P04 / Depolarising the Policy Process: How Can Rational Policymaking and Evidence Use Be Achieved in the Face of Polarisation and Populist Pressures?

Topic : POLICY, POLITICS AND POLITICAL REGIME

Chair : Justin Parkhurst (London School of Economics and Political Science)

Second Chair : Kathryn Quissell (University of Virginia)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

The panel will gather conceptual, theoretical, or empirical work that considers how to counter aspects of political polarisation which appear to undermine the 'rational' ideal of the policy sciences. Originally championed by Lasswell, the policy sciences were conceptualised as a pragmatic approach to social welfare improvement across populations. The approach was said by Lasswell (1970) to have a 'problem orientation' that in many ways relies on a process which allows groups with differing sets of interest to nonetheless define social goals (or make compromises), and subsequently to apply knowledge and evidence in a rigorous manner in order to select courses of policy action most likely to achieve those goals (or most likely to lead to improvements in desired areas).

Yet polarised political environments and the rise of populist rhetoric appear to present fundamental challenges to this approach to policymaking. Selecting goals, for instance, may require comprise for ultimate agreement in democratic societies, yet this can be increasingly difficult when polarisation makes agreement impossible. Furthermore, populist rhetoric may often invoke seemingly contradictory values, as populism often is based around identity politics rather than a clear or consistent policy platform (Dennis 1996). The ability to apply evidence to policy needs and to solve policy problems is further threatened in such environments, as polarisation may increase the likelihood for biased uses of evidence as well – through cognitive processes of motivated reasoning or confirmation bias, for example (Parkhurst 2016). It has also been shown that in some settings, publics may actively embrace a leader known to be lying when individuals feel excluded from the political process (Hahl et al 2018).

Literature has thus begun to understand some of the cognitive, cultural, or social mechanisms that support features of polarisation and populist ideology. This panel will therefore move the field forward by inviting papers that consider how to address or counter these mechanisms, in order to improve the policy process in ways aligned with the policy sciences approach.

Questions covered by papers could include:

- What is known about strategies to depolarise political environments?

- How do cognitive processes support embrace of populist rhetoric, demonization, or factual manipulation – and what can be done to counter these?

- Are there strategies to engage with individuals supporting populist movements to reduce rejection of alternative positions?

- How do debiasing efforts work (or not) in polarised or populist environments?

- What do different disciplines or fields of work bring to help understand the mechanisms of polarisation as well as possible efforts to counter them (e.g. political psychology, anthropology of ethnicity, etc.)?

Other topics related to the key issues of the panel will also be considered.

References:

Hahl, Oliver, Minjae Kim, and Ezra W. Zuckerman Sivan. 2018. "The Authentic Appeal of the Lying Demagogue: Proclaiming the Deeper Truth about Political Illegitimacy." American Sociological Review no. 83 (1):1-33. doi: 10.1177/0003122417749632.

Lasswell, Harold D. 1970. "The Emerging Conception of the Policy Sciences." Policy Sciences no. 1

(1):3-14.

Parkhurst, Justin O. 2016. "Appeals to evidence for the resolution of wicked problems: the origins and mechanisms of evidentiary bias." Policy Sciences no. 49 (4):373-393. doi: 10.1007/s11077-016-9263-z.

Westlind, Dennis. 1996. The politics of popular identity: understanding recent populist movements in Sweden and the United States. Vol. 89: Lund University Press.

CALL FOR PAPERS

See General Objectives

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Session 1

Friday, June 28th 14:00 to 16:00 (MB 3.265)

Discussants

Justin Parkhurst (London School of Economics and Political Science)

Kathryn Quissell (University of Virginia)

The moral foundations of polarization: Methods for analysis and potential ways forward

Kathryn Quissell (University of Virginia)

Moral foundations theory from social psychology has helped to explain how differences in which of the five key moral concerns (harm, fairness, in-group, authority, and purity) individuals prioritize, contribute to heated political debates between people who see the morality of issues differently, to the level of political intensity and polarization, and to possibilities for persuading opponents to adopt new positions. One key finding is that moral commonality is useful for successful persuasion and compromise, whereas moral dissimilarity can lead to the escalating moralization of debates and intractable conflict. For example, Feinberg and Willer (2015) found that if there are differences in the salience of particular moral values between advocates and the targets of their advocacy, and the framing of an issue is grounded in the morality of the advocates and not the morality of those targeted, these frames will be less likely to sway the target into adopting that position. If the framing of an issue is adjusted to be consistent with the targets' moral commitments, it increases the willingness of conservatives to adopt that position, even if they currently oppose it. If moral dissimilarity continues and intensifies, it can lead to polarization and increase the likelihood individuals will reject discordant information, reject compromise, and even forsake individual material gain (Ryan 2017). However, this theory has largely been studied in experimental laboratory settings, and it has not yet been extended to the study of political debates in the real world. In this paper, I suggest a methodology for applying this theory to the study of historical or ongoing policy processes to better understand the psychological drivers of polarization, provide illustrative case studies of HIV/AIDS and TB treatment policies in South Africa, and offer suggestions for how to depolarize political debates; specifically, through the use of moral foundations-informed strategic framing, grassroots mobilization, and venue shopping.

