

Evaluation and Utilization of Policy Information in the Canadian Parliament: The Influence of External Policy Actors

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Abstract: While policy information utilization in the Public Service has been the subject of investigation, little is known in Canada about how legislators seek out knowledge or respond to information provided by external actors. Often described as lacking influence within the policy process, the average Canadian MP is assumed to engage little in policy-making. Based on a survey conducted amongst Members of the Canadian Parliament in April 2013, this paper investigates how MPs engage with both internal and external sources of information and what are some of the potential factors that explain MPs' utilization of policy knowledge. Findings indicate that internal sources of information are the most regularly consulted, yet that amongst external providers, academic research is valued most highly. In line with recent literature on policy networks, results suggest that personal contact between policy actors is one of the most important mechanisms to ensure a positive reception of information. The overall conclusion is that MPs continue to have a strong interest in policy and respond positively to lobbying, whether these are the efforts of industry associations or academics disseminating their research.

Keywords: knowledge utilization; Canadian MPs; policy networks; Federal policy-making

Résumé : Bien que l'utilisation du savoir au sein de la fonction publique ait fait l'objet de nombreuses études, peu d'auteurs se sont intéressés à la manière dont les députés recherchent des informations et réagissent aux données qui leur sont présentées par les acteurs externes à l'institution parlementaire. Les députés fédéraux sont souvent décrits comme ayant peu d'influence au sein du processus politique et participant peu à l'élaboration de politiques. À partir d'un sondage réalisé en avril 2013 auprès de députés fédéraux, cet article explore comment ces derniers utilisent les sources d'information internes et externes et quels facteurs expliquent leur utilisation du savoir. Les résultats indiquent que les sources d'information internes sont les plus souvent consultées, mais que parmi les producteurs de connaissance externes à l'institution parlementaire, la recherche universitaire est la plus prisée. De plus, à l'instar des découvertes récentes dans le domaine des « réseaux de politiques », une analyse statistique semble indiquer que le contact personnel entre les députés et les acteurs externes est l'un des mécanismes les plus importants pour assurer la diffusion et une réception positive de l'information. En conclusion, les députés continuent de s'intéresser à l'élaboration de politiques et semblent réagir de façon positive au lobbying, que ces efforts soient faits par des associations d'industries ou des chercheurs disséminant leur recherche.

Mots-clé : utilisation du savoir; Députés Canadiens; réseaux de politiques; élaboration de politiques

Introduction

In their role as representatives, party members, and legislators, Canadian Members of Parliament (MPs) are little different from elected representatives operating in other jurisdictions. The Canadian backbencher¹, however, is often described as subject to stronger party discipline than his or her counterpart in Congress or even Westminster (Thomas, 1985, quoted in Docherty, 1997: 21; Flavelle and Kaye, 1986; Malloy, 2003), and as having only limited opportunities to take part in policy and law-making (Blidook, 2012). Moreover, Cabinet Members and the Civil servants who conduct the bulk of policy work in Canada are generally considered to have virtually no incentive to share information and involve MPs when developing legislation or programs (Savoie, 2003: 179-182).

Yet there is evidence that at least some actors take MPs seriously: a look at the Commissioner of Lobbying's website², for example, indicates that even individuals who are not Cabinet Members receive regular visits from a variety of lobbyists representing both business interests and non-profit organizations. A random sample of 20 MPs reveals that the average number of registered communications with lobbyists between March 2014 and March 2015 was 29. This is lower than the number of contacts between the Finance Minister (71) and registered lobbyists, but somewhat similar to what the Health Minister (37) faced over the same period. When lobbyists seek MPs' attention, or when the latter are required to engage in some form of policy work, a process of information exchange and acquisition must necessarily take place. Little is known about how Members respond to the policy suggestions of lobbyists or sift

¹“A member of the UK parliament who does not have any official position in the government or in one of the opposing parties” (Cambridge Online Dictionary, 2015). For the purposes of this paper, “backbencher” refers to MPs who are not Party leaders, Members of Cabinet, Parliamentary Secretaries, Speakers and deputy speakers, or a party's House Leader.

² Office of the Commissioner of Lobbying of Canada (2015). Retrieved March 20, 2015, from <https://ocl-cal.gc.ca/app/secure/ort/lrrs/do/clntSmmrySrch?lang=eng>

through the masses of information available to them. With the expansion of universities, think tanks, public policy schools, and the multiplication of private sector research through banks or consulting firms, there is an abundance of information available to lawmakers. The latter must now navigate an increasingly complex web of knowledge and policy proposals emanating from a variety of sources in order to make decisions, advocate for policies, or solve problems in their constituencies (Rich, 1975; Webber, 1991). This article seeks to answer two interrelated questions. What sources of knowledge do Members of Parliament consult in their policy work and what are some of the potential factors that explain MPs' utilization of information sources? Before proceeding to describe the methodology and report the results of a survey conducted in April 2013 amongst backbenchers of the Canadian Parliament, the literature on the interrelated issue of policy networks and knowledge diffusion will be discussed.

A. Literature Review: Policy Information Utilization Factors

Recognizing that policy information is not the only type of data available to policymakers, authors frequently distinguish between policy/technical and political information (Sabatier and Whiteman, 1985: 397; Bradley, 1980). This paper will focus solely on the former. Information of this type is defined by Webber (1987b) as "scientific and technical information about the ways a policy actually works, or would work if it were to be adopted" (1987b: 666). Webber warns of placing too many constraints on the definition of policy-relevant information – a view adopted herein – as it necessarily extends beyond "professional social enquiry" (1991: 8) and includes such things as journalistic accounts and letters from constituents.

