


# The politics of COVID-19 experts: comparing winners and losers in Italy and the UK

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## Abstract

This article analyzes the “politics of experts”—or the struggle between scientific advisers to gain visibility and influence—in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy and the UK. Modifying classic studies of policy communities of interest groups and civil servants, we classify relevant policy experts in the two countries into the following categories: “core insiders,” “specialist insiders,” “peripheral insiders,” and “outsiders.” Within these categories, we distinguish between “high-profile” and “low-profile” experts, depending on media exposure. The comparison between the UK and Italian cases helps to identify how actors interpret and follow formal and informal “rules of the game.” We identify a contest between experts to influence policy with reference to two competing “rules of the game.” The first set of rules comes from government, while the second comes from science advice principles. These rules collide, such as when governments require secrecy and nonconfrontation and scientists expect transparency and independent criticism. Therefore, experts face dilemmas regarding which rules to favor: some accept the limits to their behavior to ensure insider access; others are free to criticize the policies that they struggle to influence.

**Keywords:** politics of experts; COVID-19; science advice; insider-outsider experts; policy communities

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a dramatic test case for “evidence-based” policy. National governments used phrases like “guided by the science” to signal their reliance on experts. Of course, “the science” does not give unambiguous and infallible answers, especially during high uncertainty about a new virus (Vickery et al., 2022). Rather, many experts gave conflicting advice, and few had tangible influence on policymakers. Furthermore, science advice on health was part of a broader consideration alongside policymaker values, economic pressures, and public attitudes (Hodges et al., 2022).

Therefore, it is essential to understand who the “experts” were and the various roles that they played. For example, initial studies in Europe provide three lessons (Jensen et al., 2022). First, not all experts were equal: Biomedical and epidemiological scientists and government science advisers in the civil service had a relatively prominent role (Cairney, 2021). Second, there has been a range of experiences of influence, from “a radical form of delegation by elected politicians to appointed experts” in Sweden (Andersson et al., 2022) to policy informed by experts in Norway (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2022; Hodges

et al., 2022 also identify variations in German, Italian, Dutch, and British experiences). Third, key scientific experts were highly influential during the initial COVID-19 response (during high uncertainty and anxiety) and then less influential as governments gave more weight to social and economic concerns (Hodges et al., 2022; Eichenberger et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2021). Overall, there was unusually high reliance on certain experts during that sudden and intense period of uncertainty in early 2020.

We analyze the *politics of experts*—or struggle to gain visibility and influence—during this period. We use classic studies of policy communities of interest groups and civil servants to conceptualize this comparison. These studies identified how actors interpreted and followed formal and informal “rules of the game”: Interest groups could seek privileged insider status or criticize government policy from the outside, while civil servants were more bound by their roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, groups could seek a high profile to generate attention for their cause or a low profile to protect their privileged status. However, we modify this approach to reflect the distinctiveness of three components of the “strategic game”: the resources held by actors, rules of the game, and stakes (Allison, 1969; Crozier & Friedberg, 1977). For example, expert resources can relate to their position: Some operate inside government and know the importance of informal rules; others seek to engage but are relative novices who are more familiar with rules of science advice. These rules inform strategies related to stakes: For some, the goal is to gain access to the “control room,” influence policymakers, or achieve benefits linked to their public profile; for others, the aim is to protect their professional reputation by adhering to principles of science advice. These differences are profound when science advice rules—such as to foster open and critical debate—contradict informal governmental rules on secrecy.

We expect to find variations according to the political systems fostering different “rules of the game”: (1) when policymakers assign status according to the resources and conduct of experts and (2) the extent to which experts know and follow “insider” rules when seeking attention and influence. Competitions for influence could take place behind closed doors or in a visible competition to become the “adviser to the king.” Experts could maintain a professional distance or behave more like politicians, forming coalitions based on opposing ideas and interests, competing for positions, or quarrelling in collegiate bodies or on television. Some “insider” experts may influence who is included or excluded, while others seek access to official advisory bodies or to gain enough media popularity to focus attention on alternative approaches.

Our case study comparison helps to explore how these dynamics played out in different contexts. Most studies of policy communities focused on Anglo-Saxon countries. We examine if key elements apply to countries with different government systems, political cultures, and administrative traditions. We compare two countries with different political administrative traditions (Kuhlmann et al., 2021): the United Kingdom (Westminster system) and Italy (Napoleonic tradition). We follow the logic of least similar case comparison (George & Bennett, 2005) in terms of policy, politics, and policies (albeit within the same European liberal democratic context). In early 2020, the two countries were governed by executives of different orientations: in Italy, a yellow-red coalition government (led by Giuseppe Conte), and in the UK, a single-party Conservative government (led by Boris Johnson). Pandemic “lockdown” measures taken first by the Italian government and then later the UK government were—at least until the last week of March 2020—far apart (Capano, 2020; Williams et al., 2021). At the outbreak of the pandemic, the UK could rely on the well-established Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE). In Italy, no such body existed until the government established an ad hoc scientific advisory committee for COVID-19. Nevertheless, we show that key dynamics related to the “politics of experts” were similar.

