P57 / Closing the Theory-Practice Gap: What Do Policy Process Theories Offer Policymakers?

Topic : Policy Process Theories

Chair : Hassan Arab (Kuwait University)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Policy process theories help us understand how policies are made, why some issues receive attention while others do not, how actors influence decisions, and why policies change or remain the same. However, an important question remains: How much do these theories actually matter in the real world, and what do they offer to the people involved in policymaking? Though policy process theories are widely used in academic research, the connection between theoretical knowledge and the practical work of policymakers and public administrators deserves further attention.

The panel builds on the substantial literature on policy process theories and evidence-based policymaking. The panel considers the operationalization of policy process theories in producing lessons for policy practitioners. Weible and Cairney (2018; 2015) argue that policy scholars need to break the barrier of knowledge synthesis and move beyond paper-based discussion to communicating with practitioners and producing tangible knowledge. In their book, they apply this perspective to the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF), Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), Cultural Theory (CT), Institutional Collective Action (ICA), Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET), Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD), and the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) (Weible & Cairney, 2021).

Furthermore, this panel focuses on the gap between evidence and policy in terms of policy research and policy practice. This gap has been widely discussed by Nutley and colleagues (2007), who argue that research findings cannot simply be transferred to government and utilized by policy actors. Cairney and colleagues (2016) continued this discussion by claiming that the gap cannot be mended by producing further evidence. Policymakers are boundedly rational and are required to think systematically about issues without adequate tools (Oliver et al., 2014). Junior policy scholars seem to be particularly interested in bridging this gap, but without much guidance or practical tools, they face academic hurdles regarding rigor and validity (Plümer et al., 2025).

Lastly, the applicability and limits of policy process theories were also discussed by Weible and Cairney (2018) in relation to the “new policy science.” Recently, Cairney et al. (2025) and Weible (2025) discussed how contemporary policy process theories are not universally applicable tools; if they do not adapt to developments in science and society, they may become outdated. The authors also warn that these theories were not designed to transform policy or to serve as practical application guides for government agents (Cairney et al., 2016). This research thread is not highly contested, but it remains vague, because the use of theories to address real-world problems is complex. It requires non-scholars to become familiar with scholarly terminology and requires scholars to communicate their systematic findings in accessible ways without sacrificing their conceptual designs (Moyson et al., 2017).

This panel aims to bring policy process scholars together to discuss how their research connects to policy practice. It seeks to explore whether and how theories inform real-world policymaking, how researchers can make their findings more useful to practitioners, and what limits the application of theoretical insights in different political and institutional contexts. Rather than assuming that theories automatically translate into better policies, the panel encourages a discussion of their actual contributions, limitations, and potential for practical application.

The panel will address the following research questions:

1-How do policy process theories help us understand and address real-world policymaking challenges?
2-How can researchers connect theoretical insights to the needs and experiences of policymakers and practitioners?
3-Where can we observe the influence of policy process theories on policymaking, and what 4-happens when these theories have limited practical application?
5-What challenges prevent the application of policy process theories across different political and institutional contexts?
6-How can researchers and practitioners work together to make policy process research more relevant to

practice?

The scientific relevance of this panel lies in its focus on the relationship between theoretical knowledge and real-world policymaking. It encourages scholars to reflect not only on what policy process theories explain, but also on their practical value and limitations. By bringing together different perspectives and experiences, the panel aims to identify opportunities to make policy process research more accessible and useful to practitioners. Ultimately, it seeks to encourage a more meaningful connection between the development of policy process theories and the challenges faced by those working in policymaking and public administration.

References

Cairney, P., & Jones, M. D. (2016). Kingdon's Multiple Streams Approach: What is the empirical impact of this universal theory? Policy Studies Journal, 44(1), 37–58.

Cairney, P., Oliver, K., & Wellstead, A. (2016). To bridge the divide between evidence and policy: Reduce ambiguity as much as uncertainty. Public Administration Review, 76(3), 399–402.

Cairney, P., Fullerton, A. H., Denny, E. S., & Weible, C. M. (2025). Policy process theories in Europe: A survey of who uses them, where, and why. European Policy Analysis, 11(2), 1237–1256.

Moyson, S., Scholten, P., & Weible, C. M. (2017). Policy learning and policy change: Theorizing their relations from different perspectives. Policy and Society, 36(2), 161–177.

Nutley, S. M., Walter, I., & Davies, H. T. O. (2007). Using evidence: How research can inform public services. Policy Press.

Oliver, K., Innvar, S., Lorenc, T., Woodman, J., & Thomas, J. (2014). A systematic review of barriers to and facilitators of the use of evidence by policymakers. BMC Health Services Research, 14, 2.

Plümer, K. D., Mock, M., & Brokqvist, H. (2025). Policy process theory development: Perspectives from European junior scholars. European Policy Analysis, 11(2), 271–292.

Weible, C. M. (2025). The relevance of policy process theories in Europe. European Policy Analysis, 11(2), 144–153.

Weible, C. M., & Cairney, P. (2018). Practical lessons from policy theories. Policy & Politics, 46(2), 183–197.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Closing the Theory–Practice Gap: What Do Policy Process Theories Offer Policymakers?

Policy process theories offer valuable insights into how policies are made, how actors influence decisions, why some issues reach the policy agenda, and how policies change over time. Yet an important question remains: How do these theories connect to the real world, and what do they offer to policymakers and practitioners?

While policy process theories continue to shape academic research, their practical relevance is not always clear. Do these theories inform how policymakers approach problems, engage stakeholders, design policies, or respond to policy challenges? How can researchers ensure that their findings reach beyond academic publications and contribute to policy practice? And what can we learn from cases where theoretical insights have limited application?

This panel invites contributions that explore the relationship between policy process theories and real-world policymaking. We welcome papers examining the practical application, relevance, and limitations of established or emerging policy process theories, including the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET), the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), and other approaches to understanding policy processes.

Contributions may address, but are not limited to, the following themes:

Theory in practice: How policy process theories inform policymaking, policy implementation, and policy change.
Research and practitioners: How academic findings can be translated into practical insights, tools, and recommendations.
Real-world impact: Evidence of whether and how policy process theories influence policy decisions and practices.
Limits of theoretical application: Institutional, political, and contextual factors that shape the relevance of theories across different governance systems.
Beyond academic research: Opportunities to strengthen collaboration between policy scholars,

policymakers, and public administrators.

We welcome conceptual, empirical, and comparative contributions from different policy fields and political contexts. Both successful applications and critical reflections on the limitations of policy process theories are encouraged.

The panel aims to create a space for an open discussion about the practical value of policy process scholarship and how researchers can better connect theoretical insights with the challenges faced by policymakers and practitioners.