P03 / Explaining Democratic Backsliding: How Policy Dynamics Structure Politics in Hidden Ways

Topic : POLICY, POLITICS AND POLITICAL REGIME

Chair : Ebru Ertugal (Ozyegin University)

Second Chair : H. Tolga Bolukbasi (Bilkent University)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

This panel seeks to explore how dynamics at the policy level structure politics in backsliding democracies. There are many ways of building competitive authoritarian regimes. Based on the recent vibrant literature, we learn that democracies die increasingly through democratically elected leaders gradually subverting democratic processes themselves. These accounts show us that mechanisms like populism, 'executive aggrandizement', media control, court packing, harassment of and/or prosecuting opposition, strategic manipulation of election rules all effectively lead to democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016; Levitsky and Way, 2010; Levitsky and Zibblatt, 2018). All of these mechanisms surface at the level of politics, and accordingly, the literature has overwhelmingly focused on the nature and dynamics of politics (and polity). Alongside all these mechanisms at the politics and polity levels, elected leaders engage in radical policy reforms to fulfill electoral populist pledges in certain policy sectors while at the same time gradually alter policies in other sectors to their own advantage beneath the veneer of policy continuity. We know, however, very little about the latter, in particular how incremental under-the-radar policy changes contribute to the politics of backsliding.

We draw on two bodies of literature. First, the comparative public policy literature has been booming, producing a great deal of knowledge on the dynamics of the policy process, policy styles and processes of policy change. We know a lot more about policy dynamics through using conceptual tools such as policy capacity, policy density or policy intensity capturing changing dimensions and characteristics of public policies. Yet, how these policy processes (ordinarily seen as 'effect') structure politics remains under-researched even though earlier scholars such as E.E. Schattschneider, and more recently leading comparativists Peter Hall and Paul Pierson had convincingly showed how 'effect becomes cause'. Dynamics involved in policy feedback, policy transfer and policy learning in comparative public policy have enormous potential in revealing the expanded opportunities offered by variegated policy instruments for various mechanisms of democratic backsliding. In this way, the comparative public policy literature promises much in revealing the structuring effects of policies, themselves (re)interpreted, and abused by political leaders.

Second, the comparative politics literature has increasingly been focusing on the dynamics of policy and institutional change. In particular, historical institutionalists have been taking seriously the gradual, incremental and easily overlooked changes in the nature of policies and institutions. In doing so, scholars have been identifying not only explicit but also 'hidden faces' of change (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). Processes culminating in democratic backsliding do not always take place out in the open. There are massive hidden changes beneath the façade of ordinary, casual continuity. The literature on comparative politics promises to capture these hidden incremental changes and help us illuminate the politics of who gets what, when and how as policies change, especially in weakly institutionalized environments.

This panel aims to develop synergies between the literatures on comparative public policy and comparative politics in order to explore those policy instruments, mechanisms and strategies incumbents use for backsliding that remain under our radars in our own disciplinary silos.

CALL FOR PAPERS

In this panel, we wish to explore the implications of policy dynamics for democratic backsliding in weakly institutionalized settings. While most of the scholarship investigates causes of such momentous political shifts in the politics and polity domains, this panel aims to show how, in everyday policy processes, policies are altered in under-the-radar ways to favor incumbents, who, in turn, bricolage retrogression from democracy. We aim to explore how leaders, in various stages of the policy cycle (in sectoral/national policymaking and implementation processes), pave not-so-easily-visible pathways for democratic backsliding. Our purpose is not to offer an alternative theory of de-democratization, but to complement existing explanations by showing how policy-focused analysis reveals often-inconspicuous ways in which

actors subvert procedures and rules in policy processes resulting in de-consolidation and erosion of democracy. In addition to contributing to comparative public policy, we also aim to contribute to the emerging ‘policy-focused political science’ (Hacker and Pierson, 2014) by investigating the ways in which policy processes, including through national or sectoral policy styles, structure politics in processes of de-democratization.

We invite theoretically informed and empirically grounded papers, which are explicitly (through comparative case studies) or implicitly comparative (through single-case studies). Empirical cases of de-Europeanization (for example in pre-accession countries in the Western Balkans and Southeast Europe as well as ‘new’ member states in Central and Eastern Europe) and Latin America are particularly welcome.

Papers could – but need not – address some of the following questions: Following up on Schattschneider’s work, in what ways incumbents' altering policies create favorable politics for their 'aggrandizement'? Under what conditions do leaders resort to policy change as a strategy for democratic backsliding? At which stages of the policy process are interventions more consequential for such desired political outcomes? Are interventions at the policy formulation stage more consequential than policy implementation, or vice versa? In what ways and which type of policy instruments are amenable to politicization and to what extent are they actually politicized in subverting democracy? Are there any specific policy styles which are particularly suitable for processes of bricolage for de-democratization? What are the mechanisms in which leaders can effectively engage in under-the-radar policy changes favoring their hold onto power? Which institutional environments are likely to endow leaders with resources in their efforts at policy change for backsliding?

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Session 1

Wednesday, June 26th 16:30 to 18:30 (MB 2.255)

Role of Public Policy in the Concentration of Economic Power in Democracies: The Case of Special Economic Zones in India

Kartik Misra (University of Massachusetts Amherst)

How Europeanization Breeds De-Europeanization: Conversion and Drift in EU Pre-Accession and Beyond

H. Tolga Bolukbasi (Bilkent University)

Ebru Ertugal (Ozyegin University)

From hope to disaster: neodevelopmentalism and institutional crisis in Brazilian recent experience

Kleber Cerqueira (University of Brasília - UnB)

Jackson De Toni (Brazilian Agency for Industrial Development)