research article

Evidence-based policymaking in the legislatures: timeliness and politics of evidence in Finland

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Scholarship on evidence-based policymaking (EBP) has long called for more a realistic understanding of how politicians use evidence, especially the ways that use of evidence is negotiated with political goals. This article offers a new perspective on this question by drawing from research on legislative organisations. It introduces a new framework for the study of evidence-based policy, developed by reviewing key insights from legislative studies and interpreting their relevance for the study of EBP. It then applies this framework in an interview-based case-study of the Parliament of Finland. Previous studies have identified timeliness and relevance as some of the key barriers to using evidence, and our data focus on how key actors in legislative organisations understand and manage timeliness. Our findings show that timeliness is dominated by short-term reactions to new bill proposals, but the window for timely evidence in the legislatures can vary from months to days. Our study identifies three strategies used in legislative organisations to overcome the problems of reactivity: programmatic work, specialisation and network building. Practices relating to these strategies are discussed across legislators, political parties and committees. Our findings suggest that it is important for research on EBP in a legislative context to go beyond the study of committees and individual legislators, to explore the role of political parties. This strategy allows researchers to discover the often non-linear and indirect ways that evidence can influence policy through political parties.

Introduction

Since the emergence of evidence-based policymaking (EBP), public policy scholars have been critical of whether its goals can be fulfilled. Empirical research has been called for to provide a more realistic understanding of how policymakers use scientific evidence (Nutley et al, 2007; Boaz et al, 2008; Oliver et al, 2014a; Cairney, 2016; French, 2019). Alternative framings have been proposed to build a middle-ground between the extremes promoting and rejecting the paradigm (Head, 2015; Sayer, 2019).

Yet the meta-level goal of EBP to build a receptive ecosystem of promoters and audiences of EBP instruments has been highly successful (Simons and Schniedermann, 2021). Indeed, evidence-based health policy has gained surging interest during the COVIC-19 pandemic. Climate policies also put particular emphasis on quantitative models and evidence. Furthermore, policymaking keywords like data-driven policy have introduced new ideas that align with the goals of EBP (Verhulst et al, 2019; Nam, 2020). The push for a greater role of evidence in policymaking is therefore as strong as ever, contributing to a tension with elected politicians.

This article contributes to the long-standing need for more realistic understanding of evidence by focusing on an issue that has so far received only little attention in EBP: legislative organisation. The study directly responds to the call for studies into the real-world task environment of politicians (French, 2019) and need for integrative studies of expertise and politics (Christensen, 2020). It also connects to the literature on evidence transfer (for example, Ingold and Monaghan, 2016; also MacKillop, 2020) by exploring the mediating role of legislative organisation.

Legislative organisation refers to the structures and constraints that shape the work of legislators (Strøm, 1995). The empirical focus of the studies is typically on the dynamic interplay between political parties, legislative committees and individual legislators (Damgaard, 1995). If proponents of EBP have made only poor use of contemporary policy theories (Cairney, 2016), the case is doubly so when it comes to theories of legislative organisation. Yet legislative organisation offers a way to explore the various indirect ways that evidence interacts with politics and policy, which were recognised already by Weiss (1979) and still haunt EBP research (French, 2019: 158) but have remained elusive in empirical research. The theoretical contribution of the article is in using insights form legislative studies to inform public policy scholarship on EBP. It therefore elaborates on the organisational aspects of political uses of knowledge, a theme underscored by Daviter (2015).

To demonstrate the value of studying EBP through legislative organisation, the article uses it to analyse different notions of timeliness of evidence. Numerous studies have stressed timeliness and relevance as some of the key factors that define whether evidence has an impact on policy (Weiss and Bucuvalas, 1980; Oliver et al, 2014b; Cairney, 2016). Yet studies into what constitutes timeliness have been inconclusive on how timeliness of evidence should be understood from the perspective of politicians. The article acknowledges that EBP literature is only one of many relevant conceptual debates on the broader question of knowledge, expertise and policy. Other public policy debates can be found on knowledge utilisation, policy learning, epistemic communities, professions and sociology of science (for overview, see Radaelli, 1995; Christensen, 2020). A thorough conceptual discussion of legislative organisation in relation to all these literatures is beyond the scope of this article, but it does demonstrate that legislative organisation offers new perspectives in EBP and can therefore also be relevant for these other debates.

The article thus answers two research questions.

1. How do legislators, political parties and committees structure the use of evidence in legislatures?
2. What constitutes timeliness in the use of evidence in legislatures?

To answer the research questions, the article presents an interview-based study on the use of evidence in *Eduskunta,* the national Parliament of Finland. Along with

the study of Koga et al (2022) on Brazil, the Finnish case offers an opportunity to explore EBP in non-English-speaking countries. Finland is a good case study for evidence and legislative organisation because EBP has received broad political support in Finland, several parties have adopted it as a goal in their programmatic work, and the governments of Antti Rinne (2019) and Sanna Marin (2019–2023) enshrined EBP as a guiding principle of their policymaking. Interviews with 39 politicians, party employees, parliamentary clerks and government officials were conducted.

The findings suggest that it is unhelpful to see legislatures or legislators as empty vessels waiting to be filled with evidence provided by outside actors. Although much legislative work is driven by reactive orientation towards the immediate needs of legislative agenda and public debate, operating effectively in this environment requires the support of proactive programmatic work, network-building and specialisation. Legislators and parties try to maintain a stable policy platform that can be defended with evidence. In Finland the political parties have a key role in ensuring this long-term perspective to evidence, a viewpoint that tends to be downplayed in EBP literature. The findings therefore offer a way forward in how programmatic politics shape when and how politicians are open to update or reinterpret evidence backing their current positions.