## The theoretical framework: categorizing experts by strategy and status

Comparing experts to other political actors (involved routinely in policymaking) helps to identify the strategies they could use to influence policy and the motivation of governments to determine their status, subject to the constraining and facilitating role of a wider policymaking system that produces the rules and norms that actors are expected to follow.

Some of these rules are formal, written, and well understood. As such, they contribute to distinctive “policy styles” in each political system (Howlett & Tosun, 2020). For example, while the UK has a more established policy advisory system, both governments have developed general expectations regarding the required conduct of actors seeking to influence ministers (such as interest groups) or expected to support ministers (such as civil servants). While these actors enjoy agency (Aubin & Brans, 2020: 295), their success depends on their understanding of, and adherence to, formal rules in each political system.

However, many rules are informal and unwritten. They relate generally to inevitable limits to the concentration of power at the heart of government. Senior policymakers can only pay attention to a small proportion of their responsibilities (and the available information on policy problems), and they delegate responsibility for the rest. As such, they engage in a policymaking system over which they have limited control, overseeing “multicentric” policymaking in which many parts of the system may develop their own rules, networks, or ways of thinking (Cairney et al., 2019). These limits help to produce differences in policy styles (Cairney, 2019). For example, while the UK has a reputation for top-down policymaking, it actually “combines assertive policymaking in a small number of issues with a hands-off style in most other issues” (Cairney, 2019: 26). This mixed picture resembles aspects of policymaking in Italy, traditionally defined as “reactive” and oriented toward the consensus of organized interests (Capano, 2020; Piattoni, 2016; Sacchi, 2018).

The overall result is the need for actors to engage with reference to a confusing collection of rules: Informal rules are difficult to identify and understand, subject to competing interpretations, and may even contradict formal rules (Ostrom, 2007: 23). Furthermore, these rules may vary across each policy-making “center” (Cairney et al., 2019). In that context, we show that, generally speaking, expectations for experts are often comparable to those of interest groups and civil servants. However, many experts are relatively unaware of—or unwilling to follow—the “rules of the game” associated with key policymaking centers.

### Using studies of policy communities to classify experts

Classic studies identify how interest groups navigate such rules. They distinguish between the insider groups that enjoy regular contact with policymakers and outsider groups that are excluded from consultations and rely more on protest (Dür & Mateo, 2013; Grant, 1989; Maloney et al., 1994; Page, 1999; Toth, 2022). In that context, Grant (1989) distinguishes between high-profile groups that seek high public visibility via the mass media and low-profile groups that prefer to operate out of the limelight. The former may be in competition with others, looking for new members (or public approval) and trying to demonstrate that it is vital (Binderkrantz, 2005; Hanegraaff et al., 2016). The latter may be more established, remaining behind the scenes to insulate negotiations with policymakers from public view. Furthermore, Maloney et al. (1994: 30–32) distinguish according to

- (a) the insider/outsider strategies of groups and
- (b) the varying status assigned to groups by governments.

An insider strategy is a necessary but insufficient condition to status. It requires following informal rules, which—in the UK and Italy—includes accepting the legitimacy of government to define and address problems, maintaining the confidentiality of policy debates, and being pragmatic enough to make modest demands and avoid public criticism of decisions that do not go their way. Following these rules helps groups to develop one element of trustworthiness (reliability). However, governments also assign status according to a group’s resources (e.g., the size of the profession or population they can represent) and contribution to policy delivery (Hanegraaff et al., 2016; Kollman, 1998). They consult or negotiate with some groups across a range of policy issues (“core insiders”) or in niche areas (“specialist insiders”), include most others only in large consultation exercises (“peripheral insiders”), and exclude groups whose beliefs, demands, and/or strategies are not conducive to meaningful discussions in government (“outsiders”) (Maloney et al., 1994: 30–32).

These insights are applicable to experts when we make two modifications. First, many experts are employed directly as civil servants and are required to follow the formal and informal rules of bureaucracies. Second, science advisers are socialized in relation to different formal and informal rules, maintained “to protect the reputation of scientific professions (relating to research methods, conduct, and ethics) and principles of science advice” (Cairney, 2021: 6). Some rules regard the quality of evidence in relation to research methods. Others relate to expected behavior, such as to maintain transparency and visibility to foster external review, independence from elected politicians to foster unbiased advice, and accountability to the wider profession to maintain its credibility (Cairney, 2016).

