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Evidence and Policy-Making: An Organizational Approach

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ABSTRACT

Strengthening the role of evidence in policy-making is increasingly seen as crucial for the quality and legitimacy of public policies. Both among practitioners and scholars, there is a growing awareness that evidence-informed policy-making not only depends on the rigor and relevance of the research, science communication or features of policy-makers. It also depends on how expertise arrangements in public organizations are *organized*. Yet, we currently lack a solid understanding of *how* organization matters for the role of evidence in policy-making. The article presents an organizational-theoretical perspective on how the formal organization of public bureaucracies shapes evidence use in policy-making, with important implications for both analysis and design of expertise arrangements in public administration. The article thereby sets a new research agenda at the intersection of organizational theory and scholarship on evidence and policy-making, which speaks directly to public administration practice.

1 | Introduction

Strengthening the role of evidence in policy-making is increasingly seen as crucial for the quality and legitimacy of public policies. Practitioners in national governments and international organizations are currently actively seeking to understand and improve the conditions for evidence-informed policy-making (e.g., Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking 2017; OECD 2020; European Commission 2022; Council of the European Union 2023; Munteanu et al. 2025). Academics are also paying ever more attention to the evidence-policy relationship, as shown by burgeoning academic literatures about evidence-informed policy-making, knowledge utilization, expert communities and science advice (e.g., Jennings Jr. and Hall 2012; Head 2016; Parkhurst 2017; Christensen and van den Bekerom 2025; Raymaekers et al. 2025).

Discussions about the conditions for evidence-informed policy-making have often revolved around the quality and relevance of research, science communication or features of policy-makers (see e.g., Oliver et al. 2014). Yet, both among academics and practitioners, there is a growing awareness that evidence use in policy-making also depends on how expertise arrangements are *organized* within the government apparatus. Scholars have argued that too little attention has been paid to "the institutional arrangements for connecting research (and other evidence) to policy" (Nutley et al. 2002, 77) and to "how the organization of expert knowledge within government bureaucracies conditions expert influence" (Christensen 2021, 465), and that "a much more explicit consideration of institutions" is needed in research on evidence-informed policy-making (Parkhurst 2017, 31).

Practitioners have also increasingly shifted their attention from individual conditions for evidence use to organizational factors. For instance, a recent OECD report on building capacities for evidence-informed policy-making argues that "the use of evidence is intimately linked to organizational structures and systems" (OECD 2020, 51). The EU's current initiatives to strengthen science-for-policy ecosystems similarly highlight the "organizational structures and processes" that support scientific evidence use in policy-making and the need for "better institutionalized connections" between science and policy (European Commission 2022, 4, 15).

Yet, although there seems to be an emerging consensus *that* organization matters, we so far lack a solid understanding of

Evidence for Practice

- The use of evidence in public policy-making depends crucially on how expertise arrangements are organized within public organizations.
- Practitioners can stimulate evidence-informed policy-making through deliberate (re-)design of arrangements such as research and analysis units, advisory bodies and recruitment systems in public bureaucracies.
- Organizational design choices—such as how expertise functions are located horizontally and vertically within government and how bureaucrats are recruited—have consequences for the attention to evidence, officials' identification with expert roles and the access of experts to decision-making in government organizations.
- There is no one best way to organize expertise for policy in public administration: practitioners need to consider the advantages and disadvantages of design choices and the inter-dependencies between different expertise arrangements.

how organizational factors matter for evidence use in policy-making. An important reason is the current disconnect between evidence-and-policy literature and organizational theory. On the one hand, much research on evidence-informed policy-making springs out of more applied fields, such as health policy and environmental policy, and has rarely engaged with theoretical work on organizations and institutions (Cairney et al. 2016). This research has often taken an atheoretical approach to explaining evidence use, presenting laundry lists of factors that facilitate or hinder evidence use rather than theoretically grounded accounts (Christensen 2021). On the other hand, organizational theory literature has much to say about information processing in organizations in general but has paid little specific attention to how policy-making organizations process scientific information. This is significant since the specific characteristics of scientific evidence, which is derived from systematic analysis and exclusive knowledge, matter for how it is processed in organizations. Certainly, some existing studies offer important clues about the organizational features that can shape evidence use. Yet, they do not provide a coherent framework for analyzing the organizational conditions for evidence-informed policy-making.

The article aims to fill this gap by bringing organizational theory into discussions about evidence and policy-making. It sets a new research agenda by developing an *organizational perspective* on how bureaucratic structures matter for evidence use in public policy-making. This perspective builds on Egeberg and Trondal's (2018) organizational approach to public governance, which highlights how the organization of the government apparatus enables, constrains and shapes policy-making processes (see also Egeberg 1999; Trondal et al. 2010). Organization matters by regulating the *access* of actors to decision-making arenas, directing *attention* to certain issues and information and away from others, and shaping the *role perceptions* of actors. This approach is highly relevant for understanding evidence use in policy-making, as the specific ways in which expertise is organized into the government apparatus may give more or less power to expert actors, direct more or less attention to scientific information and arguments, and be more or less conducive to the development of expert role perceptions among government officials.

The article theorizes how three dimensions of the formal organization of public administrations may affect evidence use in policy-making: (1) *horizontal specialization*, that is, how expertise functions are organized horizontally within and across departments, for example, whether expertise functions are separated from or integrated with other functions; (2) *vertical specialization*, that is, where expertise functions are placed in the organizational hierarchy—close to political decision-makers or at arm's length; and (3) *recruitment and career policies*, such as which qualifications are emphasized in the formal criteria for selecting bureaucrats.

The article focuses on the expertise arrangements[1] of *executive bureaucracies*, which include the regular policy advisory function of ministerial bureaucrats and advisors, research, analysis and evaluation units, scientific advisors, expert agencies, advisory councils and commissions. The theoretical argument applies both to national bureaucracies and international public administrations, such as the European Commission or the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Staff.

