

Evidence-based arguments in direct-democratic campaigns: The case of health policy

Inaugural dissertation submitted by Iris Stucki in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of *Doctor Administrationis Rei Publicae* at the Faculty of Business, Economics and Social Sciences of the University of Bern.

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Introduction

This collection of four papers, titled “Evidence-based arguments in direct-democratic campaigns: The case of health policy”, constitutes my cumulative doctoral thesis in Public Administration (Doctor Administrationis Rei Publicae) at the Faculty of Business, Economics and Social Sciences of the University of Bern, Switzerland. The studies all focus on the use of evidence in public debate on votes on health policy issues, particularly smoking bans.

According to Harold D. Lasswell (1971, 28), the success of democracy can be enhanced through an informed public discourse founded on free access to facts. Lasswell (1951) coined the term *intelligent democracy*, meaning that good decision making is dependent on good information. Similarly, the transfer of knowledge is a key component of evidence-based policy making (EBPM). EBPM tries to improve political practice by integrating evidence into the political decision-making process (Nutley et al. 2010). In direct-democratic votes on policy issues, the public decides directly on the adoption of the policies. Thus, direct-democratic campaigns offer an ideal environment in which to test Lasswell’s claim about intelligent democracy. Citizens need to receive information on evidence as a basis on which to decide whether a policy works or not. Of particular importance in this context are policy evaluation studies. Policy evaluation studies assess the implementation and the impact of a policy measure in a systematic and transparent way (Widmer and De Rocchi, 2012: 11). Scientific methods are used to provide information on whether a policy measure actually works. Thus, the better voters are informed about policy evaluation results, the better they should be able to base their decision on “what works” (Nutley et al., 2010: 133). However, the presentation of arguments within the campaigns poses challenges to this rationalist view and invites an interpretative view of evidence instead.

From an interpretative viewpoint, evaluation results remain inconclusive and uncertain rather than objective, and they can be interpreted variously depending on the understanding of the problem (Edelman 2010, 105–7; Shulock 1999, 229). Direct-democratic campaigns take place in a context where other forms of knowledge and ethical and moral concerns have to be taken into account. In addition, voters are confronted with a decision-making environment of increased complexity (Sanderson 2009, 705–6). Simple cause-effect assumptions cease to be valid, and effects may result from dynamic interactions within the entire system. Thus, knowledge of parts of the system does not capture the effect of the whole. To be able to integrate evaluation results into the decision process, we need to approach evidence not in the instrumental sense of “what works” but rather with a practical guide to “what is appropriate” (Sanderson 2009, 711). Evidence does not conclusively demonstrate the choice that should be taken but provides support for a course of action (Henry 2000). Evidence-

based policy making from an interpretative perspective becomes more a part of the direct-democratic process than the decision-making process, with the aim of informing rather than influencing policies (Shulock 1999, 227). Voters, at best, might learn from evidence in a way that eventually leads to common knowledge (Dunlop 2014, 218). This means that evidence can enrich the political discourse with evidence-based presentations of different perspectives (Boswell 2009, 73; Shulock 1999, 229), and its role is to engage in a reasoned discourse about the most plausible and convincing argument in a transparent way (Fischer 2007). This interpretive view of EBPM is compatible with the premise that the function of all reasoning is argumentative and that the aim of reasoning is to form arguments intended to persuade (Mercier and Sperber 2011, 58). From the interpretative perspective, the emphasis lies on a communicative process based on dialogue and argument (Majone 1989, 22).

Switzerland is a particularly appropriate place in which to study the use of evidence in direct-democratic campaigns, because it has been claimed to be a role model for direct democracy thanks to the high frequency of popular votes (Schmitter and Trechsel, 2004,81). Swiss citizens have the final say in most of the important decisions of national politics (Sager and Zollinger 2011). Preceding a vote, political actors form ad hoc coalitions for or against the issue and engage in a direct-democratic campaign (Wirth et al. 2010). Swiss citizens base their voting choice predominantly on arguments provided by political actors in the media during the campaign (Kriesi 2005: 234, Kriesi 2012b: 236). The use of evidence is analyzed in the health sector because policy evaluations are conducted in this sector particularly often, not only in Switzerland but also internationally (Balthasar 2010). Evaluation provides a precondition for evidence-based policy making (Balthasar 2010, 333). Thus, the health sector should serve as the “most likely case” (Odell 2001, 166); the frequent evaluation that occurs in this sector is likely to lead to frequent reporting of evidence.

