

The Political Use of Evidence and Its Contribution to Democratic Discourse

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Abstract: This article argues that evidence, even when used politically, contributes to high-quality democratic discourse. Research results on the use of evidence in referendum campaigns in Switzerland show that (1) evidence fosters discourse quality and shifts the focus away from politics to policy; (2) evaluations and basic research contribute positively to discourse, but not opinion surveys and statistics; (3) the participation of experts and administrative practitioners in discourse is crucial to make evidence available to the public; and (4) evidence is always used as a part of a narrative and can alter the constructed images used in a story. In conclusion, the implications for practitioners are discussed.

A growing body of literature describes how scientific evidence is used in policy making. This scholarship on evidence-based policy making mostly focuses on how evidence is used instrumentally to improve policy and dismisses the use of evidence to support a political position as an unfortunate politicization of science (Boswell 2014, 346; Knorr 1977). In democratic campaigns, however, scientific evidence is mostly used politically. That means that politicians, interest groups, and governments select those findings that support their position and interpret evidence in accordance with their political conviction (Boswell 2009; Shulock 1999). This article assembles the results of a multiyear research project on the political use of scientific evidence in referendum campaigns in Switzerland (Sager 2017; Schlaufer 2016a, 2016b, 2016c; Stucki 2016a, 2016b, 2017; Stucki and Schlaufer 2017).¹ Based on these results, the article argues that using scientific evidence politically contributes to democratic discourse in several ways. More precisely, this article examines four questions: (1) How does the political use of evidence contribute to democratic discourse? (2) What evidence contributes most to democratic discourse? (3) Who uses evidence politically in democratic campaigns? (4) How is evidence used politically?

The article proceeds as follows: The next section details the theoretical approaches employed to examine the political use of evidence. Then, the methodological approach of the research project on the political use of evidence in Swiss referendum campaigns is introduced. The results section follows the research questions and presents a summary of already published work of the authors as well as unpublished overarching data from the research project. Finally, the findings and their practical implications for administrative practitioners are discussed.

The Political Use of Evidence

The traditional scholarship on research utilization (e.g., Weiss 1979) and the more recent literature on evidence-based policy making (e.g., Davies, Nutley, and Smith 2000; Isett, Head, and VanLandingham 2016; Sager 2007) focus almost exclusively on how evidence is used instrumentally in the policy-making process to improve policy. The political use of scientific evidence to justify and legitimize a predetermined position is mostly disregarded. However, scientific evidence arguably is used much more frequently for political than for instrumental purposes (Newman 2017). Furthermore, it is now widely recognized in the evidence-based policy making literature that policy making is not a rational process in which evidence directly influences policy but rather an inherently political process of argumentation and persuasion (Cairney 2016; Newman 2017; Parkhurst 2017; Rissi and Sager 2013). Nonetheless, empirical analyses on the political use of evidence are scarce (for exceptions, see Boswell 2009; Shulock 1999).

The analysis of the political use of evidence in Swiss referendum campaigns builds on a deliberative approach that focuses on the discursive processes leading to public policy decisions (Majone 1989; Pearce, Wesselink, and Colebatch 2014; Shulock 1999; Wesselink, Colebatch, and Pearce 2014). In this view, the goal is not to find an objectively right answer to policy problems but to adhere to a high-quality democratic discourse in which positions are justified and scrutinized and participants are respected and respond to each others' arguments (Chambers 2003). Accordingly, the role of evidence is not to provide ready-made policy solutions but to offer support for argumentation.

Therefore, the analysis also draws on argumentation theory that distinguishes between different types of arguments used in discourse (Dunn 2012; Toulmin 1958). Causal arguments focus on the effects of a policy measure ("the policy should be accepted because it has positive outcomes"), ethical arguments refer to moral principles ("the policy should be refused because it is against our religious believe"), and motivational arguments focus on the preference of other people ("the policy should be accepted, since it is wanted by the majority of the population") (Dunn 2012, 344–45).

