P205 / Pathways to Institutional and Policy Changes: Structure and Agency

Topic : Policy Change/Continuity/Dynamics

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Scholarship studying policy change and innovation has been informed by historical institutionalist approaches, such as Institutional Analysis and Development, Policy Diffusion and Innovation, Punctuated Equilibrium Framework, Policy Feedback Theory, and Ecology of Games Framework (Weible 2023). Debates centre on the drivers of institutional change: whether these stem from exogenous shocks at critical junctures, or from endogenous incremental mechanisms such as policy conversion, layering, and drift that unfold during long periods of stability (Beland, 2007).

Scholars also have different views on whether the incremental or drastic mode of policy change is inevitable and preferable given the prevailing political contexts, or whether such change can be deliberately shaped by the agency and ideational work of policy actors. In competitive multiparty systems, incrementalism is framed as a pluralistic process in which proposals depart only modestly from the status quo, accumulating over time to produce substantial policy transformation. This mode facilitates consensus-building around policy goals and enables the development of a robust knowledge base amid partisan polarisation (Hayes, 2022).

By contrast, disruptive policy change—theorised by Baumgartner and Jones within punctuated equilibrium theory—entails paradigm shifts arising from interactions between policy images and policy venues. Such interactions can unravel entrenched interest configurations and enable responses to urgent systemic crises (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991). Radical reforms nonetheless carry considerable implementation risks, high transaction costs, and unanticipated side effects; they tend to become viable when policy windows open (Kingdon, 2014).

This panel welcomes contributions to unpack how dynamics of institutional and policy change unfold across diverse issue domains, where different ideas and policy instruments may shape the trajectories of positive and negative feedback (Daugbjerg and Kay 2020). Illustrative contested topics include, but are not limited to: trade-offs between ecosystem conservation and economic development (Glavina et al., 2025); tensions between cultural diversity and social integration (Bloemraad & Wright, 2018); and the benefits and harms associated with disruptive technological advancement (Coninx & Lohr, 2026).

Reference:

Baumgartner, F. R., & Jones, B. D. (1991) Agenda dynamics and policy subsystems. The Journal of Politics, 53(4), 1044–1074.

Bloemraad, Irene & Matthew Wright. (2018) “Utter Failure” or Unity out of Diversity? Debating and Evaluating Policies of Multiculturalism. International Migration Review, 48:292-334.

Coninx, Sabrina and Guido Lohr (2026) Rethinking Disruptive Technologies: Benefits, Harms and Injustice of Human Niche Construction. Philosophy and Technology, 39(58): 1-25.

Daugbjerg, Carsten and Adrian Kay (2020) Policy Feedback and Pathways: When Change Leads to Endurance and Continuity to Change. Policy Sciences, 53: 253-268.

Glavina, Ana, Katarina Misic, Jakov Baleta, Jin Wang and Hrvoje Mikulcic. (2025) Economic Development and Climate Change: Achieving a Sustainable Balance. Cleaner Engineering and Technology.

Hayes, Michael (2022) Incrementalism and Public Policy-making. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics (In Progress). Erin Hannah (editor in chief).

Kingdon, J. W. (2014). Agendas, alternatives, and public policies (2nd ed.). Pearson Education Limited.

Weible, M. Christopher edit (2023) Theories of the Policy Process. Routledge.

Beland, Daniel (2007) Ideas and institutional change in social security: Conversion, Layering and Policy Drift. Social Science Quarterly, 88(1):20-38.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Across these debates, this panel is organised around the interplay between structural conditions and actor agency in generating pathways to institutional and policy changes. Structural conditions—institutional legacies, regime types, and the attributes of issue domains—constrain the range of changes that are possible; actor agency—the strategies, ideas, and forms of authority that policy actors mobilise—affect which of these possibilities are realised, and how. Rather than treating the drivers of change as either exogenous shocks or endogenous drift, the panel asks how structure and agency interact, over time and across contexts, to shape whether change is incremental or transformative and who benefits from it.

Building on this perspective, the panel calls for papers that examine the drivers, processes, and consequences of institutional and policy change. Contributions may address, but are not confined to, the following five questions:

1.What are the different pathways to policy and institutional changes across policy domains, and how do these distinct pathways emerge?

2.What spatio-temporal and cross-contextual patterns characterise policy change, and which structural features account for this variation?

3.What strategies do policy actors deploy to convert institutional barriers into opportunities for innovating policies and policy instruments?

4.Who sets the ideational agenda that underpins policy change, and what forms of authority enable non-state actors to shape policy and institutional change?

5.How are problem solutions developed and diffused across public and private sectors, and how do policy changes interact with shifts in societal norms around contested issues?

The panel welcomes theoretical and empirical papers that engage with this perspective, and is open to qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods.

Reference:

Baumgartner, F. R., & Jones, B. D. (1991) Agenda dynamics and policy subsystems. The Journal of Politics, 53(4), 1044–1074.

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