Crucially, these rules collide, such as when governments require secrecy and nonconfrontation and scientists expect transparency and independent criticism (Atkinson, 2023; Michie et al., 2022). Experts face dilemmas regarding which rules to favor. While civil servants take insider strategies for granted,

**Table 1.** Types of expert activities, according to status and profile.

|                     | Low-profile  | High-profile   |
|---------------------|--|--|
| Core insiders       | Protecting confidential discussions with policymakers  | Asked to speak on behalf of government                   |
| Specialist insiders | Protecting confidential discussions in advisory groups | Allowed to speak in a personal capacity                  |
| Peripheral insiders | Seeking to project trustworthiness in government       | Engaging in public debate                                |
| Outsiders           | Publishing academic research critical of policy        | Criticism of government policy in media and social media |

scientists may see them as anathema to their principles or be unaware of their value. The phrase “speak truth to power” exemplifies different expectations: For some, it sums up the independent—or “maverick” (Cairney et al., 2019)—role of scientists seeking to maintain the public debate of ideas; for others, it guarantees exclusion.

We use these insights to classify policy experts. Table 1 outlines eight types of activities, with examples based on the intersection of two dimensions: status in government and media strategy.

The first dimension is *status* (informed by *strategy*). Cairney (2021: 5–7) translates Maloney et al.’s (1994) insights to assign categories to experts. “Core insiders” are senior civil servants in government departments or agencies, subject to statutory rules. They are highly conscious of the formal and informal rules guiding civil service conduct. “Specialist insiders” are employed by organizations outside the government (such as universities, research institutions, or private companies) and appointed as members of advisory boards set up by the government. They are not as subject to statutory rules, but usually abide by the internal rules of the advisory board and have knowledge of informal rules in government. “Peripheral insiders” seek inclusion in government processes but are only able to contribute to cosmetic consultation exercises. “Outsiders” do not play any role in government advisory boards, which frees them to express their criticism of government policy and policymaking.

The second dimension is *profile* in relation to media and social media. “High-profile” experts seek media exposure and visibility. They make public statements, give interviews, participate in public debates and television broadcasts, write books and popular articles, and are active on social media. “Low-profile” experts generally limit their exposure in the mass media, avoid taking part in public debates and TV broadcasts, do not make public statements, and do not use social media assiduously. They limit themselves to the opportunities for communication provided by the scientific community or restrict high-profile communication to their government-approved roles.

The links between media exposure, scientific reputation, and expert influence are controversial (Goodell, 1977; Peters, 2008; Weingart, 1998). Policymakers often prefer experts to respect confidentiality and avoid the limelight. Scientific communities may also view with suspicion those who seek excessive publicity (Goodell, 1977). Experts who are overexposed risk losing credibility if portrayed as attracted to show business and political confrontation. If so, one could expect that media exposure is inversely correlated with policy influence. However, there are contexts in which the opposite occurs. Greater visibility can be an indicator of scientific authority and the ability to influence public opinion (Peters, 2008). Policymakers may find it convenient to communicate via advisers well known to the public (Petersen et al., 2010). Their media visibility can also be endorsed by their scientific community. Some “testimonial” experts give visibility to a discipline or organization, helping to enhance its social relevance and disseminate its findings.

The communication strategies of policy advisers must therefore take multiple factors into account. Some seek high visibility per se, using their role to gain popularity. Others use visibility to increase their influence on public opinion and policymakers. On the contrary, some restrict their role to providing evidence to favor their image of a credible scientist (Atkinson et al., 2022). Civil servants and members of advisory boards are often prohibited from making public statements. Other experts are unable to attract media attention.

In theory, if core insider experts are government employees, they are best placed to influence policymakers but the most bound by rules of conduct in government. Some are cast into the public spotlight, such as when UK government ministers wanted to be flanked by expert advisers when giving media

briefings (Kettell and Kerr, 2021; Allen et al, 2023). When asked to speak on behalf of government, they are required to show loyalty and discretion and not to express criticism freely (compared with Grant (1989) on “prisoner groups”). In contrast, outsiders are furthest removed, but enjoy freedom of expression to appeal to the public and the autonomy to pursue the rules of their scientific community. Specialist and peripheral insiders are in an intermediate position, having more constraints than outsiders but more autonomy than core insiders. Furthermore, some could move (somewhat) between positions, such as being moderately critical of policy without threatening their access.

In practice, we need case studies to identify how actors identify, interpret, and trade-off different rules and incentives. To that end, we use the following subcategories to aid the systematic comparison of potential experts: their status (within government) and visibility (to the media and public), the rules they follow (or may be expected to follow), and how we might interpret their influence on that basis.

## The UK case

In the UK “public service bargain” (Hood, 2002: 320), civil servants pledge loyalty to the elected “government of the day” and are part of a hierarchical system. Ministers are in charge and expected to represent the government in the media. Civil servants operate out of the public spotlight. In return for loyalty, they expect “job tenure” and the “avoidance of public blame” (Hood, 2002: 320). Although some enjoy delegated responsibility to manage policy communities, they anticipate the reactions of ministers (Page & Jenkins, 2005).

