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**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# The conflict of interest that is so grave that we all prefer to ignore it?

# ¿El conflicto de intereses es tan grave que todos preferimos ignorarlo?

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**Abstract**
Conflict of Interest declaration is the default way to mitigate the risk of harm of unconscious or deliberate promotion of self-interest causing misinformation or wrong decision-making. Public attention to the disclosure of interests caused by private sources of research funding results in a routine procedure now. At the same time, very strong interests caused by taxpayer-covered Governmental funding of research are generally badly underestimated. Researchers generally have no idea that taking public funding and promoting policy advice to provide more funds should be declared as a conflict of interest: Promotion of more funds and power under the control of bureaucratic bodies or entities is anticipated to bring more funding for the researchers themselves. For example, the COVID-19 response of most democratic governments, based on the use of emergency powers, enjoys broad support from publicly funded research – though the effectiveness of such a response is not supported by the history of previous pandemics. The explicit requirement to disclose public funding as a potential Conflict of Interest, at least in case the authors promote more power and more funds for the Government, will mitigate risks of one of the potentially dangerous biases both in research and in decision-making.

***Keywords:*** Conflict, Interest, Bureaucracy, COVID-19, responses, emergency, Government, bias

**Resumen**
La declaración de conflicto de intereses es la forma predeterminada de mitigar el riesgo de daño de la promoción inconsciente o deliberada del interés propio que causa información errónea o toma de decisiones incorrectas, pero la atención a la divulgación de intereses causados por fuentes privadas de financiación de la investigación se convierte en un procedimiento rutinario ahora. Los conflicto de intereses muy fuertes causados por la financiación gubernamental de la investigación cubierta por los contribuyentes generalmente se subestiman gravemente. Los investigadores generalmente no tienen idea de que tomar fondos públicos y promover el asesoramiento de políticas para proporcionar más fondos debe declararse como un conflicto de intereses: se anticipa que la promoción de más fondos y poder bajo el control de organismos o entidades burocráticas traerá más fondos para los propios investigadores. La respuesta al COVID-19 de la mayoría de los gobiernos democráticos, basada en el uso de poderes de emergencia, cuenta con un amplio apoyo de la investigación financiada con fondos públicos, aunque la efectividad de tal respuesta no está respaldada por la historia de

pandemias anteriores. El requisito explícito de revelar el financiamiento público como un posible Conflicto de Interés, al menos en caso de que los autores promuevan más poder y más fondos para el Gobierno, mitigará los riesgos de uno de los sesgos potencialmente peligrosos tanto en la investigación como en la toma de decisiones.

*Palabras clave:* Conflicto, Interés, Burocracia, COVID-19, respuestas, emergencia, Gobierno, sesgo

## 1. Introduction

It is well accepted that a scientist cannot be a perfect, interest-free intellectual machine, because there are bias (according to Phicology & Economics). For this reason, every potential conflict of interest, even a remote one, should be disclosed. The accepted practice is to disclose funding sources and relevant affiliations. Research conclusions benefiting the funding agency should be viewed with increased scrutiny because of probable and often even unintentional bias. The first discussion of unintentional bias due to conflict of interest can probably be traced to the Pentateuch (Exodus 23:8, Deuteronomy 16:19).

The Webster dictionary defines conflict of interest (CoI) as follows: "A conflict between the private interests and the official responsibilities of a person in a position of trust". CoI may influence the results of an analysis – either scientific, or regulatory, or decision-making – and should be properly declared. While Webster does not limit nature or source of "private interests", the current practice essentially limits these interests to funds and benefits received from commercial bodies and NGO, but not from governmental bodies. Moreover, it is often explicitly assumed that public funding is free from interests and possible bias ¬ (see some examples in Table 1 Yanovskiy, 2022). For example: conflict of interest of researchers funded by tobacco companies and advocating tobacco companies' interests has been broadly discussed (Pisinger et al, 2019; Bero, 2004; Brandt, 2012). However, from the society's point of view, this advocacy should not be considered less acceptable in every respect than actions of a defense lawyer at the bar, or efforts of a registered lobbyist. The only – while big – problem is undeclared conflict of interest, especially if the opponents and the broad public would be unaware of the sources of their funding. That was surely not a case in the 'tobacco wars'.

