P273 / Learning by Doing: Adaptive, Iterative and Agile Approaches to Public Policy

Topic : Policy Design, Formulation & Instruments

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Public policy is increasingly made under conditions of complexity, deep uncertainty and turbulence, in which problems shift faster than conventional policy cycles can respond. A family of approaches has emerged that treats policy as a working hypothesis to be revised through experience. Adaptive governance (Dietz, Ostrom & Stern, 2003; Folke et al., 2005; Chaffin, Gosnell & Cosens, 2014), adaptive policymaking and dynamic adaptive policy pathways (Walker, Rahman & Cave, 2001; Haasnoot et al., 2013), experimentalist governance (Sabel & Zeitlin, 2010), problem-driven iterative adaptation (Andrews, Pritchett & Woolcock, 2017), agile government (Mergel, Gong & Bertot, 2018) and robust governance (Ansell, Sørensen & Torfing, 2023) all emphasise iteration, feedback and learning, and several also favour greater discretion for actors closer to delivery. These principles are also becoming increasingly commonplace in practice, as governments across jurisdictions adopt experimental, iterative, and agile ways of working within policy programmes.

As these principles become embedded in both scholarship and practice, there is value in fostering dialogue between these literatures, which span environmental governance, policy analysis, EU and regulatory studies, development studies, digital government and public management, as well as between them and policy process theory. The panel pursues three directions for this dialogue. The first is conceptual: clarifying how adaptive, iterative, agile and experimentalist approaches relate to one another and to established concepts such as policy learning, design, capacity and change, as a foundation for more cumulative and impactful theorising (Janssen & van der Voort, 2016). The second is explanatory: treating adaptiveness both as an outcome, asking how and why governments come to work in these ways, and as a driver of outcomes, asking what difference it makes to policy effectiveness, accountability and legitimacy. Both matter for practitioners seeking to embed these approaches. The third concerns measurement: developing robust ways to observe adaptive ways of working within organisations and adaptive policymaking more broadly, linking both to outcomes.

The panel asks: How can adaptive, iterative and agile governance be conceptualised, distinguished and compared? Under what conditions do governments adopt and sustain these ways of working? With what consequences for policy outcomes, accountability and democratic legitimacy? And how can they be measured?

The panel explores four propositions. First, greater conceptual clarity across these approaches enables stronger connections with policy process theories and more transferable lessons across sectors. Second, the adoption and institutionalisation of adaptive approaches are shaped by the interplay between agency, including leadership and entrepreneurship, and the institutional settings, instruments and accountability regimes within which they operate. Third, the effects of adaptiveness on policy outcomes vary with the nature of the policy problem, organisational capacities and levels of uncertainty. Fourth, systematic observation and measurement of adaptiveness enable comparison across sectors and countries and help link adaptive ways of working to their outcomes.

The panel’s scientific relevance lies in bringing a growing and diverse body of work into conversation with policy process theory, and in building a shared comparative agenda on how governments learn, adapt and change the way they govern.

CALL FOR PAPERS

We invite theoretical, empirical and methodological papers that advance understanding of adaptive, iterative and agile governance across policy sectors, levels of government and political systems. We welcome contributions from public policy, public administration, public management, environmental governance, development studies, digital government and science and technology studies, and particularly encourage papers that bring these literatures into dialogue with theories of the policy process. The panel responds to growing interest among scholars and practitioners in governance that learns, and to a corresponding need for evidence on what adaptive approaches involve in practice and what they achieve. We therefore seek

papers that treat adaptiveness as an object of explanation, how it emerges and how it works, as well as an explanatory factor, what difference it makes. Papers may address, but are not limited to:
• conceptual work distinguishing adaptive, agile, iterative, experimentalist and robust governance, and relating them to policy learning, design, capacity and change;
• probe-and-learn approaches, experimentation, policy labs, pilots and trials, and the conditions under which their lessons are scaled, institutionalised or abandoned;
• agile methods in digital government and their diffusion beyond IT and service design into policy formulation;

• the organisational cultures, skills and capabilities that adaptive ways of working require, including the role of frontline staff, delivery partners and citizens in shaping iteration on the ground;

• adaptive governance in collaborative and multi-level settings, including partnerships across government, delivery organisations and civil society;
• adaptive governance under crisis, deep uncertainty and climate change, including adaptive policy pathways and anticipatory governance;
• tensions between adaptiveness and accountability, performance management, budgeting and audit, and their implications for democratic legitimacy;
• policy entrepreneurship, leadership and intermediaries in adaptive transformation;
• the relationship between adaptive governance, evidence use, evaluation and learning loops;
• approaches to observing and measuring adaptiveness and agility;
• comparative studies across countries and sectors, including the Global South.
We welcome single and comparative case studies, qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods designs, and practitioner-academic collaborations. Papers drawing on interviews, ethnography, participant observation, document analysis or quantitative indicators are all welcome. Papers combining conceptual clarity with rich empirical material are especially encouraged.