P95 / Measuring policy design dimensions: Effectiveness, capacity, and robustness

Topic : Policy Design, Formulation & Instruments

Chair : Mario De Rosa (Università di Bologna)

Second Chair : Lorenzo Eaco (Università di Bologna)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Policy design scholarship has shifted from individual instruments to the quality of design itself (Howlett, 2019): not only whether policies are adopted, but whether they can be implemented, can work, and remain functional as conditions change. In an era of crises and uncertainty, performance can no longer be inferred from initial adoption or formal features alone.
Three dimensions are central to this debate, touching on different aspects, time stages, and actors captured by the overarching literature on policy design. Effectiveness concerns the extent to which a policy achieves its goals and addresses the targeted problem over time (Bali et al., 2019). Policy capacity refers to the analytical, operational, and political skills and resources required to perform policy functions (Wu et al., 2015). Robustness refers to the ability of policy and institutional arrangements to remain functional while adapting to surprise and changing conditions (Howlett et al., 2018; Capano & Woo, 2017).
Despite these advances, two limitations persist. First, measurement: consolidated frameworks and comparable indicators are still scarce, and empirical studies often rely on adoption, statutory content, or single-case assessments, which are necessary but insufficient evidence of realized performance. Recent work points to the need to move from single instruments to policy portfolios, from design at enactment to post-enactment “policy life”, and from capacity as background condition to capacity as causal mechanism. Second, interaction: effectiveness, capacity, and robustness are typically studied separately, so little is known about how they reinforce or constrain one another.
The panel is therefore guided by the following research question: how can effectiveness, policy capacity, and robustness be conceptualized and measured in comparable ways, and how do they interact in shaping the quality of policy design?
Contributions may engage with four research propositions. P1 (measurement): indicators incorporating realized outputs and post-enactment dynamics assess design quality more accurately than indicators based solely on formal features. P2 (complementarity): higher policy capacity increases both effectiveness and robustness. P3 (trade-offs): greater reliance on established capacities increases rigidity, while flexibility supporting robustness reduces short-term effectiveness. P4 (contingency): robustness contributes more strongly to effectiveness under greater turbulence and over longer time horizons.
The panel brings theoretical, methodological, and empirical work into one conversation, aiming to clarify the mechanisms through which policy design works and how its dimensions can be compared across context. Sessions will close with a collective discussion on a cumulative research agenda.

References:
Bali, A. S., Capano, G., & Ramesh, M. (2019). Anticipating and designing for policy effectiveness. Policy and Society, 38(1), 1-13.
Capano, G., & Woo, J. J. (2017). Resilience and robustness in policy design: A critical appraisal. Policy Sciences, 50(3), 399-426.
Howlett, M. (2019). Designing public policies: Principles and instruments (2nd ed.). Routledge.
Howlett, M., Capano, G., & Ramesh, M. (2018). Designing for robustness: Surprise, agility and improvisation in policy design. Policy and Society, 37(4), 405-421.
Wu, X., Ramesh, M., & Howlett, M. (2015). Policy capacity: A conceptual framework for understanding policy competences and capabilities. Policy and Society, 34(3-4), 165-171.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Policy design has become increasingly relevant in public policy studies, particularly in contexts characterized by turbulence, uncertainty, and crises. Despite theoretical advances, significant gaps remain in measuring policy design dimensions and in systematically understanding their reciprocal interactions. Three dimensions appear particularly relevant for assessing the quality of policy design: effectiveness, policy capacity, and robustness. Effectiveness concerns the extent to which a policy achieves its stated

goals and addresses the problem it is designed to solve over time. Policy capacity refers to the set of skills and resources necessary to perform policy functions. Robustness concerns the capacity of institutional and policy arrangements to maintain functionality while adapting to uncertain and evolving conditions. However, literature still presents two major limitations. On the one hand, consolidated empirical frameworks and systematic indicators for comparably measuring these dimensions across different institutional contexts, policy sectors, and time periods are lacking or are only recently emerging. On the other hand, the interactions between effectiveness, capacity, and robustness remain largely unexplored, as existing research often treats these dimensions separately.

This panel aims to fill this gap in two ways. On the one hand, it welcomes theoretical, methodological, and empirical papers advancing the conceptualization and measurement of policy effectiveness, policy capacity, and policy robustness. On the other hand, it includes contributions exploring the interrelationships, trade-offs, and possible complementarities among these dimensions through both theoretical and empirical analyses. In particular:

Conceptual and theoretical developments regarding effectiveness, policy capacity, and robustness.
Methodological innovations for measuring policy design dimensions.
Empirical studies effectively operationalize policy design dimensions.
Comparative analyses across policy sectors, institutional contexts, or time periods.

No specific policy sector is required, and contributions from different policy domains are welcome. The panel particularly encourages submissions from early-career scholars and researchers working outside of the influence of North American and European policy process theories and from the Global South.