

# Policy Expertise in Contemporary Democracies

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Review of Brooks, Stephen/Stasiak, Dorota/Zyro, Tomasz (Eds.) (2013): *Policy Expertise in Contemporary Democracies*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.

Contesting basic assumptions on an issue has always been a very useful analytical tool and starting point for generating new knowledge. Whereas most of today's analyses on policy advice and political consulting denote a relentless growth of the policy expert market with think tanks, advisers, lobbyists, spin-doctors and opinion poll institutes popping up all over western capitals, Brooks, Stasiak and Zyro introduce the subject with the somewhat opposite assertion that the role of expertise should in fact be declining. In a world where, thanks to Wikipedia and the internet overall, information and expert knowledge is easily accessible for anyone, what role is there left for political experts? However, when further browsing through the book it soon becomes clear what outstanding role all contributors ascribe to policy expertise in western industrialized democracies.

The volume is split into two parts first outlining theoretical issues before focusing on national cases. Starting with theoretical models and approaches offered by Abelson to understanding lobbies and think tanks, the theoretical part's subsequent chapters address normative concerns (Zyro, Sadowski), questions of democratic representation (Thaa) and forms of (visual) communication used by policy experts (Brooks). Apart from single nation case studies (Mackinnon, Thunert, Braml, Czaputowicz and Stasiak) the second part of the volume also comprises a cross-country comparison (Abelson). The contributors convincingly examine the role and influence of policy experts from both theoretical angles and in case studies on Canada, Germany, Poland, and the United States. Yet, to all of you who may wonder about the selection of national case studies, an evident explanation is missing, raising the suspicion that the seemingly arbitrary selection of country studies is solely due to the contributors' nationality or primary field of expertise. Unfortunately, besides a passage on case selection the introduction also falls short on providing the reader with some guidance and recurring central themes. The volume could for instance have benefited from a common definition of the term 'policy expertise'; while some authors (Braml or Mackinnon) follow a very narrow approach and examine think tanks only, others (Abelson) also take lobbies into consideration or paint the big picture in their national case studies (Thunert) including ministerial research institutes, expert committees, commissions, party think tanks and foundations. The editors' introductions to each chapter unfortunately cannot compensate for the short overall introduction or the missing concluding chapter which could have summa-

rized the findings, confronted the case studies and referred them back to the volume's theoretical part.

Taking these structural aspects into account, the central question remaining is who this volume is written for. Given the short introduction to the issue and little analytical tools that may help the reader to conduct his or her own research (except for the first chapter by Abelson) it can hardly be considered a student textbook. Neither can it be used as a handbook for the broad field of policy expertise as most contributors use narrow definitions of the term causing that readers only get a glimpse of what can be compromised under the term 'policy expertise'. But then: is it possible to construct a conceptual framework that recognizes the diversity of policy expertise allowing scholars to make insightful observations on its role and impact in policymaking? Probably not. As outlined by the editors, '(t)he contributors to this volume were not asked to work within a single framework or address a common set of theoretical concerns. Instead, we think that the exploration of a range of issues associated with the policy role and impact of experts, and in particular the influence of think tanks [...] is an approach that will help to uncover the empirical relationships that are necessary for further progress in theory building" (p. 5). Hence, 'Policy Expertise in Contemporary Democracies' is a compilation of profound essays on theoretical perspectives enriched by a number of national in-depth case studies and comparisons on policy expertise useful particularly for (post-)graduates, academic experts from multiple disciplinary backgrounds such as political science, philosophy or history, as well as practitioners in policy advice and political consulting who wish to get deeper insights into specific aspects of policy expertise in contemporary democracies.

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