Three problems of public funding of science – but not CoI – have been discussed in the literature:

1) Inefficiency – lack of personal involvement and interest of bureaucrat, the inability of governmental bodies to correct mistakes, poor accountability, and other typical failures of the government (Butos, McQuade, 2006; McQuade, Butos 2012; Sánchez-Bayón, 2022a-b).

2) Political bias – politicians' interests and the struggle for science funding redistribution model, developed by Savage (1999) got later some empirical support (Rabovsky, Ellis, 2014), while definitely inconclusive (trouble related withe the unfinished agenda, Buchanan & Tullock, 1962; Anderson, 1986; Sánchez-Bayón, 2022c & 2023).

3) Assault on freedom of scientific discussion in the US universities (since Mises, 1957 see for references Yanovskiy, 2022; Sánchez-Bayón, 2019a; Sánchez-Bayón et al., 2018).

The mutual dependence of specific Conflicts of Interest of government colluding, government-dependent scientists, and the decline of the free scientific discussion at university campuses all over the US still should be investigated thoroughly, while both phenomena have been developed for decades at least since "Sputnik programs".

The consequences of vastly expanded public funding of the science firstly terrified Dwight Eisenhower – the president who was in charge and was responsible for the start of the process. Eisenhower warned in his farewell address (Eisenhower, 1961; Yanovskiy, 2022) not so much on "military–industrial complex" danger (2 lines in the Address) as on the capture of the science by the Government and on the capture of political decision-making by experts (8 lines ibid.): «…a government contract becomes virtually a substitute for intellectual curiosity» and then "we should, we must also be alert to the equal and opposite danger that public policy could itself become the captive of a scientific-technological elite."

Machan (2000) discusses government funding-induced bias in scientific research. The problem, however, is much more extensive. One should remember that publicly funded scientists and decision-makers are also human: they also respond to incentives and tend act in own interest (i.e., scientists on tenure track in a publicly funded institution expecting promotion, or intending to get publicly funded research grant, have natural incentive to yield results that are anticipated advance their personal interests rather than results than are anticipated to cause problems).

Returning to the 'tobacco wars' it should be stressed that there was actually no scientific dispute regarding grave health effects of smoking for smokers themselves. That was not the case about second-hand smoking (SHS) – adverse health effects for non-smoking individuals inhaling second-hand tobacco smoke. There is a claim of scientific consensus regarding toxicity, in general, and carcinogenesis, in particular, caused by SHS (2014). However, one should note that the above consensus was essentially achieved only after the Center for Indoor Air Research (CIAR), funded by the tobacco industry, was dissolved in 1998 as part of the Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement (MSA, 2018 see at Yanovskiy, 2022). Before then, many articles published in high-rank medical journals claimed a lack of clear evidence for SHS toxicity – i.e., Matanoski et al (1995). The consensus regarding grave consequences of SHS would not be built without decisive support of governmental entities like CDC, US Department of Health, National Cancer Institute etc. (Socol et al., 2019). The consensus supporters are rallying for more governments' power and for more taxes on tobacco industry – without declaration of the conflict of interests. The rare opponents (Peres, 2013) still failed to analyze of the consensus on SHS as a natural outcome of extensive governmental funding, though bias caused by such funding has been studied for decades (Niskanen, 1971; Jasay, 1985; Tullock, 1965; Sanders, 2004).

So, the issue of CoI induced by public funding (as a source of potential bias) still stays far from researchers' attention. The purpose of the current study is to partially fill this gap.

