P131 / Mobilising Public Officials to Change Public Policies: A Perspective on Policy Change through Professional Mobilisation Devices

Topic : Bureaucracy, Administration and Policy Process

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

How do public authorities bring about policy change by mobilising public officials? While policy studies have developed sophisticated accounts of policy change, and political sociology has extensively investigated bureaucratic practices and public officials, the mechanisms connecting these processes remain insufficiently explored. This panel seeks to bring these perspectives into closer dialogue by examining how public authorities, whether political or administrative, mobilise administrative personnel to contribute to the transformation of public policies through professional mobilisation devices.

Political science has approached policy change through a variety of theoretical frameworks. Historical institutionalism has highlighted gradual processes of institutional transformation, including layering, conversion and drift (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). Policy process theories have examined the role of institutional configurations, advocacy coalitions, policy entrepreneurs and shifting political opportunities in explaining policy change (Kingdon, 1995; Sabatier and Weible, 2014; Mintrom and Norman, 2009). These approaches have illuminated how policy agendas emerge, how reforms gain political traction and how established policy arrangements are transformed over time.

In parallel, research in public administration and political sociology has demonstrated that public officials are not merely passive implementers of decisions made elsewhere. Studies of street-level bureaucracy have shown how frontline workers exercise discretion and shape public policies through their everyday practices (Lipsky, 1980). Research on policy work has similarly highlighted the diversity of actors involved in the production of public policies and the situated practices through which policy orientations are constructed and translated into action (Colebatch, Hoppe and Noordegraaf, 2010). Research on bureaucratic organisations, administrative reforms and the sociology of the state has further explored how professional groups, organisational routines, administrative hierarchies and relations between political and bureaucratic actors shape state action (Bourdieu, 1994; Dubois, 2010; Bezes and Le Lidec, 2011). More recent work on street-level policy entrepreneurship has begun to connect bureaucratic agency with policy innovation and change (Arnold, 2021; Cohen, 2021).

Building on these contributions, the panel examines how public authorities deliberately seek to mobilise public officials as agents of policy change. To provide an analytical lens, we propose the concept of “professional mobilisation devices”. We conceptualise these devices as the organisational arrangements, instruments and structured activities through which public authorities seek to activate, coordinate and orient public officials' professional capacities towards policy change. This approach also draws on scholarship on policy instruments, which has demonstrated that instruments are not neutral technical tools but embody particular forms of governing and relationships of power (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2007). It further resonates with research on policy capacity, which highlights the individual competencies and organisational resources required for effective policymaking (Wu, Ramesh and Howlett, 2015). However, rather than examining these capacities simply as resources available to governments, we focus on the arrangements through which authorities seek to activate, develop and redirect them towards specific policy objectives.

These devices may operate by developing new competencies, assigning officials specific responsibilities for advancing reforms, organising cooperation across administrative boundaries, or creating opportunities to experiment with and promote new policy approaches. The panel invites contributions examining how these devices are designed, implemented and appropriated, and how they connect the strategies of public authorities to the everyday practices of administrative personnel.

References

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CALL FOR PAPERS

Professional mobilisation devices offer a way to examine public policy at the intersection of several perspectives: political and administrative decision-making, the everyday work and mobilisation of public officials, and the instruments through which public authorities seek to shape action. Drawing on scholarship on policy instrumentation (Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2007), policy work (Colebatch, Hoppe and Noordegraaf, 2010) and policy capacity (Wu, Ramesh and Howlett, 2015), the panel seeks to examine not only how policies are designed and implemented, but also how public officials are actively mobilised as participants in policy transformation. We invite contributions that explore how professional mobilisation devices are constructed, implemented and received by the officials they target, and how these interconnected processes shape public policies. We are particularly interested in the conditions under which these devices support new policy orientations, reinforce existing arrangements or generate unintended consequences.

Contributions may address, but are not limited to, the following topics:

- The emergence and construction of professional mobilisation devices: Why and under what circumstances do political or administrative authorities seek to mobilise public officials? How do policy problems, reform objectives, institutional contexts and power relations shape the design of these devices? Who initiates them, and what conceptions of the role of public officials underpin their development? How do these devices relate to existing instruments of public action, organisational arrangements and strategies for developing policy capacity?
- The implementation and reception of professional mobilisation devices: How do these devices interact with existing professional norms, formal rules, organisational routines and established divisions of labour within public administration? How do they reshape officials' roles, responsibilities and professional identities? How do officials interpret, appropriate, negotiate or resist these mobilisation efforts, and what forms of bureaucratic agency do these responses reveal? How do these devices interact with established forms of expertise and understandings of public service?
- Their contribution to policy change: Under what conditions do professional mobilisation devices contribute to the emergence of new policy ideas, the transformation of administrative practices or shifts in policy trajectories? How do organisational arrangements, institutional contexts and power relations shape their effects? When do these devices advance intended reforms, reproduce existing arrangements or generate unintended consequences?

We welcome theoretical and empirical contributions across policy sectors and levels of government, from the local to the supranational. We also encourage contributors to critically engage with and refine the concept of professional mobilisation devices. By bringing together diverse perspectives, the panel seeks to advance our understanding of how public authorities mobilise administrative personnel and how these efforts shape policy change.