

When Knowledge Becomes Power: What Do We Know about the Role of Expert Economists in Policymaking?



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The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back... But, soon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil

– John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, p. 383

Abstract

Since the Second World War, economists acting as 'experts' have left their marks on public policy worldwide. Literature from several different academic backgrounds has addressed the role that expert economists play in policymaking, using a variety of methodological approaches. Consequently, knowledge on this topic is dispersed and distilling it comes at a high cost to the researcher.

In this thesis we bring together and critically evaluate these findings by presenting a systematic review of the literature on the role of experts in policymaking. In doing so, we aim to establish which findings are supported across the literature, which findings are disputed, and which areas of the literature remain uncharted. Using a textual narrative method, we synthesize the literature into three themes that build upon each other to answer our research question. Firstly, we explore how economists gain the authority that allows them to become involved in policymaking. Secondly, we examine the conditions under which they can use this authority to influence policy. Finally, we explore the causal mechanisms through which this influence may occur.

While we find a range of findings that find support across the literature – such as that the influence of expert economists is particularly high during crisis situation or that economists may have a legitimating role in policymaking – we also identify a number of gaps in the literature that demand the attention of future research, some of which result from methodological biases in the literature. It is our hope that this review may serve as a stepping stone for future research to address these gaps.

Keywords— Experts, Economics profession, Public policy, Systematic literature review

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Expert Economists and Policymaking

On 20 March 1975, an airplane carrying Milton Friedman – a celebrated American economist on a mission to promote radical economic freedom –, his wife Rose, and a colleague from the University of Chicago touched base in the Chilean capital of Santiago ([Friedman & Friedman 1999](#), p. 398). Friedman was on his way to meet Augusto Pinochet, the general in charge of the military dictatorship that ruled over Chile since taking charge in a coup d'état in 1973. When Friedman visited, Chile faced a wide range of economic problems. In response to this, Pinochet decided to appoint several Chilean economists who had been trained under Milton Friedman at the Economics Department of the University of Chicago – the ‘Chicago Boys’ – to powerful policymaking positions ([Silva 1991](#)). The manifesto of the Chicago Boys, nicknamed *el ladrillo* (“the brick”), advocating mostly pro-free market policies became the foundation of the regime’s economic policy ([Silva 1991](#)). Friedman would later also write a letter to Pinochet outlining his policy recommendations ([Friedman & Friedman 1999](#), p. 399). The results of these policies would later be described by some as the “miracle of Chile” ([Richards 1997](#), p. 139).

How could a group of academic economists who received a scholarship to continue their studies at the prestigious economics department of the University of Chicago eventually end up being the engineers of Chile’s economic policies? While the story of the Chicago Boys reads like the script of a Hollywood movie, their story is not unique. Since the end of the Second World War, expert economists have occupied influential policymaking positions in a large number of countries. From the Council of Economic Advisers in the United States to Russian ‘technocrats’ who cooperated with a Harvard University think tank to devise a ‘shock therapy’ treatment for the post-Soviet economy ([Wedel 2000](#)), and from the bureaucrats who advocated tax reforms in New Zealand ([Christensen 2017](#)) to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) staff who used conditional lending to promote policy change in several African countries ([Collier & Gunning 1999](#)), expert economists have unequivocally left their mark on policies worldwide. Yet, we

observe considerable variation – across countries, policy areas, and time – in the role of expert economists in policymaking. What explains this variation?

The seemingly far-reaching policy influence of these unelected expert economists, combined with its variance presents a puzzle to researchers. One piece of this puzzle is the question of how economists have gained the authority that legitimates their influence on policy. What is it about economics that sets it apart from academic disciplines in terms of its prevalence in policymaking? Furthermore, what are the constraints on the influence of expert economists? Coming back to Milton Friedman, his ideas on economic freedom have inspired many conservatives in the United States (Friedman served as an economic adviser to the presidential campaign of Ronald Reagan (Rayack 1987)), but the same can hardly be argued about his ideas on the legalization of drugs (Thornton 2007). How far can the influence of expert economists on policymaking extend? Moreover, another piece of this puzzle is the question of how expert economists manage to influence policymaking. What are the causal mechanisms that, in some cases, allow them to translate their ideas to policies?

A growing number of studies from different scientific backgrounds, ranging from political science through sociology to economics, has addressed this research puzzle. However, these studies often address different parts of this bigger question and use a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches. Distilling this dispersed information from a large number of studies is a costly undertaking for researchers. Therefore, we present the first systematic literature review that synthesizes and critically evaluates these existing findings.¹ Our review has the following research question: **what is the role of expert economists in policymaking, and which factors cause variation of this role?**

A systematic literature review allows us to better evaluate existing studies by placing them within the context of similar work. While individual studies are limited in the generalizability of the knowledge they produce, and “frequently illuminate only one part of a larger explanatory puzzle” (Cook et al. 1992, p. 3), a systematic review allows us to draw connections between individual studies and to identify areas of agreement and uncertainty within the literature. With this review, we contribute to the literature by presenting an interdisciplinary overview of the literature that can both support and guide future research into the role of expert economists in policymaking. Besides this contribution to the literature, this thesis also has social relevance. The involvement of these experts in policymaking has at times evoked protest (Ishkanian & Glasius 2018, Buenos Aires Times 2019). Furthermore, in a television interview running up

¹One other literature review, Hirschman & Berman (2014), explores the question of how economics influences policy. This review, however, is not systematic.

to the referendum on *Brexit*, the United Kingdom’s justice secretary Michael Gove argued that “Britons have had enough of experts” (Rpmackey 2016). This exemplifies what some have called ‘post-truth politics’, a political culture that has dismissed expert opinion in favor of appeals to emotion (Davies 2016). With our review, we also aim to make a contribution to this public debate by providing insight into a phenomenon that otherwise may be perceived as happening ‘behind closed doors’.

The rest of this thesis is organized as follows. The second chapter outlines the methodology that our review follows. The third chapter presents a synthesis of the findings in the literature on how expert economists gain the authority that allows them to become involved in policymaking. The fourth chapter evaluates the evidence regarding the conditions under which expert economists can influence policymaking. The fourth chapter discusses the findings in the literature on possible causal mechanisms through which expert economists may influence policy. The sixth and final chapter brings together the findings of the three chapters that precede it, to establish what we know, and what we do not know about the role of expert economists in policymaking. Furthermore, it will suggest avenues for future research.

Chapter 2

Methodology

The main advantage of conducting a literature review over producing a new primary study is that a literature review allows us to better interpret the findings of previous work, draw connections between the literature, and compare and contrast findings, because we place these findings in the context of other work that has addressed the same question. Considering that 'the field' we are studying is not yet clearly defined, with this literature review we attempt to make up the balance and map out those issues that are well-understood, alongside those that remain unclear or disputed. As such, we hope that our work may serve as a 'point of departure' for future research into the topic.

Literature reviews come in many forms, one of which is the systematic literature review. [Petticrew & Roberts \(2008, p. 9\)](#) identify systematic reviews as “[adhering] closely to a set of scientific methods that explicitly aim to limit systematic error (bias), mainly by attempting to identify, appraise and synthesize all relevant studies”. Traditional (narrative) literature reviews are often undertaken by experts in the field and rely on the knowledge of the reviewer ([Petticrew & Roberts 2008](#)). Since the differences between studies on the topic are large, selecting and reviewing them in an unsystematic way carries a high risk of introducing bias towards one or more specific strands of literature. Indeed [Petticrew & Roberts \(2008\)](#) argue that a literature review can tell any story one wants it to, particularly if the sample of studies is not representative or the summary is not critical. A systematic approach helps limit this bias. Although there have been calls for its wider application, systematic reviews within political economy remain a rare occurrence ([Dacombe 2017](#)).

At the same time, we must also acknowledge that our choice of topic imposes limitations on the extent to which we can root out bias. For instance, a systematic review would ideally include all relevant studies, but the literature on our topic is mostly qualitative and requires close reading and careful interpretation. Because of time constraints, we have to limit our analysis to a sample of relevant studies. Furthermore, as [Petticrew & Roberts \(2008\)](#) argue, it

is particularly challenging to incorporate qualitative evidence into a systematic review. There is no scientific consensus on how to assess the quality of qualitative studies, and findings are difficult to compare, let alone aggregate. Therefore, while we aim to work as systematically as possible in order to limit bias, we should allow some flexibility in handling the findings from the literature. If we placed a methodological strait-jacket on this evidence, we would risk losing precisely the valuable insights that qualitative evidence can bring to this review.