## 2. Conflict of Interest due to public funding

### *2.1 Special interests of governmental bodies*

#### *2.1.1 Political interests*

Ioannidis (2005, Corollary 5) stated, that conflict of interest

> "… may not necessarily have financial roots. Scientists in a given field may be prejudiced purely because of their belief in a scientific theory or commitment to their own findings. Many otherwise seemingly independent, university-based studies may be conducted for no other reason than to give physicians and researchers qualifications for promotion or tenure. Such nonfinancial conflicts may also lead to distorted reported results and interpretations. Prestigious investigators may suppress via the peer review process the appearance and dissemination of findings that refute their findings, thus condemning their field to perpetuate false dogma. Empirical evidence on expert opinion shows that it is extremely unreliable."

Political interests may be perfectly legitimate, as with attempts to protect the public from the influence of toxic agents. Nevertheless, political bias in science, including the precautionary principle "to be on the safe side," is unacceptable (Moghissi et al, 2018, Socol et al, 2019).

Political conflict of interest arises since the task to help particular patients (by extending life of improving life quality) often contradicts the task of increasing public good in general – especially if the patients are considered unenlightened. The experience of the last century (Kater, 1983) shows possibility for bureaucracy ('professionals') to give up one life in order to save many lives. Eventually, it becomes possible to save lives of one group giving up lives of another – at an official's discretion.

Old democracies' response to COVID-19 (Bagus et al, 2021 & 2022; Huerta de Soto et al, 2021), it was in sharp contrast with their response to much more severe Spanish Flu (Aimone, 2010 Yanovskiy & Socol, 2021 Part II). For decision makers, the pandemic opened opportunity to grab power under grave conflict of interest.

### *2.1.2 Economic interests*

First, we should mention that public funding is none other than governmental funding; namely, part of taxpayers' money is allocated to certain projects by appropriate government officials. Thus, decisions on policy and funding are taken by human beings, and as such, government officials cannot be perfect, interest-free decision-making machines seeking the public welfare even against their own personal interests. This fact is stressed by another obvious observation that, while personal interests are usually more or less clear to someone, "public welfare" is rarely obvious and is usually the subject of hot debate (Sánchez-Bayón, 2020).

Regarding personal interests, most people—even if they are government officials—want to have stable salaries, so they are not interested in reducing public spending since such reduction endangers their positions. Many are interested in career promotion, and persons pursuing promotion are interested in widening the field of their discretionary power (Jasay, 1985) and increasing the budget they redistribute (Niskanen, 1971).

Finally, it should be stressed that even perfectly interest-free totally altruistic officials pursuing only public welfare will act exactly in the same direction of increasing authority and budget, provided they believe that they understand public welfare properly.

To summarize, it is completely natural to expect human behavior from human beings even if they are government officials. As human beings, government officials are interested in gaining more discretionary power and in redistributing more funds. Therefore, they are expected to be biased in their decisions. In economic literature, this expectation is called the Niskanen model (Stevens, 2018).

The trend of being "on the safe side" regarding toxicological or other hazards objectively serves the above-mentioned aims of more regulation and more budget (Socol et al, 2019). Speaking of SHS, for example, economic interests act in the same direction as political interests — toward accepting SHS toxicity.

### *2.2 Conflict of interest of governmental bodies and its plausible consequences*

Numerous experts advocating harsh measures empowering the governmental bodies and, at the same time accepting their funds from the budget under the auspice of the same bodies, never declared their conflict of interest. They are interested in more and more funds from the budget, so they are pushing more powerful, 'bigger' and 'bolder' unlimited Government and not feeling any problems in this regard.

All kinds of alleged manipulations of the health hazard studies paid by tobacco industry (Bero, 2013, p. 154 – 155; see specifically box 7.1) are perfectly relevant and applicable to the case of government funding as well (Table 1, column A). Growing governmental power to regulate healthcare and the broad scope of issues of life and economic activities of private persons, businesses and civil society's organizations could cause numerous conflicts of interest (Table 1, column B).

As clarified in Table 1, bureaucrat's coordination capacity for collective action could surpass big business and academic communities' respective abilities. Extended possibilities of governmental bodies make possible to create bias and even "scientific consensus". Power of civil bureaucracy to encourage uniform position and to suppress dissent opinion among academicians cannot be ignored.