The article is organised as follows. The article first introduces a framework of legislative organisation and reviews key insights from legislative studies. It then discusses the value of this perspective to EBP literature. Following the introduction of the conceptual framework, the article turns to the question of timeliness. The empirical findings are organised according to the findings on legislators, political parties and committees. The article finishes with a discussion of its key findings and ways forward.

Legislative organisation and evidence

Legislative organisation research has identified a range of formal and informal mechanisms that influence legislative activity (Strøm et al, 2003). In this article the focus is on formal organisational arrangements rather than mechanisms identified in neo-institutional legislative research such as applications of rational choice theory. The proposed framework consists of individual legislators, committees and political parties, which are widely recognised as key organisational actors within legislatures (Martin et al, 2014). The framework is parsimonious, leaving out formal hierarchies among legislators, bureaucratic actors like civil servants and legislative support functions, and extra-parliamentary actors like interest groups (for overview, see Strøm, 1995). Furthermore, the article does not discuss bicameralism and presidentialism because they cannot be analysed in the unicameral Parliament of Finland. The article also follows the legislative studies practice of excluding governments from the framework to focus on the internal organisation of legislatures, but this should not be interpreted as downplaying the importance of governments in the policymaking process.

All formal power of the legislature unfolds through the actions of elected legislators. Their relationship with evidence is defined by overabundance of information and chronic lack of time. Politicians engage with information regarding issues in public debate, individual policy positions, proposed policy options, information from constituents, interest groups stances, and symbolic aspects of what policies might mean (Kingdon, 1989). To cope with the deluge, some legislators specialise in one field of policy that guides their legislative work (Fenno, 1973; Searing, 1994). Politicians

overall are deliberately selective about whether issues warrant further analysis, with the magnitude of public attention to the issue and extent of political consensus and conflict serving as key individual–level cues (Kingdon, 1989; Walgrave and Dejaeghere, 2017; Walgrave et al, 2018). Politicians are often ready to revisit only some of their positions based on new research evidence and often reject evidence that does not support their beliefs (Baekgaard et al, 2019; Heikkila et al, 2020). On the other hand, politicians widely recognise the importance of basing their arguments and proposed policies on evidence, which gives policymakers a range of strategies to relate individual pieces of evidence to their goals and beliefs, running the gamut from policy-defining to being rhetorical and deliberately misleading (Weiss, 1979; Whiteman, 1985; Shulock, 1999; Boswell, 2009). Recent interview-based studies suggest that legislators play an active role in constituting and performing the relationship between evidence and politics rather than only reacting to evidence based on their beliefs (Rose et al, 2020; Geddes, 2021). Legislators can also be experts with previous careers in research (Christensen et al, 2022) or members in epistemic communities, which further blurs the line between researchers, policy experts and legislators (Grødem and Hippe, 2019).

Committees have been established as the primary arena for use of evidence in legislatures and their importance on the overall work of legislatures is widely acknowledged (Gilligan and Krehbiel, 1990; Mattson and Strøm, 1995). Evidence often presents itself to legislators through their membership of committees (Fenno, 1973).

Furthermore, some parliamentary committees perform oversight duties and fact–finding missions, which place information and evidence itself rather than legislative amendments as the primary product of this committee function. The most important avenue of evidence in committees is expert hearings, which serve a range of purposes from participatory and coordinative to epistemic (Coen and Katsaitis, 2019). Use of evidence is assessed for its breadth and representativeness of the public debate rather than solely for the depth of information presented in them (Rose et al, 2020). On the other hand, committee members are neither passive recipients of information nor opportunist political schemers, but active participants in constructing a dynamic combination of policy content, evidence and political goals (Geddes, 2019; The LSE GV314 Group, 2020; Aula and Raunio, 2022). It is therefore necessary to conceptualise committees as one actor in the dynamic interaction with legislators and political parties. Indeed, comparative evidence suggests that political parties are far more important to the policy process than committees although committees play an important role in organising legislative work (Siefken and Rommetvedt, 2022).

Legislators voluntarily form factions and political parties that act as the link between electoral, legislative and governmental power (Strøm et al, 2003). The organisational structure of political parties is itself a network with multiple centres, but within legislatures they operate through parliamentary party groups (Heidar and Koole, 2000). Parliamentary party groups operate as more or less cohesive units whose unity results from both voluntary alignment and coercive discipline, with the majority party or coalition controlling the legislative agenda (Cox and McCubbins, 2007). Within parties, legislators specialise in different policy areas that are mirrored in their committee memberships, granting them opportunity and responsibility to coordinate party positions in that policy area (Fenno, 1973; Mykkänen, 2010; Mickler, 2017). Individual legislators therefore both influence and are influenced by party policy positions and development of long-term programmatic goals within

the party. In multi–party systems such internal party practices and party unity are particularly pronounced (for example, Andeweg and Thomassen, 2011). How parties use evidence therefore has direct consequences for the policymaking process, although they are rarely a formal part of it and their role is sometimes disregarded by legislative researchers.

Why is legislative organisation relevant for EBP?

Informing public policy research on EBP with a perspective from legislative organisation offers ways forward in some of the long-standing conceptual problems. It helps studies to overcome the problems of 1) often assuming politicians and researchers form two separate communities, 2) overemphasising knowledge brokers outside political institutions, and 3) conceptualising policymaking as a linear process.

