (cf. Dür's [2008] definition of interest group influence). The first element of this definition is the *expert actor*. Scholarship on 'knowledge regimes' (Campbell & Pedersen 2014) and 'policy advisory systems' (Craft & Howlett 2013) highlights that multiple actors provide decision-makers with policy-relevant knowledge. There are both in-house experts who provide politicians with day-to-day advice and information, that is, ministerial bureaucracies, agencies and state research bodies, and external providers of expertise, such as universities, independent research institutes, consultancy firms and think tanks. Furthermore, decision-makers nowadays not only relate to national experts, but also to international knowledge providers such as international agencies (Christensen & Holst 2020a). A growing literature also argues for expanding the definition of experts to a new category of expert actors, namely 'lay experts' or 'citizen experts' who provide local, practical or experience-based knowledge in policy-making processes (Grundmann 2016; Krick 2021). In this project, we consider this whole range of different expert actors.

The second element of the definition concerns the policy *preferences* of expert actors. If influence is about achieving a preferred outcome, an actor's preferences are decisive. Policy preferences may derive from many sources, including political attitudes or organizational interests. Yet, we assume that expert actors to a large degree develop policy preferences based on their expert knowledge, which gives rise to specific worldviews, beliefs about cause-and-effect relationships and ideas about appropriate policy solutions (Haas 1992). We also assume that expert actors to some extent are able to formulate independent preferences, which do not simply mirror those of other political actors like elected leaders or interest groups.

The third element of the influence definition is the *policy decision*. The end result of expert influence is that the content of some public policy comes to reflect the preferences of expert actors. This can involve a change in public policy, or policy stability, if expert actors successfully manage to defend their preferred policy

in the face of political or interest group pressure for policy change. Moreover, one can study experts' influence on a specific policy decision or on multiple decisions over time.

Furthermore, the project distinguishes between the different channels through which expert actors can influence policy decisions. On the one hand, experts can have *direct influence* on policy decisions by providing information directly to decision-makers. For example, experts can be appointed to advisory groups that recommend policy solutions; expert agencies and international organizations can issue policy advice to government; expert publications can be cited in white papers and bills; etc. Direct influence may thus entail that decision-makers adopt a certain policy, reformulate a policy, or reconsider new initiatives as a direct result of expert input. INFLUEX will measure experts' direct influence in several ways, including by tracing citations to expert publications and text copied from expert reports in government white papers (WP2) and by examining the correspondence between initial expert preferences and final policy decisions (WP5).

Experts also have *indirect influence* on policy decisions. Often coined knowledge creep (Weiss 1990), indirect influence entails that expertise finds its way to policymakers and politicians incrementally. Granted, decisions often take shape gradually and through uncoordinated steps, and policymakers' uptake of expertise often comes about through intermediaries such as the media, the parliament, or by personal networks. For example, an expert proposal can be repeatedly referred to by politicians in the media or in parliamentary debates, and thereby affect policy decisions by shaping the perception of a problem and appropriate solutions. Experts may also influence political discourse through their positions as opinion leaders in traditional and social media debate (Dubois & Gaffney 2014). In INFLUEX, we examine experts' indirect impact on political discourse and politicians through a two-fold strategy: i) by mapping informal networks, interactions and communication between politicians and experts in social media, and ii) by examining whether and how politicians make use of expert knowledge and arguments in conventional political debate in parliament (WP3).

*Explaining expert influence.* Furthermore, INFLUEX aims to formulate and test arguments about the conditions under which different kinds of expert actors are influential. Throughout the different work-packages, we examine two sets of factors that may explain variation in expert influence.

