P33 / Bringing Individuals Back In: Politicians, Bureaucrats and Policy Dynamics

Topic : Policy Process Theories

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

1.1 General objectives

Policies are made by people. Mayors and city councillors, regional presidents and state governors, ministers and members of parliament decide which problems deserve attention and interact with interest groups and movements. Municipal managers, regional officials and national civil servants turn broad goals into workable rules and decide how programmes work in practice. These are the main characters acting within policy dynamics to move the policy process from intentions to concrete outputs and outcomes. Yet the main theories of the policy process treat these individual actors as residual elements, while carefully defining structural factors (institutions, coalitions, ideas, external events) (Capano et al. 2025). In other words, we know that individual action matters, but we lack a systematic account of how it matters, under what conditions and with what effects.

The general objective of the panel is to place the individual agency of politicians and bureaucrats at the centre of the analysis of policy dynamics: to study what these individuals actually do when shaping policy, at and across all levels of government, and to develop a common analytical language for studying their agency.

1.2 Scientific relevance

Individuals have not been ignored, but they are usually studied in isolation rather than as purposive agents advancing policies across territorial levels (Mendez 2025). Public policy research has examined policy entrepreneurs who promote new solutions (Kingdon 1984; Mintrom and Norman 2009; Petridou and Mintrom 2021), brokers who mediate between opposing coalitions (Ingold and Varone 2011; Christopoulos and Ingold 2015), public leaders who steer the process ('t Hart and Uhr 2008; Peci, González and Dussauge-Laguna 2023) and experts who inform it (Weible 2008). Public administration has documented the discretion of frontline workers (Lipsky 1980), the policy work of middle-ranking officials (Page and Jenkins 2005) and the relationship between politicians and senior bureaucrats in national government (Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman 1981; Hood and Lodge 2006). Local government scholars have shown that formal institutions alone do not explain local policy change (Hernández-Bonivento, Grin and Vial Cossani 2025) or stability (Meza 2022). They have studied how leadership styles differ among European mayors (Heinelt et al. 2018), how elected officials and top administrators share influence in city governments (Mouritzen and Svara 2002), how policy entrepreneurs innovate in municipal administrations (Petridou, Becker and Sparf 2021; Gofen and Lotta 2021), how frontline workers contribute to policy design (Lavee and Cohen 2019; Gofen, Meza and Moreno-Jaimes 2024), and how local policy elites (Liu et al. 2010), state governors (Kousser and Phillips 2012) and regional politicians (Calignano and Nilsen 2024) act as agents of change.

These traditions share four limits. First, they are fragmented: each tradition examines one type of actor, and they rarely speak to one another. Second, they tend to identify agency with a label. An individual is classified as an entrepreneur, a broker or a leader, and the label is then used to explain what that person did. This reasoning is circular and obscures the fact that the same person often behaves differently across phases of the same process (Capano and Galanti 2021). Third, they keep politicians and bureaucrats apart, as if formal roles determined behaviour. Fourth, policy process research has favoured national over local government (Meza and de Alba 2026), and work on municipal, regional and national actors has developed in separate fields. We do not know whether individuals act in the same ways at different levels, or how they act across levels.

The Functional Theory of Agency (FTA) offers a way to address these limits (Capano and Galanti 2018; Capano et al. 2025). It shifts the question from who the actors are to what they do. It distinguishes actors,

who hold formal roles such as mayor, minister, or civil servant, from agents, who act according to specific patterns regardless of their formal role. Drawing on Merton (1968), it argues that four functions must be performed in any policy process: steering, innovation, intermediation and intelligence. Individuals perform them through four patterns of action: leadership, entrepreneurship, brokerage and knowledge accumulation. Patterns are not identity traits: the same person can enact different patterns at different times. In a recent empirical application, Meza and de Alba (2026) find all four functions at work in Mexican local governments and show that political position shapes them without pre-determining unique roles: majority councillors mainly steer and broker in support of the mayor, while opposition councillors innovate, invest in knowledge and build alliances with state and federal actors, but also with the local civic society. This shows that asking what individuals do helps explain change and stability beyond formal roles, especially in multilevel settings where formal rules are weakly enforced.

