P196 / Governing with data: a political sociology of data in local public policies

Topic : Policy Design, Formulation & Instruments

Chair : Antoine Courmont (Université Gustave Eiffel, France)

Second Chair : Patrick Le Galès (Sciences Po Paris)

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

This panel examines data as a political and sociological object of urban governance.

Over the past two decades, urban governments have faced a sustained injunction to digitise and to ground their action in data. From the smart city to urban digital twins and now artificial intelligence, these developments have come with a discourse on evidence-based policy that presents data as a resource for steering, evaluating and legitimising public action. The empirical record is uneven: dashboards are abandoned, platforms remain underused, and expected gains often fail to materialise. Meanwhile, data have become a central medium for four sets of relations: those between central and local administrations, those between public authorities and private actors producing data and digital services for them, those internal to local administrations between different departments and elected officials, and relations between local bureaucracies and citizens. This panel takes data as an empirical entry point into transformations of urban governance and policymaking. It asks three questions: 1) how does the governance of data redistribute capacities, and modify resources and power relations in public policies and 2) under what conditions do data become instruments of government and 3) how do attempts to govern data implicate transformations in broader governance arrangements?

A first line of inquiry concerns multilevel governance. Data can operate as instruments through which central states observe, evaluate, incentivise or discipline local authorities. Indicators, reporting obligations, benchmarking exercises, national platforms and algorithmic targeting may strengthen the steering capacity of central administrations. Conversely, local governments may use data to demonstrate performance, negotiate resources, defend autonomy or contest central categorisations. The panel welcomes papers analysing how data reshape central–local relations, including tensions between standardisation and territorial differentiation, accountability and autonomy, measurement and discretion.

A second line concerns public–private relations. Data infrastructures depend on technology firms, platform companies, consultancies, cloud providers, data brokers and civic-tech actors. Local authorities may procure data, negotiate access to privately generated data, outsource analytics, or enter into partnerships to develop digital services. These arrangements raise questions of dependency, sovereignty, accountability and value distribution. Papers may examine how municipalities negotiate with private providers, how public interests are defined and defended in data contracts, and how private data become enrolled in public policy.

A third line concerns state capacity and the situated conditions of data actionability. Data do not automatically produce knowledge or govern action, and not for all actors equally. They must be collected, cleaned, standardised, secured, interpreted and embedded in organisational routines. This work depends on professional expertise, technical infrastructures, legal frameworks, budgetary resources and political support. The panel invites contributions on the practices through which data become meaningful—or remain inert—for different actors within local administrations.

Fourth, urban governments develop platforms to rationalise access to services, to organise consultation or to enable citizens to report problems, hence changing relations between citizens and urban governments and enabling more reactive policy interventions.

By combining these perspectives across cities, sectors and types of data, the panel aims to strengthen the political sociology of data in local public policies.

CALL FOR PAPERS

The panel welcomes papers that use data, data infrastructures and data projects as an entry point for

analysing the transformations of local public policy and governance. We are particularly interested in empirically grounded contributions based on fine-grained case studies of specific projects, services or policy sectors (mobility, housing, environment, energy, social policy, urban planning, public safety, etc.). Comparative papers across cities, countries or sectors are especially welcome, as are studies of projects that were abandoned, scaled down or reoriented.

Contributions may address one or more of the following dimensions:

- The data imperative and its circulation: how the smart city, digital twins, evidence-based policy or AI reach local governments, through which intermediaries, and with what effects on local agendas.

- Data and multilevel governance: the role of indicators, reporting systems, national data platforms and data-conditioned funding in the steering of local authorities by central administrations, and the ways local actors appropriate, negotiate or resist them.

- Data and public-private relations: data partnerships, procurement, dependence on platforms and vendors, the role of consultancies, and what they reveal about the changing boundaries of public action.

- The terms and conditions of actionability: the actors, skills, organisational arrangements, instruments and infrastructures that make data usable in local policy implementation, or that impede their use, for different actors and in service of different objectives.

- The historicisation of local regimes of quantification: how current data projects relate to earlier waves of statistical and informational modernisation of local government, and the way these histories constrain or afford different relationships with data in the present.

- The experience of platforms to transform access to public policies, public policy interventions and modes of concertations.

We invite papers from political science, sociology, geography, urban studies, public administration and science and technology studies, using a variety of methods. Papers should make explicit the empirical material on which they rely.