First, the influence of different expert actors is likely to vary depending on features of the *policy area and issue*. In policy areas and issues that are characterized by highly technical questions and high levels of uncertainty, decision-makers are likely to have a greater demand for advanced specialized knowledge (Haas 1992; Radaelli 1999). We therefore expect experts who produce this kind of knowledge – particularly experts in universities, research institutes, government research agencies and international organizations/agencies – to be more influential in highly technical or uncertain fields than in other areas. For example, economic policy is often regarded as a 'scientized' policy area, due partly to policymakers' need for specialized economic knowledge (Christensen 2017). Public policies regarding climate change and transport are also often regarded as shaped by scientific experts because of their technical nature (e.g. Nutley et al., 2000). By contrast, we expect less scientific knowledge providers such as citizen experts or advocacy think tanks to have less influence in these areas than elsewhere. The degree of political salience and contestation may also condition expert influence (Radaelli 1999; Boswell 2008). On salient issues, such as immigration and social welfare (cf. Baumgartner & Jones 2005), we expect policy choices to be more dictated by political considerations and less by academics and researchers. By contrast, we would expect expert actors that provide more politically tailored advice, such as think tanks or consultancies, to have greater influence on these issues.

Second, the influence of experts on policy decisions is likely to depend on features of those who make final decisions, namely *politicians and incumbent governments*. To political elites and governments, expertise may serve as ammunition to get political agendas across or policies implemented (Radaelli 1999). And based on partisan theory (e.g. Castles, 1982; Schmitt, 1996), we expect there to be differences between political parties in the extent to which they grant experts policy influence. We argue that left-leaning parties and right-leaning parties are likely to prefer different kinds of experts and expertise (see Hesstvedt 2022). Left-leaning parties are more likely to trust policy advice from social scientists in academia, whose expertise overlaps with the left's issue focus and who tend to hold more left-leaning political views, leading us to expect that these expert actors will have greater influence when the left is in power. Similarly, since greater lay involvement in policy-making is a predominantly progressive cause, we expect citizen experts to have more influence under left-wing governments. Correspondingly, right-leaning parties are likely to have lower trust in social scientists and citizen experts. Instead, we expect them to lean more on expert actors who provide business and market-oriented policy advice, such as private consultancies and conservative think tanks (Van den Berg et al. 2019; Christensen & Holst 2020b). This may be particularly pronounced for populist right parties, who may nurture a strong distrust towards traditional knowledge providers like academics and civil servants (e.g. Mudde 2007).

### *Assessing expert influence*

Extensive normative debates in political theory focus on the consequences of the role of experts in policy-making for both democratic credentials and governance quality (see Moore 2017). Where some invest hopes in experts as facilitators of genuine citizen deliberations (Pincione & Teson 2006), and ensuring more ‘truth-sensitive’ policies (Christiano 2012), others worry that a greater scope for experts in governance causes democratic deficits (Habermas 2015) and skewed decisions when experts are biased or wrong (Moore 2017).

However, ongoing discussions have three limitations that INFLUEX will address. First, both the hopes invested in experts and the democratic and epistemic worries over experts’ political role are mainly elaborated in general and abstract terms. This makes it hard to relate the involved normative concerns to empirically traceable developments, and to provide accurate assessments of patterns in present-day ‘expert-reliant governance’ (Langvatn & Holst 2022). Second, political theorists tend to approach experts in policy-making as if experts’ presence translates into impact. This conceals how the actual influence of experts is an empirical variable, and forecloses a needed assessment of the normative implications of varying patterns of influence. Third, this has resulted in a voluminous political theory literature on experts that leaves the question of different expert actors’ actual influence strangely unaddressed, even if it seems likely that normative assessments of experts’ political role must consider which experts we are talking about and whether they have genuine impact.

Responding to these limits, INFLUEX will elaborate and concretize the range of normative concerns in political theory discussions of experts’ role in policy-making, and explicate the extent to which many of them hinge on the degree and type of expert influence. Based on this operationalization, INFLUEX will in a second stage provide a normative assessment of the project’s different findings regarding experts’ influence.

