P284 / Perceptions on Public Policy, Democracy and Justice: Values, Ideas, References, Discourses and Legitimacy

Topic : Discourses, Ideas, and Narratives

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Public policies constitute an important point of interaction between the state, government, and citizens, through which demands, preferences, and political interests are both communicated and shaped. Because public opinion influences and is, in turn, influenced by state action, this two-way relationship has implications for the social and substantive dimensions of democracy. Although voting is the primary mechanism through which interests are represented, and state action is legitimized in relation to the preferences of the majority of the population, citizens do not directly choose policies; rather, they elect politicians. The decisions politicians make, as well as the measures and actions they adopt in the realm of public policy, do not necessarily reflect preferences that can be assumed to be homogeneous or representative of a majority. Instead, they tend to reflect the preferences of particular groups or, at most, coalitions of interests representing larger minorities.

This underscores the particular importance of examining public perceptions of policy priorities, which cannot be inferred from electoral outcomes alone. As Howlett (2000) argues, public opinion—whether understood in general terms or as the opinion of the majority—cannot be treated as an independent variable determining public policy formulation. Government actions, whether through direct and deliberate interventions or through unintended effects, also shape public opinion in a dialectical process of mutual influence and feedback.

According to the policy feedback literature, citizens' experiences with public policies can shape their perceptions of government and their rights, corresponding to the interpretative or ideational effects of these policies. This type of mobilization can affect bureaucrats as well as policy beneficiaries. Campbell (2003), for example, identified an increase in political participation among older adults in the United States, driven by their perception of themselves as worth citizens, which stemmed from their relationship with social security policy. Spink and Burgos (2019), in turn, identified bottom-up policymaking processes emerging from state absence in peripheral communities in Brazil, challenging the assumptions underlying most implementation analyses. Finally, Evans (1993) demonstrated the importance of participatory policies through the example of Brazil's participatory budgeting, whereby part of the public budget is allocated according to civil society's preferences. This type of bottom-up policy would foster democratic state capacities, enhancing the state's responsiveness to society.

Thus, it is important to understand the multiple effects of public policies on democracy, as well as the effects of democracy on public policies, in order to improve both. To this end, this panel seeks contributions that investigate the conceptions of democracy and justice underlying public policies, as well as their ideational and behavioral effects, which may, in turn, influence governments and public policies themselves.

Accordingly, research into public perceptions of public policies is particularly relevant, especially when focused on social policies, given that these policies have expanded and contracted over time across different historical contexts, affecting social groups in distinct ways.

The so-called Political Sociology of Public Action, which originated in France, has flourished and gained international recognition, incorporating and fostering productive dialogue with Anglo-Saxon scholarship—particularly historical neo-institutionalism. This exchange has enriched its theoretical assumptions, analytical frameworks, research concerns, variables and interdependent factors of interest, as well as its methodological tools. Drawing on the work of authors such as Gramsci, Foucault, Bourdieu, and Latour, its interdisciplinary character makes it particularly well suited to the analysis of public policies. Moving beyond critiques of monolithic perspectives, this approach has sought to articulate ideas and action through a range of analytical elements, including territories, knowledge and forms of expertise, culture, symbolism and narratives, policy sectors, intersectorality and intersectionality, as well as what may be termed the various "I's": ideas, interests, institutions, individuals, and instruments.

These approaches are characterized by a democratic and participatory analytical orientation and a particular

concern with processes of transformation and the legitimacy of public policies. As Muller and Jobert (1987), Muller (1990), and Hassenteufel (2008) argue, public policies contribute to the construction of identities. Consequently, citizens' responses to such policies may take the form of either endorsement or rejection at different stages of the policy process: when a policy is proposed, when it is experienced, and when it is discontinued. Opinions about public policies are shaped by the information available to citizens but also derive, to a considerable extent, from the beliefs, values, and frames of reference that guide the political behavior of groups sharing distinct political subcultures.