2.1 What Studies do we (not) Include?

The units of analysis of this review are individual studies. Our population is equal to all studies that have addressed the role of expert economists in policymaking and factors which lead to the variation of this role. We make no distinctions between research designs. In order to identify the most possible studies that meet these criteria, we conducted a search in three databases: Google Scholar, ISI Web of Science, and the Leiden University Library Catalogue. In addition to this, we searched within the bibliographies of studies that we identified as relevant. This approach is known as snowballing. To avoid introducing publication bias into the review, we also include unpublished work and theses. We have complemented this search strategy with hand-searching, and recommendations from experts, in particular, the supervisor of this thesis.

2.1.1 Conducting the Search

From the results of this search strategy, we manually excluded studies that clearly did not meet our exclusion criteria, based on their title and/or abstract. After these initial exclusions, 337 studies remained. Using the software *Rayyan*¹, we checked the full texts of these articles against the inclusion and exclusion criteria and excluded articles that did not meet them. After this step, 134 articles remained. A schematic representation of this process is provided in figure B.1.

Based on the time constraints on this project, we estimated that 50 would be the highest number of articles feasible to review. In order to maintain the systematic character of the review, given the diversity of academic approaches represented in the literature, we applied stratified sampling to select 50 of the 141 articles. Furthermore, by using stratified sampling we hope to increase the generalizability of the findings of our review to the population of literature. We assigned studies to clusters based on the academic discipline to which we judged that they belonged. We made this judgment based on the character of the journal or other medium in which the study was published and the academic background of the author(s). When these two variables conflicted, we estimated the most appropriate discipline based on the content of the

¹*Rayyan* is software developed by the Qatar Computing Research Institute as a tool for systematic reviews (Ouzzani et al. 2016).

study. This resulted in seven categories: economics (33 studies), public administration (24), political science (23), sociology (23), interdisciplinary social science (13), and other (5). The probability of a study to be included in our sample of 50 was based on the relative size of the cluster to which this study belonged.² A table (A.1) containing the final selection of 50 studies is included in Appendix A.

2.1.2 Not All Studies are Created Equal

With our choice of random sampling, we aim to limit the bias we introduce into the review by considering only a part of the population we identified. However, this approach also poses a key limitation. While two studies may both belong to the population we have defined above, this does not mean that they are of equal relevance or value to the academic debate. However, our sampling method does not distinguish between often-cited studies that some might regard as 'key contributions' to the academic debate and less groundbreaking studies. On one hand, this is a limitation of our review because we might miss out on important perspectives or findings. On the other hand, research has found that the act of citing literature is not objective and may introduce 'citation bias' (Higgins & Green 2008, p. 306). For instance, studies with positive findings are generally more likely to be cited than studies with negative findings, and scholars may cite literature to justify their own opinions rather than to present a balanced variety of perspectives (Higgins & Green 2008, p. 306). Thus, selecting studies based on their perceived importance to the field would risk introducing such citation bias into our review. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that any gaps we identify in our sample of literature could already be addressed in the part of the literature that we have not sampled.

2.2 Appraising Study Quality

An essential part of reviewing a study to place it within its context is critically examining the study. Are the methodological choices justified? Is the sample representative? To what extent are findings from this study generalizable? If we consider the findings of a study without taking into account such questions, we risk misinterpreting these findings or introducing bias that stems from flaws in the research design of a study into our review. In order to critically appraise the studies in our review in a standardized way, we will use a data extraction form that we have created for the occasion (see figure B.2).

²For example, the probability of a study that falls within the discipline of economics to be included was $\frac{33}{134}$.

2.3 Textual Narrative Synthesis

The synthesis (combining two or more elements to form a new whole) is the part of the review process that makes this literature review a *critical* literature review. Synthesizing rather than summarizing the literature allows us to end up with a review that is in a sense “more than the sum of its parts” (Greenhalgh et al. 2005, p. 428). Traditionally, systematic reviews have included almost exclusively quantitative studies which are typically synthesized using statistical methods (meta-analysis). Qualitative evidence, however, has traditionally not played a significant role in systematic reviews and while including qualitative evidence is gaining in popularity, the development of synthesis methods for qualitative or mixed methods evidence is still in its infancy (Petticrew & Roberts 2008, p. 191).³

In this review we opt for a textual narrative approach to synthesis, based on the descriptions of this method in Barnett-Page & Thomas (2009) and Lucas et al. (2007) (see figure B.1 for a schematic overview of our approach). After assessing the quality and characteristics of a study, we first summarize the relevant findings of that study. After repeating this for all 50 studies, we cluster the different findings into more homogenous, smaller groups.⁴ Based on our assessment of the findings, we decided to create three subgroups. The first subgroup of findings addresses how economists gain the authority that allows them to become involved in policymaking. The second group addresses the conditions under which they can use this authority to influence policy. The third group addresses the causal mechanisms through which this influence may occur.

Using our quality appraisals and summaries of findings, we then produce a synthesis in textual form of the findings in each subgroup. Finally, in a concluding chapter, we make up the balance by combining the syntheses of the subgroups and discussing the implications of these for (future) research on this topic. For a schematic overview of our methodology, see figure B.1. The textual narrative approach has been found to be particularly suitable for synthesizing evidence of different types, such as the diverse body of literature we have sampled for this review (see table A.1) (Barnett-Page & Thomas 2009). A weakness of the textual narrative approach is that the decision of how to create subgroups relies mostly on the judgment of the reviewer rather than an objective standard (Barnett-Page & Thomas 2009).

³Barnett-Page & Thomas (2009) provide an excellent review of a range of available options.

⁴In contrast to Lucas et al. (2007), we cluster at the finding-level instead of the study-level, because an individual study may produce a variety of findings that fit into different subgroups. Thus, we believe that our approach will produce more precise subgroups.

2.4 Characteristics of the Literature

Of the 50 studies we have sampled to review, the majority uses a qualitative methodology. The (comparative) case study and process tracing approaches are very well represented in the sample, but other, especially quantitative, methodologies are very sparse. Of the studies that consider a single, or small number of cases ('small N'), the cases selected are mostly Latin American, Asian, or European countries. While some studies have argued that "transnational linkages dominated by the United States" have been key to the institutionalization of economics globally (Fourcade 2006, p. 156), the United States themselves are the focus for only three of the studies. Furthermore, African and Middle Eastern countries are both represented in only 2 small N studies. With regard to the temporal dimension covered, most studies have either looked at the second half of the twentieth century – congruent with the rise to prominence of neoliberalism as an economic paradigm (Palley 2005) – or at the period following the Global Financial Crisis in the twenty-first century. Finally, a clear conception or set of criteria based on which the study define an individual as an 'expert economist' was missing in most studies. This makes the literature more difficult to compare.

Chapter 3

From Scribblers to Experts with Authority

Key points of this chapter

- The literature on epistemic communities and the economics profession present two approaches to describing how groups of economists work together to gain authority.
- The reliance on mathematics and quantitative methods within economics, the rise of Keynesianism, and the establishment of a new system of international financial governance after World War II have contributed to a perception of economists as 'social engineers'.
- Economists possess distinct qualities such as a high degree of self-confidence that make them more likely to end up in positions from which they can influence policy.
- Organizations may appoint economists in an attempt to gain legitimacy.
- A presidential system may make the appointment of expert economists to cabinet positions more likely

In his *General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, the British economist John Maynard Keynes expressed his worry that “madmen in authority who hear voices in the air are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back” (Keynes 1936, p. 338). Indeed, as we have previously noted, economists have had a remarkable influence on policymaking. Furthermore, since Keynes’ writing, it also seems that some economists have ascended from the role of “academic scribbler” into positions where they can have a more direct influence on policy (Markoff & Montecinos 1993). Over the past decades, economists seem to have enjoyed a prestigious status and a high level of authority in many areas of policymaking (Hirschman & Berman 2014, Fourcade 2006, Markoff & Montecinos 1993). In this chapter, we examine the findings in the literature on where this authority is derived from. Particularly,

we are seeking answers to the question of how *economists*, as opposed to other experts, like historians or chemists, come to be seen as having authority on policy issues.

Several of the fifty reviewed studies have addressed this question, albeit in different ways. The answers provided in these studies can be categorized into six groups. Firstly, there are explanations which take as their unit of analysis groups of economists and focus on how these groups can become influential and how membership of such groups can affect the authority of its members. A second but linked group of explanations sees the authority of economists as a result of developments in economics. The third group of explanations points at individual aspects or qualities of economists that make them particularly likely to be perceived as having authority and to be appointed to influential positions. Specifically, it highlights how economists actively engage in influencing these perceptions. A fourth and fifth group focus on how historical developments after World War II and institutional conditions respectively contributed to the perception of economists as experts and allowed economists to ascend to influential positions. The last group of explanations addresses the question by looking at the motivations for individuals or organizations to appoint an economist. In this chapter, we will discuss each group of explanations and examine the evidence that substantiates their arguments.