A number of factors influence the likelihood that policy information will be consulted and integrated by legislators in their work. If the tenets of evidence-based policy-making are to

be believed, improving the *quality* of information and the effectiveness of its diffusion to key decision-makers will result in *better* public policy (see for instance Howlett, 2009; Demaj and Summermatter, 2012). Yet given that legislators must navigate a variety of issues and priorities, the use of information is not solely predicated on its objectivity and quality. A good starting point, on which this paper will rely, is Lester and Wild's (1990) proposal to divide the various factors influencing information utilization in three groups: individual interest and preference factors, "contextual" or "institutional" factors and "technical" factors. However, Lester and Wild's conceptualization is perhaps unduly focused on processes internal to the decision maker's organization, and given the potentially growing importance of external policy actors such as lobbyists and think tanks in the Canadian political context (Savoie, 2003, Abelson, 2000, p.232), a fourth mechanism – the role of policy networks – must also be addressed. A brief consideration of the four factors will be useful to frame the present study.

Individual interests and preferences

A first key element in the process by which information is integrated in legislation and policy concerns MPs' interests and motivations. These span from the more self-interested goals of re-election (Pappi and Henning, 1998) and career advancement within the legislature (Docherty, 1997) to ideological orientations (Webber, 1986) and the public interest. In seeking information, decision-makers attempt to fill a knowledge "gap" with the purpose of reducing uncertainty³ or to meet a real or perceived need (Oh and Rich, 1996: 11). Moreover, legislators may draw upon their prior education and experience to guide both the knowledge search and the formulation of policy (Webber, 1991: 13). For instance, individuals are likely to seek

³ Demaj and Summermatter (2012, p.95) apply Brenda Dervin's (1983) "Sense-Making-Approach" as a model of information-seeking behaviour.

information that corresponds to their own ideology (Rose, 1991: 17; Kingdon, 1981, quoted in Bimber, 1991: 592; Calvert, 1985). In addition, political values may even affect beliefs about the usefulness of public policy knowledge more generally.⁴ Once this knowledge search is initiated or policy information is received through intermediaries such as lobbyists, “policymakers’ reactions to and preconceptions of the different sources or couriers of policy knowledge” (Webber, 1991: 29-30) are also thought to intervene before knowledge is accepted as valid or implemented.

David Webber’s study of social science policy information utilization in the Indiana State Legislature uncovered that different legislator ‘orientations’ were associated with more knowledge use: the ‘policy conveyor role’ – “activities directed at informing constituents about legislative activities” (1987: 668) – open-mindedness, and political ambition, emerged as the strongest predictors. In the Canadian context, Docherty observed that ambitious politicians were more likely to place greater emphasis on policy-making activities as this was a perceived criterion for promotion to Cabinet (1997: 115). Finally, positive and negative attitudes towards social science and other types of research have also been identified as an important variable for explaining knowledge search and utilization practices (Webber, 1987b; Oh and Rich, 1996).

Contextual / Institutional factors

“Contextual” or institutional factors are frequently invoked in the literature as vital elements in the chain between information diffusion and policy-making efforts (Webber, 1986; James and Jorgensen, 2009; Weible et al., 2012). For Bimber, “institutional arrangements shape the relevance of expertise to political outcomes” (1991: 587). The work of a federal MP is

⁴ According to Webber: “Legislators who advocate a limited role for government on ideological grounds need not be concerned with informing themselves about how a policy actually works and, therefore, will not rely on policy information” (1986: 268).

described as including budgetary, legislative, and representative functions as well as keeping the government accountable (Montigny & Pelletier, 2005). Activities are often demarcated between constituency and parliamentary work. David Docherty's (1997) study of Canadian parliamentarians illustrates that after having been elected, most MPs find themselves frustrated by the monopoly held by party leaders and the Cabinet over policy-making. Backbenchers may arrive in Ottawa with policy goals in mind, yet discovering that public policy decisions are made in the offices of the Prime minister or party leaders (Ibid: 118) often discourages further policy work and pushes MPs towards dedicating the bulk of their work to constituency service (see also Price and Mancuso, 1991). The centralization of power around the Prime Minister and senior public servants is a common theme in Canadian political science (see for instance Savoie, 2008) and is exacerbated by a relatively weak parliamentary committee system (Thomas, 1978, Malloy, 2004) – one of the few forums where Members, especially those from the Opposition, can participate in policy discussions. Opportunities such as committee work, Private Members Business, as well as unofficial influence through the party caucus (see Samara Canada, 2011; Soroka, *et al.*, 2009) do exist however, and are available to MPs as possible avenues for influencing policy. Ultimately, the most important variable is likely to be the MP's membership in the governing party's caucus, a position which provides privileges such as early knowledge of legislative agendas and a forum to directly challenge the Prime Minister (Savoie, 2003: 179).

Technical factors: The nature of the information

The type and format in which policy information is packaged is another important variable that may predict positive reception and knowledge utilization amongst decision-makers. The 'two-communities' metaphor (Caplan, 1979, Dunn, 1980) is the classic interpretation of the

gulf lying between scientific or academic research and decision-makers' needs. It posits that the likelihood of information being used depends on the degree to which it is adapted to the needs of policymakers (Webber, 1991; Oh, 1997: 5; Landry et al., 2001: 335). This theory has implications for academic research in particular since it is not usually produced with a policy-making audience in mind (MacRae, 1991: 31). Indeed, university and research organizations were rated as one of the least useful information providers by Indiana state legislators in the 1980s (Webber, 1987a). Only 5% of respondents considered this type of research useful, a number that can be compared to figures of 40% and 29% for constituents and interest groups (Ibid: 622). While interviewing congressional staff, Weiss observed that interest group information was preferred to objective academic research as advisors "can gauge what kind of 'correction factor' they have to apply" (1989: 421). Bradley (1980: 400) also found that valued attributes of information sources for Nevada Legislators in 1978 were convenience, accessibility, and understandability. While no research has specifically studied information utilization in Canadian legislatures, Landry *et al.* (2003) found that while information type was a statistically significant variable, it was not a very important factor for explaining the degree of knowledge utilization amongst policy advisors within the Public Service.

