

T06P03 / Contemporary Perspectives on Political Advisers, Advisory Systems and Executive Relationships

Topic : T06 / POLICY EXPERTS, ADMINISTRATION AND POLICY KNOWLEDGE

Chair : Heath Pickering (University of Melbourne)

Second Chair : Maria Maley (Australian National University)

Third Chair : Marleen Brans (KU Leuven)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

There is a growing international literature on political advisers, their agency and influence, their relationships and their systemic significance, documented in a number of comparative books (Eichbaum and Shaw 2010, Shaw and Eichbaum 2018) and most recently a Handbook on Ministerial and Political Advisers (2023, ed Richard Shaw). This panel aims to capture the variety and range of new research occurring on these topics across many different political contexts and geographic spaces. There is a need to develop the field in terms of greater description, more comparative analysis, methodological sophistication, and theoretical elaboration. The panel seeks to bring together researchers working on the many different parts of this project to help understand, advance and integrate new scholarly developments.

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel welcomes papers on any aspect of the confluence between politics and administration in contemporary democratic systems, including the activities and career trajectories of political advisers, and their relationships with ministers and civil servants. It seeks paper proposals that provide new empirical findings, especially from non-Western and non-European public administration settings, as well as those addressing other empirical gaps, such the work and significance of political staff in devolved governments. It welcomes papers using theoretical frameworks such as public service bargains, policy advisory systems, the core executive, and the gendered nature of political institutions. It encourages papers addressing puzzles such as: the norms and values surrounding the work of political staff; the agency, influence and possibly disruptive impact of political staff; their significance within the evolution of political parties; the relationships and ties between political staff and lobby groups; and the challenges of viewing their locations as workplaces. It also welcomes comparative analyses that build on and extend country case-studies and papers that explore critical concepts such as politicisation and the role of political staff in managing dilemmas of modern governance. The panel particularly welcomes papers on countries that are underrepresented in the literature, which has a Westminster and continental European bias. The panel welcomes both online and onsite participants and paper givers. The panel will be in a hybrid format.

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Session 1 Policy Advisory Systems

Wednesday, July 2nd 16:00 to 18:00 (B1)

Discussants

Heath Pickering (University of Melbourne)

Maria Maley (Australian National University)

Exploring Expertise and Advice in Sustainability policies at the local level: insights from the European context

Maria Tullia Galanti (Università degli Studi di Milano)

Giulia Vicentini (University of Naples Parthenope)

Edoardo Bressanelli (Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna)

Policy experts and their relationships with politicians and civil servants play a key part in the (successful) localisation of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2030 Agenda. In the localisation of the SDGs, various stakeholders define issues and create solutions that align with local resources and governance contexts (Fox & Macleod 2023). The multi-sectoral and integrated approach of the SDGs allows for exploring whether sustainability is primarily framed as an economic, environmental, or social issue, providing insights into how SDGs may evolve into different epistemic infrastructures or Policy Advisory Systems including academics, bureaucrats and stakeholders (Brans et al. 2022). Nonetheless, the features of SDGs expertise in PAS have never been investigated empirically.

By examining the roles, career paths, and attitudes of sustainability experts acting at the local and European level in SDG localisation, we aim to address key research questions such as: What role does knowledge play in the localisation of the SDGs? How can local sustainability experts be identified? What are their socio-professional profiles? In which policy sectors and sustainability goals are they involved? How do they fulfil their advisory roles? What are their capacities and relational profiles within local institutions and multilevel governance?

To answer these questions, we will survey approximately 2,000 sustainability experts from the three overlapping arenas of the local Policy Advisory Systems, namely the governmental, academic and societal arenas, using an original database constructed through organisational analysis and inductive mapping. The survey will analyse experts' social background, professional experience, education, and training in sustainability issues, as well as individual policy capacities, networking, and organisational skills dealing with SDGs. Additionally, we will investigate experts' advisory practices and roles.

