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Hard facts and politics: What room for performance information in political decision-making?

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Agenda: Hard facts and politics: What room for performance information in political decision-making?

- Why we want to know
- What we do know
- How we can learn more

Why do we bother?

- Why do we seek understanding of the role information plays in political decision-making?
- Because we're interested in political decisions, and information is one of the four i's whose interplay shape such decisions: information, interests, ideologies and institutions
- Because of our commitment to intelligent choice – a deeply rooted belief that many bitter political battles are mere misunderstandings, caused by too little information – we continuously raise our expectations for policymakers to ground their judgments on factual evidence
- Because our curiosity is triggered by the fact that understanding information's role is *difficult* – we don't know much about why, how and to which extent politicians use the information supplied to them

Little do we know

- Until recently the actual use of performance information was not very high on the research agenda (Pollitt, 2006)
- During the past 10 years, the topic has received increasing academic attention: who is using performance information, how, and what factors influence that use
- Still, empirically based knowledge of the effects of performance information on political decision makers is limited
- Most empirical research suggests that information is *not* used, at least not in the way we expect it to be used
- Performance-based budgeting has failed to deliver the fundamental changes to the budgetary process predicted by its proponents

Models of decision making

- Economic man
- Administrative man
- Political man?

Drivers of purposeful use of PI

- Kroll (2015) reviewed 25 top publications on drivers of *purposeful* PI use
 - Learning
 - Control
 - Budget
 - Motivate
 - Improve

Kroll, A. (2015). Drivers of Performance Information Use: Systematic Literature Review and Directions for Future Research, *Public Performance & Management Review*, 38(3): 459-486

Drivers of purposeful use of PI (cont.)

- Kroll (2015) reviewed 25 top publications on drivers of *purposeful* PI use
- **Effective drivers**
 - Measurement system maturity
 - Stakeholder involvement Leadership support and support capacity
 - Culture that embraces openness to change and values learning from mistakes (re. openness to evidence)
 - Goal clarity (re. uncertainty about issue under discussion)

Drivers of purposeful use of PI (cont.)

- Kroll (2015) reviewed 25 top publications on drivers of purposeful PI use
- Effective drivers
- Potential drivers for which findings are weak or inconclusive
 - Organizational size – effect possibly captured by system maturity and support capacity
 - Financial stress – adds pressure to adopt PM, but does not necessarily foster data use
 - Conflict and political competition
 - Individual factors: Job experience, hierarchical position, educational level

But is purposeful use realistic? Four shades of PI use that might be more difficult to observe

Function that information serves	Use to which it is put
Support for pre-existing position <i>Certifies</i> that the position is right	Political ammunition <i>Reinforces</i> advocates' confidence in their stand <i>Strengthens</i> coalition <i>Persuades</i> undecided members <i>Weakens</i> opponents' case and support
Warning <i>Signals</i> that a problem is (or is not) severe	Reordering the agenda <i>Moves</i> the problem up (or down) on the policy agenda
Guidance <i>Indicates</i> better alternatives	Design of activities <i>Leads</i> to legislative provisions, amendments, further queries
Enlightenment <i>Offers</i> new constructs, new ways of thinking about issue	Modification in thinking <i>Reconceptualizes</i> issues <i>Raises</i> level of discussion

Weiss, C. H. 1989.
Congressional Committees as Users of Analysis,
Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, 8(3): 411–431

Models of decision making

- Economic man
- Administrative man
- Political man?
 - Incrementalism
 - Strategic: Electoral retribution and blame avoidance
 - Intuism (moral decision making)

Political man's information behavior

- From rational-choice engineering to political models of information use
- Incrementalism and performance budgeting
- Incrementalism, electoral retribution and reward & punish
- Strategic use of information – conscious selective consideration and use of evidence
- Intuitionist model of political information behavior – *subconscious* selective consideration of evidence

Factors related to higher probability of information use

Leviton & Hughes ('81)

- Relevance
- Quality
- Recognition
- Credibility
- Advocacy

Weiss (1989, -99)

- Competition*
- Decentralization
- Timing
- Uncertainty
- Conflict*
- Rationality climate*

Kroll (2015)

- Measurement system
- Stakeholder involvement
- Leadership support
- Support capacity
- Learning culture
- Goal clarity

(Some of the reasons) why it's hard to do research on the role information plays

- Information isn't *utilized* – it *creeps* (Weiss)
 - Decision making vs. decision accretion
 - You ask politicians about where they got their information from, and they don't know, or don't remember
- Information flows from lobbyists and administrators, via staff, to politicians (Sabatier & Whiteman)
 - "I don't have time to read things. Someone has to come in and show it to me or tell me. I have to be communicated with verbally"
- Surveys and interviews on «How do you normally»
 - Hard to remember and reconstruct «average» behavior – validity problems
 - Social desirability problems – overestimate «desired» behaviour

Suggestions for future research

- Incorporate political rationales that mediate the information-decision nexus (forget the engineering model)
- Politicians are a heterogenous group – try to identify information behaviour types, their correlates (causes) and consequences (two examples)

The effect of education and experience on PI use

- Norwegian local Councilors' use of performance information in the pre-decisional stage (survey) (Askim 2009)
- Education: the best-educated councillors are least inclined to search for performance information
- Political experience: inexperienced councillors are most inclined to search for performance information
- Optimistic: Performance management reforms might reduce information asymmetries and thereby “level out the playing field” within municipal councils
- Pessimistic: Competency trap: The top brass may at times stop sifting for information and new ideas too quickly, because they think they know all there is to know about an issue.