Be that as it may, it should not be inferred that the objectivity of information is of no importance to policymakers. Feller et al. found through a survey of legislators from eight different U.S. states that there was "a clear preference for objective or unbiased sources of information" (1979: 425). Perhaps even more interesting is Sabatier and Whiteman's observation that among staff in the California Legislature, University faculty were rated highly on "substantive competence" and fairly highly on "objectivity", yet low ratings were provided for

“accessibility and timeliness and on the ability to provide concise, relevant information” (1985: 411).

Policy network factors

Focusing solely on the institution of Parliament in order to understand the policy process would be misleading in the contemporary Canadian context. Pappi and Henning argue for example that modern policy-making has been characterized by “the enlargement of the set of consequential actors” (1998: 553). In *Breaking the Bargain*, Savoie suggests that the rise of lobbyists, think tanks, consultants and the 24h news cycle contributed to enhancing the power of politicians within the policy process and especially that of the Prime minister (2003). Such a power shift occurred at the expense of civil servants’ traditional influence over policy in Canada.

The best framework for understanding this recent tendency is perhaps the idea of a policy ‘network’ or ‘community’. A policy community is defined by Coleman and Skogstad as “all actors or potential actors with a direct or indirect interest in a policy area or function who share a common ‘policy focus,’ and who, with varying degrees of influence shape policy outcomes over the long run” (1990: 25). Given that the members of policy networks are defined as actors who “maintain relations like information or resource exchange, influence attribution or common group membership” (Leifeld and Schneider, 2012: 731), policy networks can be described as the *active* relationships that are maintained around a particular policy issue (see also Coleman and Skogstad, 1990: 26). Börzel further proposes that these relationships or networks, “do not directly serve for decision-making but for the information, communication and exercise of influence in the preparation of decisions” (1998: 263). Variables such as trust (Bimber, 1980: 601; Weible et al., 2012), shared goals, ideology (Henry, Lubell and McCoy, 2011) as well as

interpersonal contacts and interactions (Oh and Rich, 1996; Mintrom and Vergari, 1998: 128; Landry et al., 2003) have all been identified as favouring the transfer and use of information within a policy network. For example, personal interactions with officials through lobbying were judged to be much more effective by advocacy groups in the Canadian context than House of Commons committee appearances, financial contributions to political parties, or letters to political representatives (Canada's Public Policy Forum, 2001: 18).

B. Data and Methodology

My participation in the Canadian Political Science Association's Parliamentary Internship Program provided an opportunity to distribute a survey through the House of Commons internal mail service. The questionnaire was prepared in both French and English and sent to MPs' Parliamentary offices in the first week of April 2013. The research instrument aimed for hypothesis generation and description of backbenchers' information-collecting practices rather than testing a particular explanatory model. The survey method was selected in order to reach as many MPs as possible in a short amount of time. Surveys were distributed to 239 offices, a list which excluded the Cabinet, Parliamentary secretaries, Party Leaders⁵, Whips, House Leaders, and the Speaker. The decision to exclude Cabinet members, Leaders, and House of Commons officials was made on the basis that, in comparison to the average MP, these individuals' roles either greatly enhance (for the former) or completely eliminate (for the latter) participation in policy-making. Sixty-three questionnaires were returned, one of which had to be eliminated due to an exceedingly high number of missing answers. This yielded a total of 62 completed surveys and a response rate of 25.9%. In total, 29 members of the New Democratic

⁵ The Leader of the Green Party was at the time of the survey the only elected Member of this party and was therefore included in the sampling frame.

Party (NDP), 18 Conservatives, 13 Liberals, and three “others” returned the questionnaire. Given that survey responses were not representative of party distributions in the House of Commons, weights were calculated and applied to the analysis when data is analysed in aggregate. For data protection reasons, results for the “other party” category are not identified nor analysed.

C. Description of MPs’ Knowledge Consultation Practices

Two main pathways are followed in the transfer of information between knowledge producers and Members of Parliament. Either the actor holding policy information actively attempts to transmit his or her knowledge, or the office holder seeks out information as part of policy-making endeavours. The distinction roughly corresponds to the ‘science-push’ and the ‘demand-pull’ models of information diffusion (Landry, et al., 2001). Before proceeding to explore some of the reasons why Canadian MPs consider some knowledge sources to be more or less useful for their policy work, it is first important to describe what kinds of information MPs seek and/or are frequently presented with.