(Virtual) The Role of Policy Advisers in Renewable Energy Policy in Portugal: Dynamics, Influence, and Structural Constraints

Marcelo da Conceição (Instituto Universitário de Lisboa)

Maria Asensio (ISCTE, University Institute of Lisbon, Portugal)

Pedro Gil (Universidade do Porto)

The role of policy advisers in policy design and decision-making has been increasingly examined in the

literature, particularly through the lens of Policy Advisory Systems (PAS). This framework conceptualizes policy advice as a networked process involving multiple actors—both within and outside the state—such as political advisers, public bureaucracies, think tanks, universities, and consulting firms. These actors support policymakers by analyzing policy problems and proposing solutions. This paper applies the PAS framework to a country-level and policy-specific case study—renewable energy policies in Portugal. More specifically, it examines a policy advisory subsystem, shedding light on how the renewable energy policy context shapes the configuration, operation, and influence of advisory system components.

Portugal stands out as one of the leading European countries in renewable energy adoption, with a significant increase in wind and solar energy production over the past two decades. Public policies have played a central role in this transformation, with instruments such as feed-in tariffs, public auctions for renewable capacity, streamlined permitting processes, and energy community initiatives. This paper investigates the advisory dynamics underlying the formulation and decision-making processes of these policies.

The study adopts a qualitative methodology, including semi-structured interviews with various types of advisers, such as political advisers, civil servants, academics, representatives from civil society organizations, and industry stakeholders. Additionally, documentary analysis was conducted, covering legal and policy documents, the composition and career trajectories of ministerial advisory staff, and records of public consultations and policy meetings.

Based on this empirical investigation, the paper tests several hypotheses regarding policy advisory dynamics. These include: (1) the influence of lobbying groups on political advisers and policymakers, considering the strategic importance of the energy sector in the Portuguese economy and the symbolic power of national energy companies; (2) the declining influence of public sector entities in energy policy due to financial, human, and analytical capacity constraints over the past decades; and (3) a persistent gap in engagement between energy policymakers and academic actors, as well as environmental civil society organizations, due to the limited presence of boundary organizations that could foster such linkages.

The analysis of these advisory dynamics is accompanied by preliminary conclusions on their potential effects on policy outcomes. For instance, the findings suggest that Portugal's renewable energy strategy remains primarily focused on decarbonizing the electricity sector, aligning with the commercial interests of national energy companies, rather than prioritizing direct citizen participation in the energy transition or addressing environmental concerns related to land use and biodiversity conservation.

This paper aims to contribute to the broader discussion on policy advice in Portugal—an underrepresented case in the literature on advisory systems—while advancing our understanding of how the specific contexts of policy subsystems shape the configuration and operation of advisory systems.

(Virtual) Diversity and expertise in policy advisory systems in Spain: an empirical exploration

José Real-Dato (Universidad de Almería)

Iván Medina (Universitat de València, Spain)

This paper proposes a wide scale empirical exploration of the characteristics of policy advisory systems in the central public administration of Spain. Using a dataset of more than 400 bodies with advisory functions with about 4000 individual or organizational members, we aim at describing the extent policy advisory systems formed around big policy areas vary across two main dimensions. One is the diversity of interest and groups represented (government, economic or other groups); the other is the prevalence of (allegedly neutral) experts vis à vis other types of members. Then, using data from a survey to top-level officers, we will analyse the relationship of those structural features with relevant aspects of policymaking within policy areas, such as the degree of contentiousness, the presence of veto players, or the level of use of technical and scientific information.

Relational Dynamics and Challenges in Policy Advisory System: The Executive Triangle of Ethiopian Public Administration

Kiflie Angaw (KU Leuven)

Marleen Brans (KU Leuven)

