



Flavia Donadelli

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## When evidence does not matter – What Brazil teaches us about the fragility of evidence based policymaking

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*An underlying assumption of modern political states is that they are rational systems that 'follow the science' to achieve optimal outcomes for their citizens. Whilst COVID-19 continues to foreground the strengths and weaknesses of different national scientific advice systems, **Flavia Donadelli** draws on evidence from Brazilian policymaking to argue that evidence informed policymaking is a far more ephemeral process and heavily dependent on institutional and political contexts for it to operate effectively.*

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There could be no better time to discuss the relationship between scientific evidence and policymaking than now: as the COVID-19's pandemic brutally exposes and brings the intricacies of this complex and unavoidable interaction into the mainstream.

Presently, policy makers rely on scientists more than ever, and the need for scientists to communicate clear and actionable information couldn't be more pressing. Examples of national leaders who decisively searched for and followed scientific advice are now easily contrasted by those that mocked and continue to mock scientific warnings as hysteria. The Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro is amongst the most emblematic cases of the latter, declaring that COVID-19 is nothing but a "small flu" and urging the Brazilian population to get back to work in defiance of local governors and World Health Organization recommendations. However, rather than being a new development, recent Brazilian history is full of symptomatic examples of a poor interaction between **scientific evidence** and **policy making**.



*There is a general expectation in the evidence-based policy making literature that if the right conditions of scientific consensus and effective communication between policymakers and scientists occur, the policy-evidence gap will necessarily narrow*



Taking an example from my research on forestry and pesticides policies in Brazil, despite counting with 34 occasions of direct participation of experts during congressional debates and 4 scientific reports with considerably consensual and directly applicable scientific evidence between 2005 and 2015, the resulting policies markedly opposed scientific advice. Despite being widely available and effectively communicated by scientists to legislators, scientific evidence has been largely disregarded by policy-makers in these two areas.



However, whilst it may or may not be surprising that scientific inputs are not effectively incorporated by Brazilian policy-makers (even in highly technical areas such as these), the underlying reasons for this finding warrant further attention. There is a general expectation in the evidence-based policy making literature that if the right conditions of scientific consensus and effective communication between policymakers and scientists occur, the policy-evidence gap will necessarily narrow. This focus on the analysis of the immediate science-policy interface neglects the broader institutional context that often dictates how evidence is used. Without the necessary institutional pre-conditions,

efforts towards incorporating scientific evidence to policy-making, even if well-intended, are doomed to fail.

Two significant contextual or institutional characteristics to effective evidence use are *political openness* and *consensus requirements*. Political openness refers to the levels of influence of different groups in processes of decision-making. Consensus requirements are associated with how much political consensus is needed before decisions are taken. In relation to consensus requirements, countries such as the US would have lower needs (majoritarian democracies) while Switzerland, Austria, and the Netherlands would tend towards the more consensual end of the spectrum. In relation to political openness, pluralist countries (such as the US) would allow for the highest level of social participation in decision-making, permitting the participation and representation of various social interest groups.



*This sheds light on the disturbing fact that scientific evidence can and has been utterly ignored when it contradicts the dominant interests in majoritarian and relatively closed political systems*



Because of its history and political system, Brazil can be characterised as having very low levels of political openness and medium levels of consensus requirement. In this context, access, voice, and actual interference within political institutions tend to be relatively limited and conditional on personal connections. Moreover, because Brazil has medium levels of consensus requirements, the ideological position with a congressional majority will tend to prevail without much social or political restraint.

The combination of these specific institutional features with a highly conservative political establishment has been proven particularly disastrous for the incorporation of scientific evidence in processes of policy-making in the country. This ultimately resulted in decisions that directly contradicted scientific evidence, such as the reduction of forestry protection requirements for riparian zones in private rural properties, and the reduction of pesticides' controls and authorisation procedures.

This sheds light on the disturbing fact that scientific evidence can and has been utterly ignored when it contradicts the dominant interests in majoritarian and relatively closed political systems such as Brazil, even before they were faced with explicitly polarised scientific controversies such as COVID-19. Whilst it has never been the case that knowledge simply equals power, the marked acceleration of this trend after the 2018 Brazilian elections should alarm even those already sceptical of the evidence-based policy wave. What was prior to the 2018 elections – a veiled

avoidance of scientific evidence – has become explicit scientific negationism. The current Brazilian response to COVID-19 could not be a better and most ill-fated example of this concerning trend. Whilst it might be difficult to re-imagine evidence-based policy systems in times of extreme ideological polarisation, to do so will require a renewed focus on assuring openness, transparency and accountability in decision-making processes.

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*This post draws on the author's article, [When evidence does not matter: The barriers to learning from science in two cases of environmental policy change in Brazil](#), published in *Science and Public Policy*.*

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## About the author



Dr. Flavia Donadelli is a Lecturer at the School of Government of Victoria University of Wellington - NZ and former PhD student at London School of Economics.

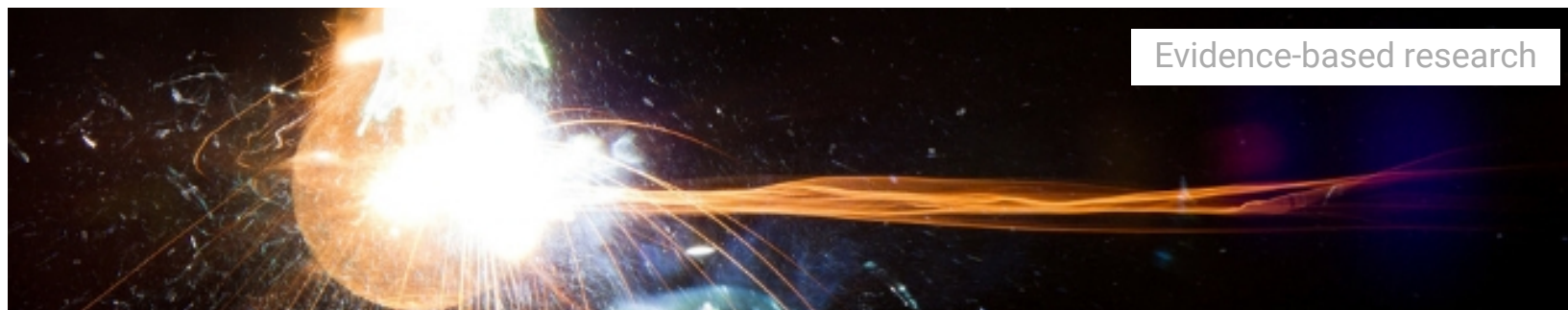
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