P293 / Beyond Unintended Consequences: Toward a Theory of Policy Side Effects

Topic : Policy Evaluation

Chair : Yongjin Choi (London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, University of London)

Second Chair : Ashley Fox (Rockefeller College, University at Albany)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

How do the consequences of a policy become a source of social problems? This inquiry has been enduring in the social sciences and has generated a long line of research. In an idealized account of the policy process, policies are conceived as deliberate solutions to social problems or designed to benefit particular groups without harming others. In practice, however, policies oftentimes give rise to new problems, whether unintentionally or at times intentionally. This paradox is common, and we can find rich examples: e.g., stricter enforcement has been found to widen social disparities in the justice system, minimum wage increases have been linked to higher unemployment, and raising the legal drinking age has been associated with riskier patterns of alcohol consumption.

Social science scholars have long recognized them. Robert K. Merton in 1936 and Aaron Wildavsky in 1980, for example, already drew attention to policy side effects, which they framed as unanticipated or unintended consequences. Economists and policy analysts have since developed sophisticated tools for assessing policy trade-offs, such as cost-benefit analysis and cost-effectiveness analysis, which are widely used in policymaking practice today. In political science, policy feedback theory explains how policies reshape politics by structuring political behaviors and decision-making.

However, these early insights have yet to be integrated into public policy scholarship in ways that address the practical challenges of managing policy side effects. Framed as unintended or unanticipated consequences, side effects have often been treated as unpredictable. Some, however, may follow generalizable or tractable patterns amenable to systematic investigation and theorization. This need is especially evident in responses to national emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, financial crises, and natural disasters, where governments implement strong, when governments adopt strong, far-reaching policies that affect individuals and society along multiple dimensions.

Recognizing this gap in the policy literature, this panel seeks to open an academic discussion on policy side effects as a phenomenon that can be systematically investigated and theorized, and invites papers that examine them theoretically or empirically. To explore this possibility, the panel aims to identify the conditions and mechanisms through which policies produce side effects, and to understand how these consequences come to be recognized, contested, and addressed as social problems. Questions of interest include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Which policy side effects are predictable, and how can they be better anticipated?
- What are the social and political ramifications of policy side effects?
- How and under what conditions do policies produce side effects?
- To what extent are policy side effects socially constructed?
- What moral dilemmas arise in implementing policies whose side effects are anticipated?
- How can side effects be monitored and mitigated, and do mitigating measures create new problems?

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel invites a wide range of theoretical and empirical papers that examine policy consequences through the lens of policy side effects. Papers may examine side effects that were unforeseen as well as those that policymakers anticipated but accepted. Relevant themes include empirical assessments of unintended consequences of public policy, including their health, political, and social ramifications; theoretical frameworks and typologies that help reveal patterns in, or unpack the variety of, policy side effects; practical recommendations for minimizing or monitoring policy side effects; and novel methods for assessing policy side effects. Papers may address any policy domain or region and use quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods. We are particularly interested in topics that discuss the following issues:

- policy consequences that undermine the stability of existing institutions or social norms, such as those of

the health care system, the economy, the education system, culture, and social interactions;

- qualitative research that deals with policymakers' behaviors, debates among stakeholders, and moral dilemmas in the decision-making process when side effects are anticipated;

- how policy side effects are distributed across social groups, and who ultimately bears their costs;

- how the media and the public interpret policy side effects, and how governments communicate policies with known side effects; and

- measures designed to mitigate policy side effects, including whether they work and whether they create new problems of their own.