Furthermore, to analyze how evidence is used politically, this research also draws on other public policy theories. More precisely, the narrative policy framework (Jones, Shanahan, and McBeth 2014), which studies the role of stories in public policy, is used to examine how evidence is used as a part of a narrative. To understand how evidence changes the images of a policy's target groups, the article builds on the theories of discursive institutionalism (Schmidt 2008) and the social construction of target groups (Schneider and Ingram 1993).

Methodological Approach

The presented research findings are based on an analysis of the use of evidence in Swiss referendum campaigns. By means of referenda, citizens directly decide on policy issues through a majority vote (Sager, Ingold, and Balthasar 2017). Before a vote, the referendum question and the positions of both sides are publicly debated. The news media and the official information brochure provided by the government are the most important channels for these public debates (Bernhard 2012; Tresch 2012). As previous research has shown, referendum campaigns provide a good case to analyze democratic discourse (Maia 2009; Marquis, Schaub, and Gerber 2011; Pilon 2009; Renwick and Lamb 2013). The methodological approach is based on a content analysis of the campaign coverage related to 221 Swiss national and cantonal

referendum campaigns in the fields of health and education between 2000 and 2012. Our analysis includes the official information brochure provided by the government for each vote as well as all newspaper items that mention the issue of the vote during the period two months prior to each vote in the newspaper with the highest circulation in each canton for cantonal votes and in the three major national newspapers for national votes (11,128 total documents). First, the author of each document was coded. Then, a computer-assisted search with keywords related to evidence was conducted to detect documents containing a reference to scientific evidence.² “Containing evidence” means that the document mentions a scientific study or scientific data. In the next step, several quantitative and qualitative analyses at the levels of documents and arguments were conducted. More details on the methodology are reported in table 1, which summarizes the empirical basis of the presented research and shows where the findings of our research project have been published.³ This Viewpoint article assembles for the first time all of these results in one framework to discuss their implications for practice. In addition, some overarching unpublished data on who uses evaluations in the examined campaigns are presented.

How Does the Political Use of Evidence Contribute to Democratic Discourse?

The research findings show two ways in which the political use of evidence can contribute to democratic discourse. First, the political use of evidence leads to higher discourse quality. A comparison of newspaper articles containing evaluation results (N = 63) with comparable newspaper articles (N = 63) without evidence shows how the citation of evidence in the media fosters high-quality discourse (Schlaufer 2016a). The comparison shows that policy positions and claims are justified in newspaper articles that contain evaluations rather than in those not containing evidence. In addition, newspaper articles containing an evaluation also tend to include opposing viewpoints, hence promoting the exchange of information and reasons. In fact, scientific evidence is frequently used to refute opposing viewpoints or to discuss both opposing sides of a referendum question.

Table 1 Empirical Basis

Data	Coding and Data Analysis	Research Questions Results Are Used For	Reference
5,816 newspaper articles and 96 government information documents from 103 cantonal campaigns on school policy	Deductive coding of evidence used and arguments containing evidence per type of actor. Quantitative analysis using frequencies and Pearson’s chi-squared tests	What evidence contributes most to democratic discourse? Who uses evidence politically?	Schlauffer 2016b
5,030 newspaper articles from 117 cantonal and federal campaigns on health policy	Deductive coding of documents and arguments containing evidence per type of actor. Quantitative analysis using chisquared tests and standardized Pearson residuals	Who uses evidence politically?	Stucki 2016b
63 newspaper articles with reference to evaluations and 63 articles without reference to evaluations from 103 campaigns on school policy	Deductive coding of discourse quality criteria (justification, reciprocity, respect). Qualitative analysis and quantitative analysis using chi-squared tests and phi coefficients	How does the political use of evidence contribute to democratic discourse?	Schlauffer 2016a
2,947 arguments from 578 newspaper articles from 16 campaigns on smoking bans	Deductive coding of type of arguments (causal, ethical, motivational) and type of evidence used. Quantitative analysis using chi-squared tests and standardized Pearson residuals	How does the political use of evidence contribute to democratic discourse? What evidence contributes most to democratic discourse? Who uses evidence politically??	Stucki 2016a
148 documents from 53 campaigns on school policy	Deductive coding of narrative elements (setting, moral, characters, story types). Qualitative analysis and quantitative analysis using chi-squared tests, Cramer’s V and t-tests	How is evidence used?	Schlauffer 2016c
3322 arguments from 591 documents from 16 campaigns on smoking bans	Deductive coding of types of arguments (causal, ethical) and target groups. Qualitative analysis	How is evidence used?	Stucki 2017