Active consultation of information

A questionnaire item was developed on the basis of observations made over the course of my work in the offices of two MPs and by consulting a number of secondary sources (Bradley, 1980; Abelson, 2000; Young and Everitt, 2010; Cohn, 2006). The providers of policy information included in the questionnaire are not necessarily the original knowledge producers, but instead represent organizations or individuals who provide secondary or primary information to MPs, either through face to face contact or via the publication and dissemination of

information. Respondents were asked “What knowledge sources are you or your staff likely to consult in your policy-making efforts?” Results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Likelihood of policy information consultation amongst MPs

| Sources of knowledge | % Likely to consult |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Library of Parliament | 93.4 |
| Academic and scientific publications | 80.7 |
| Constituents | 78 |
| Party and Leadership Research | 69.9 |
| Not for profit | 63.2 |
| Think tanks / policy institutes | 57.4 |
| Industry associations | 52.7 |
| Government publications | 49.7 |
| Private sector research | 47.7 |
| Labour unions | 28.3 |

Three knowledge providers were reported to be almost universally consulted by Parliamentarians and/or their staff: the Library of Parliament, constituents, as well as academic and scientific publications. The existing literature can explain quite well the popularity of the first; information purveyors internal to an organization are often more likely to be consulted due to their favourable institutional position (see for instance, Mooney, 1991: 447; Head et al., 2014). The Library’s role in creating knowledge free of charge, on-demand, and specifically geared to Member’s needs undoubtedly reduces transaction costs and makes this parliamentary institution especially appealing as a source of policy information. Interestingly, another internal source – Party and Leadership research – was also considered an important policy information purveyor by a high percentage of Canadian federal legislators (69.9%). This finding may reflect the strength of party discipline in Canada and the tendency for backbenchers to follow the advice of their leaders when conducting policy work. Abelson (2000) points to the Prime minister’s office for instance as being a *de facto* policy shop.

On the other hand, the high percentage of MPs who claimed that they were likely to consider academic research is slightly surprising if the ‘two-communities’ metaphor is accepted. The observation that constituents were also a likely source of policy knowledge by a large majority of MPs may be somewhat antithetical to expert-driven “evidence-based” policy-making, yet coherent in a context where, as Docherty’s (1997) argues, focus on constituency work is essentially imposed by the Parliament’s institutional rules. On the other hand, the popularity of information emanating from the Member’s constituency was not universal across political parties as only 41.7% of sampled Liberal MPs reported regularly using this information source in comparison to 83.3% of Conservatives and 84.6% of New Democrats (Cramer’s $\phi_c = 0.368$, $p < 0.05$).

The only other two statistically significant differences between political parties concerned the consultation of private sector research (Cramer’s $\phi_c = 0.334$, $p < 0.05$) and labour unions (Cramer’s $\phi_c = 0.493$, $p < 0.01$). Party ideology appears *prima facie* to account for differences in the consultation pattern of the latter two sources of information: the Conservatives’ pro-business stance may explain their greater tendency to use private sector research, while the number of labour unions officially and ideologically affiliated with the NDP could explain why unions are an attractive information source. The Liberals’ lesser interest in constituency consultation is more difficult to interpret. A possible explanation relates to the high educational levels of party members who responded to the survey, which could result in MPs having a greater belief in their own expertise. Alternatively, sampled Liberal respondents were also more experienced and may thus perceive their legislative role as that of a ‘trustee’ rather than a ‘delegate’ (see Gross, 1978: 361).

Contacts with external policy actors

MPs and their staff who actively seek policy data represent only one side of the wider exchange of information taking place around Parliament Hill – the other being the action of various policy knowledge producers or brokers who attempt to influence the policy process. The survey explored some elements of this relationship. In this part of the analysis, the focus is placed on four important external policy actors who are either active in lobbying and/or actively disseminate their research: academics, industry associations and businesses, non-profit organizations, and think tanks/policy institutes. This categorization of policy knowledge suppliers may not correspond to legal definitions (ie. industry associations are technically non-profits), but it reflects a classification based on Max Weber’s conceptualization of social action, especially with regards to the distinction between means-end and value-rationality (Kalberg, 1980). Industry associations, for example, represent business interests, and by proxy, operate according to “material” as opposed to “ideational motivations” (see Jacobs, 2015). Such a distinction is intuitive and represents more accurately the nature of interventions in the policy process than abstract legal categories.

Analysis of survey results suggests that non-profit organizations and industry associations were more often in touch with MPs than either academics or representatives from think tanks. The rate of MPs’ contact with the four knowledge providers varied on the basis of membership in the three main political parties, yet the only statistically significant difference observed was for academics ($\chi^2 = 16.777, p < 0.01$). Indeed, 40% of NDP MPs claimed to be in touch with academics at least once per week, in comparison to 20% of Liberals who reported a similar level of contact and 13.6% of Conservatives. A similar pattern emerged for non-profits as 64% of NDP MPs reported being in contact with their representatives at least once per week, with

figures of 44.4% for Liberals and 31.8% for Conservatives. In contrast, 43.5% of Conservative MPs answered that they were in touch at least every week with industry associations or private companies while 33.3% of Liberals and 24.4% of New Democrats made the same claim. One could suggest that Conservative Members' frequent contacts with the business community follows the logic of policy networks – especially on ideological grounds – yet the possibility that Conservative MPs simply received more requests because they were the governing party cannot be excluded either. Nonetheless, similarity of worldview appeared to account at least to some extent for the pattern of meetings between policy actors and legislators at the time of the survey, especially if one locates the Liberal party between the New Democrats and the Conservatives on the ideological spectrum. Finally, regarding think tanks, very few MPs claimed to be in touch once a week or more, although 38.5% of New Democrats reported to be in contact with this type of organization “once or twice per month” in comparison to figures of 13% for Conservatives and 33.3% for Liberals.