This relationship varies by ministerial personality, with civil servants more or less able to give frank feedback to ministers (Hood & Lodge, 2006: 119). Even so, there is a general expectation of behavior. Rhodes (2011: 189–99) describes the often-unspoken rules on civil service conduct, such as to use understatement and euphemism to question someone’s competence, maintain codes of secrecy, and avoid being openly angry in meetings. Furthermore, crises prompt a “siege mentality; a tight team with a sense of purpose, even mission, that becomes cohesive to the point of being inward looking and stereotyping outsiders” (Rhodes, 2011: 275). Crucially, these rules contrast with those associated with science advice principles.

These contrasting expectations help to explain why government ministers attach different value to advisers in different positions. As Table 2 summarizes, only a small proportion of experts has the knowledge, willingness, and ability to appreciate and follow UK government rules.

## Core insiders: civil servants flanking ministers

### Status

UK government ministers identified a hierarchy of science adviser status in relation to key formal positions (Cairney, 2021: 4). A core group of senior ministers (and Prime Minister) formed close professional relationships with the UK Government Chief Scientific Adviser (GCSA) and chair of SAGE, Sir Patrick Vallance, and Chief Medical Officer Professor Chris Whitty. Senior ministers also relied publicly on advisers such as Deputy Chief Medical Officers (Dr Jenny Harries and Professor Jonathan Van Tam) and senior members of the government agency Public Health England (PHE) and quango National Health Service England to bolster public health messages (Kettell & Kerr, 2022). Furthermore, the Secretary of State

**Table 2.** Types of experts, according to status and profile.

|                     | Low-profile  | High-profile  |
|---------------------|--|---|
| Core insiders       | Following governmental rules and operating behind the scenes                     | Asked by ministers to explain the problem and flank ministers in press conferences                  |
| Specialist insiders | Usually following rules and operating behind the scenes                          | Providing personal views on TV and radio interviews   |
| Peripheral insiders | Relatively unaware of the rules of the game. More aware of scientific principles | Some on TV and radio interviews. Some with high-profile social media                                |
| Outsiders           | Publishing research critical of policy   | Highly critical of government (and the secretive role of Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies) |

for each major department can also draw on a chief science adviser in that department ([Government Office for Science, 2020](#)).

### Visibility

Until COVID-19, the visibility of these positions was low (except the Chief Medical Officer's annual report—[Cairney & St.Denny, 2020](#): 108). COVID-19 helped to turn a small number of people—most notably Vallance, Whitty, Harries, and Van Tam—into household names. First, they performed a public educational role from March 2020: appearing regularly on mainstream TV and radio channels (as well as parliamentary select committees) to highlight the importance of the problem, encourage behavioral change, and explain policy. These roles rarely involved debates on competing policy choices. Second, the UK government established frequent (initially daily) TV briefings, from mid-March 2020, with one minister flanked by two experts. Advisers performed two main roles—to bolster the credibility of ministerial statements and give presentations on the impact of COVID-19—while ministers fielded “political” questions ([Allen et al, 2023](#); [Kettell & Kerr, 2022](#)). Furthermore, some organizations became higher profile, including PHE, which was abolished/reorganized to help ministers play the “blame game” ([FT Editorial Team, 2020](#)).

### Rules

Civil servants are subject to the Civil Service Code, conscious of the informal rules guiding conduct and possessing the resources and skills to retain ministerial trust. Such rules may be enforced informally but infrequently, such as when Vallance was allegedly “rebuked for arguing strongly in favor of imposing COVID lockdown restrictions earlier this year” ([Kermani, 2020](#)) or when an adviser is not used for media briefings if mildly critical of government (for example, Chief Nursing Officer Ruth May after commenting on the rule breaking of Johnson's special adviser Dominic Cummings—[Heffer, 2020](#)).

## Specialist insiders: SAGE advice legitimizing government choices

### Status

The [UK Government \(2020: 1\)](#) describes SAGE's role to provide ministers with “coherent, coordinated advice and to interpret complex or uncertain scientific evidence in non-technical language ... to allow them to make decisions and inform the government's response to the COVID-19 outbreak.” SAGE is an important body as a whole, providing an often-privileged source of regular information to ministers, usually via the GCSA. It consists of a large number of—regular or sporadic—attendees (often 70 in one meeting and over 100 overall), ostensibly drawn from “expertise from across the scientific spectrum” but with a clear preference for experts “including epidemiologists, clinicians, therapeutics and vaccine expertise, public health experts, virologists, environmental scientists, data scientists, mathematical modelers and statisticians, genomic experts” ([UK Government, 2020: 1](#)). The subcommittee Scientific Pandemic Insights Group on Behaviours considers evidence from behavioral social science ([Feitsma & Whitehead, 2022](#)).