Given the multiplicity of concepts employed in literature on evidence/science/knowledge and policy (see Christensen 2021 for an overview), a note on the concepts used in this article is in order: The article defines "evidence" as information produced based on scientific methods and theories or other forms of systematic analysis (e.g., evaluation) (see e.g., Head 2016). It also uses related terms such as "scientific evidence" and "scientific information." By contrast, the article uses the concept "expertise" to refer to the knowledge and skills that individuals have acquired through academic training and deepened through professional experience and that serve as the basis for the production and interpretation of evidence. Furthermore, the concept "expert" and related terms such as "expert advisors" and "professionals" are used to denote the individuals who possess expertise. Considering all three levels—expert actors, the expertise they carry and the evidence they produce and promote—is integral to the article's theoretical argument about how formal organization conditions evidence use in executive bureaucracies.

Significantly, the organizational argument not only helps us better understand how organizational features condition evidence use, it also has implications for how we *design* expertise arrangements in public administration (Egeberg and Trondal 2018). To be sure, how expertise arrangements are organized in different countries and sectors often reflects deep-seated historical legacies (Gornitzka 2003). Still, organizational structures are malleable and can be consciously re-designed by governing majorities (e.g., Whetsell et al. 2021; Van der Heijden 2024), including to strengthen the use of evidence in policy-making (Parkhurst 2017; Christensen et al. 2022). There is currently extensive practical experimentation with new forms of science advice structures (e.g., European Commission 2022). Importantly, the article does

not propose a one-size-fits-all organizational solution for stimulating evidence-informed policy-making in public administrations. Instead, it offers practitioners a much-needed theoretical foundation for thinking about the advantages and disadvantages of different ways of organizing expertise into the government apparatus and the inter-dependencies between different expertise arrangements.

The article proceeds as follows: First, it reviews existing scholarship that touches upon organizational aspects of the evidence-policy relationship. It then develops an organizational-theoretical perspective on how organizational factors matter for evidence use in policy-making and illustrates these arguments with empirical examples. Finally, it discusses the implications for the institutional design of expertise arrangements and the potential and limits of the organizational approach.

2 | Existing Literature

This section examines three existing strands of literature that touch upon how organization matters for the role of evidence in policy-making: the organizational science literature on information processing in organizations, the institutionalist literature on state institutions and expert ideas in policy-making, and system perspectives on the evidence-policy relationship.

2.1 | Organizations and Information Processing

In organizational science, there is long-standing interest in how organizational structure affects information processing in organizations (see e.g., Joseph and Gaba 2020). Going back to the classic work of Simon, how organizations process information is seen as part and parcel of how they make decisions (Simon 1997). Information processing can be defined as the "collecting, assembling, interpreting, and prioritizing [of] signals from the environment" (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). In policy-making organizations, these signals concern "'real-world' policy problems, problem definitions and potential pathways of government action" (Workman et al. 2009, 76). Although the notion of "information" encompasses much more than scientific evidence, scientific knowledge is one possible source of information signals about problem definitions and policy solutions.

In this literature, organizational structure—understood as the ways in which an organization divides its labor and integrates its efforts (Mintzberg 1979)—is seen as "a solution to the problems associated with information processing and a means for coordination in decision making" (Joseph and Gaba 2020, 271). In other words, a formal organizational structure that divides tasks horizontally between different units and defines a hierarchy with different levels of authority is needed to effectively process information and make decisions. An important theoretical assumption is that individual officials have limited cognitive capacity and are boundedly rational (March and Simon 1958). "This is what makes organizational structure such a crucial consideration: It delimits the responsibilities of individual officials, allowing them to focus their attentional capacities on a single domain or aspect of the task environment" (Van der Heijden 2024, 387).

At the same time, the organizational structure introduces bias. There is no such thing as a neutral structure: How tasks are divided horizontally and vertically within a bureaucracy affects which information and advice reach decision-makers and thus influence which decisions are made (Hammond 1986). The formal structure directs the attention of officials toward certain problems and pieces of information and advice and guides communication along specific lines. For instance, which department and office an official works for and what hierarchical level they are placed at strongly shape which colleagues they approach for information, thus affecting information flows within the organization (Whetsell et al. 2021). While formal structures matter in all kinds of organizations, they are especially important for information processing in public organizations due to their "reliance on rules, the hierarchy, and formal processes" (ibid., 654). This literature also highlights that organizational structures can be manipulated and thus are subject to design (Joseph and Gaba 2020; Whetsell et al. 2021). Leaders can consciously seek to improve information processing by (re-)designing organizational structures.

The literature on organizations and information processing offers valuable insights about how organization matters, which will serve as building blocks for our theoretical framework. However, this scholarship also has important limits. Most importantly, it examines information processing in general and has little specific to say about scientific information, the organizational arrangements for processing such information or the structural features that condition evidence use. This is a significant gap since scientific information has particular characteristics: Scientific evidence is generated based on systematic and objective analysis (e.g., Head 2016), and it is rooted in exclusive knowledge that is only fully accessible to professionals with specific academic training (Abbott 1988). These particular features matter for how scientific information is processed in organizations, as we will discuss in the theoretical framework. Moreover, the literature on organizations and information processing is narrowly focused on how organizational structure directs attention, information flows and choice; it has little to say about how structure matters for the identities and role perceptions of officials, which is equally important for understanding bureaucrats' behavior (see Section 3).

2.2 | State Institutions and Expert Ideas in Policy-Making

A second relevant strand of literature is institutionalist scholarship on the state, which has discussed how administrative structures condition the role of experts and expert ideas in policy-making. In their classic studies of economic policy-making, Weir and Skocpol (1985) and Weir (1989) examine how the access of experts and their ideas to policy processes—and their resulting impact on policy—is conditioned by administrative institutions. Although some state structures are open to experts and their ideas, others effectively block the flow of expertise from the academic sphere into policy-making venues. If we want to understand why some expert ideas came to influence policy (and others did not), they argue, we need to ask "whether key state agencies were open or closed to the development or use of innovative perspectives [and] how the normal mechanisms

used by states to incorporate educated expertise served to facilitate or hamper innovations in economic policy" (Weir and Skocpol 1985, 126).

