P96 / Contested Greening: Political Struggles over the Boundaries of Public Policy

Topic : Governance, Policy Networks and Coalition

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

For several years, the ecological transition in public policy has faced growing political opposition in Europe: social mobilizations, anti-environmental discourse, and the dismantling of climate policies. This phenomenon is frequently labelled a "backlash" in both the media and the scholarly literature, denoting a hostile reaction to the increased visibility of environmental issues (Bosetti et al., 2025; Paterson, 2023; Patterson et al., 2026; Tallent, 2025). Processes of opposition, delay, and outright opposition to climate policies have also been interpreted as nuances of "climate obstruction" (Edwards et al., 2023; Herranen, 2023; Szulecki et al., 2024).

These categories tend to portray such dynamics as new, even unprecedented, suggesting that the greening of public policy faces an exceptional and singular level of opposition. Yet, a large body of research has long established that contestation, retreat, and policy reversal are recurrent features of the often chaotic and conflictual careers of many public policies. Whether it concerns the definition of public problems or the formulation of policy proposals, governmental agenda-setting is often inseparable from the struggles, conflicts, and power relations that shape their making and implementation. Neither their influence nor their legitimacy can be taken for granted, since both are the product of complex, ongoing work, of multiple actors (Bachrach and Baratz, 1963; Felstiner et al., 1980; Gusfield, 1981; Cobb and Ross, 1997; Chailleux and Zittoun, 2022).

Therefore, the panel examines whether the contestation of greening policies is truly a singular phenomenon, in nature or intensity, or simply a normal process made more visible by the success and politicization of the concepts of “backlash” and “obstruction”. To explore this question, we adopt an agonistic perspective that puts the onus on the struggles structuring policy processes. We examine these contestations as a perpetually renewed struggle, not only over the definition of problems and solutions, but also over the very political ambition of greening policies: to disrupt and redraw the boundaries of more traditional public policies in the name of a greening deemed legitimate.

More specifically, the panel focuses on three types of boundaries that greening policies unsettle. The first concerns the boundaries of problems, as actors struggle to define environmental issues and the legitimate solutions to address them. The second concerns policy boundaries, as greening policies cut across established sectors and challenge the actors who claim ownership over them. The third concerns territorial and social boundaries, as these policies redraw relations between center and periphery and raise new questions of socio-territorial inequality. By examining these boundary struggles, the panel aims to better understand both what is specific to the contestation of greening policies and what it shares with the conflicts that shape policy processes more generally.

CALL FOR PAPERS

The contestation of the greening of public policies has taken centre stage in recent years, leading to many instances of policy suspension, reversal or backsliding. Yet there is a hesitation about the correct way to make sense analytically of such obstruction processes. Are they truly proper to climate and green policies? Or has simply opposition to green public policy become more politicized, and therefore more visible?

Adopting an agonistic perspective on the public policy process, this panel invites papers that examine these contestations as struggles not only over the definition of problems and solutions, but also over the boundaries that greening policies seek to disrupt and redraw.

Three types of boundaries are of particular interest:

Problem Boundaries. Conflicts over greening policies first take the form of definitional struggles, in which each side seeks to impose its own understanding of the issues and delegitimize competing proposals. Contributions may examine conflicts over the ownership of green problems and struggles over the definition of the legitimate solutions. They may also analyze how the formulation, framing, and prioritization of these issues vary across the arenas (political, administrative, media, judicial, etc.) in which these struggles unfold.

Policy Boundaries. By their transversal nature, the greening of public policies challenges the sociopolitical division of space that structures public policies, established interests, and customary modes of resolving conflicts, thereby disrupting the sectoral organization of public administration. Historical "owners" tend to defend fiercely their power and established positions. The "backlash" may thus be read, at least in part, as a sectoral counter-attack against what is perceived as an intrusion into a hitherto protected domain. Proposals may characterize these boundary conflicts and analyze the mobilization dynamics through which actors defend their frontiers.

Territorial and social boundaries. Finally, the panel will address conflicts over center–periphery relations and, more broadly, between territorial and social geographies. Transition policies reshape relations between national and local levels, as well as the perimeters deemed relevant for addressing environmental problems. Like sectoral boundaries, these changes provoke reactions from territorial actors, seeking to preserve existing jurisdictions or rejecting new policies on the grounds of the socio-territorial inequalities they may generate. The panel welcomes well-documented case studies of these struggles at the "boundaries" of greening policies, the forms they take and their consequences. It is also open to innovative theoretical contributions that help better grasp what may be specifically at stake in these policies.