3.1 A Group Effort to Gain Authority?

The studies that attribute the perception of economists as experts and their influence on policy to the actions of groups of economists broadly fall into two strands of research: the sociology of professions, and 'epistemic communities'. The sociology of professions literature studies how professions, occupations with special power and prestige, compete over authority in specific areas (Suddaby & Muzio 2015, Evetts 2003). The literature on epistemic communities is rooted in political science and international relations. Haas (1992, p. 2), the founder of this concept, describes epistemic communities as "networks of knowledge-based experts". He further outlines four necessary conditions for a group of professionals to be considered an epistemic community: shared normative and principled beliefs, shared causal beliefs, shared notions of validity, and a shared policy enterprise (Haas 1992). Thus, the main difference between these two strands of literature is their unit of analysis. Where the sociology of professions literature is concerned with the economics profession as a whole, the literature on epistemic communities focuses on smaller groups with shared beliefs within the profession.

3.1.1 Epistemic Communities of Economists

Haas (1992, p. 17) argues that the members of an epistemic community possess "professional training, prestige, and reputation for expertise in an area highly valued by society or elite

decision makers”. This reputation, along with their claim to knowledge in a specific area gives an epistemic community access to the policymaking process. At the same time, this reputation also grants legitimacy to their actions (Haas 1992). According to Haas (1992), epistemic communities set themselves apart from other groups and control access to their own community through their shared notions of validity. He argues that they use “intersubjective, internally defined tests” to validate knowledge within their realm of expertise (Haas 1992, footnote 39). Thus, by defining standards of what qualifies as valid knowledge, and using their reputation to spread these standards into the policymaking process, epistemic community members solidify their own positions as experts at the cost of rival groups.

Several studies use the concept of epistemic communities to study the influence of groups of economists on policy (Weymouth & Macpherson 2012, Chwieroth 2007, Afonso 2007, Bakir 2009), but only one of these explicitly addresses the central question of this chapter. In a qualitative analysis of central bank reform in Turkey during the early 2000s, Bakir (2009) studies the appointment of Kemal Derviş, an economist with a high position at the World Bank, as Minister of the Treasury and Economic Affairs. He finds that Derviş was appointed, at least partly, due to his reputation as a member of the transnational epistemic community of liberal economists. This reputation as a nonpartisan, international technocrat with connections in international financial organizations defined his legitimacy in both Turkish domestic policy circles and the international institutions (mainly the IMF) that Turkey was negotiating with (Bakir 2009).

While the concept of epistemic communities offers an explanation for how economists attain reputation and legitimacy to influence policy, it remains unclear how the epistemic community itself generates recognition for their expertise in a certain field. In addition to this, it emphasizes authority in specific policy areas. However, other studies have suggested that the authority of economists extends across policy areas to topics such as healthcare (Panhans 2018) or immigration (Afonso 2007). Nevertheless, epistemic community is a useful concept to understand how at times specific groups of economists, such as neoliberals, may be perceived as having more authority than other economists, or how economists form groups amongst themselves (and as such advocate a certain set of policy ideas) based on their epistemic outlooks.

3.1.2 The Economics Profession

A second group of explanations of how economists gain authority is centered around the sociology of the economics profession. Several studies find that economics has become an increasingly *global* profession and that the American model of economics has over time become the global

standard, often at the expense of local traditions (Fourcade 2006, Mallarino 2014, Dezalay & Garth 2011, Markoff & Montecinos 1993, Dezalay & Garth 2002). According to Fourcade (2006), the economics profession develops as economists in 'core' countries make models of the economy, which legitimize policy in the core and the periphery.¹ In this process, she argues, new policymaking opportunities open up for economists because their policies create demand for expertise in new areas such as privatization (Fourcade 2006).

In addition to this, Fourcade (2006) argues that in the local competition over authority in different policy areas, economists often 'beat' other professions because they can draw upon the international linkages that stem from the global nature of the economics profession as a source of legitimacy. She finds that in the economics profession specifically, "connections to (mainly) U.S.-based standards of work and professional practice are routinely used in the local competition whereby different professional segments and groups seek to assert their authority on particular jurisdictions" (Fourcade 2006, p. 145). The finding that economists compete over authority with members of other professional groups such as lawyers or engineers, is confirmed in several other studies (Kakridis 2009, Mallarino 2014, Brint 1990, Ban et al. 2016, Dezalay & Garth 2002). In the reviewed studies, competition is mainly found to come from the legal (Mallarino 2014, Dezalay & Garth 2002, Ban et al. 2016), and the engineering (Kakridis 2009) professions.

Aside from the global nature of the economics profession, its internal organization is also found to influence its authority. Kakridis (2009) shows how economists in post-World War II Greece lost this competition for authority over economic development to the professional community of engineers. He argues that this happened because the professional community of economists in Greece lacked organization and was strongly divided along political lines. Since then, however, much seems to have changed for the economics profession. More recent studies find it to be well-organized and hierarchical (Fourcade 2006, Fourcade et al. 2015, Hirschman & Berman 2014). Furthermore, it is found that the global nature of the profession also feeds into its internal organization, causing economists with academic credentials from prestigious international (especially American) universities to have more authority within the profession as well as domestically (Fourcade 2006, Mallarino 2014, Markoff & Montecinos 1993). As a result, several studies that concern a later time span, in fact, report the unity of professional communities of economists to positively affect the authority of their members (Reay 2012, Mallarino 2014, Dezalay & Garth 2002).

¹Fourcade (2006) is not referring to all economists here, but mainly to those who follow the neoclassical paradigm. The transfer of economic models to different national contexts presupposes a 'universalistic' epistemic outlook on behalf of the economist. She finds such an outlook to be present in neoclassical economics, since it relies on abstract models of the economy that are seen as universally applicable (Fourcade 2006).

In a case study of the policy debate on shadow banking regulation, [Ban et al. \(2016\)](#) compare how experts from three international financial organizations secure control over specific areas and differentiate themselves from experts working for the other organizations. They find that the experts studied used three distinct methods to do so. Firstly, some experts leveraged their authority over the definition and measurement of the problem. Secondly, experts working for the IMF appealed to the mandate of their organization over the “nexus between financial and fiscal issues” ([Ban et al. 2016](#), p. 1022). Finally, other experts leveraged their high status within the organization they worked for to claim authority ([Ban et al. 2016](#)). Furthermore, [Ban et al. \(2016\)](#) find that the international organizations they studied operated as ‘linked ecologies’: experts working within these organizations call upon outside networks of experts, staff from other international organizations, academia, and think tanks to assert their own authority and exclude other professional groups from the debate. Surprisingly, [Ban et al. \(2016\)](#) also find that the ideas of economists from elite academic institutions were rarely directly used by these experts in policy debates. Rather than top economics journals, they relied mostly on working papers from their own organization, other international organizations, and think tanks. While these working papers may still include ideas from top economics journals, this finding still indicates that the influence of academia on policymaking, at least in the case of shadow banking regulation, was at best mediated by professional publications.

Finally, what part do members of the professional community of economists themselves play in the construction of their authority? Findings from two studies indicate that economists have multiple professional identities and social roles ([Maesse 2015](#), [Medvetz 2010](#)). In order to establish their professional identity, [Medvetz \(2010\)](#) finds that economists describe themselves as balancing their functions of academic scholar, policy aide, business entrepreneur and media specialist. [Maesse \(2015\)](#) also argues that the authority of economists is constructed through discourses in these multiple fields. Since they participate in multiple discourses, economists can strategically use the benefits they gain from one discourse in another discourse. For example, an economist may mobilize their media presence to support their authority as a policy advisor ([Maesse 2015](#)). Ultimately [Maesse \(2015\)](#) finds an ‘elitism dispositif’ to be at the core of the modern economic expert discourse. He argues that this elitism dispositif results from a multitude of factors, many of which he draws from other arguments that we discuss in this chapter, such as the hierarchy in economics (section 4.2) and the ceremonial aspect of economic knowledge (section 4.6).

3.2 The Most Scientific of the Social Sciences?

Another set of explanations locates the source of economists' authority on policy issues in the economic science. A finding that emerges across many of the reviewed studies is that economists gain authority because they are seen as possessing the scientific methods and technical expertise that are needed to solve complex social issues (Mallarino 2014, Kirchgässner 1998, Fourcade et al. 2015, Boettke & Horwitz 2005). Economists themselves generally seem to share this opinion that economics is the most scientific of the social sciences (Fourcade et al. 2015). It has been argued that for much of the post-World War II period, economics has drifted towards the natural sciences, exemplified by the discipline's extensive use of quantitative methods and mathematical modeling (Fourcade et al. 2015, Boettke & Horwitz 2005).²³ Fourcade et al. (2015) find that the economics discipline, in many respects, is more similar to physics than to sociology. Boettke & Horwitz (2005, p. 2) note a change in the epistemic outlook of the discipline of economics after World War II from "modesty" to "hubris", and a simultaneous shift in the way economists see themselves from "prophets" to "engineers". This reliance on quantitative methods is found to increase the authority of economists (Mallarino 2014, Kirchgässner 1998, Boettke & Horwitz 2005, Fourcade et al. 2015).