Based on their empirical studies, Weir and Skocpol point to some specific dimensions of administrative institutions that regulate the access of expert knowledge to policy-making: recruitment and promotion policies, the degree of hierarchy, and institutional mechanisms that bring together experts and policymakers. First, "patterns of recruitment to administrative posts and procedures governing advancement are both critical factors in determining whether innovative ideas will emerge within national bureaucracies" (Weir 1989, 59). For instance, whereas recruitment based on rigid civil service-wide guidelines and seniority impedes the inflow of new ideas, "flexible standards of recruitment that allow individual departments to bring in outsiders whose career advancement is not tied to existing procedures, provides a much more hospitable setting for innovative policy proposals" (ibid.).

Second, the degree of hierarchy between politicians and administrators and within administrative departments conditions the access of expert ideas. "Prospects for innovation," argues Weir, "are further enhanced when the relationship between political officials and administrative agencies is not controlled by hierarchical arrangements that serve to restrict the flow of information from various levels of the bureaucracy to political decisionmakers" (1989, 59). Third, Weir and Skocpol (1985, 132–136) find that institutional mechanisms that allow experts, bureaucrats and politicians to interact in policy formulation facilitate the flow of expert knowledge into policy-making. For instance, expert insights had more influence in policy formulation when advisory commissions were anchored within government ministries than when commissions were cut off from the bureaucracy.

More recent studies echo and expand on these insights (e.g., Chwieroth 2009; Christensen 2017). Notably, Smith (2013) applies these arguments to examine "how the organization of policy-making bodies shapes the relationship between research and policy" (p. 81). In a study of policy-making on health inequalities, she finds that the formal division of responsibilities between and within government departments worked as "institutional filters" for research-based ideas, "structur[ing] the routes via which ideas can travel" and thus "shap[ing] the influence of research-based ideas" (p. 87). Both organizational silos and hierarchy prevented the circulation of research-based ideas during policy formulation.

This institutionalist literature thus examines more directly the institutional mechanisms for including expert knowledge in policy-making and how they condition expert influence. Although this scholarship shares with the organizational science literature the emphasis on how administrative structures filter information, it typically talks about these information flows as the spread of ideas and knowledge. The approach is also more actor-focused, with an explicit interest in how state structures condition the access of experts to decision-making. However, an important limitation of this literature is that its insights are predominantly empirically inspired and not firmly rooted in any organizational theory of how administrative structures condition policy-making. This has impeded the development of a more sustained research agenda on the organization of expertise for policy-making.

2.3 | System Perspectives on Evidence for Policy-Making

Third, a growing body of scholarship argues that the manifold organizations that link science and policy-making in a given country or sector can be regarded as a *system*, which scholars have described as "policy advisory systems" (Halligan 1995), "evidence advisory systems" (Parkhurst 2017) or "knowledge regimes" (Campbell and Pedersen 2014). This system perspective has caught on among practitioners, too, as reflected for instance in the European Commission's focus on "science-for-policy ecosystems"[2] (European Commission 2022). These concepts all highlight that the configuration of these "systems" varies across countries and policy areas and that these differences matter for policy-making.

The concept of *policy advisory systems*—defined as "the interlocking set of actors and organizations with unique configurations in each sector and jurisdiction that provides recommendations for action to policy-makers" (Craft and Halligan 2017, 2; Halligan 1995)—springs out of the literature on policy advice. "Policy advice/recommendations" encompasses various forms of advice, including for instance from political advisers or partisan think tanks. Yet, scientific knowledge is one significant source of policy advice, and scientific evidence needs to make its way through the advisory system to reach decision-making.

Halligan (1995) argues that policy advisory systems and the organizations they encompass vary on two main dimensions: location and control (see also Craft and Halligan 2017). Location refers to whether advice production is located inside the public service (e.g., ministry civil servants), in other government bodies (e.g., advisory bodies) or outside government (e.g., private consultancies). Control refers to the degree of government control over advice production. For instance, advice from ministerial civil servants is easier to control than advice from independent advisory bodies or universities. Regarding location, the traditional argument is that advisors who are placed closer to decision-makers ("insiders") will have greater influence on policy than advisory bodies located further away ("outsiders") (Halligan 1995). However, more recent work questions this assumption. Due to growing pluralization and externalization of policy advice, internal advisors increasingly fight for influence with external advisory actors such as think tanks and consultancies (Craft and Howlett 2013).

Parkhurst (2017) proposes the related concept of *evidence-advisory systems*, speaking more directly to literature on evidence-informed policy-making. He argues that to understand and improve evidence use in policy-making, scholars need to shift their attention from "individuals as knowledge brokers" to "systems of evidence advice" (p. 31). He defines evidence-advisory systems as "the collection of structural bodies [formal structures], rules and norms of practice which serve to govern the ways in which evidence informs policy

decisions" (pp. 31–32). These systems govern evidence use by affecting "who has the right to speak on expert matters; when and for which sorts of decisions evidence will be invoked [and] whose interests are represented and promoted" (p. 154). Moreover, evidence-advisory systems can be altered through conscious design. Yet, beyond references to the location of evidence-advisory bodies (Halligan 1995), Parkhurst does not specify which dimensions of formal structures matter for evidence use.

Finally, Campbell and Pedersen's (2014) concept of *knowledge regimes*, rooted in literature on ideas and politics, offers a more institutionalist understanding of the systemic links between knowledge and policy. "Knowledge regimes," they state, "are the organizational and institutional machinery that generates data, research, policy recommendations, and other ideas that influence public debate and policymaking" (p. 3). Inspired by the sociological-institutionalist notion of an organizational field, this regime encompasses "policy research organizations like think tanks, government research units, political party foundations, and others that produce and disseminate policy ideas" (p. 3) and the institutions that govern them. Note that "knowledge" is defined broadly as including ideas, information, data and advice provided by a broad range of actors—and *not* primarily scientific actors.

Campbell and Pedersen's central argument is that the "nationally specific organization of knowledge regimes" shapes the production and use of knowledge, and in turn, the adoption of particular policy ideas (2014, 6). Knowledge regimes vary on several dimensions, including public versus private provision of policy knowledge and the competitive versus consensual character of knowledge production. For instance, they contrast the competitive and partisan knowledge regime in the US with France's statist knowledge regime and the consensus-oriented regime in Denmark.