First, focus on legislative organisation dissolves the dichotomic approach to evidence and politics that often undergirds EBP literature (for an overview, see Botterill and Hindmoor, 2012; Oliver et al, 2014a). The 'two communities hypothesis' has held long-standing influence in EBP research despite contradictory evidence (Newman et al, 2016). However, as was argued earlier, legislators themselves also have expertise and can even have a background in research (see also Christensen, 2020; Christensen et al, 2022). Furthermore, legislators are embedded in the organisational dynamics of political parties and committees, which often have specific goals of combining evidence with politics in dynamic ways. Legislative organisation therefore offers a novel way of understanding the institutional dynamics of how politicians and researchers interact with each other.

Second, legislative organisation offers a novel perspective to knowledge brokers (MacKillop et al, 2020) and evidence transfer (Ingold and Monaghan, 2016). The focus of the past literature on EBP and politicians has been on supporting the dissemination and communication of evidence from the perspective of those who produce it, which creates the need to overcome barriers to politicians using more evidence (Oliver et al, 2014b). Analysis of legislative organisation offers insights into the opposite side of the relationship, that is, how politicians themselves facilitate their own use of evidence. Studies on evidence transfer and brokering have only rarely considered how institutional dynamics of legislative organisation influence the use of evidence by politicians. Analysing legislative organisation can therefore offer new perspectives to this long-standing debate.

Third, theories of legislative organisation directly challenge any notion of linear policy processes, which are common in EBP literature despite their contested nature in public policy research (for an overview, see Cairney, 2016). Legislators, committees and political parties influence policymaking in various ways that go beyond the formal role of legislatures, engaging with policies in various stages of development (for example, Heidar and Koole, 2000). They don't only receive information but actively participate in negotiation evidence and politics. Especially parties and legislators of the governing coalition influence government policy drafting, a perspective that is missed if legislatures are thought to influence bills and policies only after they have been submitted to the legislature. Although governments are not analysed in the current study, findings on legislative organisation can therefore offer new perspectives into the interaction of politics and evidence within the government as well.

Timeliness beyond linearity, agendas and crisis

Having now introduced the conceptual framework of the study, I turn to the role of timeliness. Past research has identified timeliness and relevance to be of crucial importance for successful use of evidence (Cairney, 2016). Indeed, a systematic review of the barriers to evidence use literature identified problems of availability, relevance and timing as the top three challenges (Oliver et al, 2014b). Timeliness is a highly salient challenge to EBP because similar findings were already presented in the 1970s (Weiss and Bucuvalas, 1980) and 1990s (Innvaer et al, 2002). To solve the problem of timeliness and its adjacent problems of availability and relevance, EBP research has proposed long-term collaboration and network-building (for example, Oliver et al, 2020b), various strategies of evidence transfer (Ingold and Monaghan, 2016) and knowledge brokers (MacKillop et al, 2020). The goal of these strategies has been to maximise the ability of researchers to *offer* evidence in a timely and relevant manner. However, they offer little insights into what politicians themselves think is timely. Indeed, identifying timeliness as an important facilitator of using evidence does not yet indicate what makes evidence timely and what it is timely for.

Existing public policy literature offers three primary ways of understanding timeliness: the stages model, agenda-setting and crisis mode. First, timeliness can be understood in relation to the stage of preparing individual policies. Linear models still provide the backdrop for idealised models of EBP despite the longstanding critiques (Cairney, 2016). Stages in a linear policymaking process like inception, drafting, public consultation and committee scrutiny provide suppliers of evidence with anchors of timeliness, but imply that evidence will play a different role in them. Emphasis on linearity also leads to the common EBP idea that evidence should be introduced to policymaking as 'early' as possible. The role of legislatures in such idealised models is typically reserved only for the very start (political impetus for a policy) and the very end of the process (legislative scrutiny and debate). However, in practice, the work of legislatures is not contained to their formal position within a linear policy process.

A second way of defining timeliness in public policy comes from the agenda setting literature. Agenda setting literature conceptualises policy process as a moving puzzle of shifting opportunities, which leads to only some issues being on the formal or public agenda at any given moment of time (for example, Baumgartner and Jones, 2009; Kingdon, 2014). In this framework, evidence can be seen as timely if it is available and relevant to politicians when an issue enters the formal decision-making agenda, thus allowing policymakers to make use of evidence when formulating the policy. Changes to the agenda can happen suddenly, which emphasises the need for evidence to be ready when a policy window opens. Nevertheless, agenda setting literature gives only little consideration to legislative organisation, because public debate and representative institutions are mainly used to explain *why* something is on the agenda and therefore timely for evidence, rather than analysing *how* any specific part of legislative organisation influences the use of evidence in practice. Timeliness in agenda setting literature is therefore an outcome of a process, but it does not offer an understanding of how politicians themselves interpret and cope with problems of timeliness.

It is also possible to identify a third notion of timeliness, the crisis mode. Sometimes a policy problem is forced to the agenda through a sudden shock from outside any regular policymaking or agenda setting processes. For example, the COVID-19

pandemic created a sudden need for evidence under intense uncertainty and risk (Weible et al, 2020), but the European Union sovereign debt crisis in the early 2010s also created a similar rapid need for learning and evidence (Kamkhaji and Radaelli, 2017). Evidence is needed not only to learn from the crisis but to learn during the crisis and assess available policy options (Moynihan, 2009). A sudden need for evidence can also be triggered by shocks like policy failure. However, because the status of a policy failure is constructed rather than being a given, the timely need for evidence after failure is a negotiated process that does not always qualify as a sudden crisis (Boin et al, 2009; Bovens and 't Hart, 2016). The urgency of evidence in crisis can therefore still include several frames of what is timely.

