P93 / AI Applications in Policy Design and Practice: The Interplay of Theory and Evidence

Topic : Bureaucracy, Administration and Policy Process

Chair : Mitzi Bolton (Monash University)

Second Chair : Ruby O'Connor (University of Melbourne)

Third Chair : Michael Mintrom (Monash University)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Artificial intelligence (AI) is changing the informational, institutional, and political environments in which public policy is designed and implemented. Its significance extends beyond administrative efficiency. AI can shape which problems attract attention, how policy ideas are generated and evaluated, whose knowledge informs decisions, and how public managers exercise judgement. In an AI-saturated information environment, the implications for policy innovation, political influence, and public authority are profound.

Yet a central gap remains between the promise of AI and evidence of its actual use. O'Connor et al. (2024), examining AI and complex sustainability policy problems, found that positive expectations about government applications far outstripped evidence of how public decision-makers were using these tools and what outcomes followed. Newman and Mintrom (2023) likewise show how AI challenges established understandings of evidence-based policy and the ethical practice of policy analysis. These concerns are consequential. Without closer empirical investigation, policy scholarship risks reproducing technological narratives instead of explaining how AI is changing policymaking.

This panel asks: **How is AI reshaping the ideas, actors, and processes of public policymaking, and what must policy theory do to explain these changes?**

The question opens several avenues for innovative scholarship. Do established frameworks, including the Multiple Streams Framework, Advocacy Coalition Framework, Narrative Policy Framework, and theories of policy entrepreneurship and street-level bureaucracy, adequately explain AI-mediated policymaking? How are public managers adopting, adapting to, or rejecting AI tools? How are policy entrepreneurs navigating new opportunities for innovation amid information abundance, misinformation, and competing claims to expertise? What capabilities will future policy analysts and public managers need?

The panel welcomes theoretical, conceptual, and empirical contributions across policy domains and national contexts. We encourage researchers to test established explanations against emerging practices, develop new concepts from empirical findings, and investigate variation in how AI is used across institutions and settings. Comparative studies, detailed case studies, and theory-led empirical research are especially welcome.

The scientific objective is to strengthen the connection between policy theory and policy practice. AI may create new opportunities for collaboration, analysis, and institutional learning. It may also redistribute influence, complicate judgement, and reinforce existing inequalities. Neither outcome should be assumed. Understanding what AI changes, for whom, and under what conditions is an urgent task for public policy scholarship.

CALL FOR PAPERS

How is artificial intelligence changing public policymaking, and how should policy scholars respond? This panel invites innovative theoretical, conceptual, and empirical papers examining AI's influence on policy ideas, actors, institutions, and processes.

We are interested in work that connects established theories of policymaking with evidence of how AI is actually used. The rapid growth of claims about AI's potential has not been matched by equally detailed accounts of its application in public decision-making (O'Connor et al., 2024). AI also raises fundamental questions about evidence, judgement, and ethical policy analysis (Newman & Mintrom, 2023). We invite contributions that help address these challenges.

Papers may address one or more of the following five overlapping themes:

1. **Policy theory and conceptual innovation**. How might the Multiple Streams Framework, Advocacy

Coalition Framework, Narrative Policy Framework, and theories of policy entrepreneurship or street-level bureaucracy be extended to explain AI-mediated policymaking? What remains useful, and what needs rethinking?

2. **AI in policy practice**. How are policy analysts and public manager using, adapting, or rejecting AI? What is changing in policy analysis, design, implementation, and frontline discretion? What intended and unintended consequences are emerging?

3. **Power, ideas, and sovereignty.** Where are policy ideas being generated and circulated? How does AI redistribute influence among governments, technology providers, experts, advocacy coalitions, and citizens?

4. **Policy entrepreneurship and innovation**. How do policy entrepreneurs mobilise AI, build coalitions, and navigate opportunities and constraints in an information environment saturated with AI-generated content and misinformation? Contributions examining sustainability and other complex policy problems are welcome.

5. **Policy capability and education**. How should public policy education and professional development prepare current and future public servants for AI-enabled work?

We welcome diverse methods, policy settings, and national perspectives. We particularly encourage empirical studies that illuminate actual practices, comparative research that identifies variation across contexts, and theory-led investigations that generate new explanations. Papers need not confirm existing expectations about AI. Findings that expose limitations, contradictions, or unexpected consequences are equally valuable.

Our aim is to foster a collaborative scholarly conversation in which theory informs empirical inquiry and empirical findings stimulate theoretical development. We invite contributions that move beyond technological speculation to advance a more rigorous understanding of how AI is reshaping policy design and practice.