These perspectives thus lift the analytical attention in discussions of the evidence-policy relationship from the organizational level to the system level. Yet, beyond the broad idea that the configuration of knowledge/advice-producing actors matters and that the different parts of the system are somehow interdependent, these perspectives are theoretically underdeveloped. They do not offer a clear theoretical account of how the organization of different parts of the system matters or how exactly the different parts interact in shaping the role of evidence in governance. Apart from the sketchy notions of location and control, these contributions have little to say about how organizational dimensions of the advisory system/knowledge regime affect evidence use.

3 | Theoretical Framework

The article aims to fill these gaps in existing literature by developing an organizational-theoretical perspective on how organization matters for the role of evidence in public policy-making. It makes a novel theoretical contribution by extending Egeberg and Trondal's (2018) organizational approach to theorize the specific ways in which formal organization shapes evidence use in policy-making.

3.1 | An Organizational Approach to Public Governance

Egeberg and Trondal (2018) offer a general theory of the organizational dimension of public governance (see also Egeberg 1999; Trondal et al. 2010). Given that public bureaucracies play a key role in public policy-making, the organizational configuration of public bureaucracies is crucial for policy-making processes and ultimately for policy choices. "Organizational characteristics," they argue, "systematically enable, constrain and shape public governance processes, thus making some policy choices more likely than others" (p. vii). Organization matters by directing *attention* to certain issues and away from others, by regulating the *access* of actors to decision-making arenas, and by shaping the *role perceptions* of actors.

This perspective builds on the literature on organizational structure and decision-making discussed above, understanding organization as introducing bias in the policy process by shaping information processing, preferences, access and power.[3] But a distinct advantage of this perspective is that it addresses one of the gaps identified in the organizational structure literature by also considering how organizational factors shape the identities and role perceptions of bureaucrats—for example, whether officials identify primarily as political advisors or as experts—which in turn define norms of appropriate behavior (Trondal et al. 2010; Egeberg 1999). This perspective thus sees individual behavior not only as boundedly rational but also as subject to a logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen 1989), which offers a richer understanding of the mechanisms through which formal organization shapes behavior. Furthermore, Egeberg and Trondal's approach helps fill the gaps identified in the literatures on state institutions and advisory systems by offering a theoretically grounded account of specific organizational factors that shape governance processes and the specific mechanisms through which they do so.

3.2 | Organizational Factors and Evidence Use in Policy-Making

Extending this organizational approach, the article theorizes how the organization of public bureaucracies along three dimensions—horizontal and vertical specialization and recruitment policies—can shape evidence use in policy-making, and illustrates the theoretical mechanisms with empirical examples from different types of expertise arrangements in public bureaucracies.

These three dimensions are key aspects of *formal* organization, that is, codified aspects of how organizations do their work and how their different parts relate to each other (Scott and Davis 2007, 22–23). The horizontal division of tasks and the vertical hierarchy for making decisions and overseeing the execution of tasks are the main axes along which an organization is structured to achieve its goals, whereas recruitment policies serve to select people into the organization with relevant skills to carry out these tasks (ibid., 155–160). These aspects of organization are formalized in organization charts, job descriptions,

TABLE 1 | Theoretical framework.

Organizational dimension	Design choice(s)	Implications for attention, access and role perceptions
1. Horizontal specialization	Expertise functions placed in separate units (specialization by process) vs. integrated in sectoral units (specialization by purpose/sector)	Separate expert units are conducive to: – More attention to scientific information – Stronger expert role perceptions – Less access of experts to decision-makers
2. Vertical specialization	Expertise functions placed close to political leaders vs. at lower organizational levels or in arm's-length bodies	Expert units located at greater distance from political leaders are conducive to: – More attention to scientific information – Stronger expert role perceptions – Less access of experts to decision-makers
3. Recruitment and career policies	a. Merit recruitment vs. political appointment	Merit recruitment is conducive to: – Greater access of experts to the bureaucracy – More attention to scientific information – Stronger expert role perceptions
	b. Merit recruitment based on specialist academic credentials vs. generalist competences	Recruitment on specialist academic credentials is conducive to: – Greater access of specialist experts to the bureaucracy – More attention to scientific information – Stronger expert role perceptions
	c. Centralized vs. decentralized recruitment	Decentralized recruitment is conducive to: – Greater access of specialist experts to the bureaucracy – More attention to scientific information – Stronger expert role perceptions
	d. Promotion based on experience within department vs. mobility/rotation requirements	Mobility/rotation requirements are conducive to: – Less access of specialist experts to higher bureaucratic positions – Less attention to scientific information – Weaker expert role perceptions

recruitment procedures, formal selection criteria, and so forth. They are highly relevant for understanding evidence-informed policy-making since they shape not only information flows, but also—and most obviously in the case of recruitment policies—the access of actors who possess expertise and who produce and promote evidence within the organization. This latter aspect is crucial given that the production and interpretation of scientific evidence require methodological skills and theoretical knowledge that are only fully accessible to experts with a specific academic training.

The theoretical framework is presented over the following pages and summarized in Table 1. The framework is meant to apply broadly to different expertise arrangements in executive bureaucracies. However, the three dimensions of the formal organization of expertise functions manifest differently across different types of organizations, such as ministries, agencies and advisory bodies (see Table 2 for an overview).

Certainly, these are not the only relevant aspects of formal organization. For instance, Egeberg and Trondal (2018) also discuss other features such as primary versus secondary structures and organizational size. Another significant dimension that is not examined here is rules about knowledge use in the organization, such as formal requirements for soliciting expert input on proposals or for conducting impact assessments or evaluations of policy measures (e.g., Staroňová 2010). Furthermore, by focusing on formal organizational features, the argument leaves aside the effect of informal aspects of organization, such as culture, norms, values and informal practices (we return to this issue in the Discussion section).

3.2.1 | Horizontal Specialization

First, how expertise functions are organized horizontally within and between government departments can affect evidence use in policy-making. Horizontal specialization refers to how tasks are divided horizontally across organizational units, for instance across ministries or across units within a ministry. Tasks can be divided according to four main principles (Gulick 1937): purpose, that is, by policy sector, such as agriculture or

TABLE 2 | Manifestations of organizational dimensions of expertise arrangements in different types of organizations.