Legislative organisation offers a way forward in studying timeliness of evidence *inductively*. This approach recognises that timeliness of evidence is not defined only by the formal decision-making agenda or public events, and neither can timeliness be anchored only to the formal role of legislatures in policymaking. Instead, notions of timely evidence are constructed by using qualitative data to analyse social and organisational practices that define both how evidence is used in legislatures and what makes it timely (for example, Crewe, 2015; Geddes, 2019). Timeliness of evidence is therefore dependent on the practices of legislators, political parties and committees, which make evidence relevant and timely in different ways for different purposes. Furthermore, an inductive strategy opens the way to analyse how legislators, parties and committees fight against their perennial lack of time.

Methodology

The article is situated in the long tradition of inductive and qualitative analysis of politics as proposed by Fenno (1973) and Kingdon (1989; 2014). The article is based on 39 interviews conducted with Finnish MPs, personal aides, parliamentary party employees, committee clerks, government employees and representatives of government research agencies. Breakdown of interviewees by category, gender and political affiliation available in Appendix 1. The interviews were conducted between 17 January and 25 June 2020. The interviews explored use of information and evidence in the Parliament through a semi-structured interview schedule. The data was originally collected and administered by the Finnish Innovation Fund SITRA as part of a research partnership with the Parliament of Finland, and access to data was granted to the researchers by the Finnish Innovation Fund SITRA. Written consent to participate in the research project was received from all participants. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using qualitative coding strategies suitable for elite interviews, drawing from both structural coding and theory-informed coding (Saldaña, 2021). Interviews were first coded structurally to consolidate data regarding politicians, committees and political parties, as well as different strategies of using evidence. In the second stage the data was coded again with a focus on different frames of understanding and managing timeliness. Coding was done by a single author per the terms of research data licence. The reliability and validity of the analysis is strengthened by the coder and author also having been a member of the original team collecting and analysing the interviews. Direct quotes from interviews were not used per agreement with the interviewees. Because of these methodological issues, the article focuses on identifying key empirical themes and demonstrating the value of the legislative organisation framework rather than attempting a close interpretative

analysis. The findings are therefore exploratory and theory-generating rather than confirmatory or explanatory.

Legislative organisation in Finland

The Finnish Eduskunta consists of 200 members of the Parliament elected through open list proportional representation. The formal powers of the Parliament are relatively strong in international comparison, but in practice they are exercised only at the discretion of the ruling coalition of political parties that control the formal policymaking agenda (Raunio and Wiberg, 2014). Political parties in Finland are programmatic and enforce strict voting discipline. Within political parties, individual legislators specialise in different fields of policy according to their committee seats, enforcing and coordinating party positions in those fields (Mykkänen, 2010). Before they can be approved, all governments bills must be processed by specialised committees, which have the power to summon expert witnesses and amend bills. Legislators are typically members in one to three committees, and alternate members in two more. The workload of the committees is high and committee meetings can place a significant burden on the time allocation of legislators (Aula and Konttinen, 2020). Committees amend up to half of the submitted bills, but amendments skew towards technical improvements rather than shifts in policy content (Seo, 2017). In practice committees are subordinate to the parties forming the majority government coalition because committee seats are divided proportionately to also give majority governments a majority in each individual committee. In sum, political parties are the key actor in the Parliament but can fully exercise their power only when they are members of a majority governing coalition.

Findings

Timeliness and reactivity in legislative organisation

The findings of the study confirmed that timeliness of evidence in legislative organisation is primarily associated with reaction to the legislative agenda and public debate. Three individual findings support the argument. First, the interviews suggested that lack of time forces legislators to concentrate only on issues that are immediately on the legislative agenda or subject to public debate in their areas of interest. The time–use of legislators is therefore dictated by reaction to government bill proposals and reaction to current affairs. Second, interviewees reported legislators spending a significant proportion of their time in legislative committee meetings scrutinising government bill proposals, which forces them to react to bill proposals rather than craft new bills or policies. Third, interviewees suggested, following findings of earlier studies, that legislative agenda is mostly defined by the government coalition, forcing opposition parties and legislators with low insider-access to react to bills at short notice.

Closer analysis of how the interviewees understand reactivity suggests that it can refer to several different timescales. The inductive approach to timeliness therefore elaborates on the earlier findings on reactivity. Reactivity includes different temporal windows of opportunity for evidence to be timely and relevant. Depending on different actions relating to legislative work, evidence could be timely on massively different timespans ranging from hours to months.

On the largest scale, evidence can be timely for *months* when a major legislative proposal is expected to be submitted to the legislature and is subject to extensive public debate beforehand. This creates opportunities for political parties and legislators to collect evidence in anticipation of a bill, followed by the actual bill scrutiny. Interviewees reported that while parties belonging to the government coalition receive information of most incoming bills well in advance and can also influence them, the opposition parties can prepare in advance only for few major bills. Most bills therefore come to the legislative agenda without anticipatory work by opposition parties and they are forced into far more reactivity than their governmental counterparts. Furthermore, committee clerks interviewed for the study suggest that committees do not prepare in advance for incoming bills and do not collect evidence proactively. In most cases evidence is therefore timely only for the duration of the legislative scrutiny in committees, which lasts from *weeks* to *months*.