It should be emphasized that there is a fundamental difference between conflict of interest due to private funding, and CoI due to public funding. Namely, the conflict of interest in obtaining funding from a company is limited to the interests of that particular company or at most the industry. However, funding from a government agency creates a conflict of interest even if the findings involve a different agency.

Research projects supported by public funds and advocating more public spending or more discretionary power to the Government are normally not directly beneficial for the specific agencies making decisions about their funding. Their policy advice could benefit other bodies and departments or the Government as a whole. The same was true about the research paid for by the tobacco industry. They were funded by the Center for Indoor Air Research (CIAR) and benefited the tobacco industry as a

**Table 1. Conflict of interest: possible effects (Shortened version, for full version see Yanovskiy M. 2022)**

| | A | B |
|---|---|---|
| | Plausible effects of funding research by an interest group. Based on Bero, 2013 (Box 7.1) – research funded by tobacco companies. | Comments regarding public funding |
| 1 | Funding research that supports the interest group position. | Bigger funds and broader opportunities; see Yanovskiy, 2022 materials section 2.R&D funding Structure. |
| 2 | Hiding the interest group involvement in research. | Public funding is not declared as conflict of interest (Yanovskiy, 2022, Sect. 1). |
| 3 | Publishing research that supports the interest group position. | Numerous publications advocating power of bureaucratic special interests to regulate or to redistribute taxpayers' money |
| 4 | Suppressing research that does not support the interest group position. | Large extent of public funding makes this even more feasible (Socol et al, 2019) |
| 5 | Criticizing research that does not support the interest group position. | Large extent of public funding makes this even more feasible. Moreover, public funding encourages artificial 'scientific consensus' blaming all dissenters for bias, lack of scientific rigor etc. |
| 6 | Changing scientific standards. | It is unclear how private funding – unlike public – can achieve this goal |
| 7 | Disseminating interest group data or interpretation of risk in the lay press | Government officials have much broad opportunities to contact lay press |
| 8 | Disseminating interest group data or interpretation of risk directly to policymakers. | This is an official duty of government |

Source: own elaboration.

whole, not the specific corporation, while everybody agrees, the situation constituted a clear case of CoI.

In the business environment, there are very few effective mechanisms for well-coordinated joint actions observed. A large number of the richest entrepreneurs support anti-business agenda – high taxes and excessive regulations (see Burris, 2001; for more references and details see Business funding anti-business politicians see Yanovskiy, 2022). One explanation for this as-if-strange behavior is that the heavy burden of taxes and regulations makes it difficult for new firms to enter the market and weakens the competitors of the current leaders (Rothbard, 2002 p. 184-185; de Soto, 1989 pp. 110-115). However, with well-functioning interaction, the same anti-competition goal could have been achieved with low taxes and easy regulations. But contrary to common wisdom, private cartels collapsed every time without government intervention and coercion (Rothbard, 2002; Armentano, 1996; de Soto, 1989 pp. 110-115). We should also note in this context the historical origin of monopolies: they rose in the framework of privileges specially granted by the Government, like the English East India Company.

On the contrary, the interaction of departments and ministries has been debugged by generations. The development of intra-corporate ties led to successful lobbying for the privilege of autonomy (actual independence) of public civil servants from elected politicians (Pendleton Civil Service Act, 1883). Contrary to common wisdom private cartels collapsed every time without government intervention and coercion (Rothbard, 2002; Armentano, 1996), – to say nothing of the historical origin of monopolies: they had risen in the framework of privilege specially granted by Government (like English East India Company).

The coordination of positions on budget requirements (where there is a problem of competition within bureaus and agencies) and on claims for additional powers (a less competitive area – Sanders, 2004) has been officially regulated in the USA for at least 100 years (Budget and Accounting Act of 1921).

The actual success of coordinating the actions of civilian departments is confirmed by the long-term trend towards an increase in their share in gross national product.