Organizational dimension	Ministries	Agencies	Advisory bodies
1. Horizontal specialization	Within ministries: Expertise functions placed in separate units (e.g., analysis unit, scientific advisor)/organized along professional lines (e.g., a ministry divided into an economic and a legal division) vs. integrated in sectoral units Across ministries: Expertise functions placed in dedicated ministries/central units (e.g., ministry for legal services, central unit promoting evidence-informed policy, central evaluation unit) vs. integrated in line ministries	Within agencies: Expertise functions placed in separate units (e.g., knowledge division, chief scientist)/organized along professional lines vs. integrated in sectoral units Across agencies: Expertise functions placed in dedicated agencies (e.g., bureau of statistics, government research agency) vs. integrated in sectoral agencies (e.g., health agency)	Across advisory bodies: Advisory bodies concerned with the whole range of government activity (e.g., strategic advisory council for government policy) vs. advisory bodies organized along sectoral lines (e.g., advisory council for foreign affairs)
2. Vertical specialization	Expertise functions placed close to the minister (e.g., expert advisors in top ranks of the ministerial bureaucracy) vs. at lower hierarchical levels of the ministry	Expertise functions delegated to a (semi-)independent agency (e.g., regulatory agencies, central banks) vs. kept within the ministry	Expertise functions located in independent advisory bodies (e.g., advisory council with strong formal independence) vs. placed close to the ministry (e.g., advisory commissions formally attached to a ministry)
3. Recruitment and career policies	Ministry officials... a. Appointed based on merit vs. politically appointed	Agency officials... a. Appointed based on merit vs. politically appointed	Members of advisory bodies... a. Selected based on merit vs. politically appointed
	b. Recruited based on specialist academic credentials vs. generalist competences	b. Recruited based on specialist academic credentials vs. generalist competences	b. Selected based on specialist academic credentials vs. generalist competences
	c. Recruited through a central body (e.g., centralized competitions/exams) vs. recruited independently by each ministry	c. Recruited through a central body (e.g., centralized competitions/exams) vs. recruited independently by each agency	n/a
	d. Promoted based on experience within ministry vs. mobility across ministries required	d. Promoted based on experience within agency vs. mobility across government bodies required	n/a

healthcare; function/process, for example, legal tasks or economic analysis; territory; or clientele. Through the division of tasks certain issues are pooled together while other issues are kept apart (Egeberg and Trondal 2018, 8–9). Placing tasks together in an organizational unit leads to greater coordination of these tasks and fosters interaction and common identification among the people handling these tasks. By contrast, separating tasks between different organizational units reduces communication and information flows between staff responsible for the different tasks.

Applied to the organization of expertise functions in government, the key distinction is whether dedicated units are responsible for research/analysis across the organization (i.e., task

specialization based on "process") or whether this responsibility is integrated within units that are divided along sectoral lines (i.e., task specialization by purpose/sector). Examples of the former are departments that provide a specific form of professional knowledge (e.g., the European Commission DG Legal Services), a dedicated analysis division or a chief science advisor in a government department, or a central government office that promotes evidence-informed policy-making (e.g., the UK Cabinet Office What Works Team). Table 2 offers a more detailed overview of how the horizontal specialization of expertise functions manifests across different types of organizations.

Different arguments can be made about the consequences of these two different ways of organizing expertise functions. On the one hand, Trondal et al. (2010) argue that specialization of tasks by sector—the dominant specialization principle in public bureaucracies—not only fosters a strong attachment among officials to the department and sector but also promotes "the emergence of epistemic communities of sector experts who enjoy shared understandings of causal relationships between means and ends, worldviews, roles and norms of appropriate behavior" (Trondal et al. 2010, 27). Sector departments promote internal cohesion, bureaucratic autonomy and issue specialization, all of which may strengthen the emphasis on evidence in the organization. Yet, specialization by sector may also direct the attention and identification of officials toward sectoral interests and weaken the emphasis on evidence. This tension also applies to the sectoral organization of research agencies and advisory bodies. For instance, Gornitzka (2003) shows how the organization of state research agencies along strictly sectoral lines in the fisheries and agricultural sectors stimulated close interaction between ministry officials, agency experts and clients within a specific sector, which increased the exposure of policy-makers both to scientific information and to clients' interests.[4]

On the other hand, task specialization by process—for instance, dedicated research units or departments organized along professional lines—may stimulate the role of evidence within the organization. As Egeberg observes: "Process-specialized organizations [...] tend to cultivate professional knowledge" (1999, 158). Organizing units along professional lines can be expected to direct particular attention to scientific information and professional definitions of policy problems and solutions and foster strong professional identities among officials. For instance, the creation of a dedicated economic analysis division in the New Zealand Treasury in the late 1970s contributed to an increased focus on new micro-economic theories from the economics discipline, a strong identification as economists among staff, and a redefinition of the country's economic problems and how to solve them in line with this new economic thinking (Christensen 2017, 59–62).

Another instructive example is how tax policy work is organized in the Norwegian Ministry of Finance. Rather than having one tax policy department with different divisions for personal income taxation, corporate taxation, value-added tax, and so forth (i.e., specialization by purpose/sector), the ministry has two separate departments for Tax Economics and Tax Law (i.e., specialization by process). This way of organizing has stimulated the development of economic and legal expertise and close links with external professional communities (such as regular interaction with university professors in tax economics), led staff to identify primarily as economists or lawyers rather than as tax policy officials and directed attention toward scientific evidence from tax economics and tax law (ibid., 117 ff.).

At the same time, separating expertise functions organizationally from other policy-making tasks can make it more difficult for evidence to influence decision-making. Since boundaries between organizational units limit interaction and information flow, dedicated research/analysis units may lack access to the policy-making processes that unfold within sectoral units. Sectoral units may be more focused on other concerns than the scientific basis of policies, preventing evidence from being integrated in policy formulation. The weak embedding of knowledge units in the core policy-making operations of the ministries has for instance been highlighted in the Dutch context (WRR 2025, 174). Similarly, chief science advisors may find themselves isolated within government departments and sidelined from policy-making processes. By the same token, Kupiec et al. (2023) show how creating centralized evaluation units within government strengthens evaluation expertise and independent evaluations but also results in reports that are less useful for implementing organizations, whereas integrating the responsibility for evaluation within each line ministry makes evaluations more user-oriented and likely to produce relevant operational knowledge (see also Andersen and Pattyn 2025).