A related development within the economic science that is found to have increased the authority of economists is the rise of Keynesianism as the dominant paradigm after World War II (Boettke & Horwitz 2005, Markoff & Montecinos 1993, Lindvall 2009).⁴ Boettke & Horwitz (2005) argue that Keynesian macroeconomics gave policymakers the idea that they possessed the "analytical toolkit" to engineer economic success.

Despite the apparent view that economics holds itself to a high scientific standard, two studies have found the flexibility of economics to also influence the authority of economists (Kirchgässner 1998, Reay 2012). Kirchgässner (1998) argues that because of the nature of economic theory, economics can effectively be used to support many different (opposing) ideological positions. Therefore, policymakers seeking to gain credibility will solicit the advice of economists whom they believe will support their position (Kirchgässner 1998). Similarly, other studies argue that economic thought can be applied to an almost infinite range of (policy) problems, giving

²³None of the reviewed studies discuss explicitly why this shift has occurred, but a commonly voiced explanation elsewhere is 'physics envy', the perceived envy of scholars in economics for the mathematical rigor of physics, and the adoption of similar mathematical methods in order to appear more 'scientific' (Mirowski 1992).

³More recently, Fourcade et al. (2015) argue that the paradigm has shifted towards applied microeconomics.

⁴Keynesian economics is founded in the ideas of the British economist John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946). A central idea in Keynesian economics is that aggregate demand strongly influences economic output and employment. Following from this, Keynesian economists generally advocate the use of fiscal policy by governments to influence aggregate demand and stabilize economic output.

economists many opportunities to claim authority over policy issues (Mallarino 2014, Reay 2012). This idea is also known as 'economic imperialism' (Lazear 2000).

3.3 Individual qualities of economists

Another set of explanations relates the authority of economists to individual aspects or qualities that they possess. Could it be that economists tend to have certain characteristics or personality traits that make them particularly prone to be perceived as legitimate or appointed to positions where they can influence policy? A number of studies find that economists tend to have the image of independent, nonpolitical figures which positively influences their authority (Mallarino 2014, Bakir 2009, Chwiero 2007, Maesse 2015, Medvetz 2010, Markoff & Montecinos 1993). Furthermore, some studies find that economists are seen as more international or cosmopolitan than other experts (Mallarino 2014, Reay 2012, Markoff & Montecinos 1993). Markoff & Montecinos (1993) find that the sheer fact that economists in developing countries tend to have a better command of English than other experts grants them authority because they are seen as better negotiators with foreign parties. They also find that since it is difficult to judge the quality of the work of economists when they act as experts in policymaking, external sources of validation such as degrees from prestigious universities are important. For some economists, previous experience in different sectors such as academia, government, and the private sector (Mallarino 2014) or a network in international organizations (Bakir 2009) has played a role.

Another finding which emerges across studies is that economists tend to have greater self-confidence (or even overconfidence (Angner 2006)) compared to other experts (Fourcade et al. 2015, Angner 2006). According to Fourcade et al. (2015), in the U.S. this is a result of several professional characteristics of economists such as a much better financial position compared to other academics, the dominant position of economics among the social sciences, the hierarchy within the discipline, and the rise of finance as a subject of study. Angner (2006) argues that economists involved in policymaking are likely to fall prey to significant overconfidence in their own abilities, because the conditions in which they work stimulate this. These conditions are that economists are expected to deliver solutions to difficult questions, feedback on the outcome of policies is difficult to come by, and economists face few institutional constraints on what they can advise. Furthermore, Angner (2006) finds that many economists suffer from confirmation bias, as well as selection bias whereby economists who are overconfident are overrepresented among those who are selected as policymaking experts. In sum, because economists tend to be so confident in their own abilities to solve problems, they get asked more often when difficult problems arise (Fourcade et al. 2015, Angner 2006).

3.4 Economists' Authority in Historical Perspective

Several explanations related to historical factors have been proposed for the authority of economists. The implication underlying many of these is that the process whereby economists gain authority is path dependent and contains positive feedback effects.⁵ Some studies have found that after economists are appointed to key policymaking positions, they introduce economic methods into the policy process, creating demand for more economists who master these methods (Mallarino 2014, Markoff & Montecinos 1993, Braun & Hubner 2018).

Another historical development that is found to have contributed to the authority of economists is the establishment of the Bretton Woods system of monetary management in 1944, which created important roles for the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (Markoff & Montecinos 1993). On the one hand, Markoff & Montecinos (1993) find that this development made the international financial system much more technical, upon which many countries decided to appoint economists with backgrounds similar to IMF and World Bank staffers that could understand the technical jargon. On the other hand, they find that countries which became dependent on the resources of international financial institutions tended to appoint Western-educated economists to signal credibility to their donors (Markoff & Montecinos 1993).

Some studies have pointed at the importance of transnational linkages in stimulating the reputation of economists. Developments such as the Marshall plan (Kakridis 2009), the 'battle' between the Western and Eastern blocs during the Cold War to export policy advice to non-aligned 'Third World' countries (Boettke & Horwitz 2005, Dezalay & Garth 2002), are argued to have created the notion of economists as 'social engineers' (Boettke & Horwitz 2005) and provided local elites with ideological and material resources to consolidate their power (Dezalay & Garth 2002). In addition to this, Boettke & Horwitz (2005) argue that the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and the initial perceived success of the socialist economic policy model of centralized planning also fed into the perception of economics as a toolkit to engineer development.

3.5 Institutional Sources of Authority

The fifth group of explanations has found the origin of economists' authority to at least partially lie in the institutional context, or in other words, the "humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic, and social interaction" (North 1991, p. 97), within which they operate. As

⁵While one clear and uncontested definition of path dependence does not exist, we may define the concept by its outcomes. According to Pierson (2000, p. 251), "the notion of path dependence is generally used to support a few key claims: Specific patterns of timing and sequence matter; starting from similar conditions, a wide range of social outcomes may be possible; large consequences may result from relatively "small" or contingent events; particular courses of action, once introduced, can be virtually impossible to reverse; and consequently, political development is often punctuated by critical moments or junctures that shape the basic contours of social life".

such, findings suggest that political patronage (Mallarino 2014) and a presidential political system (Amorim Neto & Samuels 2011) positively affect the authority of technocrats and their ability to progress through to influential positions in public policy. On the other hand, the influence of interest groups and social pressures in the political system (Bangura 1994, Mukherji 2013, Ban & Blyth 2013), the importance of geographical representation in an international bureaucracy (Christensen et al. 2017), and a parliamentary or semi-parliamentary political system (Amorim Neto & Samuels 2011) are found to have a negative effect on the authority of economists or on their appointment to influential positions. Institutional factors are also found to affect the formation of a technocratic elite. Bangura (1994) provides case studies of attempts to create a technocratic elite in Nigeria, Ghana, Botswana, and Cote D'Ivoire. He finds that frequent institutional change and lack of credible commitment on behalf of the political leadership hinder the formation of such a class of technocrats (Bangura 1994).

3.6 Impressing with an Economist: The Case of Legitimacy Concerns

The final category of findings relates to the motivations of those who are in the position to appoint economists to influential positions in public policy. The most general and encompassing of these explanations is from Markoff & Montecinos (1993), who argue that there is a large ceremonial aspect to appointing economists to high offices. This ceremony grants legitimacy to governments. The prestige, media presence, university degrees, and use of quantitative methods by economists are all elements of this ceremony (Markoff & Montecinos 1993).

Bates & Krueger (1993) find that there are two possible explanations for why technocrats gain power. Firstly, they argue that some politicians appoint technocrats as a solution to what they refer to as the “politician’s dilemma” between spending to promote the public good and spending on, for instance, patronage to keep themselves in power. By delegating some responsibilities to agencies staffed with ‘non-partisan experts’, they reduce the opportunities for distributive politics and allow limits on public spending to be imposed (Bates & Krueger 1993). Secondly, they argue that some politicians appoint technocrats in an attempt to institutionalize policies that serve the interests of a particular (elite) group in society and protect their economic and political power (Bates & Krueger 1993).

Other studies have found a connection between politically left-wing governments and the appointment of economists to influential positions (Chwioroth 2007, Kaplan 2017). The appointment of economists is found to be rooted in credibility concerns from the government (Chwioroth 2007). Furthermore, Kaplan (2017) finds that during cyclical upturns, left-wing

governments tend to appoint heterodox economists, whereas they tend to appoint more mainstream economists during cyclical downturns in order to signal their commitment to 'sound policy'. [Martínez-Gallardo & Schleiter \(2014\)](#) finds that presidential cabinets, on average, contain more technocratic ministers than other democratic governments of other forms. Studying 44 cabinets that ruled in Latin American countries between 1983 and 2011, he finds that presidents appoint technocratic ministers to avoid agency risks that they would face if they appointed a career politician who may face incentives related to their own political career that conflict with those of the president ([Martínez-Gallardo & Schleiter 2014](#)). Moreover, [Markoff & Montecinos \(1993\)](#) argue that high-level politicians appoint economists to their staff in order to prevent reputation loss they might incur.