The panel's scientific relevance lies in three contributions.

- Theoretically, it offers a common language for research traditions that have developed separately, and it links policy process theories with public administration and with local and regional government studies.

- Empirically, it brings together comparative evidence on the individual agency of politicians and bureaucrats at all levels of government.

- Practically, it clarifies what individuals in public office can realistically do, which matters for the design of public organisations and the training of officials.

1.3 Research questions

The panel is organised around five research questions:

1. What do politicians and bureaucrats do when they influence the policy process, and how do their patterns of action compare across roles, policy sectors, countries and levels of government?

2. Which conditions (formal mandates, institutional position, relationships of trust, expert reputation) make the patterns of action of politicians and bureaucrats viable, and do they differ between a municipality, a region or state, and a national government?

3. Why and how do politicians and bureaucrats, as individual agents, select and change their patterns of action during the same process?

4. How does the individual action of politicians and bureaucrats connect to collective actors, to action across levels of government, and to policy outcomes?

5. Which research designs and methods allow us to observe the individual agency of politicians and bureaucrats reliably?

The panel welcomes papers that apply, extend or criticise the FTA, and papers that study individual agency from other perspectives.

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CALL FOR PAPERS

Policies do not make themselves. Behind every agenda, reform and programme are individuals who decide, propose, negotiate, resist and adapt, including mayors, councillors, governors, regional ministers, national politicians, senior officials, middle managers and frontline workers. While theories of the policy process recognise the importance of these individuals, they typically treat them as illustrations of larger forces or as exceptional figures (such as entrepreneurs, brokers and leaders) who emerge when structural explanations are insufficient. This panel invites papers that take individual action seriously, studying it systematically and comparatively.

The panel focuses on individuals in political and bureaucratic roles at all levels of government: municipal, regional, state and national. It asks what these individuals actually do when they influence policy, under what conditions their actions are possible and effective, and what the consequences are for policy stability, change, success and failure. The panel welcomes work that studies politicians and bureaucrats together, because officials often promote ideas and build alliances while politicians often work on technical details:

what individuals do cannot be inferred from the positions they hold.

The panel's main reference point is the Functional Theory of Agency (Capano and Galanti 2018; Capano et al. 2025). According to this theory, four functions must be performed in any policy process: steering, innovation, intermediation, and intelligence. Individuals perform these functions through four patterns of action: leadership, entrepreneurship, brokerage, and knowledge accumulation. The same person can enact different patterns at different moments. Recent empirical work has applied this framework to municipal councillors, demonstrating how political position shapes the functions individuals perform (Meza and de Alba 2026).

However, papers are not required to adopt this framework. The panel welcomes contributions that apply, test, extend or criticise the framework, as well as contributions that study individual agency from other theoretical perspectives.

We invite submissions of theoretical, empirical and methodological papers. Topics may include:

? Patterns of action of politicians and bureaucrats in agenda setting, formulation, decision-making and implementation at any level of government.

? Comparisons between individuals in different positions (for example, majority and opposition, elected and appointed, central and peripheral) and between levels of government.

? The conditions that make individual action by politicians and bureaucrats viable and effective, such as formal mandates, institutional position, relationships of trust, expertise and reputation.

? How and why individuals (politicians and bureaucrats) change their patterns of action during the same policy process.

? The relationship between individual agency (of politicians and bureaucrats) and collective actors, such as parties, social movements, coalitions and other organisations.

? The individual action of politicians and bureaucrats across levels of government, such as local actors mobilising regional or national allies.

? The connection between the individual agency of politicians and bureaucrats and policy outcomes.

? Research designs, data and methods for observing the individual agency of politicians and bureaucrats, such as interviews, elite surveys, network analysis, process tracing, mixed methods and comparative case studies.

Papers based on single cases, comparative designs, and large-N data are equally welcome, as are contributions from all regions of the world.

The panel aims to develop a shared vocabulary for research traditions that have evolved independently (such as policy process theories, public administration and local and regional government studies) and to pave the way for a joint publication.