Feinberg, M., & Willer, R. (2015). From gulf to bridge: when do moral arguments facilitate political influence?. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 41(12), 1665-1681.

Ryan, T. J. (2017). No compromise: Political consequences of moralized attitudes. American Journal of Political Science, 61(2), 409-423.

Welfarism: An Ally for Rational Policy-Making?

Noel Semple (University of Windsor Faculty of Law)

This paper considers the potential of welfarism to bolster rational and evidence-based policy-making. Welfarism holds that making individuals' lives better is the ultimate goal of all public policy. In any choice between policy options, welfarism proposes that there is a "right answer" — an option that can best be

expected to maximize the aggregate welfare of everyone affected by the choice (Sen 1979,Adler 2019). The premise of this approach is that the lifetime welfare of an individual can be quantified, and compared to the welfare of other individuals (Layard and O'Donnell 2015).
Welfarist techniques (such as social welfare functions and cost-benefit analyses) are already applied to policy questions in areas such as regulation, taxation, and climate policy. Welfarism may also be the implicit normative orientation of some or most public policy professionals. What if a government were to explicitly adopt welfarism as an overarching policy approach? Doing so might help defend rational policy-making from polarization and populism, in several ways:

- Populism draws on public distrust of policy elites. Welfarism explicitly dedicates those elites to a simple goal with broad public resonance: making individuals' lives better. It facilitates accountability of policy elites, by providing a yardstick for normative evaluation of their choices (Tirole 2017).
- Populist policies tend to disregard the interests of individuals who are "distant" in one way or another – e.g. foreigners and the unborn. Welfarism insists on considering everyone's welfare (Singer 2016).
- Issue polarization (Parkhurst 2016) tends to occur when rival policy options serve apparently incommensurable social values. Welfarism allows the value of these values to individuals' welfare be weighed quantitatively. In this sense, welfarism creates a common currency for policy deliberation (O'Donnell 2013). It is a natural ally for rational and evidence-based policymaking.
- Polarised policy environments foster issue bias and undercut democratic support for evidence-based policy (Parkhurst 2017). Welfarism seeks support for a widely appealing core value, and then objectively evaluates policy options using that shared frame of reference (Clark, Fleche et al. 2018).

Adler, M. (2019). Measuring Social Welfare: an Introduction. New York, Oxford University Press.
Clark, A., S. Fleche, R. Layard, N. Powdthavee and G. Ward (2018). The Origins of Happiness: The Science of Well-Being over the Life Course. Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press.
Layard, R. and G. O'Donnell (2015). "How To Make Policy When Happiness Is The Goal."
O'Donnell, G. (2013). Using Well-Being As A Guide To Policy. World Happiness Report 2013.
Parkhurst, J. (2017). The politics of evidence: from evidence- based policy to the good governance of evidence. Abingdon, UK, Routledge.
Parkhurst, J. O. (2016). "Appeals to evidence for the resolution of wicked problems: the origins and mechanisms of evidentiary bias." Policy Sciences49(4): 373-393.
Sen, A. (1979). "Personal Utilities and Public Judgements: Or What's Wrong With Welfare Economics." The Economic Journal89(355).
Singer, P. (2016). One World Now: The Ethics of Globalization. New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Press.
Tirole, J. (2017). Economics for the Common Good. Princeton, Princeton University Press.

Epistemic credibility, expressive authenticity, and evidence use in policy

Brooke Struck (The Decision Lab)
Chantale Tippett (Nesta)

The policy sciences endorse an idealized model of policymaking as a rational process of (1) establishing a shared set of goals, and then (2) deploying evidence to work towards those goals in the most efficient manner. The functioning of such a system is undermined by the misuse of evidence, whether intentional or not. Polarized political environments are notably challenging to policy-making of this type, because they can make it more difficult to (1) achieve the compromises necessary to select goals behind which the whole citizenry will stand, or even to (2) agree on the evidence or where it points. Populism heaps on the even greater threat of shifting the conversation away from evidence as a whole.

In their recent paper, Hahl, Kim and Sivan dissect the perceived authenticity of populist demagogues—even as they lie openly—concluding that voters are more likely to identify with such candidates when the voters themselves feel either that the political establishment no longer represents the public or no longer represents their own group (i.e.: their "public"). The authors note along the way Frankfurt's analysis of bullshit, which is distinguished from both truthfulness and lying in that bullshit has no concern for the truth.

However, if the populist demagogue is not interested in the truth, then what are they talking about? They are openly not being judged on credibility but rather on authenticity. What is this authenticity? Ernst Cassirer's Myth of the State, published in 1946, dissects just this same problem with respect to Nazism, concluding that in politics "we are always living on volcanic soil." The practical, rational model of policymaking embraced by the policy sciences is always threatening to give way under our feet if the "hopes of fulfilling [collective] desire, in an ordinary and normal way, have failed."