### *2.3 Conflict of interest and mechanisms of public funding*

The taxpayers' money is leading source for research in universities in North America and in EU – both public and private. Therefore, it would be quite reasonable to check opportunities of (unelected) government officials to promote – by financing corresponding research – their interests of widening authority and increasing budget. The most reliable way to test the above-mentioned hypothesis is to analyse grant-awarding procedures – to accept or to decline application, to resume or to break cooperation. Are these procedures simple, transparent, and eventually reduced to one unique reliable criterion for decision making? Or vice versa, the procedure is complex, costly, relying on multi-criteria choice, eventually leaving an opportunity for discretionary, arbitrary choice? Another, indirect test of grant-awarding process is assessment of the a posteriori efficiency of the funded projects.

Surprisingly, few researchers tried to perform even the latter test of a posteriori efficiency. The notable exemptions are Azoulay et al. (2009), 2009; Fang et al. (2016). We have not found in literature works analysing the grant-awarding procedures. Nearly nobody suggests cutting governmental funding of science – the works like Golan, 2009 are very rare exception.

Public funding from huge institutions like EU Horizon, NSF, NIH etc., are typically comes as a big grant (US$ 100,000 and more). To get funded from these sources scientific center must pass sophisticated highly labour-consuming procedures of application. Successful applicant must then deliver even more labour-consuming reports. Highly sophisticated procedures of applications and reporting (Gordon, Poulin, 2009; Herbert et al, 2013, Bollen et al, 2019) leave wide opportunities for discretionary decision making (Rabovsky, Ellis, 2014). Opportunity to take into consideration 'social equity', 'diversity' and similar factor make process even more complicated (Ginther et al, 2011; Bollen et al, 2019), and gives even more room for discretionary decision making.

Dependency on discretionary decisions about huge grants induce very strong incentives to follow more or less clear social and political agenda.

## 3. Conflict of interest in low-dose-radiation research

### *3.1 LNT model – in the best interest of public officials*

From the very beginning of the 20th century and by nowadays, demand for ionizing radiation had been steadily growing. X-ray diagnostics (later, nuclear medicine) and radiation therapy, nuclear power, and security screening had become routine components of modern life.

If the threshold (tolerance) dose model would have been chosen for radiation toxicity, then below-threshold-dose applications (medical imaging and more) would not demand strict regulation and control. However, in if the linear no-threshold (LNT) hypothesis is true or may be true, then every ionizing-radiation application is potentially hazardous, Therefore, (1) much more resources should be spent on the study of radiation side-effects, and (2) every application of ionizing radiation empowers governmental Department (Agency) authorized to protect public health. In addition, the model is pretty simple and therefore provides officials with plain and defendable basis for decision-making.

Can one be sure that the above consideration played no role in the fact that LNT is presently the most widely used model for radiation risk assessment? There have even been claims regarding scientific consensus with respect to LNT (see, for example, Boice, 2017) despite increasing criticism of the model (see, for example, Feinendegen et al., 2013; Siegel, Greenspan et al, 2018; Calabrese, 2019). The authors are not surprised, that the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and other regulatory bodies use LNT as a basis for their risk assessment.

### *3.2 LNT model – public funding*

Let us consider the National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academies' report "BEIR VII Phase 2" (NRC, 2006) which is probably the most extensive to-date source supporting LNT (Vaiserman et al, 2018).

At page ii of the report, one could find funding disclosure: "This study was supported by funds from the U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Department of Energy, and U.S. Environmental Protection

Agency through EPA Grant #X-82684201, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission through NRC Grant #NRC-04-98-061, and the U.S Department of Homeland Security through U.S. Department of Commerce, National Institute of Standards and Technology Grant #60NANB5D1003." At p. viii of the report, we find: "The NRC vetted all potential members to ensure that each was free from any apparent or potential conflict of interest."

This literally means that the agency (NRC) did not consider as potential conflict of interest that it paid for the research and enjoyed research conclusions and policy advice promoting the best interest of the above agency.