D. Testing a Model of Knowledge Utilization

As pointed out by Knott and Wildavsky (1980: 543), the reception of information does not necessarily imply that it will be “used” or implemented by the decision maker in his or her work. Rather, the authors propose seven steps to describe the application of knowledge in policy-making, from simple acknowledgement to full implementation. Yet, self-reports about the degree of knowledge utilization are likely to be affected by high levels of recall bias; especially since the implementation of knowledge generally takes place in subtle ways, in what Carol Weiss describes as “knowledge creep” or “enlightenment” (1980; 1989) – a process which the MP may not be fully aware of. In addition, given that backbenchers' influence may be more indirect

because of the dearth of formal channels through which to engage in the policy process, they may find it difficult to link policy knowledge use with a specific outcome. For these reasons, the following section explores MPs' evaluation of the *usefulness* of academic research, as well as policy knowledge shared by think tanks, non-profit organizations, and industry associations and businesses. Support for this line of reasoning is found in the data: the usefulness of each knowledge source is highly correlated with Members' reports that they are likely to consult this provider of knowledge in their policy-making efforts.

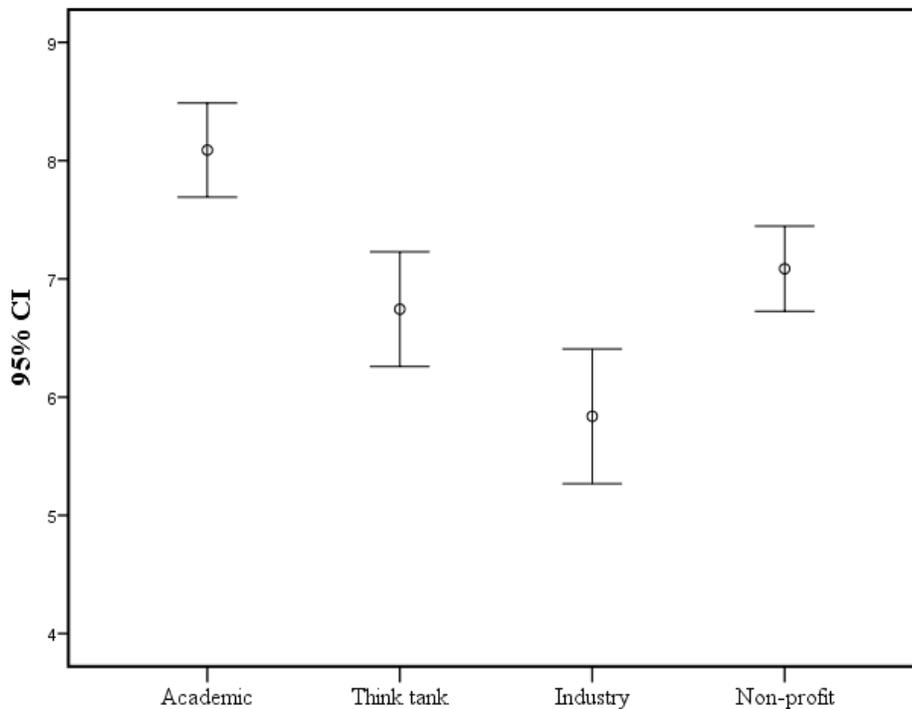
The outcome variable

In the survey, participating MPs were asked to rate the usefulness of information provided by the four policy actors discussed in the previous section. This was measured on a 1-10 Likert scale, with ten being "extremely useful" and one "completely useless". The hope is that by comparing MPs' evaluations of these four purveyors of policy information, one of the key determinants of knowledge diffusion in policy-making will be taken into account: the characteristics of the information provided. While there is undoubtedly much variation in the knowledge produced *within* each category of actors, enough commonality exists in the aims and nature of the information provided by academics, think tanks, non-profits, and the private sector to constitute an interesting basis for comparison.

As Figure 1 illustrates, it is fairly clear that knowledge produced or disseminated by academics was considered on average to be most useful for policy-making work amongst this cohort of Canadian backbenchers – quite a contrast with Webber's (1987a) findings for Indiana state legislators in the 1980s, where academic research was perceived to be one of the least useful sources of policy information. Non-profit organizations are rated marginally higher than

think tanks, followed by industry associations and private companies. While the remainder of the analysis herein explores why MPs consider each source of knowledge more or less useful, a question remains: why is academic research valued so highly by all MPs? This cannot be fully answered in the context of the present study, yet one of the survey items provides some hints for a possible explanation. Respondents were asked to report why they trusted certain knowledge sources over others. Two of these were selected by a vast majority of MPs: “the organization is non-partisan and neutral” (75.8%) and “the research is scientific and verifiable” (85.5%), answers which can be contrasted with “I share the organization’s / the person’s views” (36.1%) and “I trust the individual researcher” (38.7%).⁶ These findings suggest that, in large part, academic research is valued more than the other three sources of information due to its strength in providing objective and verifiable data.

Figure 1: Judgements of policy information sources’ usefulness



⁶ It is of course possible that MPs are attempting to present themselves in a positive light rather than expressing their true preferences.

Further statistical analysis was conducted in order to better understand why MPs value each knowledge source to a greater or lesser degree. The three factors influencing the likelihood of knowledge diffusion – individual preferences and interests, institutional factors and network dynamics – are treated as exogenous variables predicting the likelihood that policy information will be well received by MPs. An explanatory framework is developed and tested in the next sections.

Individual preferences and interests

Individual preferences and interests may affect knowledge utilization and positive evaluations of information sources in two ways. First, the more closely an MP is aligned ideologically with a knowledge provider, the greater the likelihood this source will be considered useful; and second, the greater an MP’s perception that policy information of a certain type assists in reaching his or her goals, the likelier this source will be evaluated positively. Party membership represents a good proxy for ideology and was integrated in the analysis with dummy coding; membership in the Conservative party serves as the reference category. Information on the MP’s reasons for engaging in policy work is provided by a survey question which asked respondents to rank seven policy motivations in order of importance for their own policy-making efforts (see Table 3).