### Visibility

Some of its members enjoyed a high profile, including “a small group of consistent attendees who are relatively known by ministers, visible in print, TV, and radio media, and asked to provide oral evidence by House of Commons committees” (for example, Professor Graham Medley, chair of SAGE subcommittee Scientific Pandemic Infections group on Modelling—[Cairney, 2021: 5](#)).

### Rules

Most appeared to be conscious of—informal but well-known—rules, including the need to emphasize, before each interview, that (a) they are expressing personal opinions and (b) they try to provide evidence while avoiding direct commentary on policy.

## Peripheral insiders: not excluded, but largely ignored

### Status

Most other scientific experts proved to have low status within government networks, albeit with some potential to feed in via more influential actors.

### Visibility

The visibility of these experts is ad hoc and sporadic, with some examples of experts able to raise key issues without necessarily being included in formal deliberations. For example, Professor Trish Greenhalgh criticized “SAGE’s reluctance to recommend a ‘precautionary’ approach to wearing face masks” and “played a leading role in synthesizing the evidence” that indirectly informed policy change (Cairney, 2021: 10).

### Rules

This low status reflects a much wider issue in the study of “evidence-based” policymaking: Many academics do not engage enough to learn or follow the insider rules of the game, or they are more likely to follow the rules associated with their professions (Cairney, 2016).

## Outsiders: excluded and not visibly influential

### Status

Outsiders have excluded status by ideology and/or strategy. There was a long list of critics of UK government policy.

### Visibility

The most organized campaign came from “Independent Sage”: a group of experts who came together to mirror the work of SAGE but come to very different—more state interventionist—conclusions. This visibility was clear in social media (especially Twitter), with some members enjoying routine TV and radio appearances.

### Rules

In most cases, individuals were more likely to refer to the rules of scientific professions and reject the insider rules of the game. Most notably, former GCSA David King established “Independent Sage” to challenge the alleged secrecy and lack of independence of the serving GCSA and SAGE (Clarke, 2021).

## Influence

These distinctions help us to explore the relative influence of each actor. Cairney (2021) provides a proxy measure of the influence of core and specialist advisers: The UK government’s framing of COVID-19—as a chronic problem to be managed rather than eliminated—and its initial responses in the first half of 2020 (e.g., to delay “lockdown” measures) were highly consistent with on-the-record scientific advice. In other words, the UK fits the Western European pattern of high (temporary) influence (Hodges et al., 2022). Using this proxy, the influence of “peripheral” actors is infrequent and fleeting, and the UK government never changed policy to reflect recommendations from outsiders like Independent SAGE (Cairney & Kippin, 2023).

## The Italian case

Compared to the UK, the study of Italian policy advisory systems and the “rules of the game” to which policy advisers must adhere are less explored (e.g., Galanti & Saracino, 2021). From the available evidence, we deduce that experts directly appointed by ministers must adhere to a high degree of discretion and loyalty, especially if advisers are appointed on the basis of a fiduciary relationship or political loyalty (Di Mascio & Natalini, 2016). “Core insiders” are expected to show loyalty to the government, adhere to a code of secrecy, and act out of the spotlight. “Specialist insiders”—although to a lesser extent than core insiders—are expected not to openly contradict members of the executive and to keep a low media profile (unless politicians ask them to go public).

With the outbreak of the pandemic—during which the Italian Minister of Health was Roberto Speranza—Italy witnessed an explosion of advisory committees and task forces set up ad hoc to help national and regional governments cope with the pandemic (Capano, 2020; Galanti & Saracino, 2021). Suddenly, the media and the public realized how relevant it is to involve experts and how delicate are the interactions between policymakers and scientific advisers. The Technical-Scientific Committee (TSC) is the advisory board at the national level that, in the Italian government’s handling of the pandemic, had the most visibility (Camporesi et al., 2022; Capano, 2020).

**Table 3.** Types of experts, according to status and profile.

|                     | Low-profile   | High-profile  |
|---------------------|---|---|
| Core insiders       | Subject to governmental rules and confidentiality clause                                      | Asked by ministers to go public and explain the problem through periodic press conferences    |
| Specialist insiders | Subject to the internal rules of the TSC and confidentiality clause                           | Providing their personal opinion on the media   |
| Peripheral insiders | Not subject to governmental rules, but careful not to publicly contradict the government line | Not subject to governmental rules and active in the media and social media                    |
| Outsiders           | Publishing research, also critical of government and TSC decisions                            | Independent and critical of the work of the government and the TSC. Very present in the media |

Note. TSC = Technical-Scientific Committee.  
Source: Author's own.