The doctoral thesis approaches the use of evidence in direct-democratic campaigns from the perspectives of both sender (the crafting of arguments) and receiver (reading of arguments). The thesis rests on Lasswell’s normative assumption that the success of democracy depends upon informed decision making. Evidence-based argumentation is of higher quality and can help make citizens to achieve better decisions because it enhances the quality of the debate, the quality of the opinion, and eventually, the quality of the policy. To illustrate the analysis, I take Henry and Mark’s (2003) model of evaluation influence (see Table 1). They perceive the goal of evaluation to be social betterment. Evaluation is conceived of as program and its results as output that eventually leads to social betterment. On its path to social betterment, evaluation can influence a range of outcomes (Henry and Mark 2003, 295–96). ‘Use’ in this conception is an indicator of a change process triggered by the evaluation.

Table 1: Focus of dissertation using Henry & Mark's (2003) model of evaluation influence

<i>Output</i>	<i>Outcome I</i>	<i>Outcome II</i>	<i>Outcome III</i>	<i>Impact</i>
Step	Public debate	Opinion formation	Policy change	Social betterment
Indicator of evaluation influence	Reference to evaluation results	Reading of evaluation results	Integration of results in decision	
Level	Interpersonal	Individual	Collective	
Main use	Political	Conceptual	Instrumental	

I focus on Outcomes I and II and use two indicators: reference to evaluation results and reading of evaluation results. More proximate outcomes include reference to evaluation results in the public debate; this takes place at an interpersonal level with proponents and opponents substantiating their arguments with evaluation results. This political use may mediate further outcomes, such as the reading of evaluation results in articles, which help to form opinions. Here, evaluation findings are used conceptually, causing some change in the thought or actions of an individual. The model is a simplified version of reality and only serves as illustration for the different elements of my research. I do not test the dependencies of these steps in particular because Sanderson argues that in reality the complexity of the route to social betterment is characterised by non-linear dynamics (2006, 121).

The following research questions are at the heart of the studies: To what extent is evidence used in direct-democratic campaigns? How often do proponents and opponents use evidence, and which actors are most inclined to integrate evidence into their discourse? For what kind of arguments is evidence most used? What are the functions of evidence-based arguments? How do evidence-based arguments and normative arguments work together? And finally, what characterises voters that read evidence-based arguments?

An overview of the papers is presented below. Summarizing the main results, the studies show on the one hand that the volume of evidence reported is low: only 6.8% of media items contain a reference to evidence, and just 6.4 % of the arguments refer to evidence. On the other hand, the results indicate that the barriers facing voters who seek to inform themselves about evidence are high: voters need to have a high involvement and a high political sophistication to inform themselves about evaluation results in a campaign.

The first paper in this collection, titled “The use of evidence in public debates in the media: The case of Swiss direct-democratic campaigns in the health policy sector” (early online in *Evidence & Policy*) focuses on the use of evidence in media news reporting prior to votes on health policy issues. I analyse firstly how political actors use evidence in the arguments they want to convey to the public via the media and secondly how the public discourse is mediated via those media. The paper uses chi-square tests to compare the proportions of items in which evidence was reported with those in which no evidence was reported. Of 5030 media items retrieved, a reference to evidence is found in 6.8%. The analysis shows that experts, as authors of items, and interviews and comments, as types, use evidence above average. However, experts and the government are among the least frequently presented sources of arguments. The sparsity of arguments from the government can be explained by the publication of the governmental booklet, in which the government presents evidence to the public to a much higher extent than in the media discourse. However, the study indicates that collaboration between experts and journalists presents a challenge that obstructs the realisation of EBPM in the practice of democracy.

The second paper, titled “Evidence-based arguments in direct democracy: The case of smoking bans in Switzerland” (early online in *Evaluation and Program Planning*) moves from the level of the media item to the level of the argument and focuses on the issue of smoking bans. The study examines 16 public debates that took place during Swiss direct-democratic campaigns on smoking bans between 2005 and 2012. By comparing evidence-based arguments with arguments that do not refer to evidence, the article shows that evaluation results are mostly cited in support of causal arguments referring to the effects of policy interventions, which contributes to an informed discourse. The results indicate that common knowledge has an impact on how evidence is used politically. Knowledge about specific impacts seems to foster the use of arguments referring to general evidence. Conversely, when the impact is not yet clear, reference to specific studies is preferred to raise the credibility of arguments. The results indicate that the political use of specific studies, by adding new information about the policy, might eventually lead to a consolidation of common knowledge related to the impacts. The results further show that researchers, such as evaluators, have the highest chance of bringing specific studies into the discourse. At best, then, the political use of evaluation results by evaluators leads to a conceptual use of those results by voters. Thus, provided that they are willing to take part in the discourse, evaluators have the potential to act as teachers at the interface between political and conceptual use and so fulfil a key role in enhancing democracy.