3.2.2 | Vertical Specialization

Where expertise functions are located vertically in the government bureaucracy can also shape evidence use in policy-making. Vertical specialization refers to "the intended division of labor across hierarchical levels within or between organizations" (Egeberg and Trondal 2018, 10). Vertical specialization manifests differently within and between organizations. *Within* the organization, it refers to how tasks are divided across different levels in the organizational hierarchy, for instance between the higher and lower levels within a ministry. *Between* organizations, it refers to how tasks are divided between a superior unit and a subordinate unit, such as when a ministry delegates tasks to a semi-independent agency or an arm's-length advisory body (ibid.) (see Table 2). Where officials are placed in the hierarchy directs their attention, contacts and identification. For instance, compared to lower-level officials, higher-level bureaucrats will have more contact with political decision-makers, be more aware of political concerns and identify less exclusively with the organization. Similarly, ministry officials will pay more attention to political signals than officials in semi-independent agencies or advisory bodies.

Whether expertise functions are placed close to the political leadership or rather at lower organizational levels or in arm's-length bodies matters for the role of evidence in policy-making. Organizational research finds that placing government functions at a greater distance from the minister—for example, in a semi-independent agency rather than in a ministerial unit—leads officials to pay more attention to expert concerns (Egeberg 1999; Gornitzka 2003; Egeberg and Trondal 2018). It may also enable officials to independently formulate policy preferences without political intervention

and to develop stronger expert role perceptions and attachment to their profession. A striking example is how the increasing formal independence of central banks has led to their "scientization": central banks are increasingly engaged in research and scientific publishing and have forged close links to academia (Marcussen 2006).

At the same time, being located far from ministers may restrict experts' access to decision-makers and the influence of evidence on decisions (Weir 1989; see also Egeberg 1999). For instance, Smith (2013, 91–92) shows how the great distance between ministers and specialist civil servants working on health inequalities in the UK reduced interaction and prevented research-based ideas from reaching political decision-makers. One minister described the research unit as "a civil service within the civil service … you don't see much of them", whereas civil servants felt that they were "at quite a distance from ministers" (ibid.) Another example is arm's-length advisory bodies, such as the Dutch system of independent advisory bodies. Although few would question their objectivity or the scientific basis of their advice, these bodies may struggle to reach decision-makers with their recommendations and influence policy since they are not embedded within the regular policy-making processes in the ministries (WRR 2025).

Conversely, advisors located closer to the political leadership are likely to enjoy greater access to decision-makers and greater potential policy influence (cf. Halligan 1995). Yet, they are also more exposed to political control. They are likely to be more sensitive to political signals and to see themselves not only as experts but also as political advisors—and therefore to consider not only scientific evidence but also mainly what is politically desirable. This is visible for instance in Italy, where ministerial *cabinets* have an important policy advisory role: These advisers are located close to the minister and therefore potentially influential, but their role is also highly politicized and leaves little room for bringing evidence to bear on policy questions (Di Mascio and Natalini 2016).

Another example of how proximity to decision-makers entails both influence and exposure to control is Norway's system of temporary advisory commissions. These commissions are appointed, composed and given a mandate by government, and usually include not only academics and stakeholders but also civil servants from the appointing ministry as members or secretaries. Commissions are often influential since they are well integrated into the policy formulation process. But research shows that they are also vulnerable to political and administrative steering, that participants often combine expert roles with political and departmental loyalties, and that commission reports typically balance scientific evidence with considerations about political and administrative feasibility (Hesstvedt and Christensen 2023).

3.2.3 | Recruitment and Career Policies

A third dimension of formal organization that can affect evidence use in policy-making is bureaucratic recruitment and career policies. Note that the argument focuses exclusively on the *formal* aspects of staff policies—for instance, formal recruitment procedures, selection criteria and mobility requirements—as opposed to informal organizational practices regarding recruitment and promotion (Scott and Davis 2007, 22–23).[5] Some elements of recruitment and career policies may concern the entire civil service, while other elements vary between different types of organizations (e.g., ministries and agencies) and across different levels or types of positions within an organization (e.g., between top-level managers and mid-level policy officers). While recruitment and career policies are partly a function of the specific tasks of an organization or related to a job, we know empirically that recruitment policies for similar bureaucratic positions can vary widely across organizations and countries (e.g., Wilson 1989, 59–65; Peters 2010, chap. 3). The argument presented here about the consequences of recruitment and career policies for evidence use applies both to the variation in staff policies between different organization types and between different position types in an organization and to the variation between different countries or organizations in staff policies for similar organization or position types.

The argument is meant to apply broadly across executive bureaucracies, covering both recruitment and career policies in ministries and agencies and formal selection criteria for members of advisory bodies (see Table 2 for an overview of how the recruitment dimension is expressed across different types of bodies). Although advisory bodies are a special case, since they often involve temporary and part-time appointments, the formal criteria for selecting members for these bodies can be expected to have similar effects as recruitment policies in ministries and agencies.

Recruitment policies are crucial because they affect what kind of people enter the organization and how officials make decisions and see their own role (Trondal et al. 2010, 29–30). Most fundamentally, whether bureaucratic positions are formally filled through merit recruitment or by political appointment matters: Merit recruitment favors evidence-informed policy-making since it ensures that officials are competent and autonomous from other interests and since it is more likely to foster expert role perceptions (ibid.).

But what kind of merit is emphasized in formal selection criteria is also significant. Merit recruitment based on higher academic credentials is likely particularly favorable for evidence-informed decision-making: not only does it bring highly trained experts into the organization who are oriented toward scientific evidence and arguments, it may also forge strong expert role perceptions among staff. For instance, Chwieroth (2009) shows how the IMF's policy of recruiting staff with PhDs in economics—often from top US universities—led officials to identify strongly as economic experts (rather than as representatives of national interests) and to promote problem definitions and solutions inspired by economic thinking, which in turn led the IMF to promote the liberalization of capital controls.

