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

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

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

Second Chair : Kathryn Quissell (University of Virginia)

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)

Welfarism: An Ally for Rational Policy-Making?

Noel Semple (University of Windsor Faculty of Law)

Epistemic credibility, expressive authenticity, and evidence use in policy

Brooke Struck (The Decision Lab)

Chantale Tippett (Nesta)

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

Dion Curry (Swansea University)

Institutionally induced “slow thinking” as a strategy to depolarise political environments

Elisa Rebessi (Università degli Studi di Milano)