### *Methodology and data*

*Measuring expert influence.* INFLUEX pursues a novel methodological agenda for studying expert influence. So far, the measurement of expert influence has received little attention (Christensen 2020). Existing research predominantly relies on two approaches: (a) *process-tracing*, i.e. examining the steps in the process through which an actor influences a decision (e.g. Boswell 2008); and (b) *analysis of attributed influence*, which measures perceptions of expert influence based on the expert’s own assessment or on the perceptions of decision-makers (e.g. Head et al. 2014). Yet, these approaches have important limits: Process-tracing can only be applied to a handful of cases at a time, and the attributed influence approach relies on perceptions of influence rather than on an objective influence measure. Also, the increasing availability of documents relevant for studying expert influence, e.g. academic publications, advisory reports, media articles and government white papers, has opened up for alternative methodological approaches (cf. Wilkerson and Casas 2017).

In addition to the traditional approaches, the project therefore pursues four novel strategies for examining expert influence based on text and documents. These approaches have been used to study the policy influence of actors such as interest groups and politicians, but have so far not been systematically applied to the study of expert influence: (c) *analysis of preference attainment*, which involves assessing the degree to which final policy decisions match initial expert preferences based on the coding of documents expressing expert preferences and policy decisions (cf. Dür 2008; Klüver 2009); (d) *quantitative text analysis*, including a text reuse approach to examine to what extent policy decision documents reuse (i.e. borrow, copy or plagiarize) text from expert documents (cf. Collins et al. 2013; Wilkerson et al. 2015); (e) *citation analysis*, which entails investigating to what extent expert actors and the documents they produce are mentioned in political discussions about policy and in policy decision documents (see Pattyn et al. 2020; Christensen and Hesstvedt 2021); and (f) *network analysis* of interaction between politicians and experts in social media, that enables us to assess expert’s influence through informal channels and political discourse (e.g. Barberá, 2015).

This bigger menu of approaches increases our ability to pick a strategy that is well suited to the specific research question and data at hand. Triangulation these approaches also offers unique opportunities for validating our influence measures. INFLUEX employs all six methodological strategies to examine expert influence in different WPs: process-tracing (WP4), attributed influence (WP1), preference attainment (WP5), citation analysis (WP2A, WP3A), text reuse analysis (WP2B) and network analysis (WP3B).

*Bridging normative and empirical analysis.* INFLUEX contributes methodologically also in its normative part. In corners of political theory, there is a rising interest in giving normative assessments a firmer empirical foundation, moving beyond armchair philosophy. Yet, the questions of method raised by the ambition to bridge normative and empirical analysis have received limited attention both from critics of ‘ideal’ theory (e.g. Wolff 2018) and in recent contributions on the methodology of political theory (e.g. List & Valentini 2016). In its methodological approach, INFLUEX emphasizes, first, *operationalization*. The project seeks to translate the general and abstract hopes and worries of philosophical discourse into parameters that are normative significant, yet empirically traceable. The emphasis is, second, on *rigorous empirical analysis*.

INFLUEX explicates how normatively significant parameters are sensitive to empirical variation, and provides an evaluation of the full set of specific findings from the empirical parts of the project. This careful bridging of political theory and social science scholarship sets INFLUEX apart from other research projects.

*Study context and data.* Empirically, the project focuses on the influence of different expert actors in Norwegian policy-making. The reasons for examining the Norwegian case are both theoretical and practical. First, Norway has traditionally scored high on indicators of democratic and governance quality, and this is often attributed to a specific Nordic governance model where knowledge-based decision-making is an important pillar, yet within the confines of channels of citizens participation, and a social-democratic welfare regime (Christensen et al. 2017). The project allows us to test this assumption, in part by investigating the actual influence of different expert actors on public policy under different conditions, in part by assessing the normative consequences of varying influence patterns on democratic credentials and governance quality.

Second, and more pragmatically, the Norwegian case offers unique data that allows for fine-grained analyses of expert influence. The project will exploit large-scale data sets with information about government white papers, official advisory commission reports and reports from other knowledge providers to government from the last 20 years (including citation data and text data), which have been compiled by the project team in previous projects (Hesstvedt 2019). In addition, the project will gather data on mentions of expert actors and publications in social media and parliamentary debates.

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