ABSTRACT

The growing complexity and interconnectedness of policy challenges and the importance of evidence-based

polycymaking, necessitate the expansion of policy advisory practices. Regardless of the practice of policy advising dating back to early human civilizations, its conceptualization, theorization, and methodological development have increased in recent decades. However, the existing state of the art and literature on policy advisory systems and practices mainly originated from the Global North and developed economies. As a result, there remains a noticeable knowledge gap on the subject from in developing economies, particularly in the Global South contexts. This study envisages narrowing down this gap by studying Ethiopia's policy advisory systems and practices using semi-structured in-depth interview data and drawing on the executive triangle approach. The study found that ministerial advisors play a crucial role in strategic policy advice and operational routines within public administration. They serve as the ministers' arm, not only in gathering and producing policy advice, devising policy implementation instruments, and collaborating with stakeholders but also in managing daily routines and bureaucratic tasks. Ministerial advisors are overburdened by bureaucratic tasks due to political leaders' lack of confidence in civil servants and the persistent inefficiencies within the bureaucracy. Ministers rely on their advisors' technical expertise. Ministerial advisors use internal and external sources of information to structure and produce policy advice that could be applied to micro, meso, or macro-level policy issues. The study also found that ministerial advisors are external experts hired by donor organizations to advise the government. The relationship between advisors and civil servants within the executive triangle is contentious. Advisors often undermine civil servants, while civil servants, in turn, perceive advisors as a threat. The indirect presence of donors in the executive triangle plays a crucial role in the institutional dynamics and exerts a pervasive influence on policy processes. This study sheds light on policy advisory systems, their roles within the public bureaucracy, and the policy process, offering valuable insights from the context of developing countries. It also adds to the ongoing debate and discussion on policy advisory scholarship.

Keywords: ministerial advisor, executive triangle, donor, minister, bureaucracy, civil servant, developing economies [Ethiopia]

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Session 2 Advisers and change over time

Thursday, July 3rd 08:00 to 10:00 (B1)

Discussants

Heath Pickering (University of Melbourne)

Maria Maley (Australian National University)

Advisory Bodies in Polish Regional Government: Their Role, Organisation, and Influence on the Policy Process

Tomasz Kupiec (University of Warsaw)

Introduction

Governments have long sought policy advice from sources beyond the public service. Among these external sources, advisory bodies operating at arm's length from government play a particularly prominent role (Brans et al., 2010; OECD, 2017).

The role of such bodies, their influence on the policy process, and their position within the broader policy advisory system (PAS) have been the subject of scholarly investigation for several decades (Bouchat et al., 2024), with more recent contributions emerging from comparative studies (Crowley & Head, 2017).

Despite the expanding body of literature, a significant gap in knowledge persists regarding countries beyond the Westminster tradition and Western Europe (Howlett, 2019). Poland serves as a notable example of this underrepresentation, as it is absent from the International Library of Policy Analysis series, in which Czechia is the sole representative of the CEECs. While all CEECs face a shortage of experts in public policy administration and dedicated academic programmes, Poland lags behind Czechia and Hungary in this regard (Botha et al., 2017).

Comprehensive studies on PAS in Poland remain virtually non-existent. A notable exception is Olejniczak et al. (2015), who examined internal analysts within central government. However, no studies have systematically addressed advisory bodies in a manner aligned with the Western European tradition, nor have they connected Poland's PAS to the broader mainstream literature on policy advisory systems.

Research goal and design

This study represents an initial effort to address this gap. Its primary objective is to map and characterise (semi-)permanent institutionalised advisory bodies (ABs), as defined by Fobé (2017), that have been established by regional governments in Poland. The research questions guiding this study include:

- To what extent do ABs influence the policy process?
- What are the dominant roles of different ABs? Do they primarily serve an informational or policy-supporting function (Van Damme et al., 2011)? Are they instrumental, substantiating, or legitimising (Real-Dato, 2022)? Do they provide evidence, legitimacy, evaluations, countervailing power, or strategic foresight (OECD, 2017)?
- What types of knowledge do ABs provide? Are they predominantly 'hot', short-term knowledge or 'cold', long-term knowledge (Prasser, 2006)?
- How are ABs organised and institutionalised? This includes examining their membership structures and relationships with government, following typologies proposed by Van Damme et al. (2011), as well as

determining whether they are mandatory (embedded in national legislation) or voluntary (established at the discretion of regional governments).

Additionally, the study will seek to identify correlations between the organisational characteristics of ABs and their dominant functional roles in the policy process.

The initial mapping covers all (ABs), based on requests for access to public information (n=200). Following that 12 case studies were conducted. Selection was guided by the maximum variation strategy (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Each case study involved at least four IDIs with AB members. AB meeting minutes were also analysed.