Overall, the interviewed legislators, party staff and aides perceived a *week* to be a long time in a legislature. This means that evidence is often gathered at the last possible moment according to the high-pressure reactive logic of the legislature. Although legislators and parties might consider evidence to be timely for the whole duration of the committee scrutiny, interviewees suggested that the time window to appear in committee hearings might be only *days* or *weeks* when the committee prepares their hearing plan. If evidence misses this window, it can be difficult to force evidence to the formal committee agenda even if it reaches individual legislators. Finally, some interviewees noted that the window of timeliness can sometimes be mere *days* or *hours* prior to an important meeting or during a fast-moving negotiation. One such case are plenary debates where legislators can use evidence symbolically and rhetorically without deeper consideration of its implications to policy. Extreme reactiveness is exacerbated by the fragmentation of legislative work into committee meetings, legislative tasks, constituency service and political communication which lead to stress, anxiety and even exhaustion (for discussion, see Mannevuo, 2020; Mannevuo et al, 2022). Legislators can therefore search for evidence on a range of disparate issues without intentions for a more long-term perspective on using it, which further shortens the window of timeliness for individual legislators. As indicated by earlier evidence, legislatures perennially lack time because the number of public policy issues competing for attention is always larger than the capacity of legislatures to deal with them.

The differences in these timescales influence what kind of information legislators and political parties can consider. Timeliness is therefore intricately connected to an action-oriented understanding of relevance: legislators look for evidence that provides them with actionable insights into a current bill proposal that they are interested in. Complex evidence is relevant for reaction only when there is enough time to turn it into meaningful propositions in relation to the issue under scrutiny. The shorter the timescale of reactivity, the more actionable any piece of evidence must be to have an effect. Both legislators and party staff reported often receiving evidence that is irrelevant because it does not clearly indicate what amendments should be done to a bill. Earlier studies in EBP in legislatures have also emphasised the importance of actionability and clarity, but the current findings elaborate on the difficulty of knowing from the outside what counts as timely, relevant and actionable evidence within the legislature. The findings elaborate on Geddes' (2019) arguments on how use of evidence in legislatures is related to the interpretative performances of legislative

work, meaning that the evidential value and its relevance must be constructed by the participants and cannot be dictated by those providing the evidence.

Strategies to manage timeliness in legislative organisation

Use of evidence in legislatures is not limited to reaction. Although reactivity dominates the formal aspects of legislative work, the interviews suggest that there are also long-term perspectives that inform the use of evidence. This section employs the framework of legislative organisation to review strategies to manage timeliness beyond reaction. Three strategies were identified in the interviews: programmatic work, legislative specialization and expert networks. Table 1 maps the role of these strategies across legislative organisation.

Programmatic use of evidence was identified by exploring the role of parties in the legislature and the preparation of evidence-based responses to bill proposals in committee and plenary debates. Parties craft programmatic documents to maintain a stable policy platform that remains even when legislators or their policy portfolios change. Interviews with party staff and aides highlighted the importance of party programmes as the go-to source when preparing responses to bill proposals and issues in public debate. The interviewees explained that parties proactively seek new evidence to inform their programmatic positions and that expertise and evidence play an important role in their preparation. However, time windows for updating programmes open up irregularly. While the new evidence regularly presented in committee hearings could provide an important source for programmatic work, in practice interviewees reported that majority of evidence provided in hearings is quicky forgotten after bill scrutiny. Only some evidence is deemed significant enough to reinterpret existing programmatic policy positions or change the programme itself.

Legislative specialisation was identified by analysing both how legislators understand expertise and how parties organise expertise within them. The phenomenon of specialisation is well-known in legislative research as was discussed in the literature review. In addition to the overall role of committees as a venue for specialisation, the interviews suggest that legislators themselves can in some cases acquire an expert status. An expert status grants them independence in interpreting evidence and skills

Table 1: Legislative organisation and the strategies of managing timeliness

	Programmatic work	Legislative specialisation	Expert networks
Legislator	Interpret newly acquired evidence against existing programmes. Lead crafting of new programme documents.	Specialise according to committee memberships and develop personal expertise	Maintain personal connection to expert networks to support access to timely evidence and experts who can interpret it.
Political Party	Maintain party policy platform through programme documents. Interpret when evidence warrants changes in programmes.	Maintain party policy across different policy areas. Facilitate specialisation in party staff and among legislators.	Coordinate party expert networks to support both reactive and proactive work.
Committee	Provide arena where individual bills are interpreted against programmatic policy goals	Facilitate divisions of labour within legislature, political parties and legislators	Provide arena for parties to deploy, validate and expand their expert networks

to guide both party and committee collection of evidence. Legislative specialisation also occurs in political parties when they employ specialised policy staff that has expertise in specific areas of policy. Such specialisation improves the ability of a party to process evidence beyond the individual capacity of legislators. Specialisation helps parties and legislators to dedicate time to individual issues, benefit from the accumulation of knowledge and experience, and increase the ability to collect and interpret evidence under time pressure.

Building of expert networks was identified by analysing *who* legislators turn to when looking for evidence and how parties try to maintain a robust evidence–based policy platform. The interviews revealed that both MPs and parties maintain networks of experts that align with the interests and priorities of the party. The notion of timeliness at stake here is again a long-term perspective of avoiding the problems of reaction: trusted expert networks make expertise and evidence available on short notice when it is needed. They help parties and legislators by providing relevant and actionable evidence on a timely basis.

Use of the different strategies to transcend problems of reactivity take different forms in different parts of legislative organisation. The next sections analyse reactivity and the strategies to go beyond it in each different component of legislative organisation.

