P177 / Evaluating Public Policy Transitions: Governance, Learning and Democratic Challenges

Topic : Policy Evaluation

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Climate change, biodiversity loss, resource scarcity and energy security are increasingly understood as complex public policy problems (Auld et al., 2012 ; Head, 2023). Such challenges are characterised by epistemic uncertainty, controversy, multiple and often competing objectives, long time horizons, interdependencies across policy sectors and levels of government, and interactions among a wide range of public and private actors. Addressing these problems requires governments to act under conditions of incomplete knowledge while simultaneously adapting policies to changing contexts and societal expectations. These characteristics have fuelled growing interest in policy learning, policy capacity and adaptive governance within public policy research (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013; Howlett & Ramesh, 2015; Dupont et al., 2023).

At the same time, these developments challenge conventional approaches to public policy evaluation. Evaluation frameworks have traditionally been designed to assess relatively bounded interventions with clearly defined objectives, stable causal assumptions and measurable outcomes. Yet complex policy problems rarely conform to these conditions. Outcomes emerge through interactions among multiple policies, organisations and contextual factors; objectives evolve over time; and causal relationships are often difficult to identify. In response, evaluation research has increasingly engaged with complexity through approaches such as developmental evaluation, systems evaluation, reflexive evaluation, contribution analysis and complexity-aware monitoring and evaluation (Patton, 2011; Leeuw, 2012; Bamberger, Vaessen & Raimondo, 2016; Nabielek and Kunseler, 2026). Rather than focusing exclusively on accountability and performance measurement or relying solely on expert-led assessments, these approaches emphasise learning, adaptation, reflexivity and decision-making under conditions of uncertainty.

This “complexity turn” in evaluation research resonates strongly with recent developments in public policy scholarship (Cashore, forth). Research on policy learning has examined how policymakers, administrations and stakeholders acquire, interpret and use knowledge in situations characterised by ambiguity, contestation and uncertainty (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013; Dupont et al., 2023). Similarly, the literature on policy capacity has highlighted the analytical, operational and political capabilities required to design, coordinate and adapt policies addressing complex and systemic challenges (Howlett & Ramesh, 2015). Recent contributions in evaluation research have further argued that evaluation should be understood not only as an accountability mechanism, but also as means of supporting adaptive governance, learning and capacity-building (Pattyn, 2019).

The panel aims to contribute to ongoing debates on how governments can develop the capacities required to govern transformative change while safeguarding democratic legitimacy, accountability and collective learning. It addresses the following question: what role can evaluation play in strengthening governance, policy learning and policy capacity in contexts of long-term systemic change? Three hypotheses guide the discussion. First, public policy transitions challenge conventional evaluation approaches as well as the underlying rationales for evaluation (Stern, 2024), which often rely on predefined objectives, stable and linear causal assumptions and short-term performance indicators. Second, evaluation can support policy learning by generating knowledge that enables adaptation, experimentation and coordination under conditions of uncertainty. Third, evaluation may contribute to policy capacity and adaptive governance by strengthening governments’ ability to analyse, navigate and govern complex processes of transformative change.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Climate change, biodiversity loss, energy transitions and resource governance are increasingly understood as complex public policy challenges. Characterised by uncertainty, multiple objectives, long time horizons and interactions across actors and governance levels, these challenges raise important questions about how governments learn, adapt and build the capacities required to steer transformative change.

Recent developments in evaluation research have responded to these challenges through approaches that move beyond conventional performance measurement and accountability frameworks as well as expert-led evaluations. Developmental and reflexive evaluation, contribution analysis, systems approaches and other complexity-oriented methods increasingly seek to support learning, adaptation and decision-making under conditions of uncertainty. Yet important questions remain regarding the contribution of evaluation to the governance of public policy transitions, and how transformation-focused evaluation can become institutionalized.

This panel aims to foster dialogue between public policy research, transition studies and evaluation scholarship by examining three complementary dimensions of evaluating public policy transitions : 1) Evaluation of public policy transitions, examining how transition processes challenge conventional evaluation frameworks and require renewed reflection on the purposes, instruments and knowledge claims of evaluation. 2) Policy learning through the evaluation of public policy transitions, exploring under what conditions and how evaluation can support learning, adaptation, experimentation and coordination in contexts characterised by uncertainty and systemic change. 3) Policy capacity through the evaluation of public policy transitions, analysing how evaluation contributes to the analytical, operational and political capacities required to govern transformative change.

Papers addressing one or several of the following issues, whether conceptually, methodologically or empirically are welcome:

· Evaluation of public policy transitions and transformative change;

· Policy evaluation and policy learning / policy adaptation;

· Policy evaluation to foster policy capacity and state capabilities;

· Policy evaluation and transition governance;

· Policy evaluation and evaluation systems under complexity and uncertainty;

· Evaluation in multi-level and multi-actor governance systems;

· Democratic, participatory and deliberative functions of evaluating transition policies ;

· Evaluating transition policies as a governance instrument;

· Comparative approaches to evaluating transition policies;