Contribution

The study directly contributes to expanding knowledge on countries that remain underrepresented in PAS literature. Additionally, it aims to enhance understanding of the determinants shaping the roles of ABs.

Path Dependence and Institutional Adaptation: A Historical Institutional Analysis of Italian Ministerial Cabinets (1861–2022)

Fabrizio Di Mascio (Università di Torino)

Anna Malandrino (Università di Torino)

Alessandro Natalini (University Parthenope)

Giulio Francisci (Università di Roma LUMSA)

This paper investigates the historical evolution of ministerial cabinets (MCs) in Italy from unification in 1861 to 2022, addressing how institutional legacies and political agency have shaped these advisory structures over time. The study's central research question asks:

How have Italy's ministerial cabinets adapted to shifting political contexts while maintaining continuity, and what factors have influenced their persistence and transformation?

Employing a historical institutionalist framework, the paper analyzes the incremental changes in MCs, focusing on processes of path dependence and conversion during critical junctures, including the Fascist era, the post-war democratic transition, and the collapse of the party system in the 1990s. Drawing on archival research and process tracing, the study examines the interplay between legalism, administrative traditions, and political instability, uncovering how political elites have reinterpreted and reconfigured MCs to consolidate their discretionary power while circumventing bureaucratic vetoes. This research fits closely with the panel's objectives by contributing to the study of ministerial

advisory systems, both in terms of methodological innovation and theoretical elaboration.

The diachronic approach advances the understanding of how MCs, as key nodes in political advisory systems, operate within their institutional context. Additionally, by situating the Italian case within broader debates on ministerial advice systems, the paper highlights the systemic significance of political advisers in contexts characterized by

administrative resilience and political turbulence. The findings aim to enrich the international literature on ministerial and political advisers, offering a distinctive perspective on how historical legacies interact with contemporary governance dynamics.

Disappearing public servants: Changing recruitment patterns for ministerial advisers in Australia

Maria Maley (Australian National University)

A distinctive feature of the Australian model of the ministerial office since its formal establishment in 1984 has been a significant level of recruitment of public servants as ministerial staff. Employing public servants on leave from their departments as partisan advisers has been seen as useful by ministers and as highly desirable by the public service. Research shows that in the 1980s and early 1990s as many as 42% of advisory staff in federal ministers' offices were drawn from the public service, but that this fell to 25-30% in the period 2011-2018 (Maley 2024). This paper reports on newly obtained data for the last 6 years (2019-2024) which shows a dramatic decline in the proportion of staffers drawn from the public service, beginning in 2018, and seen in governments of different parties. This paper explores possible explanations for this major change in the employment backgrounds of Australian ministerial staff, including institutional change, changes in role, professionalisation and evolution of political parties.

Maley M (2024) 'Cabinetisation or a Westminster solution? Understanding the employment of public servants in Australian ministers' offices' *Australian Journal of Public Administration*

(Virtual) Chief of Staff: The Rise of Political Craft in Westminster Democracies

Heath Pickering (University of Melbourne)

Chiefs of Staff are influential figures in executive government. Put simply, they are a politician's number one adviser. Their most trusted confidante. Their gatekeeper. Their political manager. Though unelected, they play an essential role in shaping policy decisions, influencing ministers and public servants, and contributing to political outcomes. Despite their prominence, the influence of chiefs is more often assumed than substantiated, more frequently mentioned than precisely defined, and more readily advocated than critically examined. This text aims to shed light on these éminences grises, focusing particularly on the prime minister's chief of staff, and asks who they are, what they do, and why they matter. The analysis spans the four classic Westminster democracies—Australia, Britain, Canada, and New Zealand—from 1990 to 2024 and is underpinned by fresh evidence and analysis, including 15 interviews with former prime ministerial chiefs of staff. The text traces the evolution of the position; examines the demographics of this group; explores the roles they perform; and analyses how they fit within a prime minister's leadership style. Cementing their position at the apex of political life, these essential actors have ushered in a new era of political craft.