Committee strategies to manage timeliness

Work of committees in Finland is dominated by reaction to bills submitted by the government. As a result, interviews suggested that expert opinion and evidence in committees is always focused on the short-term question of whether it warrants amendments to a bill. Furthermore, because Finnish committees have few independent resources of their own, their use of evidence is dominated by the opportunities provided by expert hearings, skills and knowledge of the legislators, and resources of the political parties.

From the perspective of specialisation, committees are a vehicle of specialisation that allows the legislature itself, legislators and political parties to increase their efficiency through divisions of labour (for example, Gilligan and Krehbiel, 1990; Mattson and Strøm, 1995). Committees facilitate specialisation among legislators and party staff. From the perspective of timeliness of evidence, committees therefore *organise* and *channel* the use of evidence to be available for bill scrutiny.

From the perspective of building expert networks, committees are the arena where legislators and political parties deploy their expert networks for timely interventions into bill scrutiny. Earlier evidence suggests that committee hearings in Finland consist of a small circle of experts from government agencies, interest groups and party affiliates (Seo, 2017). Interviews with committee clerks confirmed that the experts are summoned from a small pool of trusted experts. Interviews with party staff, aides and legislators further confirmed that parties are actively referring experts and try to ensure the representation of their own expert networks. Experts heard in committees are therefore largely the same as the expert whom parties themselves consult. Arrival of bills into committee scrutiny is often the trigger to engage these networks to determine and defend the party position in relation to a specific bill. A powerful position in committee hearings can therefore be an *outcome* of an actor already being part of party political expert networks and therefore having the opportunity to influence their position. On the other hand, repeated consulting of familiar experts

constitutes a chance to update and reinterpret policy positions even if its primary goal is immediate reaction to a government bill. Repeated reactionary use of same experts can therefore constitute an ongoing conversation between experts and legislators, which over time facilitates programmatic change and the expertise of the legislators. What this means for timeliness is that reactive pressures can sometimes be overcome if politicians themselves consider evidence to be important beyond the immediate bill under consideration, although it is more common for evidence to be forgotten. A legislative organisation perspective therefore suggests that evidence presented in committees has a role beyond their role in the policy process.

The interviews did not suggest that Finnish legislative committees themselves would engage in proactive work with evidence. The focus on bill scrutiny and absence of independent inquiries means that committees themselves do not engage in long-term programmatic work.

Political party strategies to manage timeliness

Political parties are crucial for legislators and committees to go beyond reactivity by using long-term strategies. This aspect of managing timeliness is an elaboration of the well-known role of political parties in legislatures to reduce uncertainty and instability (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2011; Cox and McCubbins, 2007). The findings suggest that while legislative work might be driven by reactivity in ways that limit the opportunities to thoroughly consider evidence, political parties cannot afford such volatility and therefore deliberately maintain access to actionable and relevant evidence through their use of programmes, specialisation and expert networks.

Based on the interviews, Finnish political parties accumulate evidence and expertise over time and codify them into official party programmes, which reduce their need to determine policy positions reactively. Given the hectic reactionary rhythm of legislative agenda and public debates, parties value stability of the programmes rather than trying to define their position anew each time an issue emerges. Since the programmes can stay in place for years and become codified into binding coalition agreements, the evidence-base of a programme can influence party positions for a very long time. This has direct implications for timeliness: if a party does not want to change its programmatic policy positions, contrasting evidence will not influence the position even if it was timely from a policy process perspective or agenda setting perspective. The role of programmes suggests that when politicians are unfazed by latest evidence presented by researchers, as is often lamented in EBP literature, the reason can be in the lifecycle of when parties are open to updating their programmatic position and their evidence base. The lag between evidence first influencing individual legislators or party activists, then becoming codified into party programmes, and finally being turned to government policy can be considerable.

When political parties do update their policy programmes, however, this provides an important opportunity for experts and researchers to influence them. In other words, rewriting a policy programme makes evidence time-independent from the legislative agenda or public debate. Some interviewees suggested that parties write policy programme especially when they are members of the parliamentary opposition, which gives them freedom from binding government coalition agreements. This leads to a somewhat counterintuitive finding that the right time to influence programmatic party policy positions can be when they *do not* have governmental power.

Legislative specialisation in political parties allows parties to be more efficient in their policymaking and bill scrutiny, helping them to make sense of evidence under time pressure. The findings confirmed that specialisation is closely related to committee-based division of labour (for example, Mykkänen, 2010; Andeweg and Thomassen, 2011). Interviews suggested that specialisation in parties happens on two levels. On the one hand, legislators specialise according to their responsibilities in legislative committees and their personal interests. Legislator specialisation will be further discussed later in the article. On the other hand, party staff can also specialise in specific policy areas. Interviews with party staff suggested that specialist staff could in fact be more specialised than legislators because legislator committee memberships are frequently reshuffled whereas party staff remain in place for longer periods of time. Furthermore, specialist party staff can dedicate their work to specific policy fields and committees, whereas legislators divide their attention between diverse political functions such as legislative scrutiny, public debate, constituency work and collaboration with stakeholders. As a result, specialist party staff can put their full focus on specific fields of policy, helping parties to overcome reactivity and engage in more proactive policymaking.