Table 2: Ranking of policy motivations by MPs

| | Moral/religious beliefs | Ideology | Constituency | Party's agenda | Science and evidence | Requests from industry | Requests from nonprofits |
|----------------|-------------------------|----------|--------------|----------------|----------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Mean | 4.25 | 3.97 | 2.08 | 3.05 | 3.05 | 5.84 | 4.67 |
| Median | 4 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 6 | 5 |
| Std. Deviation | 2.084 | 2.255 | 1.068 | 1.647 | 1.562 | 1.288 | 1.544 |
| Rank | 5 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 7 | 6 |

Finally, having a strong orientation to policy was also included as a possible predictor of how positively MPs receive different sources of information. This is captured by a variable assessing whether the respondent wants to implement a particular policy idea not found in their party's platform (0 = no objective, 1 = currently has policy objective, 2 = has had policy objective since election).

Contextual/Institutional factors

As backbenchers cannot be clearly differentiated on the basis of their access to power beyond being a member of either government or opposition parties, there is no obvious way to identify their institutional position. A dummy variable representing membership in the opposition parties was thus included in the analysis. While having a position within the shadow cabinet may also provide opposition MPs with greater opportunities to develop policy, this question was not included in the survey. The questionnaire did contain three subjective indicators. MPs were asked to comment on: 'My staff and I have enough time and resources to adequately study my area of policy focus', 1-5 Likert scale, 5 indicating complete agreement). In addition, there were two yes/no questions as to whether or not, Parliament, on the one hand, and the respondent's political party, on the other, 'provide enough opportunities to participate in the policy process' ('yes' = 1).

Policy network factors

Finally, the hypothesis that policy networks play a role in knowledge diffusion suggests that the more MPs are in personal contact with various policy actors, the more likely they are to receive positively the knowledge provided by the same actors. Alternatively, MPs may be

overwhelmed by frequent meetings and may tend to view negatively the information conveyed by organizations and individuals who lobby excessively. The variable capturing this is dummy-coded for the analysis, with '1' representing Members who claim to meet at least once per month with the relevant policy actor.

Control variables

Four control variables were also included. These are the MP's gender, age, length of tenure in the House of Commons and level of education. While previous research has not paid much attention to such "demographic" characteristics, one study (Askim, 2009) found the experience of policymakers at the municipal level in Norway to be a factor associated with a greater consultation of performance information. Moreover, gender, age, and the level of education are all factors with the potential to influence an individual's worldview.

E. Results

A Spearman's rank correlation matrix was first run to identify the relevant variables for each of the knowledge sources. Ideally, all variables would have been entered simultaneously or in blocks as part of a regression model, yet the small number of cases did not allow for this approach. Only predictors significantly correlated with a propensity to consider the different knowledge sources as more or less useful were included in a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models. Instead of presenting correlation matrices, significant variables are flagged in the table below. The few missing values identified are replaced by using the multiple imputation procedure in SPSS.

Table 4: Significant non-parametric correlations (N = 62)

| Academic research | Think tanks | Industry associations and businesses | Not for profit organizations |
|--|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| In touch at least once per month*** | In touch at least once per month** | In touch at least once per month** | In touch at least once per month*** |
| Policy knowledge impossible to implement** (-) | MP is a women*** | Member of the NDP*** (-) | Length of tenure in the House of Commons** (-) |
| Policy motivation: Science/evidence* | Policy motivation: Constituency issues* (-) | Level of education** (-) | Policy motivation: Requests from non-profits** |
| | | Member of the opposition*** (-) | |
| | | MP is a women* (-) | |

*p < .10. **p < .05. ***p < .01, - = negative correlation

Regression models

Eight models were run to test the relative significance of the correlations reported in Table 4. For each knowledge source, the first model consists of variables significantly correlated with evaluations of usefulness that are not identified as controls. The second model adds the four control variables – even in cases where their correlations were not significant – as well as

Table 5: Usefulness of academic knowledge (N = 61¹)

| Variable | Model 1 | | | Model 2 | | |
|--|---------|---------|---------|---------|------|---------|
| | B | SE B | β | B | SE B | β |
| (Constant) | 7.89 | 0.63 | | 6.94 | 1.21 | |
| In touch at least once per month | 0.86 | 0.36 | 0.28** | 0.72 | 0.41 | 0.23* |
| Policy knowledge impossible to implement | -0.41 | 0.16 | -0.28** | -0.38 | 0.17 | -0.26** |
| Policy motivation: Science/evidence | 0.19 | 0.11 | 0.20* | 0.22 | 0.12 | 0.24* |
| Member of the NDP | | | | 0.23 | 0.42 | 0.07 |
| Member of the LPC | | | | -0.17 | 0.58 | -0.04 |
| Level of education | | | | -0.13 | 0.27 | -0.06 |
| MP is a women | | | | 0.57 | 0.43 | 0.16 |
| Age | | | | 0.02 | 0.02 | 0.14 |
| Tenure in the House of Commons | | | | -0.03 | 0.07 | -0.05 |
| R ² | | 0.26 | | | 0.32 | |
| Adjusted R ² | | 0.23 | | | 0.20 | |
| F change | | 6.88*** | | | 0.73 | |

*p < .10. **p < .05. ***p < .01.

¹One outlier dropped due to likely questionnaire error

dummy variables for political party membership due to their importance within the Canadian parliamentary system.