A smaller number of studies discusses the motivations of other parties than national governments to appoint economists. When it comes to the private sector, [Braun & Hubner \(2018\)](#) find that firms make strategic use of the influence of economists to steer the policy process. [Seabrooke & Nilsson \(2015\)](#) studies the role of economic knowledge in the Financial Sector Assessment Program (FSAP) division within the IMF. This division's reputation took a notable blow after they praised the Icelandic financial sector's ability to withstand shocks in 2006. After the Global Financial Crisis started, the FSAP attempted to restore their legitimacy within the IMF by bringing in senior advisors from the private sector ([Seabrooke & Nilsson 2015](#)).

3.7 Conclusion

The literature on the authority of economists to influence policymaking has produced a wide range of findings on how this authority gets established. The study of how groups of economists have gained authority has taken two approaches. One of these follows the concept of epistemic communities, while another originates from the sociology of the profession. Furthermore, several cross-literature findings emerge. Firstly, an important factor underpinning the authority of economists is the perception of economists as 'social engineers'. This perception was mainly fueled by the rise of Keynesianism and the use of quantitative methods in the economic science, and the simultaneous development of a new international financial system in which institutions like the IMF play a large role. Secondly, several findings indicate that the appointment of economists is a process whereby organizations attempt to gain legitimacy. Third, findings from mainly sociological studies indicate that economists may possess a larger-than-average amount of self-confidence which makes them more likely to be selected for influential positions in policymaking. Furthermore, some institutional conditions, such as presidentialism, may make the appointment of economists to cabinet positions more likely.

Aside from these findings, we also notice that many of the processes whereby economists gain authority that are described in the literature seem to have elements of path dependence. This has interesting implications for the way we understand this authority. For instance, if the authority of economists increases this may also lead to more 'legitimacy-motivated' appointments of economists to influential positions in bureaucracies or governments. From these positions, economists may again positively influence their own authority by increasing the use of economic methods or hiring other economists. This way, the authority of economists may compound over time.

More research is needed to explain the variation of policymaking authority between economists. From the literature we know that academic background is one factor that goes into this, but, not all graduates from prestigious (American) institutions become experts involved in policymaking, and not all expert economists have an extensive academic background. Which other factors explain why some economists are seen as 'experts' while others are not? For some economists, the reason for this may be a personal preference for taking on a more humble epistemic position. However, recent scholarship has drawn attention to internal dynamics such as sexism in economics ([Wu 2018](#)), which may also serve as explanations for the variation in policymaking authority between economists.

Chapter 4

From Authority to Influence: When is the Time Ripe?

Key points of this chapter

- Political and economic crises present opportunities for expert economists to influence policy change
- Expert economists are more likely to influence policy if they are part of a well-organized group advocating an idea
- Expert economists are more likely to influence policy if their proposals align with the interests of relevant elites
- Expert economists are most likely to be involved in policymaking when the question at hand is complex, but the solutions they offer are simple
- The involvement of economic expertise in policymaking may be conditioned by a set of institutions, referred to as the 'knowledge regime'

Having examined what we know about how expert economists gain authority we must now ask ourselves under which conditions they can use this authority to influence policy. [Hirschman & Berman \(2014\)](#) tellingly write that “every sociologist, anthropologist and political scientist knows that economics is the most politically influential social science [...] every economist, on the other hand, knows that such influence is extraordinarily limited, when it exists at all”. Therefore, in this chapter, we aim to get an understanding of the conditions under which economists can influence policy.

Based on the findings in the literature surveyed, we have grouped these conditions into four categories. The first group of findings relates to political and economic crises. These events are found to make the influence of economists more likely. Another group of findings relates to other economic and political conditions. The third group of findings attributes the policy influence of economists to the nature of the policy problem they are presented with and the kind of answers

they provide in return. An interesting overarching conclusion which emerges from this is that while economists are more likely to exercise influence when the policy problem is complex, their proposed policies are more likely to be implemented if they are simple. A final category of findings concerns institutional conditions upon which the policy influence of economists turns out to be dependent.

4.1 Crises as Opportunities

One finding that emerges across a wide range of studies included in the review is that economists are most successful in influencing policy under conditions of political or economic crisis ([Baker 2013](#), [Mukherji 2013](#), [Bakir 2009](#), [Maman & Rosenhek 2007](#), [Braun & Hubner 2018](#)). The reasoning provided behind this is that crises cause politicians to seek policy changes ([Baker 2013](#), [Maman & Rosenhek 2007](#), [Mukherji 2013](#), [Bakir 2009](#)). However, most of the literature on crises and economist-induced policy change finds that if economists want to be successful in promoting a policy during or directly after a crisis, they need to be well-organized before the crisis ([Baker 2013](#), [Mukherji 2013](#), [Braun & Hubner 2018](#), [Bakir 2009](#)). A network of economists that share certain ideas can use the institutional positions and access to research tools of their members to promote these ideas among policy makers when the opportunity to do so – a crisis situation – emerges ([Baker 2013](#), [Mukherji 2013](#), [Ban & Blyth 2013](#)).

Evidence from China contradicts the findings on crises and the influence of economists. [Shih \(2011\)](#) finds that in the 1990s, a group of Western-influenced technocrats in high positions within the Chinese bureaucracy advocated interest rate liberalization. They were, however, only allowed to 'try out' such policies in favorable economic conditions of low inflation and high growth, because this meant that interest rate liberalization would not hurt the interests of other actors such as state-owned enterprises, state-owned banks, and the Ministry of Finance ([Shih 2011](#)). This finding may be specific to very 'top-down' bureaucracies such as China.

While crises are widely recognized within the reviewed literature as *a* factor that plays into the process of policy change, whether it is *the* factor is debated. While some argue that a crisis changes the position of the economists advocating an idea as well as the attitude towards it of politicians and the public ([Baker 2013](#), [Bakir 2009](#), [Maman & Rosenhek 2007](#)), others argue that a crisis is merely a 'tipping point' to implement reforms that is preceded by a longer period of domestic endogenous ideational change ([Mukherji 2013](#)). Finally, some argue that crises create opportunities for expert economists to influence policy because they tend to create uncertainty and technical tasks which cause politicians to look for expertise ([Braun & Hubner 2018](#), [Maman & Rosenhek 2007](#)).

4.2 Other Economic and Political conditions

Aside from crisis situations, other economic and political conditions have been linked to economist-induced policy change more sporadically. Findings from India (Mukherji 2013), Russia (Ban & Blyth 2013), and Switzerland (Afonso 2007) indicate that whether economists can make policy is dependent on whether that policy aligns with the interests of other groups with political influence. In India, the institutionalization of Washington Consensus principles was negotiated with a “coalition of industrialists, professionals, and farmers”, so points within the original Consensus that would hurt the interests of any of these groups were not adopted (Mukherji 2013, p. 364). In Russia, the “interests of the managerial elites and would-be oligarchs that preyed on state resources” constrained the Russian technocratic elite in the 1990s to implement Washington Consensus principles (Ban & Blyth 2013, 248). In the early 2000s, when Vladimir Putin came to power and Russia experienced a commodity boom which made it less dependent on international financial institutions, the Russian government could treat the Washington consensus as a “malleable set of policy constraints” (Ban & Blyth 2013)

4.3 Complex Questions, Simple Solutions

Some literature has found the nature of the policy question to influence whether economists could have influence over it. First and foremost, most of this literature finds that economists are the most influential when policy questions are complex (Haas 1992, Braun & Hubner 2018, Callander 2008), framed as technical (Brint 1990), or salient (Afonso 2007).¹ On the other hand, Dolowitz & Marsh (1996) finds that economists are most likely to actually have policy influence if the policy they advocate is not too complex, the perceived side effects are low and predictable, and when the outcomes of the policies they advocate are easy to predict. Thus, it seems that economists are most likely to have an influence on policy when they present a simple policy solution to a complex problem.

With regard to the extent of economists’ influence, Lindvall (2009) finds that their policy influence is restricted to choosing the *instruments* rather than the *objectives* of policy. Furthermore, Braun & Hubner (2018) finds that economists face additional restrictions on which ideas they can advocate and which instruments they can use, based on the organization for which they work. Finally, an obvious but nevertheless important finding is that economists can

¹While it may seem like a contradictory finding that economists tend to have influence when questions are technical or when they are salient, the two are in fact not mutually exclusive. Economists may become involved with different kinds of policy problems for different reasons. See Schrefler (2010) for a discussion of how independent regulatory agencies may use scientific knowledge differently under different circumstances.

influence policy only if they can provide a “credible causal story” to explain a policy problem and a “recipe to overcome them” (Afonso 2007, p. 6).