Expert networks consisting of party members, aligned interest groups and like-minded individual researchers were confirmed to be important sources of evidence for political parties. Their purpose in relation to timeliness is to provide a timely supply of expertise and evidence that is available on short notice in a way that is relevant and actionable for legislators. In addition to the policy programmes and specialist staff, expert networks provide further capacity to work with evidence under reactive pressures. These networks are used both to formulate programmes and to react to bill proposals. Interviews with party officials asserted that the maintenance of the expert networks is the prerogative of the party, not a personal property of politicians. Interviewees explained that parties must maintain robust policy platforms and expert networks even when individual legislators change policy responsibilities or lose their seats. These findings provide insights into the role of political parties as brokers of evidence. Admittance to expert networks was not reported to depend only on partisanship. Some experts were reported to be party members who have special professional skills or work for interest groups closely associated with the party. Nevertheless, some could be researchers or experts with no formal ties to parties. Individual university researchers were mentioned as examples of such collaboration. Some interviewees also suggested close cooperation with formally impartial government research institutes. These findings suggest that partisan expert networks are not purely interest-based but can include a wide variety of members who are broadly aligned with the interests of a political party.

Legislator strategies to manage timeliness

Based on the interviews, legislators rely heavily on strategies to manage timeliness. Without support, the ability of legislators to make effective use of evidence would be severely curtailed. Although interviewees from party staff and aides stressed that legislators ultimately make the decisions on how to use evidence in committee scrutiny and public debate, legislators themselves emphasised their reliance on party staff and aides to collect and interpret evidence. As suggested earlier, it is the political parties that have an interest in maintaining a stable evidence-based policy

platform that is informed by specialisation, policy programmes and expert networks. However, Finnish legislators hold a key position in ultimately deciding what to do with evidence during committee bill scrutiny, because they act as the link between committees and political parties.

To fight against the reactiveness of legislative work, legislators need to specialise. Two different forms of specialisation could be identified in the interviews. On the one hand, specialisation can mean responsibility to manage collective party positions during bill scrutiny, typically through membership in legislative committees. Such specialisation often includes duties to liaise with party expert networks and participate in policy programme drafting, connecting it to the other strategies to overcome reaction.

Specialisation can also mean legislators acquiring an expert status within the party or a committee. When a legislator is recognised as an expert, their policy positions become important beyond their role as representatives of party and constituency preferences. The interviews suggested that expert status can be acquired through long-term commitment to work in legislative committees, which allows legislators to slowly integrate large amounts of evidence into their personal policy expertise, although the evidence itself is collected and interpreted on a reactive basis. However, committee memberships can change frequently due to reshuffles and legislators might not have an interest in building expertise in the committees to which they are allocated. Not all specialisation therefore leads to development of expertise. Frequent changes of responsibility led some legislators to question whether specialisation ultimately pays out in comparison to developing a more generalist role (see Searing, 1994). On the other hand, expert status can also be acquired independently from legislative work, for example through prior professional training and experience. In these cases, expertise as a legislator was a continuation of their earlier political and policy work. Interviews with party staff suggested that because parties often have priority policy areas and strive for issue ownership, the presence of expert legislators within a party is often skewed. For example, the left-leaning Social Democratic Party can have several legislators who are genuine experts in social and health policy, but no expert legislators in some other area. This means that legislator expertise can also be closely connected to the programmatic goals of their parties, which further complicates traditional EBP conceptualisation of the relationship between evidence and politics.

Discussion and conclusions

The findings of the article demonstrate that using a framework based on legislative organisation offers a way forward in having a more realistic understanding of how politicians use evidence. The strategy offers an alternative framework to overcome conceptual problems in EBP literature, such as rigid dichotomies of politicians and experts, overemphasis on the supply side of evidence brokers, and linear conceptualisations of policy processes.

The first research question of the study was 'How do legislators, political parties, and committees structure the use of evidence in legislatures?' The main argument of the article is that it is inadequate for studies of EBP to analyse legislators, committees and political parties in isolation from each other. This insight is fundamental to contemporary scholarship on legislative organisation (for example, Cox and McCubbins, 2007; Siefken and Rommetvedt, 2022) but has not been given adequate attention in EBP literature. If studies of EBP only concentrate on either legislators

or committees, they risk missing their dynamic relationship with political parties. Legislative branches of political parties also influence political aspects of EBP in governments, although in public policy literature the two are often analysed separately.

The findings stress the role of political parties in shaping use of evidence in legislatures. Political parties in Finland have a key role in maintaining a stable policy platform based on party-specific policy programmes and advice of expert networks. Political parties have a central role in collecting, processing and brokering evidence within legislatures. The work in legislative committees focuses on interpreting party policy programmes in relation to new policies and evidence. Yet EBP research has so far paid only little attention to the role of evidence in party politics or policy programmes. Nevertheless, focus on the programmatic work of political parties can reveal new evidence on why, when and how parties are ready to revisit the evidence base of their programmatic goals. Furthermore, the study shows that political parties coordinate expert networks that are used both reactively to respond to bill proposals and proactively to craft party policy programmes. Having a strong position in committees is often an *outcome* of an expert already having a strong position within the networks of a specific party. Because the same networks are integral in updating party policy programmes, parties can be reluctant to change their policy positions unless evidence first sways their preferred network of experts. The findings suggest that the proposals in EBP and knowledge utilisation literature to boost the uptake of evidence can be inefficient if they concentrate too much on individual legislators or committee hearings. It might be more effective to influence political parties by liaising with party staff, consulting parties when they are rewriting policy programmes, or integrating oneself to the expert networks of parties. The finding therefore has implications for who should be the target audience of evidence brokering and when evidence translation should happen.