The TSC's high profile contributed to changes to its composition (to a degree not witnessed in the UK). When established on 5 February 2020, it consisted of seven members: all male and with a medical degree and six were senior executives representing “national health institutions” (Ministry of Health, National Institute of Health, National Institute for Infectious Diseases, Civil Protection). The TSC was accused of being excessively male and “Rome-centric”<sup>1</sup> and the absence of key areas of expertise. Andrea Crisanti, a microbiologist at the University of Padua, declared: “The first TSC contained incompetent and non-independent people.”<sup>2</sup> The Deputy Minister of Health, Pierpaolo Sileri (professor of General Surgery at a private university in Milan), proposed to Speranza to include some virologists who were getting high media visibility and would give greater representation to northern regions (Cecchi Paone & Sileri, 2020). However, Sileri's nominations were not taken into consideration.

In April 2020, the TSC was expanded to 20 members (including the original seven), but the composition remained similar: 20 were male, 19 were from Rome-based organization, 18 had a degree in Medicine, and 15 were representing national health institutions [plus four representatives of national medical societies—Pneumology, Pediatrics, Geriatrics, and Anesthesiology—recommended to Speranza by his personal adviser, Walter Ricciardi (Ricciardi, 2022)]. The TSC was accused of having a “narrow range of expertise” (Pistoi, 2021), frequently making decisions on matters on which none of its members had specific competence (Hodges et al., 2022).

In response to criticism, the Conte government appointed six additional members on 15 May 2020: all women and representative of five regions (Abruzzo, Campania, Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy, and Veneto). The intention of the national government was to be seen to rebalance the TSC's composition. Still, status and influence varied markedly within the TSC.

## Core insiders: the “internal” members of the TSC

### Status

More than half of the members of the TSC were employed by national government as senior executives of the Ministry of Health and major national health agencies.

### Visibility

Members of the TSC were subject to strict nondisclosure agreements (Camporesi et al., 2022; Galanti & Saracino, 2021). The only exception was made for the spokespersons of the TSC, who were allowed to attend official press conferences.

<sup>1</sup> There is no direct equivalent in the UK (beyond a general sense of London-centric government). Other territorial issues included tensions between the UK and devolved governments (Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) regarding internal communications and the effect of UK government policies on the others. However, these issues were largely between elected leaders.

<sup>2</sup> Intervention on the Rai3 television network on 27 September 2021. [https://www.adnkronos.com/covid-crisanti-virus-era-morto-per-2-membri-del-cts\\_6hSHy3nL3NRKDrEQomVaxa](https://www.adnkronos.com/covid-crisanti-virus-era-morto-per-2-membri-del-cts_6hSHy3nL3NRKDrEQomVaxa).



## Rules

Experts employed by the Ministry of Health and other government agencies were subject to public service rules and already embedded in governmental and ministerial dynamics.

## Specialist insiders: the Minister's personal adviser and the "external" members of the TSC

### Status

A minority of TSC members were employed by organizations external to the government (universities, hospitals, and research institutions). The Minister's personal adviser, Ricciardi—professor of Hygiene and Preventive Medicine at a private university in Rome—was akin to a specialist insider since he was not appointed as a TSC member and served as a consultant free of charge, while remaining an employee of his university.

### Visibility

"External" members of the TSC were subject to the confidentiality clause. In contrast, Ricciardi had greater independence. He had great media visibility, coming into disagreement with prominent experts in the media, various regional presidents, and some TSC members.

### Rules

TSC members employed by organizations outside the government were generally less familiar with ministerial and civil service rules. They were not subject to the ministerial hierarchy and mainly responded to the rules of the scientific community. Ricciardi, having held important government posts in the past (Casula & Toth, 2019), is well acquainted with the formal and informal rules governing civil service and engagement with ministers.

## Peripheral insiders: formally included, loyal to the government, but with little influence

### Status

Members of the TSC appointed last were often peripheral, as were other experts called upon by the national government on a sporadic basis.

### Visibility

By choice or necessity, the majority kept a low media profile, although some tried to gain more visibility (such as Nino Cartabellotta, president of the GIMBE Foundation).

### Rules

In general, peripheral insiders avoided openly criticizing government or TSC decisions. Most tried to follow the rules to which insiders are bound, in the hope of gaining more government recognition. Ultimately, they sought to combine loyalty to the government with appropriateness to the scientific community.

## Outsiders: excluded from the TSC, but with high media visibility

### Status

From the earliest stages of the pandemic, Italian television broadcasts and major newspapers gave much space to some virologists and epidemiologists directly involved in treating patients. Some became celebrities (Campus & Saracino, 2022). Specifically in the first months of the pandemic, the media scene was dominated by a small number of "star virologists," excluded from the TSC<sup>3</sup>: Matteo Bassetti, Roberto Burioni, Ilaria Capua, Andrea Crisanti, Massimo Galli, Fabrizio Pregliasco, Antonella Viola, and Alberto Zangrillo. None had official appointments from the national government. Most work in northern Italian regions (mainly in Lombardy, but also in Veneto and Liguria). Despite requests by Deputy Minister Sileri and parts of the press to co-opt some, none became TSC members.