Table 6: Usefulness of think tank knowledge ($N = 60^2$)

| Variable | Model 1 | | | Model 2 | | |
|----------------------------------|----------|-------------|---------|----------|-------------|---------|
| | <i>B</i> | SE <i>B</i> | β | <i>B</i> | SE <i>B</i> | β |
| (Constant) | 7.50 | 1.14 | | 7.75 | 1.51 | |
| In touch at least once per month | 1.03 | 0.44 | 0.26** | 1.03 | 0.53 | 0.26* |
| Policy motivation: Constituency | -0.16 | 0.19 | -0.10 | -0.13 | 0.17 | -0.08 |
| Member of the NDP | | | | -1.15 | 0.50 | -0.30** |
| Member of the LPC | | | | 0.19 | 0.63 | 0.03 |
| Level of education | | | | -0.01 | 0.29 | 0.00 |
| MP is a women | | | | 1.60 | 0.48 | 0.37*** |
| Age | | | | 0.00 | 0.02 | 0.01 |
| Tenure in the House of Commons | | | | -0.10 | 0.08 | -0.16 |
| R^2 | | 0.12 | | | 0.34 | |
| Adjusted R^2 | | 0.09 | | | 0.24 | |
| <i>F</i> change | | 3.90** | | | 2.84** | |

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

²Two outliers dropped due to likely questionnaire error

Table 7: Usefulness of private sector knowledge ($N = 62$)

| Variable | Model 1 | | | Model 2 | | |
|----------------------------------|----------|-------------|---------|----------|-------------|----------|
| | <i>B</i> | SE <i>B</i> | β | <i>B</i> | SE <i>B</i> | β |
| (Constant) | 5.06 | 0.48 | | 9.51 | 1.54 | |
| In touch at least once per month | 1.19 | 0.60 | 0.25** | 1.18 | 0.53 | 0.25** |
| Member of the NDP | | | | -1.91 | 0.60 | -0.42*** |
| Member of the LPC | | | | -0.34 | 0.82 | -0.05 |
| Level of education | | | | -0.81 | 0.39 | -0.27** |
| MP is a women | | | | -0.93 | 0.65 | -0.18 |
| Age | | | | -0.02 | 0.02 | -0.11 |
| Tenure in the House of Commons | | | | -0.12 | 0.10 | -0.17 |
| R^2 | | 0.07 | | | 0.36 | |
| Adjusted R^2 | | 0.05 | | | 0.28 | |
| <i>F</i> change | | 4.19** | | | 4.16*** | |

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

Table 8: Usefulness of non-profit knowledge ($N = 62$)

| Variable | Model 1 | | | Model 2 | | |
|--|----------|-------------|---------|----------|-------------|---------|
| | <i>B</i> | SE <i>B</i> | β | <i>B</i> | SE <i>B</i> | β |
| (Constant) | 5.59 | 0.52 | | 6.18 | 1.08 | |
| In touch at least once per month | 1.08 | 0.48 | 0.30** | 0.95 | 0.49 | 0.26* |
| Policy motivation: Requests from non-profits | 0.19 | 0.12 | 0.20 | 0.20 | 0.12 | 0.22 |
| Member of the NDP | | | | -0.33 | 0.42 | -0.12 |
| Member of the LPC | | | | -0.45 | 0.58 | -0.11 |
| Level of education | | | | -0.19 | 0.28 | -0.10 |
| MP is a women | | | | 0.25 | 0.45 | 0.08 |
| Age | | | | 0.01 | 0.02 | 0.09 |
| Tenure in the House of Commons | | | | -0.12 | 0.07 | -0.27* |
| R^2 | | 0.16 | | | 0.25 | |
| Adjusted R^2 | | 0.14 | | | 0.14 | |
| F change | | 5.86*** | | | 1.04 | |

* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

F. Discussion

The only universal tendency across all evaluations of policy information usefulness is the positive influence of regular contact between Members and the knowledge purveyor. Meeting at least once per month was significantly correlated with MPs rating a knowledge provider's information as more useful. This held across all models, even with the inclusion of control variables. What is perhaps most surprising is that political party membership, while playing a role in how frequently MPs meet with various actors, does not nullify the effect regular meetings have on positive perceptions. Thus, while being a member of the NDP was associated with a more negative evaluation of knowledge supplied by industry for example, the association between regular meetings and a positive evaluation of usefulness was present even for the members of that party. Such observations provide support for Weible *et al.*'s (2012) suggestion that regularly contacting decision-makers and building relationships pay over the long run. However, the particular cause and effect relationship should be explored further through a panel

study. Such a design is required in order to evaluate whether legislators increasingly consider certain information sources as useful after regular interactions with policy actors, or if they meet with certain organizations or individuals because they *initially* perceive the information supplier positively.

Subjective policy motivations were significantly associated with the perceived usefulness of three of the four information sources in initial bivariate tests. This finding suggests that MPs' values – expressed as motivations for policy-making – may also be significant factors for knowledge utilization. The relationships are somewhat predictable; valuing evidence and science was associated with a tendency to judge academic knowledge as more useful; similarly, a correlation was found between the degree to which demands from non-profit organizations serve as a motivation for policy and the usefulness of the information they provide. Somewhat more puzzling was a negative relationship observed between the usefulness of knowledge emanating from think tanks/policy institutes and the importance of constituency issues as a policy motivation. Perhaps think tanks are perceived to be particularly exclusive or elitist in Canada given their relatively weak position in the policy process (Abelson, 2000), or more plausibly, the types of issues addressed may be more national than local in scope. In the regression models, two of the three motivations did not prove to be significant predictors. For academic knowledge, however, science or evidence as a policy motivation, on the one hand, and disagreement with the belief that policy suggestions are impractical or impossible to implement on the other, were positively correlated with a tendency to consider academic research useful. This relationship remained significant even when introducing political party dummies and other controls. Such a finding raises questions as to the source of policy motivations and beliefs. Being a member of the Liberal party ($\rho = 0.310, p < 0.05$) and having a higher level of education ($\rho = 0.380, p < 0.01$)

were two variables associated with ranking science and evidence higher on the list of policy motivations. Yet, the regression model indicates that this does not fully capture the importance of the subjective motivation as an independent effect. Furthermore, a belief that most policy suggestions are impractical or impossible to implement was not associated with any of the theoretically plausible pathways. Along with the high value placed on objective knowledge by MPs more generally, these results raise interesting questions as to the influence of recent campaigns for more “evidence-based” policy-making in Canadian federal politics (Semeniuk, 2013).