Unfortunately, the case of EPA's preference of LNT model accompanied with failure to consider conflict of interest is far from being unique. This situation is still not considered as a problem by scientific community.

## 4. Conflict of interest in COVID-19 research

### *4.1 Use of emergency powers for managing medical crisis*

'Emergency powers' means that the government is authorized to do what it is usually forbidden to do. Extreme NPI imposed by means of emergency powers need very solid justification. Fear of high mortality in case of an unfortunate evolution is not sufficient to impose emergency measures. The latter statement is based on two solid foundations.

The first foundation is the classical medical principle 'primum non nocere' – first, do not harm. This principle is valid no matter how serious the medical problem is; it should be valid for public health also. The harm caused by lockdowns and masks was obvious a priori and confirmed a posteriori.

The second foundation is the classical juridical principle 'semper necessitas probandi incumbit ei qui agit' – in any dispute, the burden of proof lies with those who lay charges. Citizens do not lay charges against the government; the government lays charges against citizens – to wear masks, to close their business, to stay home.

Therefore, the overall-positive outcome of the extreme NPI should be justified by proper scientific analysis. Clearly, such analysis must avoid CoI, and at least exclude undeclared CoI.

### *4.2 COVID-19 crisis management: reliance on emergency powers*

From the very beginning the COVID-19 management relied on extreme NPI (lockdown, masks) and on vaccination (the vaccination, when became available, turned to be semi-compulsory de-facto). The research supporting lockdowns, compulsory masks and compulsory vaccination, is quite vulnerable to critics. For example, some of researchers arrive to conclusions regarding lockdown effectiveness based on single-country comparison of real-world results and computer modelling (Krishan, Kanchan, 2020; Cauchemez et al, 2020; Di Domenico et al, 2020). Support of lockdown effectiveness (Flaxman et al, 2020; Brauner et al, 2021) is seldom (if ever) based on cross-country comparison using both mortality data and measure of severeness of NPI developed by the Blavatnik School of Government team (Hale et al, 2021).

Numerous governments over the world assumed the power to impose mandatory vaccination on their citizens claiming endorsement by "scientific consensus" on the issue. Given lack of conclusive evidence (statistical or qualitative) of significant advantages of compulsory vaccination compared to voluntary, one (Lawler, 2017) ought to consider the inevitable threats of coercion. One such threat is that all anti-vaccination initiatives and movements can be traced back to compulsory vaccination, starting from the very first anti-vaccination movement inflamed by the United Kingdom Vaccination Act of 1853 (Saint-Victor, Omer, 2013). Second, coercion to vaccination badly harms the same basic personal rights which had "secured to every man the fruits of his own industry" (Adam Smith, 1776) and therefore caused both modern economic growth and permanently rising demand for (and provision of) healthcare services – including vaccination itself. Third, any decision to enforce compulsory vaccination creates numerous incentives harming public good (e.g., encourages pharmaceutical industry to invest in political lobby rather than in R&D etc) – and weakens incentives to run educational programs etc.

### *4.3 Opposition to emergency powers: privately funded*

The opposition to use of emergency powers was and remains (nearly exclusively) privately funded. Let us consider, for example, two of major US platforms for scientifically-based criticism of emergency NPIs that are privately funded. American Institute for Economic Research (AIER), a think tank, became the center of professional issues. Foundation for Economic Education (FEE), private NPO, became the center of popular articles critical of unprecedent responses to COVID-19.

AIER was one of driving forces of Great Barrington Declaration (GBD) international initiative (October, 2 2020). Numerous professionals who signed the Declaration urged decision makers to consider negative consequences of lockdown policies.

