

# Book Review: Policy Expertise in Contemporary Democracies

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*In the world of Wikipedia, blogging, and citizen journalism where huge masses of information and the capability to disseminate opinions, thoughts and ideas is available at the click of a mouse, what is the role and impact of political experts? This book comes as a timely contribution in an age where experts' credibility is often demanded and yet contested, and elites are seen as ever more detached from the consequences of their actions, writes **Marcos Gonzalez Hernando**.*



**Policy Expertise in Contemporary Democracies. Stephen Brooks, Dorota Stasiak and Tomasz Zyro. Ashgate. January 2013.**

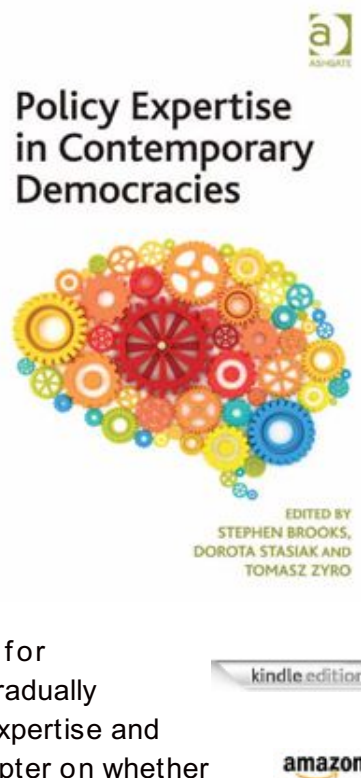
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How can modern political institutions produce credible and authoritative public policies in a world where we have given up on the ideal of objectivity? What should be the purpose of expertise and science in this respect? These questions, and their many implications, are the point of departure of [Stephen Brooks](#), [Dorota Stasiak](#) and Tomasz Zyro's new edited book, *Policy Expertise in Contemporary Democracies*. The book consists of a novel set of reflections on the part expertise should play in informing political decisions in the context of representative mass democracy.

Divided in to a theoretical and an empirical section, this volume comprises some particularly interesting approaches and case studies on how experts, authorities, and the public do and should engage with each other. Starting with [Donald Abelson](#)'s – a renowned expert himself – framework for understanding and assessing the impact of lobbies and think tanks, the book gradually turns into an exploration of the many dimensions of the relationship between expertise and politics. Particularly thought provoking in this respect are Maciej Sadowski's chapter on whether a philosopher can become a policy expert, and Tomasz Zyro's reflections on the role of wisdom and virtue *vis-à-vis* the policy debate.

In the following part, the book presents a selection of studies on policy experts, think-tanks, and policy advice in particular social and institutional contexts; namely the US, Canada, Germany, and Poland. In this sense, it comes as an addition to the growing preoccupation on think-tanks within the social sciences. However, it would have benefited from an additional chapter that problematised the relationship between knowledge, interests and these institutions even further, thus partaking more fully in the current literature on [think-tanks](#). On this occasion nonetheless, our focus will be on Winfried Thaa's and Stephen Brooks' chapters, attempting to engage them in a dialogue that is – regrettably, in this reviewer's view – absent from the book.

Thaa's 'Deliberating Experts Versus Political Representation' is dedicated to the tension between technocracy, the representation of weak interests in public policy, and the sources of legitimacy of expert committees. Using as case study the Süßmuth committee on immigration under Gerhard Schröder's government, Thaa illustrates how seemingly well-intentioned public policy initiatives – aimed at de-politicising contentious matters through rational, nonpartisan consensus – can frequently overlook the interests of non-expert members of the public.



In Thaa's view, the push towards technocratic apolitical solutions risks becoming gradually more non-democratic, passing the opinions and biases held by an elite as objective truths. Following Hannah Arendt, he claims politics and democracy are indispensable precisely where things cannot be known with certainty and where we deal with values, which technocratic discussions tend to ignore. Thus, there is no substitute for political deliberation.

The second chapter under review, Brooks' 'Speaking Truth to Power: The Paradox of the Intellectual in the Visual Information Age' focuses on current trends in the way expertise and knowledge is presented to the public. In an era of social media and mass communication, how convincing an idea is depends on much more than its intellectual merits, and how it is 'packaged' becomes central for assessing its impact. Hence the paradox that intellectual authority has become, to a degree, independent of traditional forms of asserting credibility. Thus, techniques devised initially for entertainment – such as the use of easily understood narratives and visual aids – become ever more central for seeming believable in the public domain.

Using as an example Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, Brooks expounds how its visual and rhetorical devices allowed it to become more noticeable. In a saturated market of ideas, where immediacy is ever more important, attention from the public and policymakers becomes a rare commodity.

But why is this the case? For Brooks, it has to do firstly with the ubiquity of communication technologies. Both of these authors write in the backdrop of the emergence of new forms of democracy, based on interacting with 'audiences' rather than solely with 'parties' or traditional representative institutions. The advent of ICTs and social media in the last decades has brought about new forms of engagement of governments with the wider public. But also, this process is crucially related to the erosion of institutionally guaranteed authority. This in turn has rendered the role of expertise in governing public affairs an ever more contentious issue. Often seen as elitist, now experts are compelled to explain, in lay terms, their knowledge to larger publics or be increasingly marginalised from the public debate.

In some sense, the arguments of Thaa and Brooks seem to coincide: expert knowledge cannot afford being too distant from public scrutiny or democratic deliberation. Nonetheless, at another level, they signal almost contradictory risks, one towards 'technocratic-elitist' policymaking and another pointing to a 'populist' degradation of representative democracy. In the aftermath of the 2008 crash – when we all know too well the danger of these possibilities – a more engaged discussion that accounted for these seemingly opposing tendencies would have been commendable. Instead – at least the theoretical section, since the second part is more engaged in comparative analyses – this volume gathers together an archipelago of fascinating contributions, without enough bridges between them.

This book comes as a timely contribution in an age where experts' credibility is often contested (but demanded) and elites are seen as ever more detached from the consequences of their actions. At the same time, politics becomes increasingly a matter of 'packaging', thus fostering worrying tendencies for any informed public debate. It expounds and explores many of the deadlocks that plague modern policymaking, albeit, I believe, could have gone further in teasing apart their implications. This volume, nonetheless, should be of particular interest to students, political scientist, policy experts and anybody attentive to the convoluted and rapidly changing relationship between political and epistemic authority. As Brooks reminds us, only in the 1970s technocracy was still considered an ideal. How quickly things change!

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