As far as information supplied by think tanks and industry are concerned, more partisan demarcation lines were identified. For instance, being a member of the NDP was found to significantly affect the MP’s perception of knowledge usefulness – negatively, in both cases. Perceived usefulness of policy information supplied by the private sector was lower amongst New Democrats in comparison to the ruling Conservatives, a fairly predictable result given the NDP’s social-democratic leanings⁷. On the other hand, a more negative evaluation of the usefulness of policy information produced by think tanks or policy institutes within the NDP is puzzling. While the partisanship of think tanks is well-known (Tapp, 2014), there is little evidence of ideological imbalance in Canada’s policy institute landscape. More likely however, is that the result is spurious, due to the important positive correlation between being a women and judging policy information provided by think tanks as more useful. This is supported by the fact that women are overrepresented in the NDP and that there is no significant bivariate relationship between being a member of this party and the usefulness of think tank knowledge. The finding that women, more than men, tend to view think tanks and policy institutes as more

⁷ In the bivariate analysis, being a Member of the Opposition was also a significant predictor. This variable could not be included in the model due to multi-collinearity.

useful is also somewhat difficult to explain, yet the effect is significant in both multivariate and bivariate analysis, indicating a fairly robust association. More in-depth qualitative research could shed light on this interesting correlation.

In the case of knowledge conveyed by the private sector, the survey reveals that education was a significant factor as results show a negative association between higher education levels and the identification of private sector knowledge as useful. This could be explained by a tendency for highly educated individuals to value objectivity in policy information and to perceive industry and business organizations as especially biased.

Finally, evidenced by the lowest R^2 for the full model, differences in MPs' tendency to consider non-profit organizations as more or less useful were not well explained by the models. The problem may relate to the diversity of non-profit organizations in Canada, as the latter cover a wide range of interests and ideologies – from church groups to *Greenpeace*. Yet the finding that more experienced MPs tended to consider non-profits as less useful is interesting, and may reflect the reality that there is perhaps less to be gained politically from following the advice of advocacy groups: they do not create jobs nor usually represent clear electoral gains.

G. Limitations

This study was initially intended to be mostly descriptive; the questionnaire was thus kept short due to considerations of time pressure MPs face in their work. Therefore, variables for multivariate analysis were perhaps not ideally constructed. Some of the scales, such as the frequency of meetings with various actors, had to be simplified in order to minimize recall bias, with a similar issue emerging for the variable measuring MPs' tenure in the House of Commons. Second, with a simple, cross-sectional research design, causality cannot be inferred and findings

should only be interpreted as correlational. In addition, the analysis' reliance on self-reports may have introduced more measurement error than if the data had been based on objective measurements. Finally, question marks remain as to whether positive evaluations of policy information usefulness result in further knowledge utilization (See Knott and Wildavsky, 1980). The tentative suggestion is that positive evaluations will certainly not be detrimental to the reception of policy recommendations, yet it is probably unlikely that backbench MPs will attempt or be able to implement policy proposals wholesale.

Conclusion

A popular conception of backbenchers is that they are largely irrelevant actors in the Canadian policy process. The results obtained in this modest study indicate that MPs remain interested in policy-making: only 8.9% of MPs stated that they never had a policy idea not explicitly part of their Party's platform, while 67.5% claimed to have held independent policy goals at the time of their election. Moreover, nearly all backbenchers believed that their efforts could influence policy at both the national and local level. This paper sought to better understand what information sources Canadian MPs consult in their policy-making efforts and how different knowledge producers are perceived. A few knowledge sources were reported to be almost universally consulted by MPs: the Library of Parliament, academic research, and constituents. Interestingly, MPs considered academic research as very useful, a fact owing to a high premium placed on objective and verifiable policy information. When it came to evaluating the usefulness of information provided by academics or representatives from think tanks, non-profit organizations and the private sector, regular personal contact was almost always associated with more positive evaluations of the information provided, even when controlling for political party

and a number of different demographic characteristics. This finding supports the notion that Parliamentarians respond positively to the lobbying by external policy actors. Thus, the addition of “network dynamics” to Lester and Wild’s (1990) model of knowledge utilization described at the outset of this study appear to be supported.

Beyond this, very few factors were relevant for more than one knowledge source. A path of further enquiry, and an approach largely absent from the literature, would be to focus on how explanatory factors affect the utilization of knowledge sources in different ways. For example, ascribing greater importance to science and evidence in policy-making was correlated with the belief that academic research is useful, but this factor was not relevant for information supplied by think tanks, as well as the private and non-profit sectors. Whether regular lobbying can play a role in changing decision-makers’ reception of policy information appears to be supported by the study, yet many questions remain for future research. The length, type, and limits of lobbying, as well the various reasons why MPs may act on behalf of external actors are all issues which should be further investigated in Canada.

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