P157 / Governing by Technique. Technocracy, Policy Instruments and Policymaking in Local Governments

Topic : Knowledge, Science and Expertise in Policy Process

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Context. Local governments now make policy through a dense layer of technical intermediaries: senior municipal and metropolitan officials, agencies and publicly owned companies, consultancies, data and modelling firms, evaluators, policy advisors, advocates, audit bodies, and the professional communities that design indicators, contracts and plans. National recovery plans, European funding conditionality, climate adaptation, digital platforms and, more recently, artificial intelligence have multiplied the instruments through which cities plan, allocate and evaluate. These instruments travel with the experts who know how to operate them. Technocracy has become an ordinary condition of local policymaking, rather than an exception reserved for crises or central executives.

State of the art. Research on technocracy has mostly examined national executives, central banks, independent authorities and expert governments (Radaelli 1999; Esmark 2020; Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti 2021), and has framed the question as a trade off between output legitimacy and democratic accountability. The sociology of policy instruments offers another entry point. Instruments are not neutral tools: each carries a theory of the problem, a representation of the target population and a distribution of power among actors (Lascoumes and Le Galès 2007). Technique and politics are produced together in the choice, design and use of instruments. These two literatures rarely meet at the local scale, where the boundaries between elected officials, administrators and external experts are thinner, more personal and less codified, and where technical choices bear directly on who gets housing, care, water or public space.

Research question. The panel asks how technocrats (in a broad sense) and instruments shape local policymaking, and under which conditions they widen or narrow the space for democratic choice. We treat technocracy in the plural, as a configuration of actors, knowledge and instruments whose effects depend on the institutional field in which it is embedded.

Hypotheses. We propose three working hypotheses. First, at the local level technocratic influence works less through formal delegation than through instrument design: indicators, eligibility rules, procurement criteria, algorithms and evaluation frameworks fix the terms of choice before elected bodies deliberate. Second, technocratisation can depoliticise distributive conflict by turning claims on resources into procedural questions of compliance, optimisation and performance; contested demands persist, redirected toward technical arenas where fewer actors can intervene. Third, the democratic effects of technocracy vary with the capacity of local administrations, the plurality of expertise mobilised, the reversibility of instruments and the presence of independent expertise held by unions, associations, residents and opposition parties. Under some configurations technical knowledge strengthens accountability and policy learning; under others it locks in choices and shields them from contestation.

Bringing together policy science, political sociology, public administration and local government studies, the panel moves the debate on technocracy from the central to the local state, and from a normative opposition between experts and democracy to an empirical analysis of how technique and politics are assembled in public action.

CALL FOR PAPERS

The panel welcomes theoretically informed empirical papers, based on single cases or comparisons, on local and metropolitan governments in Europe and beyond. Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods designs are equally welcome. We particularly invite contributions on:

· the mapping of local technocratic arenas: who the experts are, how they are recruited, and how their careers move between administration, politics, consultancy and academia;

· the design, choice and use of policy instruments in local policies (plans, indicators, contracts, budgets, platforms, data, algorithmic and AI tools) and the political work these instruments perform;

· the relationship between elected executives and senior officials, city managers, municipal companies and

technocratic agencies in policy formulation and implementation;

· the role of courts of auditors, administrative courts, control bodies and independent authorities in shaping what local governments can decide;

· the uses of external expertise and consultancy in the local implementation of national recovery plans and European funds;

· technocratic depoliticisation and repoliticisation in local welfare, housing, water, climate and urban regeneration policies;

· participatory and deliberative devices as technical instruments, and the conditions under which they open or close policy choices;

· comparative research on how administrative traditions and multilevel arrangements condition the democratic effects of local technocracy;

· the impact of technocratic policymaking on local democracy towards either progress or a step backwards in terms of accountability and the capacity to act as an intermediary between citizens and institutions

Papers may address any policy field, provided the analysis attends to the local or metropolitan scale. We are especially interested in research that follows an instrument through its whole trajectory, from framing and adoption to routine use by street level bureaucrats and effects on target populations, and in comparisons of cities where the same instrument produced different outcomes. Papers should state their research question, their empirical material and the mechanism they identify. Authors may present in Rennes or online, according to IPPA rules for on site panels.