P120 / In|formality, (In)formality, informality: discussions and developments in policy

Topic : Bureaucracy, Administration and Policy Process

Chair : Joanna Mason (University of Sydney)

Second Chair : Tamara Mulherin (University of Edinburgh)

Third Chair : Lianne Visser (Institute of Public Administration - Leiden University)

Fourth Chair : Lindsey Garner-Knapp (University of Sussex)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Policy actors spend considerable time writing policy, advising politicians, eliciting stakeholder views on policy concerns, and implementing initiatives. Yet, they also converse in cars, meet for dinners, and have discussions in hallways. They have informal discussions before formal meetings or share a drink afterwards to make sense of what happened in formal negotiations (Stubbs, 2015). How such activities contribute to policymaking is frequently overlooked in favour of portraying policy as being rational, analytical, scientific, and developed in an orderly sequence of stages (Laswell, 1956; Simon, 1972; Stone, 2022). Informality, meanwhile, is often equated with state malfunctioning, illegitimate, or undemocratic or is described as the 'back-stage' to the formal 'front-stage' or as invisibilised from formal policy making processes (i.e., Ayres et al., 2017; Christiansen & Neuhold, 2012; Kleine, 2013; Lipsky, 2010).

Public policy research has long contested this presumed order and rationality, opening up to alternative perspectives of formal and informal. Such insights are relevant today, given the interactive dimensions in contemporary policy theorising, including New Public Governance, co-production of services, and collaborative policy making (Cairney & Toomey, 2024; Durose, 2016; Osborne, 2010; Osborne et al., 2016) whereby policy emerges through relational configurations of people, places, and processes. The concept of informality garners some lustre here and important work has pointed to the informal in policy work (Bevir & Rhodes, 2001; Colebatch, 2014; Lindblom, 1959; Metze, 2010; Yanow, 1996), yet empirical studies have been limited in their explorations of how and why the informal actually matters. We argue that understanding everyday policymaking requires attention to how the informal acquires meaning, what it produces, and how formal and informal are entwined and coproduced.

This panel seeks to extend the theoretical, methodological and empirical insights of the volume '*Informality in Policymaking: Weaving the Threads of Everyday Policy Work*' (Garner-Knapp et al., 2024, 2026) and asks how informality can be applied in adjacent and complementary areas within public policy, public administration and governance. In the volume, we resist a binary or fixed understanding of formality and informality and instead attend to its fluidity and trace how it is interwoven into everyday policy work and its human and non-human enactment. Informality, from this standpoint, is not a property of particular practices, materials, or spaces, but acquires meaning through enactment in situ; it is locally and historically situated. By focusing on what people do and say as a lens to understanding the meaning-making of policy actors and policy subjects, informality acquires meaning that resonates with professional practices in public administration and institutions. Thus, what is perceived to be informal in one context or situation can differ from another, and even within a context, multiple understandings of what is informal can coexist.

This panel encourages authors to critically engage in theoretical debates on what informality means in context to better understand and address real-world policy processes, practices, and challenges.

Garner-Knapp, L., Mason, J., Mulherin, T., & Visser, E. L. (2024). *Informality in Policymaking: Weaving the Threads of Everyday Policy Work*.

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel invites scholars to explore what informality means and affords in their own research domains. We welcome theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions examining how informal practices, materials, and spaces are produced, and how informality manifests differently across contexts (e.g. spaces, places, and policy arenas), values, and circumstances.

We invite abstracts that consider how the informal in policymaking emerges as an assemblage of shared knowledge, exchanged ideas, negotiations, and inclusion of other formative practices deployed by actors in

multiplicities of contexts. By foregrounding the material realities of policy work – the doings and sayings of policy – papers will contribute novel and relevant insights for both policy practitioners and policy scholars.

Possible questions include:

· How do informal exchanges shape formal decisions, policy implementation, or collaboration between organisations?

· How do actors distinguish between formal and informal practices, and when do these distinctions change or become contested?

· What roles do documents, meeting spaces, and other material arrangements play in connecting formal and informal policy work?

· How does informality manifest differently across organisational settings, policy arenas, or political and administrative contexts?

· How can researchers study informal practices that are difficult to observe or absent from official records?

We welcome scholars from diverse backgrounds and methodological approaches.

Ayres, S., Sandford, M., & Coombes, T. (2017). Policy-making ‘front’ and ‘back’ stage: Assessing the implications for effectiveness and democracy. The British Journal of Politics and International Relations, 19(4), 861-876.

Bevir, M., & Rhodes, R. A. (2001). Decentering tradition: interpreting British government. Administration & Society, 33(2), 107-132.

Cairney, P., & Toomey, C. (2024). Collaborative Policymaking: a qualitative systematic review of advice for policymakers. Open Research Europe, 4(204).

Christiansen, T., & Neuhold, C. (2012). International handbook on informal governance.

Colebatch, H. K. (2014). Interpretation in the Analysis of Policy. Australian Journal of Public Administration, 73(3), 349-356. Durose, C. (2016). Designing public policy for co-production: theory, practice and change.

Kleine, M. (2013). Informal governance in the European Union: How governments make international organizations work. Laswell, H. D. (1956). The decision process. Bureau of Governmental Research, University of Maryland.

Lindblom, C. E. (1959). The science of" muddling through". Public Administration Review, 79-88.

Lipsky, M. (2010). Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public service. Russell sage foundation.

Metze, T. (2010). New Life for Old Buildings: Mediating Between Different Meanings. Working for policy, 75.

Osborne, S. P. (2010). The new public governance? : emerging perspectives on the theory and practice of public governance.

Osborne, S. P., Radnor, Z., & Strokosch, K. (2016). Co-Production and the Co-Creation of Value in Public Services: A suitable case for treatment? Public Management Review, 18(5), 639-653.

Simon, H. A. (1972). Theories of bounded rationality. Decision and organization, 1(1), 161-176.

Stone, D. A. (2022). Policy paradox: The art of political decision making.

Stubbs, P. (2015). Performing reform in south east Europe: Consultancy, translation and flexible agency. Making policy move: Towards a politics of translation and assemblage, 65-93.

Yanow, D. (1996). How does a policy mean?: interpreting policy and organizational actions.