

T10 / T10P12 - Political Agency in the Policy Process

Topic : T10 / Public policy, administration and policymakers

Chair : Jan Olsson (Örebro University)

Second Chair : Erik Hysing (Örebro University)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Political agency in the policy process is a highly relevant but a somewhat neglected theme today. Political agency can be defined as actors that can create and change procedural and substantial rules and norms of the policy process as well as directly influence value allocations between policy areas and groups of citizens. The aim of the panel Political Agency in the Policy Process is to increase our knowledge on the meaning and character of political agency in the policy process; the importance of contextual factors that tend to open up for different forms of political agency; and consequences and effects of political agency in terms of policy influence, power, and democratic legitimacy. The panel invites empirical, theoretical, as well as normative contributions on political agency in the policy process from different scholarly fields (policy analysis, institutional theory, public administration research, and planning studies) as well as from different research areas in order to jointly accomplish comparative overview that can help us synthesize and theorise. In particular, we are interested in papers that address issues within these three themes: What type of policy actors operate as political agents and how can those be theoretically conceptualised (policy entrepreneurs, street-level actors, inside activists etc.)? What type of contexts – such as institutional rules and norms, administrative organisations and professional networks – tend to give rise to political agency? What are the likely consequences and effects of different types of political agency when it comes to policy influence, power and democratic legitimacy?

CALL FOR PAPERS

Political agency in the policy process is a highly relevant but a somewhat neglected theme today. Political agency can be defined as actors that can create and change procedural and substantial rules and norms of the policy process as well as directly influence value allocations between policy areas and groups of citizens. Political agency in this respect was taken for granted activity in the early days of policy analysis. It was perceived as a rational, top-down activity by leading politicians with the stage-heuristic model in the minds of both practitioners and academics. This further implied that issues of democratic control, accountability, and legitimacy were not seen as difficult challenges. From the 1980s onward, as a reaction to social and political changes, a number of theoretical developments – like implementation studies, new institutionalism, policy-network approaches and governance research – have fundamentally altered the meaning and importance of political agency in a number of respects. Today, political agency is relevant in all stages of the policy process, including implementation and evaluation; it is exercised by a much wider range of actors, including different types of public officials, professionals, and experts; it is more open to external contacts and influences; its nature has diversified in terms of the strategies and resources used; and it is exercised in a multi-actor context with complex interactions of different types (vertical-horizontal, symmetric-asymmetric etc.). A major challenge to further our understanding on political agency in the policy process is that important theoretical and empirical insights are spread over different scholarly fields like policy analysis, institutional theory, public administration research, and planning studies. We are thus in need of comparative overview to be able to synthesize and develop new empirical and theoretical insights. To contribute to this endeavour, this panel invites scholars specialised within different research areas and representing different subjects. The aim of the panel is to increase our knowledge on the meaning and character of political agency in the policy process; the importance of contextual factors that tend to open up for different forms of political agency; and consequences and effects of political agency in terms of policy influence, power and democratic legitimacy. What type of policy actors operate as political agents and how can those be theoretically conceptualised (policy entrepreneurs, street-level actors, inside activists etc.)? What type of contexts – such as institutional rules and norms, administrative organisations and professional networks – tend to give rise to political agency? What are the likely consequences and effects of different types of political agency when it comes to policy influence, power and democratic legitimacy?

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Session 1

Discussants

Jan Olsson (Örebro University)

Erik Hysing (Örebro University)

The formalization of activism in the local administration- on public administrators with strategic positions

Petra Svensson (School of Public Administration)

Magdalena Zeijlon (School of global studies)