4.4 Institutions

Finally, the literature has pointed at the effect of the institutional features of political systems on when economists can have policy influence. Maslow (2018) argues that the ‘knowledge regime’ of a political system is the main determinant of when and how knowledge influences policy. Maslow (2018) adopts a definition of a knowledge regime from Campbell & Pedersen (2014, p. 3), who again have defined it as “the organizational and institutional machinery that generates data, research, policy recommendations, and other ideas that influence public debate and policymaking”. According to the literature on knowledge regimes, variations in these organizational and institutional machinery across political systems explains the varying influence of actors such as expert economists on policy. Maslow (2018) finds that in Japan, the developmental state² and strong bureaucratic institutions fostered weak think tanks that emerged along governmental lines. Liberalizing reforms in the 1990s, along with the Asian Financial crisis and reform of the electoral system, created more political competition between parties and enhanced the role of ideas in politics. Subsequently, the knowledge regime became more competitive and more think tanks emerged along ideological lines (Maslow 2018). Besides knowledge regimes, other findings indicate that economists are more likely to influence policy if the policies they propose fit with past policies (Dolowitz & Marsh 1996) and within the existing institutional context (Afonso 2007).

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have taken our previous chapter’s discussion on the authority of economists one step further by asking: under which conditions can authority lead to actual policy influence for economists. We have made an attempt at mapping these conditions, and arrive at five generalizable findings. To start with, political and economic crises present an opportunity for expert economists to influence policy change. This conclusion is perhaps the most supported finding in this literature review, but an important caveat is placed by Shih (2011), who finds that in China the reverse was true. Secondly, economists are more likely to influence policy if they are part of a well-organized group advocating an idea. This finding echoes the sentiments of epistemic communities approaches that we have discussed in chapter 3. Third, expert economists are more likely to influence policy if their proposals align with the interests of relevant elites.

²Developmental state is a term used in political economy to refer to East-Asian states that pursued state-led growth policies in the second half of the twentieth century (Leftwich 1995)

While this finding may seem obvious to some, it is important to note that the influence of expert economists is not unbridled as we found this nuance to be missing in several of the studies we reviewed. Fourthly, we find that expert economists are most likely to be involved in policymaking when the question at hand is complex, but this involvement is more likely to lead to actual policy influence if the proposed solution is straightforward. Finally, some evidence finds that the involvement in policymaking of (economic) expertise is conditioned by a set of institutions, referred to as the 'knowledge regime'.

With regard to areas which remain unclear, the strong focus in the literature on crisis situations has left the conditions under which expert economists can influence policymaking in 'business as usual' situations underexposed. This can largely be attributed to the case selection of many studies that follow a case study or process tracing approach. This focus on crises has come at the cost of knowledge about the role of expert economists in policymaking during 'normal' times. For instance, we know relatively little about the kinds of policy areas in which economists can become involved. While we know that this range of areas goes far beyond economics, there are policy areas where we might expect economists to play a larger role than they do in practice. For instance, many prominent (U.S.) economists have publicly voiced their support for a carbon tax, but politicians have not been rushing to implement this public policy idea ([Hook 2019](#), [Rabe 2018](#)). An interesting question that remains unexplained by the literature that we have reviewed is why expert economists have not been able to influence policymaking in areas such as climate change policy. Future studies that select cases of economists acting under 'normal' conditions could shed light on questions such as these.

In addition to this, most of the studies on the relationship between economists' involvement in policymaking and crises have followed a process tracing methodology. Future research could test whether this theory holds for a larger sample of countries, and after controlling for potential confounding variables, using a quantitative approach. Furthermore, the literature on this topic does not include extensive evidence on cases where economists were unsuccessful at influencing policy. While these may be difficult to identify, studying such 'negative cases' may give us a more complete understanding. Moreover, the arguments presented in the literature on the conditioning effect of 'knowledge regimes' are promising, but this area remains understudied. More comparative research on this topic could help us understand how differences in knowledge regimes between countries affect the influence of economic experts.

Chapter 5

Advocates in the Right Place: How Economists turn their Ideas into Policies

Key points of this chapter

- Expert economists can use a strategy of promotion and persuasion to influence policy.
- The institutional positions of expert economists are important determinants of their policymaking influence.
- International linkages between expert economists in different countries may be used as a vehicle to influence policy.
- While some studies have suggested that the 'esteem' of expert economists can be a cause of policy influence, we find only weak support for this as an independent causal mechanism.

Now that we have addressed how and why expert economists gain the authority to influence policy as well as under which conditions economists can influence policy, we have arrived at the last piece of our puzzle. In this chapter, we will explore the available evidence on the question of how economists practically go about influencing policy. Furthermore, we will examine whether or not we can discern distinct 'strategies' among expert economists who have been successful at influencing policy.

Within the literature we reviewed, this question has received less attention than the questions we addressed in the previous two chapters, but here lies also the merit of a literature review: we can initiate theory building. To this end, we have identified four possible mechanisms and grouped relevant findings from the literature accordingly. The first mechanism that we identify is promotion and persuasion by expert economists. Secondly, we discuss the degree to which the literature supports the argument of a previous literature review by [Hirschman & Berman \(2014\)](#) that the esteem of expert economists functions as a mechanism to influence policy. Thirdly, we

identify the institutional position of expert economists in state bureaucracies as a mechanism through which they may influence policy. Finally, we discuss the findings in the literature that identify international linkages as a causal mechanism for policy influence.

5.1 Promotion and Persuasion

The first strategy whereby economists may influence policy that surfaces in the literature consists of promotion and persuasion. This strategy was used by, for instance, economists advocating macroprudential reforms after the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 (Baker 2013).¹ The sudden rise to prominence of macroprudential ideas and subsequent policies after the crisis can be seen as remarkable in light of the dominant view of financial regulation as representing “orthodox, conservative, [and] incremental forms of governance” (Baker 2013, p. 113). Baker (2013) argues that this sudden ideational and policy shift was the result of an efficient strategy of active promotion and persuasion by its proponents. Expert economists working in organizations that were involved in the policy process of banking regulation were effective at “engaging with and selling their ideas to national policy-makers in the post-crisis period”, and turning these policymakers into advocates of their ideas as well (Baker 2013, p. 124).

In a similar approach to promotion and persuasion, an economist may influence policy by bringing an issue or idea to the attention of policy-makers. Haas (1992) argues that members of transnational epistemic communities can influence how states perceive their own interests in two ways. The member may either directly point out these interests to a policymaker or point out the “salient dimensions” of an issue from which the policymaker can then deduce their state’s interests (Haas 1992, p. 4). Haas (1992) goes on to argue that following this, policymakers in one state may become convinced to the extent that they will persuade policymakers in other states to follow their example. In addition to this voluntary adoption, Dolowitz & Marsh (1996) argues that policymakers can be indirectly or directly coerced into adopting new policies. Indirect coercion can occur through, for instance, a fear of lagging behind or because there are perceived positive feedback effects to pursuing the same policy as other countries. The most prominent example of direct coercion is perhaps the employment of conditional loans by the IMF and the World Bank. The argumentation in (Haas 1992), however, contradicts that in (Lindvall 2009), who argues that economists are involved merely in choosing policy instruments rather than objectives.

¹Macroprudential reforms aim to limit risks to the financial system by expanding the powers of public authorities to intervene in financial markets (Baker 2013, p. 113).

An alternative perspective on promotion and persuasion is provided by [Ban & Blyth \(2013\)](#) who argues that in Brazil, expert economists managed to influence policymakers to adopt Washington consensus principles by linking them to pre-existing domestic ideas. Furthermore, [Bakir \(2009\)](#) emphasizes the importance of a 'policy entrepreneur' – a person who can use their knowledge of the policy process to link their preferred solutions to policy problems – to promote certain policies among policymakers.²

5.2 Esteem of the Expert

Another mechanism through which economists might influence policy that surfaces from the literature is through the esteem that we have discussed in chapter 3. Perhaps this mechanism should be seen as providing support to promotion and persuasion efforts of economists. Several studies, including the only other literature review on this topic by [Hirschman & Berman \(2014\)](#), argue that the esteem of experts who advocate a policy is an important cause of policy change ([Hirschman & Berman 2014](#), [Panhans 2018](#), [Haas 1992](#)), but only one study finds empirical evidence for this ([Baker 2013](#)). Overall, whereas [Hirschman & Berman \(2014\)](#) find that professional esteem is an important cause of expert-induced policy change, we find that, while it contributes to their authority (see chapter 3), there is little resounding evidence in the literature we for the claim that it is also a direct mechanism through which economists influence policy.

