

BEYOND EVIDENCE: HOW FRAMING SHAPES PUBLIC HEALTH POLICIES DURING HEALTH CRISES

Authors

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Abstract

This study investigates how framing, evidence, and the roles of scientists and political decisionmakers in policymaking influence public health policy decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic in Quebec and Sweden. Utilizing a comprehensive dataset of press conference transcripts, we apply natural language processing (NLP) to assess the impact of different framings on suppression and mitigation policies. Our analysis reveals that framing affects policy decisions, often independent of evidence. In Quebec, where political decisionmakers were central, a Dangerous framing, which emphasizes the severe health threats of COVID-19, is associated with an increase in stringent suppression policies, even in the absence of strong evidence. In contrast, Sweden's policy process, characterized by scientific autonomy, required high levels of evidence for the Dangerous framing to impact suppression policies. A Moderate framing, balancing societal benefits and virus risks, promoted mitigation policies when supported by strong evidence, with variations between jurisdictions. These findings illustrate that the framing of a health crisis can be as influential as evidence, with distinct implications for the role of political and scientific actors. This study contributes to public policy literature by highlighting the relationship between framing, evidence, and the differentiated roles of policymakers and scientists in the policymaking process during health emergencies.

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