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#### Key messages:

- Political leaders frequently used the phrase "following the science" during the COVID-19 pandemic when speaking publicly about contentious decisions.
- These public communications often emphasized the centrality of scientific advisors and the importance of expert guidelines in the decision-making process. In both cases, politicians appeared to distance themselves from their own decisions.
- The potential implications of the excessive use of phrases like “follow the science” include confusing the public about who is responsible for policy decisions and reducing public trust in scientific evidence, scientific advisors, and politicians.

#### Introduction:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many leaders said they were "following the science" when making public health decisions. The article examines politicians' use of the phrase "following the science" in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom (UK) during the early months of the pandemic (March-September 2020).

#### Why is it important?

This article fills a gap in existing research by examining how the phrase "following the science" misrepresents the role of scientific evidence in policymaking, the relationship among politicians and public health officials, and the locus of accountability for public health decisions.

By analyzing instances when elected leaders used this phrase in relation to issues such as mass event cancellations, border closures, face masks, and in-person learning, the Global Strategy Lab's Public Health Institutions team found that politicians commonly used the term “following the science” to deflect responsibility onto government processes and public servants. For example, presenting Chief Medical Officers (CMOs) as decision-makers on contentious issues suggested that public health decisions were solely determined by scientific evidence or advice.

This kind of messaging can be problematic for several reasons. First, in representative democracies, policy decisions are not (and should not be) based *solely* on scientific evidence; considerations such as resource constraints, public opinion, and ethics also matter. Second, this messaging has the potential to confuse the public about who decides and who is accountable for

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those decisions. Third, it also risks undermining the public's trust in scientific advice and advisors. Understanding these dynamics can contribute to greater transparency and accountability in decision-making during future crises.

#### What are the policy implications?

- GSL's analysis suggests that politicians invoked "the science" to delay and justify decision-making on scientifically contested and politically risky issues such as mass event cancellations, school closures, border restrictions, and mask mandates.
- When politicians imply that decisions are made by CMOs, it can create the illusion that these advisors, rather than politicians, are the ones in control.
- Politicians' claims to be "following the science" can undermine trust in 'the science' and in scientific advisors when scientific evidence and policy decisions inevitably change or evolve. This may complicate government responses to future public health crises.
- Shifting responsibility onto scientific advisors also poses a risk to the balance between public servants and politicians, where the former provide candid advice with the understanding that political leaders bear ultimate responsibility for decisions.
- These implications suggest that politicians should be consistent, transparent, and accountable in their messaging to build public trust, preserve the integrity of the CMO's role, and increase their chances of effectively navigating future crises.

#### Data analysis and methods

This article is part of a multi-year research program at GSL that is investigating the design of public health governance. Earlier articles provided an [in-depth analysis](#) of the role of the CMO in Canada and [introduced our comparative analysis](#) of public health governance. In this article, a qualitative content analysis of prominent national newspapers in Australia, Canada (English and French), and the UK, allowed GSL researchers to identify and evaluate instances during the first six months of the pandemic (March-September 2020) when political leaders invoked the notion of "following the science." This study advances our understanding of how politicians communicate about public health, sheds light on the link between scientific evidence and public policy, and contributes to our knowledge of pandemic responses in multiple countries.