Second, the political use of evidence leads to a focus on policy rather than politics. The comparison of newspaper articles with and without evidence (Schlauffer 2016a) also shows that argumentation containing evidence is less likely to contain disrespectful language and personal attacks on opponents.

A comparison of arguments that contain scientific evidence (N = 184) with arguments without evidence (N = 2,763) (Stucki 2016a) shows that the majority of arguments in referendum campaigns employ an ethical mode of reasoning—that is, the argument is based on the moral rightness or wrongness of policies. However, scientific evidence is mostly used in support of causal arguments that refer to the potential outcomes of the proposed policy. Therefore, the use of evidence in campaigns leads to more causal arguments that focus on policy, as opposed to ethical arguments, which focus on normative considerations and politics.

What Evidence Contributes Most to Democratic Discourse?

Different types of evidence, such as policy evaluations, research results, opinion surveys, and statistics, may be used to support arguments. However, which type of evidence contributes most to democratic discourse? Stucki (2016a) shows that causal arguments are predominantly backed by findings from policy evaluations and basic research. Policy evaluations and basic research contain policy-relevant information and allow causal attribution to potential impacts of a policy. Conversely, other types of scientific evidence fail to add information on specific policies: Stucki (2016a) shows that opinion surveys are mostly used to back motivational arguments—that is, arguments that appeal to the motivating power of a majority’s support for a policy. Rankings and statistical data cannot provide policy-relevant information either, as they do not allow for causal attribution (Schlauffer 2016b). Such studies are used primarily to demonstrate policy problems and less to support solutions.

This distinction between policy problems and their solutions in the spirit of Hume’s distinction between Is and Ought is crucial in policy analysis: whether an observed fact is a problem that needs to be resolved constitutes a moral judgment that cannot be derived with reason. However, whether a solution is apt to resolve a given problem is a question regarding causality for which factual evidence is an utmost reasonable backing (Hume 1978, 469).

Who Uses Evidence Politically in Democratic Campaigns?

The overall analysis of the use of evaluations in Swiss referendum campaigns (Stucki and Schlauffer 2017) shows that those actors who participate the least in campaigns use evidence most frequently in their argumentation. Of all documents examined (N = 11,128), only 2.0 percent (217) contain a reference to an evaluation. Table 2 shows that primarily documents authored by members of the

Table 2 Use of Evaluations by Author

	Total Number of Authored Documents (N= 11,128)	Documents Referring to Evidence (% of Authored Documents)
Journalists	5,523	114 (2.1%)
Citizens	3,227	42 (1.3%)
Members of Parliament and parties	1,246	17 (1.4%)
Members of interest groups	827	8 (1.0%)
Members of executive	231	32 (13.9%)
Experts and scientists	47	4 (8.5%)

executive branch of government (that is, ministers and civil servants) as well as by experts contain evaluations. However, those actors are hardly active in the examined campaigns: experts wrote less than 1 percent of the examined documents and members of the executive only 2 percent. Conversely, almost half of the documents were written by journalists and almost one-third by citizens (i.e., letters to the editor). However, these actors hardly refer to evaluations.

This finding is confirmed by an analysis of all arguments used in votes on smoking bans (N = 3,322 in 591 newspaper articles and government booklets) (Stucki 2017; Stucki and Schlaufer 2017). Besides experts and members of the executive, journalists also use evaluations more often than the other actor groups. In contrast, citizens, as well as parliamentarians and party members display a below-average use of evaluations in their arguments (see table 3).

