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

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This article applies an integrated conceptual framework that bridges sociological and equivalence framing theories to understand how framing, evidence level, and the balance of influence between policymakers and scientists shape policymaking during a health crisis. Using a dataset of daily press conferences from Quebec—where political decision-makers held comparatively greater authority—and Sweden—where scientists enjoyed more autonomy—this study employs Natural Language Processing techniques and OLS regressions to examine how evolving frames and evidence levels influenced the adoption of stringent suppression measures or moderate mitigation policies during COVID-19. The findings show that in Quebec, where political decision-makers exerted relatively more influence, a frame emphasizing imminent danger justified far-reaching interventions even with low levels of evidence. By contrast, in Sweden, the effect of the same frame was conditional on higher levels of evidence, illustrating a different approach to uncertainty, where scientists may require stronger empirical justification. This research highlights how the required level of evidence for a policy decision varies according to different frames and different actors. Ultimately, this study advances our understanding of how frames interact with varying evidence levels and actors, offering lessons on the balance between democratic accountability, expert influence, and framing in shaping highly consequential policies.

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