It should be stated that the dissenters, while attaining no clear personal or professional benefits, were subjected to direct attacks. E.g., one of the reactions to GBD was the collective letter – published by Lancet two weeks (!) after publishing GBD (Alwan et al, 2020) – and endorsing extreme emergency measures ("robust public health responses"). The authors of letter (ibid.) promoted counter-initiative: "John Snow Memorandum". More reactions included, besides others (Table 1), dissemination of interpretation in the lay press alleging that the very idea to consider side-effects of the emergency policy was caused by "secret" (private) funding (VT Editors 2020; Greenhalgh et al. 2020 see Yanovskiy, 2022). Not less important, information about dissenting positions and research programs was suppressed; see also "Great Barrington Declaration in Google and in DuckDuckGo search engines" at Yanovskiy, 2022.

### *4.4 Comparison of methodologies: pro- and anti-emergency views*

Both AIER and FEE experts follow the Austrian School (Coyne, Bottke, 2015) standard: "Reference to a thinker's bias is no substitute for a refutation of his doctrines by tenable arguments. Those who charge the economists with bias merely show that they are at a loss to refute their teachings by critical analysis." (Mises, 1957, p. 28).

Bjørnskov (2021), e.g., used the Blavatnik database to compare NPIs and outcomes in European countries: The Blavatnik School of Government prepared a detailed protocol to assess severity of NPI on country-by-country basis. The criteria include non-essential business closure, stay-at-home orders, transport restrictions, school closures etc. A regularly updated database is maintained by Hale et al.

Bjørnskov's analysis revealed no clear association between NPIs and mortality. The employed methodology is quite simple, the datasets – of Hale et al, excess mortality (Eurostat, 2020; DHSC, 2020 in Yanovskiy, 2022) – are open, so Bjørnskov's analysis could be easily replicated and refuted if found faulty.

On the contrary, most (if not all) studies that support NPI effectiveness based on cross-country comparison use unique (to the corresponding study) methodology to estimate NPI severity (Alfano, Ercolano, 2020; Brauner et al, 2021). Flaxman et al (2020), in addition, developed their own model fitted to observed mortality, and counted 'saved lives' by comparing actual mortality with computer-generated results for no-NPI scenario; the model itself was not disclosed. Therefore, essentially such study cannot be verified. Another example – Alwan et al credited governments of New Zealand, Japan and Vietnam with success in the confinement of COVID-19 by means of severe NPIs. However, these three countries are very different. New Zealand really employed severe lockdown response. Japan did not impose lockdown. Vietnam is a totalitarian country with no reliable statistics and no trustworthy information on either real response or its outcomes (see Yanovskiy, 2022).

Bjørnskov's study was supported by a private fund. Other referenced studies were supported by public funding. Funding details are provided in Yanovskiy, 2022.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

The major share funding academic research is public – actually, governmental – funding. Highly sophisticated procedures of applications and reporting (Herbert, et al., 2013) leave enormous opportunities for discretionary decision making (Rabovsky & Ellis, 2014): to accept or to decline application, to

continue or stop a program. Taking into consideration social equity, diversity and similar factors makes the decision-making process even more complicated (Ginther et al, 2011), and gives even more room for discretionary decisions. All the above creates strong incentives among researchers to follow not only formal but also informal guidance of governmental officials. Huge difference between payoffs – to be generously funded or to be excluded or even ostracized (see the case 'Assault on Math' – Yanovskiy, 2022) – encourages researchers to meet expectations of officials, and therefore to promote solutions relying on more discretionary power and more funds for governmental bodies.

There is therefore an obvious and strong conflict of interest of governmentally funded researcher whose research outcomes justify Bigger Government. For a particular researcher and for the research community in general, it is much easier to ignore this CoI than to acknowledge it.

The trend toward more regulation and a larger budget seems to be balanced by the general public's desire to have fewer restrictions and pay less tax, but often this balance does not work. In fact, the average person is rationally ignorant if a particular issue does not seem important enough (Downs 1957), so people are ready to rely on expert opinions and do not object to expanding regulation and public spending.

In a democratic society, the interests of officials cannot be eliminated (Stigler, 1975). However, they should be properly acknowledged and mitigated by proper transparency and independent scientific scrutiny (Sánchez-Bayón, 2019b).

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