Table 3 Use of Evaluations in Arguments

	Total Number of Arguments (N= 3,322)	Arguments Referring to Evaluations (% of Total Arguments)
Members of parliament and parties	1,141	13 (1.1%)
Citizens	924	5 (0.5%)
Members of interest groups	723	12 (1.7%)
Journalists	277	33 (11.9%)
Members of executive	202	11 (5.4%)
Experts and scientists	55	20 (36.4%)

How Is Evidence Used Politically?

In referendum campaigns, scientific evidence is always used politically. But how is evidence used politically to convince others of a political position? The findings of the research project show that scientific evidence is never presented “just as facts.” Rather, evidence is always incorporated into the stories and narratives that are used in campaigns to maximize voters’ support. Schlaufer (2016c) shows that evidence can be used in relation to different elements of a narrative to make a story more convincing. Most frequently, evidence is used to describe the problem that the referendum is supposed to solve or to present a solution as effective and superior to the solution proposed by opponents.

The findings further show that powerful stories contain uncontested and publicly accepted evidence. An examination of the use of evidence in referendum campaigns on smoking bans (Stucki 2017) illustrates how uncontested evidence about the negative health impact of tobacco has reinforced the need to protect nonsmokers.

Thus, when scientific evidence is uncontested, evidence can help create a positive and powerful image of the policy’s target group and present its problems as solving an important public problem, which makes policy change possible. However, when scientific evidence is contested, the public importance of the problem is questioned, and policy solutions impeded.

Discussion and Implications for Practitioners

The research presented here shows that the political use of evidence can contribute to democratic discourse by increasing the focus on policy and raise the levels of justification, responsiveness, and respect. However, not all types of evidence contribute equally to discourse: policy evaluations and research findings add information on the impacts of a policy, whereas other studies such as opinion surveys or rankings do not. The reported research also shows that evidence is not frequently used in democratic campaigns. This might be explained by the fact that those actors who use evidence in democratic discourse, namely, members of the executive branch of government and civil servants, as well as experts, hardly participate in campaigns. Moreover, the results have shown that evidence needs to be presented as a part of a story to be most influential, and that uncontested evidence makes a story more powerful.

However, the present findings must also be considered in light of several limitations. Most importantly, these findings pertain only to the examined case of Swiss referendum campaigns in the fields of education and health. Whether they hold true in other contexts, policy fields, and debates other than referendum campaigns needs to be addressed by future research. Furthermore, our study did not include an analysis of whether scientific evidence was accurately reported.

Despite these limitations, there are several implications of these results for administrative practitioners. Most importantly, using evidence to support a political position should not be dismissed as politicization of science but rather as conducive to high-quality democratic discourse. Therefore, practitioners involved in framing public discourse are strongly encouraged to not only actively seek evidence but also use evidence in their argumentation. Practitioners who are involved in the production of evidence as well as policy analysts, scientists, and evaluators should not shy away from publicly sharing analysis that is relevant to the political world. Practitioners as well as scientists have the possibility and the responsibility to actively present evidence (and in particular evaluations and research findings) in the public arena and explain its scope and relevance to citizens. One way this can be done is to combine evidence with stories and emotional appeals (see also Cairney, Oliver, and Wellstead 2016). By doing so, evidence is made available to all (Arinder 2016) and may become increasingly accepted by the public. Publicly accepted and uncontested evidence in turn makes policy change possible. Such evidence-based information allows citizens to learn about effective policy solutions and about the relevance of evidence to their daily lives.

Further analyses show that voters do indeed choose evidence-based information, especially when their involvement with the issue is high and they are well educated (Stucki, Pleger, and Sager 2018). After all, more involved and enlightened citizens are the best answer to the emerging challenges of post-truth democracy.

Notes

- 1 The project was financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation (Number 141893; see Sager, Widmer, and Balthasar 2017).
- 2 The following search terms were used: study, studies, evaluation, inquire(ment), investigation, investigate, evidence, verification, verify, review, examination, examine, survey, analysis, analyze, assess(ment), proof, proven, trial, experiment, test, report, record, demonstration, demonstrate, confirm(ation), detect(ion), research, data, empirical, scientific.
- 3 More information on the methodology and the coding schemes are reported in the respective publications.

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