Conversely, merit recruitment based on selection criteria such as general analytical skills or managerial skills—that is, generalist competences—may weaken the role of evidence in policy-making. Recruitment based on generalist skills not only makes it harder for highly educated specialists to enter the bureaucracy,

it also discourages the formation of expert role perceptions by signaling to recruits that the organization puts little value on specialist competences (Christensen 2015). For instance, the recruitment competitions for entering the EU bureaucracy place little emphasis on advanced degrees and specialist qualifications, instead selecting staff based on tests that assess general intelligence and abilities (ibid.).

Moreover, bureaucratic recruitment can be formally centralized or decentralized. Decentralized recruitment, where government departments independently recruit officials for specific vacancies, is more likely to foster evidence-informed policy-making than centralized recruitment (e.g., government-wide civil service exams) (see Weir 1989). When departments recruit for specific positions they put more emphasis on specialist competences necessary for the job, whereas central recruitment exams are geared toward selecting officials who can be employed across the public service and thus tend to put a premium on general skills. For instance, a comparative study finds that Ireland's traditional system of centralized recruitment exams emphasizing general skills led to a lack of economic experts and expertise in the bureaucracy, whereas decentralized recruitment in New Zealand and Norway made it easier for government departments to hire economic experts, strengthened professional identities among bureaucrats, and increased the attention to and influence of scientific evidence in policy-making (Christensen 2017).

Bureaucratic career policies regarding promotion or mobility can also have effects on evidence use in policy-making, by directing the attention and loyalties of officials and by defining what skills are valued by the organization. Promotion policies that favor experience in the relevant department or policy area are likely to favor specialization and the development of subject-matter expertise. By contrast, mobility or rotation policies that formally require officials to change departments regularly make specialists less attractive and discourage officials from developing expertise on a specific topic. For instance, Wille (2013) observes that the European Commission's requirement that senior staff change positions frequently has "favored the generalist over the specialist … Generalists are a lot more likely to be considered for a wider range of senior positions than officials with a highly specialized technical background" (p. 129). Department-hopping officials are also likely to pay more attention to cross-cutting issues than sectoral issues and to see themselves as managers or political advisors rather than as experts. For instance, the rotation requirements for Dutch top civil servants are often criticized for producing a class of top bureaucrats who are politically responsive and managerially adept but who have limited subject-matter expertise and commitment to evidence-informed decision-making (WRR 2025).

3.2.4 | Interaction Between Organizational Factors

Finally, inspired by the system perspectives discussed earlier, an organizational approach to evidence and policy-making also needs to consider the *interaction* between different elements of an organization's formal structure. The effect of one aspect of the formal organization of expertise functions on evidence use in policy-making is likely to depend on other aspects of how expertise is organized in public bureaucracies.

For instance, locating expert advisory bodies close to ministerial policy-makers may favor evidence-informed policy-making particularly in settings where civil servants are recruited based on specialist credentials, since this makes civil servants more receptive to scientific evidence. Conversely, if civil servants are recruited based on political loyalty or generalist skills, close links between advisory bodies and decision-makers may favor the politicization of advice.

Similarly, organizing expertise functions in separate units versus integrating them in sectoral units may affect evidence-informed policy-making differently depending on the recruitment system. In organizations that recruit civil servants based on specialist credentials, a sectoral division of functions may foster the formation of epistemic communities of sector experts, whereas in organizations that recruit based on generalist competences it may tend to favor sectoral interests. In other words, different recruitment policies may direct the attention of sectoral units toward different external constituencies: toward external scientific and professional communities in the case of civil servants recruited based on specialist competences and toward external interest groups when formal selection criteria emphasize generalist competences—with the former more conducive to evidence-informed policy-making.[6] By the same token, organizing departments along professional lines will likely direct attention to scientific information and professional definitions of policy problems and solutions particularly in organizations that recruit staff based on advanced specialist qualifications. If the recruitment system instead favors candidates with a generalist profile, this effect of horizontal specialization will likely be weaker.

4 | Discussion and Conclusion

How organizational structures condition evidence use in policy-making is not a matter of academic interest only. Governments are currently grappling with how to organize public organizations to foster more evidence-informed policy-making. There is extensive practical experimentation with different types of expertise arrangements at all levels of governance, often promoted by international organizations such as the EU and the OECD (e.g., OECD 2020; European Commission 2022; Council of the European Union 2023).

The theoretical framework has direct relevance for these practical debates: It not only helps us better understand how organization matters for evidence use, it also has implications for the *design* of expertise arrangements in public bureaucracies (cf. Egeberg and Trondal 2018). Compared to other aspects of institutions, politics and society that affect the use of evidence in policy-making, organizational structures can be deliberately (re-)designed (see also Whetsell et al. 2021; Van der Heijden 2024). This is something political and administrative leaders are acutely aware of: Structural changes to government—such as the establishment of analysis units or advisory bodies or reforms of bureaucratic recruitment—are often a key step in efforts to stimulate evidence use in policy-making, whether in immigration policy or economic policy (e.g., Boswell 2015; Christensen 2017).

The theoretical framework offers practitioners something that is currently missing from policy documents and gray literature

on evidence-informed policy-making, namely a robust foundation for distinguishing different dimensions of the organization of expertise arrangements and considering the advantages and disadvantages of different design choices. This article argues that design choices shape policy-making processes *in systematic ways*, by affecting the attention to evidence, the access of experts and the role perceptions of officials. One important insight is that there is no one best way to organize expertise arrangements: Most design choices involve fundamental trade-offs, for instance between experts' independence and access to decision-makers. And since the effect of design choices depends on other elements of formal organization, different design choices need to be seen in conjunction: Re-designing one part of government's expertise arrangements may not have the desired effect unless other parts are reformed, too.

An organizational-structural approach to evidence and policy-making also has limitations, both theoretically and practically. Certainly, *informal* aspects of government bureaucracies, such as organizational culture, norms and values, also matter for evidence-informed policy-making. Rather than deny the importance of organizational culture, the perspective adopted in this article sees the formal and informal aspects of organizations as interlinked: Formal organization contributes to shaping the informal norms and practices regarding evidence use in policy-making by directing attention and interaction, defining identities and norms of appropriate behavior, and apportioning access and power (see Egeberg 1999). For instance, whereas an organizational-cultural account might point to the strong professional expert culture in a government department, the argument presented here shifts the attention to the structural features of the department that fostered this culture, such as its recruitment policies. However, note that this argument contrasts with organizational theories that see formal structures as largely symbolic and de-coupled from what the organization actually does (Meyer and Rowan 1977; see Egeberg 1999, 157 for a discussion).

