

How does Polarisation affect the Quality of Evidence-Based Policy?

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Evidence-based policy is the process of making policy by consulting credible and relevant evidence to make decisions. *Policy-based evidence* is its opposite. It is when the process of evidence-based policy is leveraged by ‘policy elites to increase their strategic role over what constitutes a social problem’ (Marston & Watts 2003, p.158). Here, I’d like to make the case for a shift in the quality of evidence-based policy. Specifically, from evidence-based policy to policy-based evidence. And I’d like to say that this shift negatively affects the quality of evidence-based policy when caused by political polarisation.

What does it mean to be politically polarised? Well, we all believe things. But people can take different paths and end up with different beliefs about, say, the same political topic ϕ . This can lead to the following interaction:

‘I care about ϕ . I think its continuation is good’, says Isabelle.

Clarence responds, ‘You fool! We need to stop ϕ .’

‘Nuh-uh’, retorts Isabelle.

Say Isabelle and Clarence had similar upbringings, but Isabelle became liberal and Clarence became conservative. Then we can say Isabelle and Clarence are *polarised* on ϕ . And I’ll argue that people being both polarised *re.* topics dealt with by policy makers (e.g., immigration, war, healthcare, etc.) is bad for evidence-based policy.

This is my strategy: first, I’ll unpack polarisation and say something about how this limits a group’s set of prominent perspectives (§2), I’ll highlight the relevant structure of policymaking (§3), and finally bring this together to argue that polarisation perpetuates a shift from evidence-based policy to policy-based evidence.

1 Divide and Polarise

People polarise in two relevant ways: *profoundly* and *persistently* (Dorst 2023, p.357). Profound polarisation is when the polarisation is so extreme that they cannot understand one another’s perspective (Sunstein 2000). Persistent polarisation is when, in discussion, individuals don’t revise their perspectives on the topic at hand (Pew Research Center 2016). Isabelle and Clarence’s dialogue displays both of these dynamics. First, Isabelle thinks ϕ is good, whilst Clarence thinks it’s bad and demands it stops; that is, they’re profoundly polarised. Second, Isabelle refuses consideration of Clarence’s opinion; that is, they’re persistently polarised.

Both of these types of polarisation can happen to groups as well as individuals. Suppose Isabelle and Clarence are representatives for two opposing political organisations. Well, the people who support Isabelle or Clarence will likely have similar views on ϕ ; that is, the collectives who support either Isabelle or Clarence are polarised also.

Some initial observations are in order. I think polarisation is enlightened by the concept of *echo chambers*. This phenomena is social–i.e., concerning groups–and epistemic–i.e., dealing with people’s beliefs (Nguyen 2020). What’s most relevant for us is the upshot of these concepts, *viz.* that people preserve the noetic structure of their positions despite what others with different opinions say to them. Why? Because they’re part of a group which, as a collective, will support its members. This can undergenerate a diversity of opinion and overgenerate confidence in that opinion. Two upshots:

RESTRICT

Less likelihood to diverge from their collective.

LIMIT

Less likelihood of having a diversity of prominent opinions

LIMIT needs developing more. Why is it less likely? Cue persistent polarisation. Specifically, the persisting acceptance of in-group members, and hostility to the out-group (Hobolt et al. 2024, p.1464). Say Justin has no beliefs about ϕ , but he’s liberal. Justin sees Isabelle debating Clarence on YouTube¹. Because of Justin’s liberal priors, he’s more likely to side with Isabelle because he shares more beliefs with her than with Clarence. Moreover, she’s really confident about her position on ϕ , which Justin may adopt also without good justification. Justin watches, agrees, and adopts Isabelle’s position on ϕ . He also defends this belief strongly, just as Isabelle did. Why? Because polarised perspectives are *infectious*: in-group members are drawn to beliefs espoused by other in-group members. That is, if someone has no priors about ϕ , but shares prior political beliefs with a proponent some other belief about ϕ , they’re more likely to adopt that other belief. Therefore, they’re less likely to adopt the out-group’s position on ϕ .

So, people and groups can be profoundly and persistently polarised, which RESTRICT and LIMIT. Now, let’s turn to polarisation’s effect on evidence-based policy making.

2 Good and Bad Policy

Steele 2012 represents the structure of evidence-based policy well. Let S be the state of the world, A_n the actions policy makers will take, and O_n the consequence of the action in the respective state of the world. We get the following:

	S	$\neg S$
A_1	O_1	O_2
A_2	O_3	O_4

Scientists are commissioned to find out the state of the world. So, if they discover that S is true, then the policymaker will pick A_n that has the best outcome in S . That is, the goal of the evidence-based policymaker is to choose the action with the consequence that ‘improve[s] the overall health of the whole system’ (Allen 2022). (I’m being telegraphic here, but for our purposes this is sufficient.)

So how can this process go wrong? By shifting to policy-based evidence. Consider the state-consequence matrix. Let A_1 and O_1 be the desired action and consequence of the policymaker. Policy-based evidence would mean that, instead of investigating both S and $\neg S$, they would commission scientists to investigate S . The scientist may find evidence for and against S , but the policymakers may (purposefully) *cherry-pick*, *misinterpret*, or *misrepresent evidence* (henceforth, *manipulate*) relating to S .

¹Algorithms push content with extreme views to generate more engagement; profound polarisation satisfies the extreme part of this. Moreover, this incentivises people to exploit algorithms by making more extreme content.