The findings show that individual politicians can acquire a position of specialisation and expertise within their own party and among other legislators. The specialisation and expertise of politicians is well-known in legislative research (for example, Fenno, 1973; Searing, 1994) but has only recently been picked up in public policy and EBP research (Bovens and Wille, 2017; Grødem and Hippe, 2019; Christensen, 2020; Christensen et al, 2022). Yet it goes against the assumed distinction between objective evidence and value driven politics that is common in EBP. Focus on legislative organisation offers one way forward in this emerging literature by highlighting the connection between expertise of individual legislators and the practices of political parties. The findings suggest that an expert status of legislators is not the type of scientific expertise emphasised in EBP literature but more akin to the expertise of civil servants and policymakers (see Fleming and Rhodes, 2018; Grødem and Hippe, 2019). Furthermore, the legislative organisation perspective highlights that an expert status is closely connected the division of labour in political parties, a finding known in committee literature (for example, Andeweg and Thomassen, 2011). Future studies on expertise and politics should expand on these initial findings on the party-political aspects of legislator expertise.

The second research question of the article was 'What constitutes timeliness in the use of evidence in legislatures?' The study approached the question inductively after discussing linear policy process, agenda setting and crisis mode approaches to timeliness. The findings confirmed what was expected based on earlier studies on legislative organisation: legislative work is highly reactionary and subject to intense

time pressures. The findings show that timeliness of evidence cannot be understood only through the policy process theories or agenda setting theories, although they are useful in explaining why issues end up on the legislative agenda. It is more tempting to characterise the reactivity of legislative work as a perpetual crisis mode, but this would needlessly inflate the more traditional sense of crisis mode as a rection to major external shocks. Using the inductive approach, the study identified multiple timescales that range from months to mere hours, giving very different meanings to timeliness and influencing what can count as timely, actionable and relevant evidence. To overcome problems of reactivity, legislators and political parties have developed strategies of managing evidence so that it is more readily available when a reactionary need arrives. Existing understanding of timeliness in EBP literature might therefore not have acknowledged quite how intense the time pressures of legislative work can be, which can lead to misunderstandings in what counts as timely, relevant and actionable evidence.

Finally, it is necessary to consider the limitations of the study. First, a study based on a single country imposes limitations to the generalisability of the finding. A legislative organisation framework is easily transposable to other countries and future studies should therefore test whether similar dynamics can be found elsewhere. Second, focusing only on legislative organisation, the article did not consider the role of governments, although they typically hold a dominant policymaking position in parliamentary democracies. Taking governments into account would add a constraining factor to use of evidence in legislatures, which suggests that the findings of the current study might overestimate the influence of evidence in legislatures. Furthermore, the article was unable to assess how much policy programmes and expert networks of political parties also influence government policymaking. Third, the limitations of the data set allowed the article to merely identify a variety of notions of timeliness but prevented it from offering a more interpretative analysis of them or arriving into theory-confirming or explanatory findings. The findings on different notions of timeliness and strategies to manage it should therefore be taken as a point of comparison for more thorough interpretative analyses of timeliness of evidence in legislatures.

Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Appendix 1: Composition of interviews

The interviews were conducted between 17 January and 25 June 2020.

Table A1: Interviewees by category

Member of the Parliament	Interviewees who were MPs at the time of the interviews	7
Parliamentary Party Group employees and parliamentary aides	Includes both managerial personnel, policy specialists and personal aides.	14
Parliamentary clerks and civil servants	Includes parliamentary committee clerks, civil servants in ministries and government agencies, and senior officials in research institutes	18
	Total	39

Table A2: Interviewee gender by party affiliation

Political party	Men	Women	Total
Christian Democrats	1	0	1
Centre Party	0	2	2
National Coalition Party	3	0	3
Finns Party	1	2	3
Swedish People's Party	1	1	2
Social Democratic Party	1	4	5
Left Alliance	2	1	3
Green League	1	1	2
Non-affiliated (civil servants and clerks)	6	12	18
Total	16	23	39

The table includes party affiliation for those interviewees for whom it was relevant, that is, Members of the Parliament, Parliamentary Party Group employees and parliamentary aides. Information on party affiliation is not available for parliamentary clerks or civil servants.

Table A3: Breakdown of elected politicians and party employees by political party

Political party	Elected politicians	Party employees	Total
Christian Democrats	0	1	1
Centre Party	1	1	2
National Coalition Party	1	2	3
Finns Party	1	2	3
Swedish People's Party	1	1	2
Social Democratic Party	2	3	5
Left Alliance	1	2	3
Green League	0	2	2
Total	7	14	21

Appendix 2: Details on the collection and original use of the interviews

The interview data set was originally collected as part of a collaboration between Finnish Innovation Fund SITRA and the Parliament of Finland. SITRA is a government-owned foundation that is supervised by the Parliament of Finland and regulated by the 'Act on the Jubilee Fund of Finnish Independence' (717/1990) but operating independently with profits from its endowment.

The interviews used in this article were collected in a single wave between 17 January and 25 June 2020. The findings were published in November 2020 in the report *Miten tietoa käytetään päätöksenteossa – Selvitys kansanedustajien tiedonkäytöstä lainsäädäntötyöhön liittyvässä päätöksenteossa* (Sitra, 2020 [loosely translates as 'How is evidence used in decision making – report on the use of evidence and information by MPs in legislative work']) which was commissioned and received by the Parliament of Finland. The interviews were part of a larger research programme that collected over 200 interviews between 2017 and 2023. For further information on the research programme, see https://www.sitra.fi/en/topics/reforming-the-decision-making-process/#what-is-it-about.