<sup>3</sup> Survey conducted by Reputation Science (dated 30 November 2020). <https://www.reputationscience.it/analisi-dagli-esperti-italiani-sul-covid-19-sovraccarico-di-informazioni-e-indicazioni-incoerenti/>.

## Visibility

The star virologists had exceptional media exposure: They were interviewed by major newspapers and appeared frequently on television, even several times a day. These experts became familiar characters to the general public, and some of them accumulated a TV presence (“speaking time”) greater than Prime Minister Conte (Campus & Saracino, 2022). Many other scientists contributed to the debate with scientific publications and popular articles, without, however, seeking particular media visibility. Some of these “low-profile” outsiders expressed criticism of the government’s and the TSC’s decisions.

## Rules

Having been excluded from formal advisory appointments at the national level, outsiders often publicly criticized the choices made by the government. Some harshly criticized the work and composition of the TSC. Bassetti, for example, publicly stated that he considers some members of the TSC to be of low scientific profile<sup>4</sup>. According to Viola, the Italian TSC was excessively “politicized” compared to advisory boards in other countries<sup>5</sup>.

## Influence

These dynamics contribute to some distinctive elements of *influence*. As in the UK, for many months, the technical indications coming from the TSC were largely accepted by the national government. The government justified many of its decisions by claiming that it followed the indications of the TSC experts (Camporesi et al., 2022; Hodges et al., 2022). However, there is a greater variation of experiences among core and specialist insiders than in the UK. Ricciardi had a great influence over the Minister of Health and many government decisions. Some newspaper articles describe Ricciardi as the minister’s “super-adviser” or alter ego<sup>6</sup>. As a whole, the TSC had a demonstrable influence on the government’s choices, but some members had more, while the six women appointed in May 2020 described having played a peripheral role<sup>7</sup>. With a few exceptions, “peripheral insiders” had little influence on the public debate and even less on government decisions. In contrast to the UK, some high-profile outsiders strongly influenced the public debate in Italy.

## Concluding discussion: What are the rules of these “politics of experts” games?

The COVID-19 crisis highlights the importance of the *politics of experts*: there is a *competition between experts to enter the inner circle or gain visibility and influence*. If so, do experts behave like politicians and interest groups? Certainly, many compete for access to the most important advisory bodies and positions to influence policy with their advice. However, the Italy and UK comparison shows that the development of factions and visibility of competition differ in each case.

In the UK case, some contests were relatively invisible. For example, experts in key positions drew on a select group of experts in a limited number of expert fields. Many sources of expertise were not included, but often without visible conflict, beyond a general sense that it was relatively difficult for (say) social science and humanities experts to make their voices heard. More publicly salient contests relate to a wider debate between advocates of opposing approaches to COVID-19: those associated with the “John Snow Memorandum” (Alwan et al., 2020) and pushing for greater state intervention versus those associated with The “Great Barrington Declaration” (Kulldorff et al., 2020) and seeking to reduce state intervention in favor of individual responsibility. High-profile debates took place outside of government (although UK ministers held meetings directly with Barrington advocates). When UK ministers tended toward less state intervention over time, it related more to their beliefs and interests than a competition between experts to establish their authority or influence.

In the Italian case, many of these contests are relatively visible. Within the Italian TSC, the main internal contrast was between those in favor of strict lockdown measures and those who leaned toward

<sup>4</sup> See the article in Adn Kronos, 14 November 2020. [https://www.adnkronos.com/bassetti-cts-inadeguato-chi-li-ha-scelti\\_10dxcKbfoBZRpuPCi5dbFV/](https://www.adnkronos.com/bassetti-cts-inadeguato-chi-li-ha-scelti_10dxcKbfoBZRpuPCi5dbFV/).

<sup>5</sup> Intervention on the La7 television network on 26 April 2021. <https://www.la7.it/otto-e-mezzo/video/cts-profssa-viola-in-italia-e-troppo-politicizzato-26-04-2021-377539>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.fanpage.it/politica/walter-ricciardi-il-ministro-ombra-della-sanita-tra-conflitti-dinteresse-e-nomine-fantasma/>.