In such cases, humankind's mythical, expressive nature re-emerges; words take on not only new semantic meanings but become incantations. Modern usage would identify this as "dog-whistle politics," where a symbolic act of identification—and exclusion—hides behind a thin veil of apparently epistemic intent. Cassirer's account thus fills in a notable gap in the work of Hahl, Kim and Sivan, helping us to grapple with the notion of authenticity as speaking an expressive rather than an epistemic "truth."

Politics and policymaking always have both an epistemic and an expressive facet. Thus, a robust solution to bolster the use of evidence must similarly be both epistemic and expressive. On the epistemic/pragmatic side, we must strive to create situations where voters do not lose hope. On the expressive side, when hope is threatened, we must offer a better alternative than divisive populism. People's identities cannot be treated simply as a political obstacle to evidence use. I thus highlight a "positive identity politics" as an important component in a program to support effective societal decision-making—the stated objective of the policy sciences.

Polarity and Rationality: Unpacking the Psychological Underpinning of Citizen Perceptions of Trust and the Legitimating Effect of Epistemic Communities

Dion Curry (Swansea University)

Dion Curry (Swansea University), Gabriela Jiga-Boy (Swansea University), Owen Williams (Swansea University)

How much do citizens trust those governing? How much should citizens trust that those governing make evidence-based decisions? Trust is about legitimating decisions as much as it is about individual characteristics and trustworthiness. Recent political contexts (e.g., UK, USA) have witnessed lapses in citizens' trust (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2019). But distrust in government can hide an even bigger problem – distrust in non-partisan expertise and scientific evidence – which can further undermine any attempts (partisan or bipartisan) for policymaking. As such, citizens might, in fact, distrust more the solutions to evidence-informed problems and the politicians proposing them, rather than the problems themselves (Campbell & Kay, 2014). This implies that partisanship can be a lens that corrupts attitudes towards expertise and evidence.

This paper explores two research questions: 1) Does political partisanship shape individual perceptions of trust in experts and scientific evidence? and 2) How can epistemic communities foster independent thinking and bridge the gap between governments and citizens by enhancing trust in expertise? This includes the role that epistemic communities can play in acting as a bridge between different actors and conceptions of trust at individual and group levels.

Drawing on two surveys, we assess political positions, political knowledge, social principles and open-mindedness about the Brexit referendum. The analysis reveals some key differences in partisanship and voting blocs. While both sides showed a strong preference for prioritising good outcomes, Leavers were more likely to prioritise political inputs, whereas Remainers focused more on process and actively downplayed the importance of democratic inputs, showing a partisan difference in how political decisions are made by the populace. We then follow on to look at how a reduction in shared identities between citizens and government institutions has an impact on bases of trust (perceptions of competence and moral reliability). Firstly, if similarities vs. dissimilarities between people and government are salient, how do those group dynamics impact trust? Secondly, if we want to increase trust, can we appeal to one's sense of autonomy? People may prefer to be independent thinkers in deciding whether to trust or not political leaders and institutions, with sensitivity to normative values of what it means to be a good citizen and collective efforts at improving trust (Amel et al., 2017) or scientific interest and knowledge (Motta, 2018). Thus, if we foster independent thinking, can we restore shared identity and further increase trust? What role can epistemic communities play in fostering this independent thinking?

This project is particularly timely in a political landscape where identities are shifting among political identifications and community intergroup dynamics. It adds to our understanding of how evidence is used and received in policymaking by identifying individual-level factors that affect a person's trust in both evidence and its use in policy. It also provides potential solutions for bridging the gap between debates on the interplay between 'rational' policy and an increasingly polarised political landscape by bringing together psychological perceptions of trust and the epistemic communities literature.

Institutionally induced "slow thinking" as a strategy to depolarise political environments

Elisa Rebessi (Università degli Studi di Milano)

When polarization takes place, we are typically forced to choose between Yes or No, limiting our thoughts to

a specific position that excludes completely the other. In such circumstances, we are more exposed to our cognitive biases, since the necessity to engage only with one specific position triggers an *instinctual* rationality, a “fast way of thinking” (Kahneman 2011) impervious to scientific, evidence based arguments. Populist parties and leaders systematically use manipulative arguments that increase their visibility and impact generating polarized emotions and reactions on the electorate. When doing so, populist leaders are exploiting voters’ instinctual rationality. This goes to the detriment of individuals’ thoughtful attitude that contemplating the evaluation of different alternatives is prone to use knowledge and logic to deliberate (“slow thinking”). This paper discusses some institutional mechanisms that promoting solutions that avoid the reduction to two mutually exclusive alternatives can contribute to depolarise political environments both in the ascendant and descendant phases of the policy process. For what concern the ascendant phase, the focus will be on the electoral systems that force voters to give a ranking of the candidates. For what concern the descendant phase, the focus will be on examples of deliberative processes in local governments (Bobbio 2017) where participants’ informed understanding of the alternatives has allowed to treat and transform the conflict, generating new solutions.

Bobbio, L. (2017). Neither completely political nor completely unpolitical. The third way of deliberative arenas. *Partecipazione e conflitto*. 10(2): 613-635.

Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. New York, NY, US: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.