P237 / From Imaginaries to Policies: How Illiberal Imaginaries Shape the Policy Process

Topic : Discourses, Ideas, and Narratives

Chair : Eva M. Hejzlarová (Charles University Prague)

Second Chair : Karel Cada

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

The central question of this panel is whether and how the rise of illiberal actors is reshaping established policy-making processes and institutions, and whether the conceptual tools developed within mainstream policy process research remain adequate for explaining policy-making under these new political conditions (Kingdon 1995; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith 1999; Baumgartner & Jones 1993). Building on recent scholarship on illiberalism and democratic backsliding, the panel seeks to bring the study of illiberal political projects into closer dialogue with public policy research by examining how illiberal ideas, actors, and governing practices affect the formulation, adoption, and implementation of public policies (Laruelle 2022; Varga & Buzogány 2021).

Since illiberal voices have recently risen to power across many democratic countries, it is crucial to understand their impact on policy processes and public policies. Among the range of analytical perspectives that can be used to study this phenomenon, we focus on social imaginaries. Social imaginaries (Castoriadis 1997, Laclau 1990, 2005, Taylor 2004, Beckert & Bronk 2018, Císa? & Kolmaš 2026) are ways people imagine their social existence, the expectations they normally hold of one another, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie those expectations.

In the panel, we focus on illiberal imaginaries. Drawing on Laruelle's (2022) conceptualization, we view illiberalism as a reaction against contemporary liberalism across multiple domains. Such dynamics entail the reinterpretation of key liberal concepts, including freedom, democracy, and rights, which become invested with new and often profoundly illiberal meanings (Krzy?anowski & Krzy?anowska, 2024). However, we are not interested in illiberal imaginaries per se, but in their policy consequences and in bringing the study of illiberalism closer to public policy scholarship. We examine the impact of these imaginaries at three main levels: (1) at the level of the formulation of political problems and solutions – what these imaginaries perceive as a problem, and what solutions they propose; (2) at the level of public administration – what institutional policies, the structure of administrative processes, and the politicisation and depoliticisation of public policy-making entail; and, last but not least, (3) at the level of the imagination of the political system and the nature of sound policy-making.

The panel has a cross-cutting nature and aims to bring together what we know about the effects of illiberal governments on policies, specifically on the individual stages of the policy process. Our aim here is neither description nor normativity, but rather to advance our understanding of how illiberalism is relevant to policy-making and to the scholarship. Although developments such as the weakening of institutional checks and balances or the increasing use of coercive policy instruments raise important normative concerns from a liberal democratic perspective (Schneider & Ingram 1997), our primary interest is analytical rather than evaluative. We ask what public policy scholars can learn from examining how policies are formulated and implemented in illiberal contexts.

CALL FOR PAPERS

While empirical analyses are particularly welcome, we encourage contributors to situate their findings within broader debates on policy processes, governance, and democratic change. We are especially interested in how observations from illiberal settings can inform, challenge, refine, or extend existing theories of the policy process. In this regard, contributions should speak not only to the specific characteristics of illiberal policy-making, but also to the broader question of whether and how the rise of illiberal actors is reshaping established policy-making processes and institutions, and whether the conceptual tools developed within mainstream policy process research remain adequate for understanding policy-making under these new political conditions.
Contributions may address questions such as:

- What problems and policy solutions are articulated through illiberal imaginaries (ii)?
- How do ii shape policy agendas, institutions, and administrative practices?

- How do ii affect the politicisation and depoliticisation of policy-making?
- What visions of the state, governance, and political order do ii promote?
- How do ii redefine the principles of legitimate and effective policy-making?
- What are the implications of these transformations for public policy processes and outcomes?
- To what extent do these developments challenge, confirm, or require revisions to established theories of the policy process?

We are interested in papers that examine this phenomenon from various perspectives, ranging from discursive analyses of texts and utterances, through studies based on qualitative interviews and questionnaires with policy-makers, to ethnographic observations of lived experiences with policy-making. We are interested in the impact of illiberal policies on various sectors and at different governance levels. The panel is open to both academic research and insights from public policy practitioners. We welcome scholars at various stages of their careers.

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