P03 / Politics, Politicization and Public Policy: Grasping the different epistemological and ontological perspectives

Topic : POLICY, POLITICS AND POLITICAL REGIME

Chair : Philippe Zittoun (ENTPE - LAET - University of Lyon)

Second Chair : Sabine Saurugger (Sciences Po Paris - Centre d'Etudes Européennes (CEE))

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

While the link between politics and public policy has been a persistent research question in the field of politics since its inception, there is no clear mapping of the different perspectives and approaches. In this panel, we would like to discuss the possibility of better understanding the different perspectives. More specifically, we would like to discuss how the different perspectives can change our understanding of what a public policy is and how to understand the policy process. We proposed to discuss three different categories

1) Considering that these two concepts are ontologically different, each with its own logic, its own configuration of actors and its own field of activity, some authors approach this question in terms of the relationship between two different systems, the political system and the public policy system.

2) Other authors favour an epistemological distinction, arguing that while there is indeed an autonomous political system with its own logic, this time public policies are considered as objects that can be politicised, i.e. that can become political objects.

3) Other authors have argued that public policy is ontologically a political object and consider its design and implementation as political activities.

CALL FOR PAPERS

The aim of this panel is to discuss the question of the relationship between politics and public policy on the basis of empirical and/or theoretical work, explaining the epistemological and/or ontological perspective chosen to grasp these two concepts. We call for papers that refer to the 3 (or more) categories of understanding of the relationship between politics and policy in order to discuss, stabilize or criticize this categorization.

P03 / Politics, Politicization and Public Policy: Grasping the different epistemological and ontological perspectives

Chair : Philippe Zittoun (ENTPE - LAET - University of Lyon)

Second Chair : Sabine Saurugger (Sciences Po Paris - Centre d'Etudes Européennes (CEE))

Session 1

Thursday, July 3rd 10:15 to 12:15 (E1)

The Politics of Intent: Concealment, Strategic Ambiguity, and Procedural Control

Yashas P R (Christ University)

PRERNA YADAV (Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay)

Policy making remains primarily influenced by a rationalist and efficiency-driven lens, which prioritizes performance metrics, bureaucratic efficiency, and outcome-based governance while downplaying the political nature of policy intent. The reluctance within policy studies to critically examine concealed intent, despite growing evidence that policymakers manipulate ambiguity, procedural complexity, and governance opacity to serve political interests while shielding their true motivations has increasingly been considered as crucial to the understanding of policy success or failure. Rather than viewing intent as a neutral or transparent driver of policy, this paper argues that concealed intent is central to understanding how policies serve political objectives.

While the strategic use of intent is not new, its significance has increased with the rise of populist policy-making. There are increasing incidences wherein leaders command diffused public support and employ rhetorical grandstanding, selective problem framing, and performative governance to construct policies that appear public-serving while being embedded with partisan or institutional self-interest. Procedural mechanisms like bureaucratic layering and regulatory discretion diffuse accountability by dispersing decision-making, obscuring responsibility for policy outcomes. This strategic ambiguity manufactures legitimacy while consolidating political control, reinforcing the need to reassess the politics-policy linkage beyond efficiency-driven models.

To illustrate this, we examine contemporary fake news regulation and farm laws in India, demonstrating how policymakers exploit legal and procedural ambiguity to manage public perception and maintain electoral advantage. India's IT Rules 2021 allows the government to procedurally position itself as the arbiter of truth, enabling selective enforcement of narratives while preserving the illusion of neutral governance. Similarly, the 2020 farm laws, framed as economic reforms for the agricultural sector to improve farmers' income through market interventions; would have strategically weakened regulatory protections for farmers while benefiting corporate interests. The eventual repeal of these laws following mass protests illustrates how policy reversals themselves can be used as political manoeuvres rather than admissions of policy failure.

By reassessing the policy-politics linkage through the lens of concealed intent, this paper challenges efficiency-driven models of policy-making, offering a critical perspective on how governance mechanisms are strategically used to shape political outcomes rather than merely solving public problems.

Politics, Politicization and Public Policy

Sabine Saurugger (Sciences Po Paris - Centre d'Etudes Européennes (CEE))

Philippe Zittoun (ENTPE - LAET - University of Lyon)

Tbc

Unpacking the Politics of Disaster Governance: Advancing Critical Disaster Studies Through Post-Structuralist Discourse Theory

Watcharapol Supajakwattana (Naresuan University)

The escalating frequency and intensity of disasters over recent decades have underscored the urgent need for effective and adaptive disaster management strategies. This growing demand has propelled the emergence of disaster management studies, a field predominantly shaped by technocratic and scientific approaches grounded in positivist epistemologies. While these methodologies prioritize efficiency and technical expertise, they often function—whether intentionally or inadvertently—as depoliticized instruments of governance. Consequently, such frameworks frequently marginalize local community knowledge, reinforce centralized state authority, and exacerbate enduring social inequalities and conflicts in disaster-affected regions.

This paper argues for the adoption of post-structuralist discourse theory (PDT) as a critical framework to interrogate the political strategies underpinning disaster governance and the complex tensions between state actors and local communities. Rooted in the Essex School of Discourse Analysis, PDT offers a robust lens to conceptualize disasters as "dislocatory events" that reveal societal contingencies and ignite political contestations. By framing disasters as inherently political terrains characterized by power struggles and conflict, PDT facilitates a nuanced examination of governance structures, power relations, and socio-political dynamics in disaster contexts. Its methodological framework, particularly the Logics of Critical Explanation (LCE), provides systematic tools to analyze the sedimented yet often opaque logics of power, including social, political, and fantasmatic dimensions.

The paper is organized into three key sections. The first critiques the historical evolution of disaster management as a technocratic and positivist enterprise, highlighting its limitations and unintended consequences. The second examines the emergence of Critical Disaster Studies (CDS) as an alternative paradigm, emphasizing its potential to reveal the contingent and political nature of disasters while addressing its unresolved theoretical and methodological gaps. The third introduces post-structuralist discourse theory as a foundational ontological and epistemological framework to advance CDS. This section elaborates on the core principles of PDT and demonstrates its applicability in uncovering the deeply embedded politics of disasters. The paper concludes by addressing key critiques of both CDS and PDT, particularly their perceived idealism and challenges in practical application, while proposing pathways to reconcile theory with practice.

Left-Wing Swiss Cities Under Neoliberal Pressures: An Analysis of Zurich and Lausanne (1973–2023)

Mountazar Jaffar (University of Lausanne)

This article analyzes the transformation of Zurich and Lausanne under the influence of urban neoliberalism, a phenomenon characterized by the privatization, deregulation, and financialization of urban spaces (Harvey, 1989). While these dynamics have been widely studied in European and American cities, little research has focused on Switzerland’s largest cities, which have all been governed by left-wing majorities since the 1990s.

The aim of this article is to examine the evolution of Zurich and Lausanne between 1973 and 2023 through five key indicators: median taxable income, rent trends, subsidized (social) housing, spatial segregation and gentrification. These data allow for an assessment of how these two cities have responded to neoliberal dynamics despite left-wing governments.

The results show that Zurich has followed a strongly neoliberal trajectory, with rising rents, a reduction in social housing, and marked socio-spatial polarization including a higher concentration of wealthier residents in the city. Lausanne, on the other hand, has resisted these trends better by increasing its supply of social housing, thus limiting gentrification. This study provides new perspectives on how Swiss cities navigate between left-wing policies and competitiveness and raises relevant questions regarding social and spatial justice.