5.3 Institutional Position of Economists

Another way in which economists may influence policies is through their institutional positions. [Baker \(2013\)](#) argues that in the case of banking regulation after the Global Financial Crisis, proponents of macroprudential reforms were successful at being appointed to committees that produced key reports analyzing the crisis. From this position, proponents were able to ensure that macroprudential reforms were included as potential solutions in these reports. A case study on the U.S. healthcare system has also found that the institutional position of economists helped them to influence policy ([Panhans 2018](#)). Furthermore, [Christensen \(2017\)](#) finds, based on case studies of Norway, Denmark, New Zealand, and Iceland, that the contrasting experiences of these countries with market-conforming tax reform are due to differences in the institutionalization of the role of economists in policymaking across these countries. He argues, moreover, that two specific aspects of the institutional position of economists were critical to the ability of economists to influence policy from their institutional positions. Firstly, bureaucracies that recruit staff based on advanced qualifications in a field “establish a direct link for the transmission of new

²The concept of policy entrepreneur in political science, developed by [Kingdon & Thurber \(1984\)](#), refers to people who “use their knowledge of the process to further their own policy ends” ([Cairney 2015](#))

approaches from the center of the discipline” (Christensen 2017, p. 15). Secondly, Christensen (2017, p. 18) argues that the authority of economists (see chapter 3) is conducive to ‘bureaucratic autonomy’, the ability to “independently formulate, pursue, and attain their policy preferences”.

Evidence from quantitative studies supports these findings (Chwioroth 2007, Weymouth & Macpherson 2012). This quantitative evidence links the “formation of a coherent team of neoliberal economists” in a state bureaucracy (Chwioroth 2007, p. 443), and the presence of people with a Ph.D. in economics from an American university (Weymouth & Macpherson 2012) to capital account liberalization and trade liberalization respectively.

5.4 International linkages

A final mechanism through which expert economists may influence policy is the strategic use of international linkages that exist as a result of the globalized nature of the economics profession (see chapter 3). An empirical example of in the literature we surveyed is the independence of Israel’s central bank. Here, Maman & Rosenhek (2007) argues, interstate dominance from the United States over Israel functioned as a vehicle to transmit policy expertise. He contends, furthermore, that while the American government used the legitimacy of expert economists to conceal the coercive nature of their actions, experts used the coercive power of the American government to implement their policy ideas, creating a win-win situation (Maman & Rosenhek 2007). Another way in which international linkages may serve as a mechanism through which expert economists influence policy is through informal norms. Haas (1992) argues that epistemic communities may contribute to the creation and maintenance of social institutions that guide international behavior. Finally, several studies find that foreign aid and cooperation with foreign NGOs such as the Ford Foundation have served as a mechanism to influence policy (Kakridis 2009, Mallarino 2014).

5.5 Conclusion

We have highlighted several mechanisms by which expert economists may influence policy. The mechanism which features most prominently in the literature we have reviewed is that of promotion and persuasion. We also find that the institutional position of expert economists and international linkages resonate in the literature as such mechanisms. Remarkably, however, we find little support for two of the mechanism proposed in the previous literature review by Hirschman & Berman (2014). Firstly, for esteem of the expert as a mechanism, we find only thin empirical evidence in our review. Esteem might be considered as a stepping stone rather than a causal mechanism. Secondly, while Hirschman & Berman (2014) also point at cognitive

infrastructure as a mechanism, the literature we have reviewed has not put forward any findings of this.

Overall, while we find substantive support for the finding that economists can influence policy with a strategy of promotion and persuasion, through their institutional position, and through international linkages, other causal mechanisms remain underdeveloped in the literature we have surveyed. In further theorizing such mechanisms lies an important task for future research. Furthermore, the literature we reviewed has not discussed the question of how economists choose a strategy, and whether multiple strategies can reinforce one another when they are both pursued at the same time. Moreover, the literature has not addressed how expert economists compete over policy influence with other (non-expert) groups.

A more fundamental issue that remains unclear in the literature is whether the ideas of economists can independently change policy outcomes, or just serves to legitimate or substantiate the preexisting arguments of policy-makers? The literature we have reviewed, although it does not address the question specifically contains support for both of these positions. Experimental evidence from the field of evidence-based policy (in particular, the topic of 'motivated reasoning') has found that Danish local politicians are biased by their prior attitudes when interpreting policy-relevant information ([Baekgaard et al. 2017](#)). Furthermore, a similar experiment asked politicians to justify their opinion and found that the bias of local politicians increased as a result of this ([Christensen 2018a](#)). We should be cautious not to extrapolate the findings from these experiments to other contexts, but nevertheless, the hypothesis that policymakers reject ideas from economists if they are not in line with their beliefs deserves to be tested. In this regard, the field of evidence-based policy should be a source of inspiration.

Chapter 6

Expert Economists and Policymaking – Where do we Stand?

We started this thesis with the story of the Chicago Boys, a group of Chilean economists who, backed by a military dictatorship, transformed Chile into one of the most radically neoliberal countries in the world. Ever since, literature from various scholarly backgrounds has examined the influence that expert economists, like the Chicago Boys, have on policymaking. This thesis presents the first attempt to systematically review this literature, by bringing together these diverging strands in order to define what we know, what we do not (yet) know, and what remains contested.

As such, we have focused on three key dimensions of this question. Firstly, we have examined the origins of the authority that has allowed expert economists to put their stamp on policymaking worldwide. Secondly, we have distinguished the conditions under which this authority can lead to policy influence. Finally, we have examined how – given that they have established authority and the conditions are right – expert economists may go about influencing policy.

6.1 What do we Know?

With regard to the first of these dimensions, we find that many of the explanations in the literature allude to the idea that the processes whereby economists gain authority exhibit elements of path dependence. The literature itself has found that the increasing reliance on advanced quantitative methods and positivist epistemic outlook of economics have contributed to the perception of economists as 'social engineers'. Furthermore, economists may become involved in policymaking to grant legitimacy to the group that the economist sides with, or because they possess a great amount of (self-)confidence. Finally, membership of an epistemic community and the globalization of the economics profession are found to contribute to the authority of expert economists. With regard to the second dimension, we know that expert economists are found to be influential in policymaking during political and economic crises and if they are part

of a well-organized group. Other studies have found that the involvement of expert economists in policymaking depends on the type of policy question and whether their ideas align with the interests of other relevant groups. Finally, with regard to the third dimension, the mechanism through which expert economists may influence policymaking that is most clearly defined in the literature is that of promotion and persuasion. Furthermore, several findings suggest that the institutional position of expert economists may be an important determinant of their ability to influence policy.

Naturally, our review has limitations. Firstly, our search strategy may not have identified all potentially relevant studies. Secondly, our review consists of 50 of the 134 studies that we identified. Sampling these 50 studies was done based using a stratified method, without considering the quality of the study or its contribution to the field. Thus, the review undoubtedly misses several key findings from studies outside our sample. Thirdly, due to the geographical scope of the reviewed studies, the generalizability of the findings we identify is limited.

6.2 Avenues for Future Research

We have identified three main gaps within the literature that demand the attention of future research. The first of these is that the individual differences in authority between economists with similar academic or ideological backgrounds. Secondly, the focus of the literature's case selection on crises has left the role of expert economists in policymaking under 'business as usual' circumstances underexposed. As a result of this, we know relatively little about the conditions that are conducive to the involvement of economists in policymaking under these circumstances, or whether this involvement may be of a different kind. Future research may address this gap by selecting a wider variety of cases than has previously been done. Finally, a gap exists with regard to the effect of the involvement of expert economists on policy outcomes. The literature strongly suggests that in some cases, expert economists can change these outcomes according to their preferences, while in other cases, their involvement merely serves to legitimate the opinions of policymakers or politicians. Most likely, which form the involvement of economists takes (this is not restricted to the two simplistic scenarios we presented) depends on a multitude of conditions, such as the salience of the issue. Exploring these conditions is again a task for future research.

We hope that this review may serve as a point of departure for researchers from various disciplines, brave enough to take on the challenge of tackling these gaps in the literature by going off the beaten track.