Political agency has always existed within the public administration and has been conceptualized with notions such as policy entrepreneurs, advocates, zealots and activists. These notions describe behavior and convictions of the actors executing political agency, and the actors who is behaving as political agents may be found in varying places in the public organization. In the Swedish local government administration, attention has been paid to the benefits of having active political agents working as employed public administrators, and roughly throughout the past 15 years, there has been a growing tendency to employ administrators in the local administration with the formal task of working strategically and cross-sectoral with promoting and monitoring certain topics (eg. exert political agency) which are considered to be important for a holistic and sustainable administration. These public administrators hold titles such as public health strategists, development leader, environment strategists, gender equality strategist and safety coordinator. This paper focuses on the work of these administrators, and aims at 1) answering the question of how the formalization of the positions affects the political agency; and 2) discussing how this formalization can be interpreted in the context of the broad development of a social investment state. The data consists of an interview study with 27 public administrators working as strategists, coordinators and development leaders for varying social aspects. The argument for limiting the study to political agency in the social field is that the social strategic work provides as specific context for agency, because of the closeness to the conventional welfare services in the municipal organization. Thus, the breaking point between these two logics: the conventional municipal organization with informal political agency and the non-conventional organization with formally assigned political agents, is likely to be most visible in the social field, and to provide us with the best insights of the meeting of the informal and formal political agency.

Policy Entrepreneurs in the Picture: the Wh

Stijn Brouwer (KWR Watercycle Research Institut

Dave Huitema (VU University Amsterdam -IVM)

After decades of skepticism about the prospects of directed policy change, we currently witness a renaissance in the study of the role of agency in policy dynamics. Whilst theoretical frameworks such as those on Punctuated Equilibria, Policy Streams, and Advocacy Coalitions, have coined important agency related concepts such as windows of opportunity, venues, and policy entrepreneurs, they gave limited direction for follow up research to those who seek to expand our understanding of the role of agency in policy dynamics. Therefore, as a corollary of the renewed interest in the role of such agency, a need to further unpack agency in policy processes has arisen. This paper is an attempt to address some of these challenges by focusing intently on the concept, role, and meaning of policy entrepreneurs; highly talented and exceptional bureaucrats, who, just like their private counterparts, are constantly on the alert for new opportunities (for policy change) and have the capacity to “sell” and “market” new ideas. The purpose of our paper is to shed greater light on who these hitherto rather abstract and underappreciated individual key actors are, how and why they act to achieve their goals, and what meaning their incidence and influence has. By elucidating their strategic modus operandi, we aim to contribute to a better understanding of the strategies that individual change agents employ in their efforts to affect policy change, as well as to examine when certain strategies are combined with what effect, i.e., to assess the contextual effectiveness. The empirical research of our paper is based on a uniquely comprehensive four-year study, entailing more than 60 in-depth interviews and an extensive mail survey of over 300 water policy entrepreneurs. The environment informing this study is the water management system in the Netherlands, a country with a diverse institutional context, and renowned worldwide for its expertise in water governance. Theoretically, we build on the emerging line of literature on the significance of individual actors in policy processes, the most prominent works on policy

entrepreneurship, and the most influential explanations of policy change. Contrary to expectations based on heroic biographies and opposed to the widespread idea of a heavily bureaucratic government, this paper makes the surprising case that entrepreneurship at the local level is relatively common. In addition to novel data on the incidence and profile of policy entrepreneurs and the (contextual) conditions relating to the selection of strategies, this paper presents a robust and complete typology of entrepreneurial strategies, linking these to circumstances under which they can be effective. Contrary to what is suggested in most prevailing theories on policy change, this paper shows that by effectively placing emphasis on particular strategies and strategy combinations, individual agents are very well capable of effecting policy change. Our paper concludes with a discussion on how our findings relate to the main theories of policy change, what they mean for the larger democratic questions about accountability and legitimacy, as well as what they imply for both individuals and organisations aspiring to become more entrepreneurial.

Political Agency from a Discourse Perspective

Sina Leibold (Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research)

Georg Winkel (University of Freiburg)