Politicians' learning profiles

Survey: When you are in the process of taking a stand on a specific case, how often do you actively and single-handedly collect information to supplement the pre-prepared case documentation?

Table 2: Factor analysis of policy learning profiles* (N = 718)

	Components		
	1 Cosmopolitans	2 Locals	3 Loyalists
Data source consulted by councillors			
Case documents from previous cases in the municipality	0,052	0,602	0,322
Results from satisfaction surveys conducted among users/inhabitants	0,158	0,767	0,099
Performance information in the municipality's annual report or in balanced scorecard documentation	0,309	0,741	0,061
Party programmes and other documentation of your local party's policies within the area in question	-0,025	0,326	0,788
The web-pages of the political party you represent	0,465	0,049	0,748
The web-pages of other municipalities	0,724	0,087	0,41
The web-pages of central government, regional government, labour unions or the Association for local governments	0,827	0,07	0,304
Reports from researchers or consultants	0,733	0,358	-0,126
National databases with benchmarking data	0,756	0,229	0,023

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- Deduce expectations from decision models via information behaviour models to PI use, and then generalize back up – will strengthen also the empirical base for decision models

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- Design research that tests contingencies of PI use
 - Blame-avoidance should be important in highly salient policy areas combined with negative messages
 - Political intuition should be important on issues where one's political ideology is strong
 - Information behavior in different stages of a decision making process (one example)

On timing

- A study of Norwegian local Councilors' use of performance information (survey) (Askim 2007)
- Disaggregated the decision-making process to derive different *functions* PI serves for legislators along this timeline.
- Found that performance information is used by legislators mostly in the pre-decisional and the post-decisional stage
- In the decisional stage, performance information is relatively less used in order to take a stand on a particular issue. Other information more influential in forming legislators' positions

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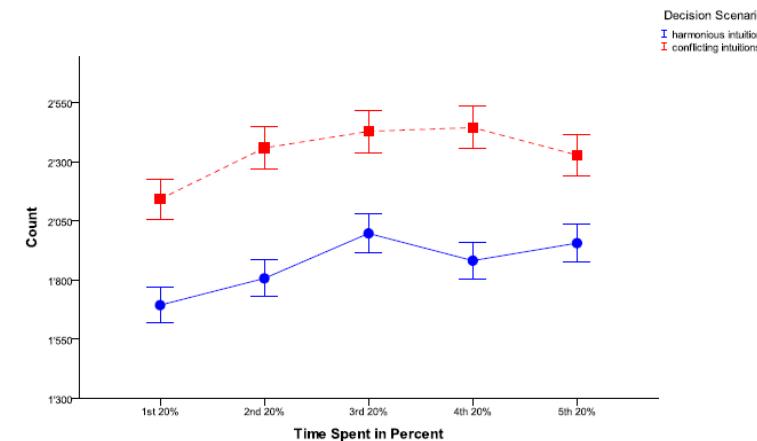
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- Define groups rather than individuals as the unit of observation (offices, party groups)
- Remember the weaknesses of perceptual data, and surveys especially (common source bias, self-selection problems, average behavior problems etc.)
- Try experimental research designs – two examples

A performance-based budgeting experiment

- Does performance information influence allocation of public monies?
- Design: survey experiment among 844 Danish city councilors - isolate the causal effect of performance information on spending
 - The treatment group received an information cue about how the public schools in their municipality perform compared with public schools in all other Danish municipalities, whereas the control group received no such information. The cue contained information that their schools performed either among the best, the middle, or the worst third of Danish schools regarding their grades when taking the student body composition into account.
- Information treatments showing high and low performance had a positive effect on attitudes to spending, whereas information on average performance had a negative effect on spending attitudes
- Theoretical takeaway: Blame-avoidance rationales drive politicians' use of PI more than performance-based budgeting rationales do

An experiment on the effect of political intuition on information behavior

- Test the assumption that politicians have no substantial interest in policy-relevant information until their political intuitions are in conflict and fail to provide orientation
- An eye-tracking experiment with 56 Swiss legislators (self-reported information use vs *actual* behavior)
- Inspired by psychology and findings from research on chess players
- Takeaway: To be considered, information must make intuitive sense with what one already knows about a given issue; otherwise it is ignored or disputed.



Summary

- Why we want to know
- What we do know
- How we can learn more