<sup>7</sup> *la Repubblica*, 29 March 2022. [https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2022/03/29/news/cala\\_il\\_sipario\\_sul\\_cts\\_che\\_per\\_due\\_anni\\_ha\\_governato\\_la\\_nostra\\_vita-343343864/](https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2022/03/29/news/cala_il_sipario_sul_cts_che_per_due_anni_ha_governato_la_nostra_vita-343343864/).

more permissive measures (Camporesi et al., 2022; Guerra, 2021). Many TSC sessions split into opposing camps. A first line of conflict arose from belonging to different medical-scientific disciplines. The TSC was dominated by a majority of doctors with a specialization in Hygiene and Preventive Medicine. The representatives of the other medical specialities were in the minority, and many types of expertise were absent. A second reason for opposition was territorial, with a contrast between the center (Rome) and the periphery (the other regions, particularly those in the Center-North). Within the TSC, the “Roman” component (i.e., national government employees and employees of organizations based in the capital) has always been over-represented. A third cleavage stems from the opposition between public and private health care. Representatives of private health-care facilities lobbied to include relevant experts in the TSC. Public hospitals (the majority in Italy) were under-represented.

These comparative differences extend to the dynamics between insiders and outsiders as they try to navigate *the formal and informal rules of different games*. The UK experience highlights a distinction between core/specialist insiders versus peripheral insiders and outsiders, according to the status granted by governments. The core insiders were civil servants with formal advisory roles, well placed to provide regular information and advice, sourced regularly from SAGE. Many other potentially valuable experts sought to engage, but most proved to be peripheral, while some sought to mirror SAGE and provide evidence-informed criticism from the outside. Following the rules in government mattered, combining the informal rules associated with interest groups, and formal civil service rules, to reinforce a British system of keeping debates in house and deferring to the power of ministers to make choices. Alternative outsider campaigns—following rules of independent science advice—had little impact on policy. Ministers relied on a small group of science advisers, even when—after the initial emergency period—they made choices less consistent with their advice.

In Italy, the rules of the game did not appear so dissimilar to the British case, even if the actors make different strategic use of them. Experts who are government employees are largely socialized to such rules. They do not contradict government choices. They maintain a low media profile and keep disputes in house. However, the minister’s personal adviser, Ricciardi, deviated from these rules. He chose media exposure. He never publicly delegitimized the minister’s choices, but criticized TSC recommendations. The members of the TSC who were not employed by government agencies adhered partly to the rules of public service and partly to the rules of the scientific community. This led to lively discussions within the TSC. However, internal divisions were not made public, as the members of the TSC were bound by a strict confidentiality clause. The outsiders have always been free from the formal and informal constraints of the insiders. “Star virologists” attacked the government’s choices and TSC decisions. High-profile outsiders influenced the public debate, partly following the criteria of the scientific community and partly the rules of show business.

Overall, we find a contest between experts to influence policy with reference to two competing “rules of the game.” The first set of rules comes from government: recognize the authority of ministers, be pragmatic, present modest demands, keep debates in house, and do not criticize the outcomes. The second comes from science advice principles: remain independent, speak truth to power when necessary, and promote transparency and accountability (Michie et al., 2022). This contest took place during the early stages of the COVID-19 emergency, a dramatic and exceptional period characterized by a widespread feeling of being “under siege.” It influenced the behavior of policymakers and experts. Policymakers relied heavily on experts, using the rhetoric of “following the science” to navigate uncertainty and benefit from public trust in scientific authority. Key experts were given extraordinary responsibility. In these early phases of COVID-19, experts were particularly attuned to the value of rules of expected behavior: to keep key adviser positions, avoid troubling the policymakers grappling with an unprecedented crisis, and avoid conflict with expert colleagues (which would exacerbate public anxiety). With the passage of time—partly at the urging of the experts excluded from the most relevant adviser roles—the “rules of science” regained some prominence, partly to avoid criticism from the scientific community, affirm the relevance of certain scientific disciplines (especially those excluded from governmental scientific advisory boards), and reaffirm the autonomy of experts vis-à-vis politicians.

These insights are crucial for future research on the relationship between policymakers and experts. In the wider interdisciplinary field of “research engagement” or “knowledge transfer,” there is too much focus by researchers on how government rules and policymaker skills should change to fit with a scientific ideal of evidence-based policy. There is too little focus on the political role of scientists and the relative impact of their engagement strategies. Therefore, we center the politics of experts—the contest

to influence the policy debate—to identify the inescapable role of politics in expert-informed policy-making. This process is never technocratic, and interdisciplinary research is futile unless scholars face up—and adapt—to political realities rather than pretending that they could be removed if they get in the way of good policymaking. However, we provide only an initial exploratory contribution, which requires further investigation and empirical confirmation. Further research on this topic may use more sophisticated methods, cover a larger number of cases, and compare different policy areas. Future research may also test this analytical framework with reference to less turbulent periods than the early stages of the pandemic emergency. Any further study should also analyze in more detail the context within which the “politics of experts” takes shape and reconstruct more systematically the rules of the game, resources held by the actors, and motivations of the players.

## Conflict of interest

None declared.

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