Beyond organizational features, evidence use in policy-making is influenced by features of the political and societal environment, such as the extent to which politics is adversarial or consensual or citizens' trust in science. The effect of organizational design of expertise arrangements can be expected to be conditioned by these factors. For instance, in polarized political settings, placing advisory structures close to political leaders may favor the politicization of expertise rather than evidence-informed policy-making (see also the discussion about different types of evidence use below). Similarly, separating expertise functions from other policy tasks may be especially important to safeguard the independence, objectivity and legitimacy of experts and their advice in adversarial settings.

Furthermore, (re-)designing government institutions to stimulate evidence-informed policy-making is easier in theory than in practice. Administrative structures—including recruitment systems and research and advisory bodies—are usually the product of long and nationally specific historical processes (e.g., Gornitzka 2003). Actors who have a stake in the existing organization of bureaucratic staff policies and advisory bodies are likely to oppose reform, which can make institutions increasingly difficult to change (cf. Pierson 2000). Even when reforms are adopted, it may take time before new expertise arrangements take root. Therefore, practical recommendations about the design of expertise arrangements need to consider the politics of organizational reform. Moreover, discussions about the design of expertise arrangements need to take into account broader normative debates about the proper role of scientific evidence in democratic policy-making which this article has not addressed, such as worries about technocratic governance and expert biases (see Parkhurst 2017; Christensen et al. 2022).

Another limit of the theoretical argument is that it focuses on the implications for the *extent* of evidence use in policy-making. Yet, it is well established in the literature that policy-makers can use evidence *in different ways*, not only for genuine problem-solving, but also symbolically to give policy-making an appearance of rationality or strategically to support a predetermined policy stance (Weiss 1979; Boswell 2008). We would expect formal organization to shape the type of evidence use through many of the same mechanisms as discussed above. For instance, organizational features that increase the access of expert actors to decision-making arenas are likely to favor problem-solving use over strategic use, since expert actors are more committed to scientific integrity and objectivity. Similarly, the role perceptions of officials—which are shaped by formal organization—define what is considered appropriate behavior, including norms about how evidence should be used. Officials who see themselves primarily as experts are more likely to use evidence for genuine problem-solving, whereas officials who identify also or primarily as political advisors are more likely to use evidence in strategic or symbolic ways.

Academically, the article sets a new research agenda at the intersection of organizational theory and scholarship on evidence and policy-making. While an empirical analysis of the argument is beyond the scope of this article, the theoretical framework lays the foundations for systematic and cumulative empirical research on how expertise functions in public administration are organized across countries, sectors and organizations, and on how the specific organization of expertise arrangements shapes evidence use in policy-making and policy choices. Future studies should examine how the formal organization of expertise functions matters across different types of organizations, such as ministries (and equivalent bodies), agencies and advisory bodies both in national governments and international organizations.

Various research designs can be employed to investigate this relationship. Scholars can conduct small-n comparative analyses of how the variation in the design of expertise arrangements across similar countries or across government departments within a single country shapes decision-making processes, combining analysis of co-variation and process-tracing based on policy documents and interviews (cf. Blatter and Haverland 2012). They can also adopt diachronic designs, systematically comparing policy-making in a government department before and after a reorganization of expertise arrangements (see Egeberg 1999, 164). Furthermore, researchers can exploit the variation in design across temporary advisory commissions or task forces to conduct large-n statistical analyses, for instance to examine whether commissions that have greater independence from government systematically have more or less influence on policy.

Although this article has focused on the organization of expertise arrangements within the executive bureaucracy, the organizational perspective can be extended to other institutions, too. The approach is relevant for analyzing the organization of mechanisms meant to strengthen evidence use in parliaments, which speaks to the growing literature on legislative science advice (e.g., Geddes 2024). It can also be applied to study the organization of private knowledge providers such as consultancies or think tanks and their links to policy-making (Campbell and Pedersen 2014), or to examine how the higher education and research sector is organized in different countries and how this affects public policy-making (Gornitzka 2003).

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

[1] The term "expertise arrangements" is preferred to "science advice arrangements" and "science-for-policy arrangements" to make clear that the argument applies not only to structures that are labeled as "science advice" but also to the regular expertise functions of public bureaucracies.

[2] The European Commission defines a "science-for-policy ecosystem" as "a complex of organizational structures and entities, processes, and networks that interact to support the mobilization, acquisition, synthesis, translation, presentation for use, and application of scientific knowledge in policymaking processes" (2022, 4).

[3] More specifically, Egeberg and Trondal's perspective merges insights from two schools of thought about organizational structure: Gulick's (1937) work on administrative structures and Simon's (1997) theory of administrative behavior. For a more detailed discussion of the different theoretical perspectives on organizational structure, see Hammond (1990), Egeberg (1999) and Scott and Davis (2007, 40–58). Egeberg and Trondal are also inspired by the institutional approach of March and Olsen (1989).

[4] Similarly, advisory bodies can be organized along sectoral lines or cut across policy areas. For instance, the Netherlands has both sectoral advisory councils in areas such as migration and international affairs and cross-cutting "strategic" advisory councils such as The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR). The theorized effects of horizontal specialization can be expected to apply to these kinds of bodies, too.

[5] Scott and Davis (2007), an authoritative source on organizational theory, recognize "human resources practices," such as "how participants are recruited, what kinds of rewards they receive, and what kind of careers they have once inside the organization," as one of the main components of formal organization (p. 22).

[6] Although both epistemic communities and interest groups advocate for specific policies, epistemic communities derive their policy goals from expert knowledge whereas interest groups pursue policies that further their interests (Haas 1992, 18). Recent literature has challenged this distinction, pointing to "instrument constituencies" that encompass both interest-based and knowledge-based proponents of specific policy solutions (Voß and Simons 2014, 738).

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Biography

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