(Virtual) P247 / Digitising the State: Welfare Technologies, State Capacity and the Future of Democratic Accountability

Topic : State and Policy Capacity

Chair : Shikha Chauhan (University of Lucknow)

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

General Objectives
Governments across the world are increasingly reorganising public administration around digital infrastructure, including biometric identification, integrated social registries, direct benefit transfers, interoperable databases and algorithmic systems for eligibility assessment and fraud detection. These instruments are transforming how states identify citizens, allocate resources and deliver public services. Although digitalisation is widely associated with improved efficiency, reduced leakages and enhanced administrative reach, its implications for democratic accountability, inclusion and responsiveness remain contested. Existing scholarship on digital-era governance, administrative capacity and algorithmic governance highlights both the potential of digital technologies to improve public service delivery and their capacity to reproduce exclusion, intensify surveillance and obscure responsibility for administrative decisions.

This panel seeks to examine how digitalisation is reshaping the relationship between state capacity and democracy through a comparative analysis of digital welfare and public service delivery across the Global South and North. It conceptualises state capacity through two interconnected dimensions: administrative reach, understood as the ability to identify, enrol and serve populations at scale, and democratic responsiveness, understood as the ability to recognise grievances, correct errors and make public authority answerable to citizens.

The panel addresses five broad research questions:

1. How and under what institutional conditions does digitalisation enhance administrative capacity while affecting democratic accountability?

2. How do digital identification, social registries and algorithmic decision-making reshape access to welfare, and which groups are most vulnerable to exclusion?

3. How does digital welfare alter the roles of street-level bureaucrats, local representatives, intermediaries and citizens in policy implementation?

4. What mechanisms—including grievance redress, judicial intervention, independent oversight and data-protection safeguards—enable citizens to contest digital administrative decisions?

5. How do political institutions and electoral incentives shape the use of digital welfare for political credit-claiming, executive centralisation and new forms of clientelism?
The panel will explore the hypotheses that digitalisation expands administrative reach more readily than democratic responsiveness; that exclusionary outcomes depend not only on technological design but also on institutional arrangements and the availability of effective remedies; and that digital systems can either centralise political authority or strengthen accountability, depending on the distribution of decision-making power and oversight.

Its scientific relevance lies in bringing public policy implementation, comparative state capacity, digital governance and democratic accountability into a common analytical framework. Combining qualitative fieldwork, comparative case studies, legal and policy analysis, and quantitative evaluation, the panel will generate cross-regional insights into when digitalisation produces inclusive and accountable governance and when it creates technically efficient yet democratically unresponsive states.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Call for Papers: Digital State Capacity and Democratic Accountability
Digital technologies are increasingly embedded in the everyday operations of the state. Biometric

identification, digital welfare platforms, integrated beneficiary databases, direct benefit transfers and algorithmic decision-making are transforming how governments implement policies and interact with citizens. Yet the expansion of digital administrative capacity raises fundamental questions about inclusion, accountability and democratic control. When public services are mediated by databases and automated rules, who is responsible when citizens are excluded? Does the removal of intermediaries improve access, or does it weaken the channels through which citizens communicate grievances and demand accountability?

This panel invites theoretical, empirical and methodological contributions examining the relationship between digital state capacity and democratic accountability. We welcome comparative research from South Asia, Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, Australia and other regions, including studies of both successful digital reforms and initiatives associated with exclusion, administrative failure or political contestation.

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

1. Digital welfare delivery, direct benefit transfers and the political economy of public service provision.
2. Biometric identification, social registries, data governance, privacy and surveillance. Algorithmic decision-making, automated eligibility assessment and errors in welfare allocation.
3. The changing roles of street-level bureaucrats, local representatives, intermediaries and civil society.
4. Digital exclusion, social inequalities and citizens' experiences of negotiating or resisting state systems.
5. Grievance redress, judicial intervention, administrative appeals and institutional oversight.
6. Executive centralisation, political credit-claiming, electoral incentives and digital clientelism.
7. Comparative approaches to measuring administrative reach, policy effectiveness and democratic responsiveness.

We particularly encourage contributions that connect technological design with institutional arrangements, policy implementation and citizens' lived experiences. Methodologies may include ethnographic and field-based research, comparative case studies, quantitative evaluation, mixed-methods analysis, policy tracing and legal or institutional analysis.

The panel seeks to develop a comparative framework for understanding when digitalisation strengthens state capacity without undermining democratic accountability, and when improvements in administrative efficiency come at the expense of inclusion and responsiveness. Contributions that advance theoretical debates while generating actionable insights for public policy design and implementation are especially welcome.

Researchers at different career stages and scholars working across disciplinary and geographical boundaries are encouraged to submit proposals.