The third paper, titled “Arguing about smoking bans: The role of evidence in the social construction of conflicting policy ideas” (early online in *Critical Policy Studies*) stays at the

level of the argument but focuses on how evidence-based and normative arguments are intertwined to form policy ideas. The study again examines 16 campaigns concerning smoking bans in Switzerland between 2005 and 2012. It analyses how evidence is used in conflicting policy ideas about smoking bans and how social constructions are affected by this. A qualitative content analysis of campaign material reveals that evidence does not suffice to promote policy solutions; however, the contestedness of evidence influences the social construction of target groups. Powerful ideas benefit from uncontested evidence, which allows the unanimous construction of problems of target groups as publicly important. Contested evidence, by contrast, may impede policy solutions. The study corroborates the notion that ideas and discourse are central to policy change. Observing discourse over ideas enables policy analysis to trace the origin of the idea and to identify which agents promote which interests and ideas, including evidence claims, at the expense of others and why. The results indicate that we need evidence to be widely accepted to close the gap between evidence and policy, which then allows institutional change to take place. This is where experts with specialised knowledge about the policy problem are required. The more that widely accepted evidence is brought into the public debate, the harder it is for actors such as the tobacco industry, to successfully maintain the contestedness of an issue.

The fourth paper, co-authored with Lyn Pleger and Fritz Sager and titled “The making of the informed voter: A split-ballot survey on the use of scientific evidence in direct-democratic campaigns” (under review), explores whether and to what extent voters choose information on evaluation results when informing themselves about an issue-specific vote. It starts from the premise that existing evidence has to be acknowledged as a source of relevant information before knowledge can inform decision making. The analysis is based on a split-ballot survey of one group that voted and another group asked for general judgments on a specific issue. Results show that voters, compared to people making a general judgement, do indeed choose evidence-based information, especially when their involvement with the issue is high and when they are well educated. Voters with prior opinions on an issue prefer evidence-based information that support their opinions, while voters without prior opinions choose both pro and con sources equally. This motivation to find support for one’s own opinion in the context of a vote is only likely to decrease when reading more than one media item. Political engagement seems to play an additional role for voters in whether they choose to read several media items or only one. Thus, if our aim is a high quality of opinion, high personal involvement, while necessary, does not suffice. The challenge for democratic politics is to ensure that voters are highly engaged, highly involved, and highly educated at the same time and to the same degree.

In sum, the four papers show that we need more evidence-based arguments in direct-democratic campaigns and that we need ways to ensure that citizens have the opportunity to learn about this evidence. My research implies two possible ways out of the dilemma for EBPM in direct democracy.

The first is based on the concept of knowledge-based journalism (Nisbet and Fahy 2015). Here, journalists function as critically informed explainers of science, as facilitators of discussions, and as presenters of a broad portfolio of policy solutions. To fulfil such an ideal role, they depend on the help of experts. Experts themselves recognise that they have a role to play in educating the public in policy debates, but many hesitate to participate because they fear the incorrect quotations and unpredictability of journalists (Besley and Nisbet 2013). Thus, to be able to enrich the discourse with evidence, experts need to accept that their knowledge might be reinterpreted in the attempts of the public to articulate their own realities, and that other knowledge might be equally important for decision making.

The second is based on the concept of deliberative democratic exercises, such as citizens' juries or deliberative polls, in which a representative sample of the population makes an informed decision based on information material, discussions with experts, and hearings (Dryzek 2009). Deliberative exercises have been found to raise political engagement when involvement is low and to support citizens in overcoming political apathy (Dienel 2002, 188; Fishkin 1995, 43). In addition, they have been found to encourage active citizenship and to increase citizens' willingness to become involved in decision making (Coote and Lenaghan 1997, 88). If such exercises included the targeted communication of evaluation results from both the pro and the con sides, participants would have to grapple with information from evaluation results in envisioning the concrete impacts of a policy measure. Besides raising participants' involvement through their learning about possible impacts, such deliberative discussions might also enhance political knowledge by educating citizens about policies (see also Dunlop and Radaelli 2013).

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