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Appendix A

Literature

Table A.1: Overview of the literature included in the review

Citation	Methodology	Case Selection	Time	Publication
Afonso (2007)	Qualitative	Switzerland	1960s-1990s	Swiss Journal of Political Science
Amorim Neto & Samuels (2011)	Quantitative	57 countries, based on data availability	1980-2000	Revista Ibero-Americana de Estudos Legislativos
Angner (2006)	Qualitative, literature review	Anders Åslund (swedish economist), literature on liberal reforms in Russia	1990s	Journal of Economic Methodology
Baker (2013)	Qualitative	Basel regulations after the Global Financial Crisis	2008-2013	New Political Economy
Bakir (2009)	Qualitative	Turkey	2001-2009	Governance
Ban & Blyth (2013)	Qualitative	Brazil, Russia, India, China	1980s-1990s	International Political Economy
Ban et al. (2016)	Content analysis, network analysis, prosopographic analysis	Bank of International Settlements, Financial Stability Board, and the International Monetary Fund	2008-2016	Review of International Political Economy
Bangura (1994)	Qualitative	Nigeria, Botswana, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire	1970s-1980s	Development and Change
Bates & Krueger (1993)	Mixed methods	Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Egypt, Ghana, Korea, Turkey and Zambia	1980s	Book: Political and Economic Interactions in Economic Policy Reform: Evidence from Eight Countries

Boettke & Horwitz (2005)	Conference proceedings	pro-	Literature	<i>not specified</i>	History of Political Economy Conference
Braun & Hubner (2018)	Qualitative		European Union	2008-2017	Competition and Change
Brint (1990)	Literature review		Literature on the policy influence of experts	<i>not specified</i>	Sociological Forum
Callander (2008)	Formal modelling		<i>not applicable</i>	<i>not applicable</i>	Quarterly Journal of Political Science
Christensen (2017)	Qualitative		Norway, Denmark, Ireland, New Zealand	1980s-2016	Book: The Power of Economists within the State
Christensen (2018b)	Quantitative		Norwegian advisory commissions on economic policy	1967-2013	Policy Science
Christensen et al. (2017)	Quantitative		200 recruitments of the European Commission	1985-2015	Public Administration
Chwieroth (2007)	Quantitative		29 emerging markets	1977-1999	International Organization
Dezalay & Garth (2002)	Qualitative		Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico	1945-2000	Book: The Internationalizations or Palace Wars: Lawyers, Economists, and the Contest to transform Latin American States
Dezalay & Garth (2011)	Qualitative		<i>not specified</i>	<i>not specified</i>	International Political Sociology
Dolowitz & Marsh (1996)	Literature review		Literature on policy transfer	<i>not specified</i>	Political Studies
Eggertsson (1998)	Literature review		Literature on macroeconomic policy and neo-institutional economics	<i>not specified</i>	Scandinavian Journal of Economics
Fourcade (2006)	Qualitative		The economics profession	Twentieth century	American Journal of Sociology
Fourcade et al. (2015)	Literature review		Literature on the superiority of economists	<i>not specified</i>	Journal of Economic Perspectives
Haas (1992)	Theoretical		Literature on epistemic communities	<i>not specified</i>	International Organization
Halffman & Hoppe (2005)	Qualitative		The Netherlands	1945-2004	Book: Scientific Expertise and Political Decision Making

Hartwell (1971)	Qualitative	Current China	960-1126 A.D.	The Journal of Asian Studies
Hirschman & Berman (2014)	Literature Review	Literature on the policy influence of economists	<i>not specified</i>	Socio-Economic Review
Hurl (2018)	Qualitative	27 municipalitis in Ontario, Canada which used a service offered by KPMG	2011-2017	Innovation
Kakridis (2009)	Qualitative	Greece	1944-1950	Journal of Modern Greek Studies
Kaplan (2017)	Mixed methods	16 democratic countries in Latin America	1960-2011	Electoral Studies
Kirchgässner (1998)	Discussion paper	Literature	<i>not specified</i>	Discussion paper - University of St. Gallen
Lindvall (2009)	Qualitative	Austria, Denmark, Sweden	1960s-2000s	World Politics
Maesse (2015)	Qualitative	Literature on the economic expert discourse	<i>not specified</i>	Journal of Multi-cultural Discourses
Mallarino (2014)	Qualitative	Colombia	1960s-2014	Bulletin of Latin American Research
Maman & Rosenhek (2007)	Qualitative	Israel	1985	Review of International Political Economy
Markoff & Montecinos (1993)	Literature review	Literature on economists in top political functions	<i>not specified</i>	Journal of Public Policy
Martínez-Gallardo & Schleiter (2014)	Quantitative	44 cabinets in 12 Latin American countries	1983-2012	Comparative Political Studies
Maslow (2018)	Unstructured in-depth interviews	Intellectuals and policy experts affiliated with old and newly established thinks tanks in Japan	1990s-2017	Pacific Affairs
Mattei (2017)	Qualitative	Italy	1922-1945	Journal of Law and Society
Medvetz (2010)	Qualitative	43 American staff members of think tanks	2000s	Qualitative sociology
Mukherji (2013)	Qualitative	India	1960s-1990s	International Political Economy

Nelson (1987)	Qualitative	United States	1945-1980	Journal of Economic of Literature
Panhans (2018)	Qualitative	United States	1945-2018	Oeconomia
Plehwe (2011)	Qualitative	Argentina	1980s	Critical Policy Studies
Reay (2012)	Qualitative	52 economists working in public or private sector jobs in the United States	End of the twentieth century	American Journal of Sociology
Seabrooke & Nilsson (2015)	Optimal matching analysis	Teams in the IMF Financial Sector Assessment Program	2008-2013	Governance
Shih (2011)	Qualitative	China	1980s-2010s	Journal of East Asian Studies
Simmons & Elkins (2004)	Quantitative	All IMF member countries	1966-1996	American Political Science Review
Stone (2005)	Literature review	Literature on think tanks and policy advice	<i>not specified</i>	Asian Development Bank Paper
Weymouth & Macpherson (2012)	Quantitative	72 countries where economists registered with the AEA are active	1981-1997	International interactions

Appendix B

Methodology

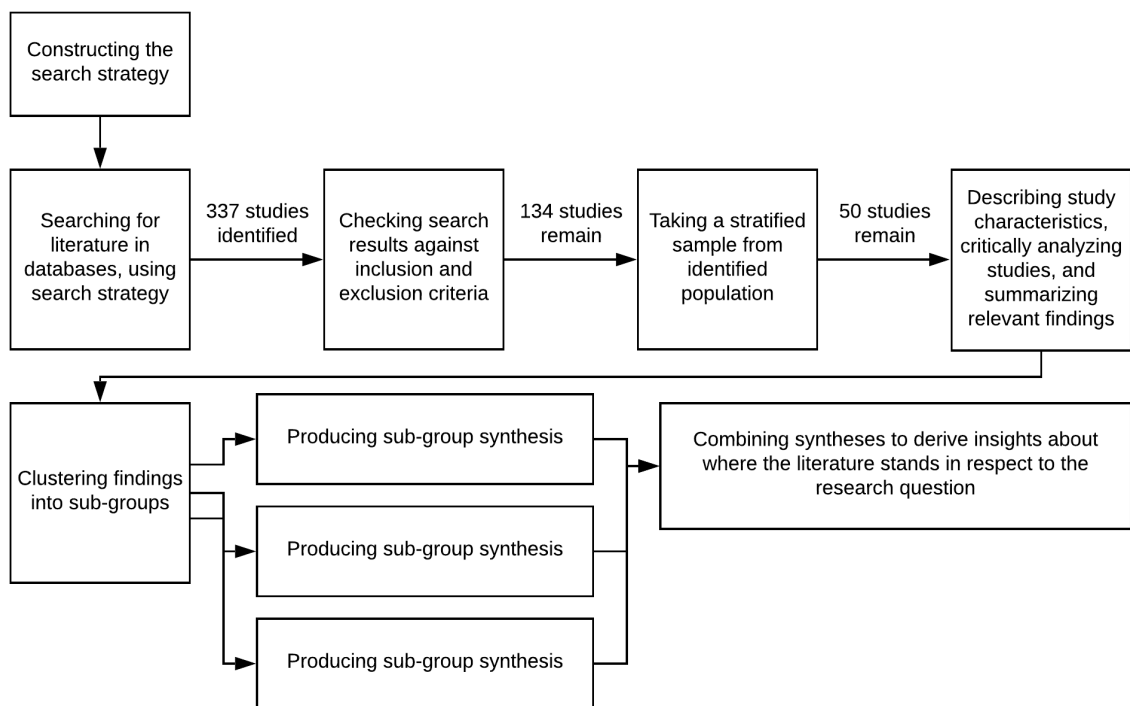


Figure B.1: Schematic representation of the methodology of this literature review

Data Extraction Form	
Title of Study	
Author(s)	
Year	
Type of Publication	
(Journal)	
Discipline	
Author affiliations	
Study affiliations (funding, conference, special project, etc.)	
Research Question	
Methodology	
Is the choice of methodology justified?	
Case Selection	
Case selection justified?	
Time & Place	
Data Source	
Type of 'experts' examined	
Criteria for being 'experts' clearly defined?	
Setting/environment in which experts operate	
Answer to research question	
Finding on role of expert economists in policymaking?	
Overall assessment of internal validity (1-5)	
Overall assessment of external validity (1-5)	
Are findings credible?	
Is generalizability addressed?	
How consistent and clear are the findings in relation to the research design?	
Does the research make any strong assumptions? Are they justified?	

Figure B.2: Data extraction form