P250 / Apparent Paradoxes and Ambivalence in Citizen-State Encounters and Public Opinion

Topic : Citizens, Participation and Social Movements

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Apparent paradoxes are not uncommon findings in public opinion research. However, rather than assuming that they indicate an absence of political sophistication on policy issues or indifference towards policy-making processes, a growing body of interpretivist research is arguing that so-called contradictions are built on citizens' complex sense-making around normative dilemmas and ideas (Boswell et al., 2019). Disentangling such ‘paradoxes’ in political sense-making challenges scientific expectations about how normative commitments, taken-for-granted knowledge, and everyday engagement with the state, so-called citizen-state encounters, fit together.

Interpretivists typically set out to understand how citizens' attitudes and behaviour regarding state action fit into broader understandings of politics (world-making, Berger and Luckmann, 1966) by integrating ‘deep stories’ (Hochschild, 2016) and methods of active listening (Cramer, 2016).

The panel brings together interpretivist public opinion research to examine, bottom-up, how political sense-making takes shape within everyday relationships and citizen-state encounters. The objective of the panel is to collect and discuss insights on how rejection of and criticism towards policies can coexist with participation in state encounters (Boswell, 2026; Soss, 1999), law-abidingness (Koch, 2018), and everyday claim-making (Hilhorst, 2025).

The panel furthermore encourages methodological reflection on how researchers recognize inconsistency, distinguishing tensions experienced by participants from contradictions inferred through analytical categories and expectations.

The panel treats apparent paradoxes as opportunities to revisit assumptions about political coherence and to examine unresolved tensions, which reoccur across disciplines. Its scientific contribution lies in connecting work on public opinion across policy domains.

The Panel is intended as a venue to refine the concept of ambivalence. Its scientific contribution is furthermore a methodological one for the interpretivist community: by comparing approaches to data collection and interpretation, contributors can examine how others identify and elicit tensions in socio-political accounts. In particular, it provides a venue to jointly reflect on how, for example, interview prompts, researcher-interlocutor interaction and analytical choices can make ambivalence (in)visible.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Why would citizens comply with institutions they dislike? Why do citizens continue to draw on and reproduce social orders they question or disapprove of? Why would they elect parties whose programmes they dislike? A growing body of interpretivist research has started to unpack the normative complexity of everyday citizen-state encounters, to understand political attitudes and behaviors that appear inconsistent, surprising or ambivalent.

This panel brings together interpretivists from across policy domains to examine how ambivalent political sense-making and practices in citizen-state encounters take shape amid competing norms and pragmatic demands. It explores how citizens navigate tensions, and how their social positions and interactions with the state shape what they consider (un)desirable, (un)acceptable, or (un)necessary.

The panel also invites reflection on how researchers identify and interpret such tensions. Apparent inconsistencies may reflect competing assumptions about roles and contexts. Citizens may feel the pressure of a personal dilemma, accommodate it without resolving it, or see no contradiction at all.

Contributions are encouraged to examine how such tensions are reconciled, sustained or left unresolved, and what these different strategies tell us about the way in which (and why) citizens engage with political life.
We also invite reflections on how these ‘inconsistencies’ (if they truly are such) are methodologically and empirically recognized, whether they are lived contradictions as part of the participants’ milieu, or rather analytical categories informed by the expectations that researchers (and other agents, such as politicians) sometimes place on citizens.

The panel welcomes papers addressing questions such as:

- How do citizens’ normative judgements of the state vary across sites, situations, and time?
- How do citizens navigate normative dilemmas during or regarding the state encounter, and when do they experience competing commitments as contradictory?
- How do social positions and relationships shape the standards through which citizens interpret and make sense of policies and politics more broadly? How do experiences of uncertainty or social marginalization shape what citizens expect, do, or are prepared to accept?
- What roles do habit, affect, and attachment play in sustaining policy practices?

We welcome empirical, theoretical and methodological papers from any area of qualitative public opinion research. Contributions may draw on various methods of data collection (e.g., interviews, ethnography, focus groups, etc.) and data analysis (e.g., narrative analysis, critical frame analysis or other interpretivist approaches), including mixed methods designs that give sustained attention to citizens’ meaning-making. European and non-European cases are welcome, and comparative works are highly appreciated, to broaden the scope of political life and attitudes included.