Discourse approaches have become increasingly popular in policy analysis. The different approaches applied commonly claim to address the interrelation between actors and discourses (and partially institutions). However, the analytical focus of most approaches is on structures (discourse), whereas agency is often black boxed. In order to address this gap, in this contribution, we propose an analytical approach to systematically explore discursive agency. We propose a Discursive Agency Approach which has been developed based on two sources of evidence: (1) a literature review of theoretical and analytical dimensions of agency in discourse approaches, and (2) empirical evidence of discursive agency as a fruitful analytical category drawn from a set of empirical case studies, and additional interviews focusing specifically on discursive agency. The proposed analytical approach consists of four major elements: 1) policy discourses, 2) political institutions, 3) agents defined via a set of characteristics and 4) strategic practices further categorised into coalition building and discursive, organisational and governance strategies. The Discursive Agency Approach is intended to complement and strengthen existing discourse approaches for the analysis of (1) how the dominance of a particular policy solution is constituted through the agency ascribed to its proponents in dynamic discursive processes, and (2) how actors acquire political relevance through discursive means. To enable this goal, we propose distinct research steps and associated methods that link the approach to existing means of analysis. Our approach and its analytical tools aim to increase our knowledge on the importance of agency in the policy making process from a political discourse perspective. This includes the question how agents “form” discursively by the assignment of specific “characteristics”, and which discursive strategies are applied to enable different forms of agency. In this way, the paper offers an important contribution to a discussion on agency in the policy making process.

Politics as Institutional Subversion

Jan Olsson (Örebro University)

Politics as Institutional Subversion -a neglected explanatory factor behind institutional change and continuity Abstract In understanding institutional change and stability within governments and public administrations we need better theoretical insights on the importance of different logics of action. Important social and political trends of today not only increase the likelihood of institutional influence among key-actors (individuals and groups) within and outside public organizations, but also imply that theoretical thinking on change and stability probably underestimate the importance of incremental interactivity between endogenous and exogenous factors; the interconnection between material and ideational factors as well as the relevance of bottom-up influence of political agents in the policy process. Thus, to focus more on these neglected aspects we can expect and hope for theoretical development in explaining institutional change and stability. This article modestly contributes in this direction by theorizing on a specific type of action logic – called logic of subversive action – which is a tacit reaction against existing rules and norms either by ignoring, violating or seeking to change them, or trying to preserve stability by resisting new political or management initiatives. The article theorizes on how this logic can contribute to a better understanding of the mechanisms behind institutional change and continuity in politics and administration. An institutional framework is formulated in contrast to both rationality models and “structural institutionalism” in order to put subversive action into a broader, institutional context open to different action logics. In the main section, it is argued that subversive action is a distinct and highly relevant logic that can complement other action logics like appropriate behavior. More precisely, the article addresses: (i) the nature and meaning of the logic of subversion; how it is defined and spelled out in governments and public administrations; (ii) what contexts that give rise to subversive action; and (iii) how it can work as an important mechanism behind institutional change and stability. The article ends with a discussion on future research needs and the prospects to open up a new research agenda.

Legitimacy and Accountability

Erik Hysing (University of Oslo)

Jan Olsson (University of Oslo)

Public officials are powerful actors in the policy process and, thus, potential key political agents of major policy changes. In the modern welfare states, public officials need to be empowered in order for public administrations to effectively and efficiently handle complex policy issues. However, as non-elected officials, this power has also been widely considered a legitimacy problem as citizens cannot hold officials directly accountable and elected politicians only have limited knowledge and control over the administration. Traditionally, the power of public officials has been theorized as legitimate if incorporated and controlled within a hierarchic bureaucratic structure. New reforms and trends such as new public management and governance has, however, challenged key bureaucratic features such as secure employment and fixed salaries within public administration as well as the legitimacy of the democratic state apparatus. Another ground for

legitimacy traditionally invoked is that officials act as neutral experts. While the relative importance of scientific expertise has been challenged, it remains an important epistemological ground for legitimate power. However, the neutrality of individuals, and more specifically the non-political character of officials, has been more severely challenged on both ontological (can anyone truly be neutral?) and empirical grounds. Research on inside activism, as well as similar theoretical concepts such as institutional activism and femocrats has shown that public officials act strategically from inside public administration to change government policy and action in line with personal value commitments (Olsson and Hysing 2012). The question addressed in this paper is on what grounds such actions/activism can gain legitimacy. The paper identifies and discusses strengths and shortcomings with three potential strategies to legitimate inside activism: The democracy strategy (based support and networks with elected politicians) The missionary strategy (based on effectiveness, i.e. that good results will lead to public acceptance after the fact) The deliberative strategy (based on direct citizen consultation and consensus) These strategies are, in the final part of the paper, discusses in terms of how they can secure legitimacy as well as key capacity for policy change.