Examples of this process abound². Consider one: European immigration policy. Here, evidence was used, not to create policy beneficial for immigrants or Europe’s citizenry, but to lend ‘credibility to controversial claims, [underpin] high-risk decisions or [bolster] the credibility of government agencies’ (Boswell 2009, ii)³. The goal here was not to choose the correct action and consequence based on the evidence, but to gather evidence to support a predetermined choice. In part, then, the consequence of some action (also) includes benefits to policy makers and politicians, and their desirability may overshadow the interests of the individuals and groups the policy will affect. This instrumentalisation of scientific facts for political purposes falls under the remit of policy-based evidence.

3 Polarised Policy

So, what does polarisation have to do with all of this? My answer is twofold. First, by polarisation’s own lights, most people are affected by it and the affected group doesn’t exclude policy makers—i.e., policymakers can be polarised. Recall RESTRICT. I think this affects how policymakers choose which states are investigated by selecting states that potentially yield evidence in favour of their own beliefs. For example, say Clarence is making a policy on ϕ . He wants to stop it. Let S be the state where ϕ has negative economic effects; the best action for him here is *stop* ϕ . But what does he mean by economically negative? economically negative for whom (proletariat, bourgeoisie)? economically negative for what (house prices, salary)? etc.. Of course, he could choose all of these questions, but *restrict* means he’s less likely to diverge from the interests entailed by his polarised position. The point is this: polarisation can prevent policymakers from selecting states that don’t have a bias for their polarised belief. So, they may select evidence to be gathered based on the policy they already have in mind. That is, they implement policy-based evidence.

Similarly for other cases. Suppose policymaker a suffers RESTRICT. And they manipulate evidence in favour of S' , with the intention of acting in a way that has the consequence of personal benefit. If they do this because they’re merely ignorant of the evidence favouring $\neg S'$, this isn’t necessarily bad policymaking—they may be acting in the interests of the whole system. However, if they do it because the consequences under $\neg S'$ don’t align with their polarised beliefs, then they’re making choices that aren’t in the interest of the whole system. Essentially, this is a test for manipulative intention which affects policy quality by driving it to policy-based evidence.

However, perhaps this test is too quick. For it assumes dishonesty of the policymaker. After all, policymakers comprise a small portion of the population. Also, they are politically nuanced and process a lot of information about political topics. If they’re going to take a polarised position, then maybe there’s a good reason. So, what reason can we have for saying they weren’t just ignorant of $\neg S'$, but instead had the manipulative reason in favour of S' ?

So, secondly, we look to LIMIT to. And my answer will focus on explaining how LIMIT ratifies the following problem: the most prominent positions determine what a healthy system looks like. Particularly, how LIMIT can lead to a knowledge-monopoly: ‘*asymmetry in the cognitive resources of actors* [potentially leading] to cognitive closure, ignorance of knowledge pluralism and a more or less explicit tendency to protect the cognitive core of organisations or networks at the science-policy interface against contrary evidence’ (Strassheim & Kettunen 2014, p.263).

Consider a consequence of our problem: states that only affect marginalised groups aren’t considered when defining a healthy system. LIMIT and the case of Clarence and Isabelle explain this well. Let Isabelle be a member of a marginalised group, and Clarence a member of the prominent group and policymaker. They are polarised on a political topic. If LIMIT is true, then Clarence may not only side with the prominent group, but also display hostility towards the out-group when

²E.g., (Weatherall & Bruner 2020).

³Contemporary example: Trump’s ICE.

defending his own beliefs. As such, Clarence, when considering Isabelle’s demands regarding the topic, may discriminate against them because they are out-group beliefs, and part of a marginalised group. This means that there is a rejection of states whose analysis may promote a healthy system for the marginalised group. That is, there’s discrimination *qua manipulation*; hence, policy-based evidence and its negative consequences.

Now, one immediate response to these issues is that policymakers should give ‘[s]pecial attention [...] to vulnerable and marginalized groups and to the harms and benefits to people who cannot easily raise their voices’ (Norheim et al. 2021, p.11). However, this solution fails and my proposed issues persist under polarisation.

Why? Because LIMIT is a mechanism that forms knowledge-monopolies. Consider political topic ϕ . Say Isabelle and Clarence polarise on it. Hence, we’ll assume they suffer from LIMIT. Let them be part of larger respective collective I and C , also polarised on ϕ . Now, because beliefs on ϕ are infectious, we can assume that, when exposed, most members of I or C adopt their in-group’s belief ϕ . Because the set I is marginalised, it will be smaller than the set of C . So, there is a *cognitive asymmetry* between the groups. That is, there is a knowledge-monopoly in favour of C .

And this knowledge-monopoly will exclude marginalised voices. For, as explained, polarisation generates both hostility to the out-group and an inscrutability to the out-groups position (persistent polarisation). And this is amplified when there is simply more people sided with the prominent group over the marginalised group. If this weren’t the case, then the response would work, but *infection* seems to suggest that this is the case, and also that there’s fewer people to be convinced of the marginalised side’s case.

So, the issues I have proposed still hold. Moreover, the concept of knowledge-monopolisation shows why polarisation pushes policymakers to possess the manipulative reason in favour of S . That is, polarisation degrades the quality of evidence-based policy by pushing policymakers to (unintentionally) do policy-based evidence.

Conclusion

Let’s take stock. I’ve argued polarisation on topics dealt with by policymakers isn’t very good for evidence-based policy’s quality. RESTRICT pushes policymakers to choose evidence in a manipulative way—they are pushed to act in line with a policy-based evidence approach. Because of LIMIT, there’s less diversity of opinion which leads to a knowledge-monopoly and all its consequences, and giving reason why policymakers choose manipulatively.

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