P207 / Connecting Public Policy Theories and Concepts to Realities Beyond the West

Topic : Policy Process Theories

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Classic frameworks are essential for analysing public policy. The Advocacy Coalition Framework, the Multiple Streams Framework and Lowi's typology of policies provide valuable general guidance on understanding policy phenomena. However, their explanatory power diminishes when we consider the more context-specific dynamics that characterise policymaking in the Global South.

The field's founding questions, concepts, and theories were based on a limited geography. Public policy, as a discipline, was largely constructed in and for Western liberal democracies (El-Taliawi et al., 2021) and presupposes a specific institutional configuration. This includes professionalised bureaucracies, party systems, formalised interest groups and a clear boundary between the state and the market. Such conditions are mostly found in wealthy, secular, and electorally stable democracies in North America and Western Europe.

Public policy frameworks often fail to adequately explain policymaking in the Global South, where conditions often include poverty, inequality, international dependency, informality, economic instability, and low administrative capacity. The policy process in these regions can also be influenced by context-specific factors such as informal settlements, armed conflict, authoritarian rule and organised crime. While these characteristics are not unique to the Global South, they were largely absent from the empirical settings in which classic approaches were developed.

Some effort has been made to innovate, revise and adjust policy concepts. The idea of 'guanxi' has been used to analyse Chinese foreign policy tools (Xu & Mawdsley, 2025), the notion of 'policy ambassadors' has been used to address human agency in policy diffusion in Brazil (Porto de Oliveira, 2019), and the concept of 'government by default' has been used to study Cameroon. However, more work is needed. This panel emphasises the importance of research connecting established theories with locally grounded knowledge outside the West (Nair & Varma, 2022).

Three questions are addressed: 1. In what ways do classic policy studies concepts and theories fall short in their understanding of the Global South? 2. How can concepts, theories, approaches, and empirical evidence from the Global South expand policy studies? 3. How do concepts born in the Global South travel and become established elsewhere, and what can we learn from this process about the creation of policy theory itself? We are seeking innovative contributions that are empirically robust, methodologically sound and conceptually strong. A publication resulting from the panel is envisaged.

References

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CALL FOR PAPERS

Classic public policy theories, concepts, and frameworks, which were largely developed in the West, have yet to be meaningfully tested against the realities of the Global South. The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) and Lowi's typology of policies (distributive, redistributive and regulatory) provide valuable general guidance on understanding policy phenomena in different contexts. The same can be said of Lasswell's policy cycle (agenda setting, formulation, decision-making, implementation and evaluation). However, such frameworks often fail to adequately explain the policymaking process in the Global South, which is often characterised by poverty, inequality, international dependency, informality, economic instability, and low administrative capacity. The policy process in these regions is also influenced by context-specific factors such as informal settlements, armed conflict, authoritarian rule and organised crime. For example, how can we analyse policymaking in Beirut without considering security and internal displacement? Or public policy in São Tomé and Príncipe or Cabo Verde without considering their archipelagic geography? Or Haiti, Senegal or Gabon without considering international development cooperation? Or Thailand or Indonesia without considering religion? And what about China, where we must consider the nature of the party-state? What about Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela and Bolivia, where we must consider the politics of the Amazon? Traditional policy studies approaches do not adequately address the geographical, political, historical, sociological, cultural, and administrative characteristics of these regions. While these characteristics are not unique to the Global South, they were largely absent from the empirical settings in which classical approaches were developed. This panel emphasises the importance of policy research that connects established theories with locally grounded knowledge and practical experience from outside the West. We are seeking innovative contributions that are not only empirically robust, but also methodologically sound and conceptually strong. We envisage publishing a book containing the papers presented at the panel.