The analysis in terms of frames of reference, as proposed by the sociology of public action, incorporates into the analytical and evaluative dimensions theoretical elements such as "the inevitability of change and the relationship between actors' assertion of identity and the question of legitimacy" (TOMAZINI, 2021, p. 203). These elements are often overlooked due to the predominance of rationalizing and linear paradigms. When a frame of reference becomes hegemonic in policy production, it not only guides policy by indicating the direction to be taken but also identifies the actors who occupy central positions. From this perspective, however, it is not only influential and prominent actors who sustain and advance ideas; rather, ideas themselves confer influence and centrality upon actors (TOMAZINI, 2021, p. 204). Thus, "the cognitive frameworks internalized by actors structure conflicts and tensions surrounding public policies. Cognitive and normative elements are therefore central to explanations of change" (TOMAZINI, 2021, p. 18). Accordingly, if public policy is understood as being inherently defined by change, as Muller (2005) argues, the cognitive approach offers a theory of change (MULLER, 2005; SUREL; PALIER, 2010; TOMAZINI, 2021) that, when considered alongside neo-institutionalist approaches (LEVI, 1991; NORTH, 2018; STREECK; THELEN, 2005; MAHONEY; THELEN, 2010), enriches explanations of policy dynamics.

In the wake of the constructivist turn and the development of discursive neo-institutionalism (SCHMIDT, 2010), the cognitive approach, or the political sociology of public action, has gradually gained ground in public policy analysis. This development has occurred alongside related or complementary approaches, including policy paradigms (HALL, 1993), epistemic communities (HAAS, 1992), networks (RHODES, 2006), advocacy coalitions (SABATIER; JENKINS-SMITH, 1993), multiple streams (KINGDON, 1995), punctuated equilibrium (BAUMGARTNER; JONES, 1993), and street-level bureaucracy (LIPSKY, 2010). It also encompasses more recent approaches, such as the three "I's" (PALIER; SUREL, 2005), the pragmatic approach (ZITTOUN, 2021), the socio-historical approach (PAYRE; POLLET, 2021), and actor-centered approaches that examine elites, elected officials, mediators, brokers, professionals, bureaucracies, political parties, identity-based and interest groups, and social movements (in HASSENTEUFEL; OLIVEIRA, 2021). In addition, more methodologically oriented approaches include policy instrumentation (HALPERN; LASCOUMES; LE GALÈS, 2021) and field analysis (DUBOIS, 2021). There is, therefore, a rich and still insufficiently explored field for further debate and research on public policies, particularly if we recognize that "ideas also matter" (ROCHA LUKIC; TOMAZINI, 2013).

In the French context, the shift away from the term "public policies" toward the expression "public action" was associated with a critique of traditional approaches to public policy studies, which centered on the state, in favor of a perspective in which public action is collectively constructed by multiple, interconnected actors operating across different levels and contexts (OLIVEIRA; HASSENTEUFEL, 2021). This perspective draws attention not only to the political and formal dimensions of democracy but also to its social and substantive dimensions (BOBBIO, 2005).

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How are public policies connected to democracy? And what kind of support do they receive from citizens? What do the comparative analysis say about the legitimacy bases for more egalitarian and redistributive policies implementation, following the social democratic lines of Welfare-State, in different countries?

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It matters to know the perceptions of different social groups, since public policies are an important point of contact between the State and citizens, through which both inform each other about demands, preferences and political interests. Since the expressed opinions affect and are affected by the State actions, they interfere with the social and substantive dimension of democracy. Views and perceptions about poverty, justice, social inequalities, social assistance, conditional cash transfer policies and about their origins and justifications, for example, vary among social groups. Knowing them may help to understand how to improve democracy.

The analysis of public policies has benefited from cognitive approaches and the sociology of public action. Emphasizing the role of ideas, values, references, beliefs, knowledge and worldviews - and of action -, the panel aims to contribute to this debate.
The panel welcomes comparative, qualitative and quantitative studies, including groups such as elites,

street and high-level bureaucrats, policy beneficiaries and sociodemographic strata. Contributions addressing the following topics are also welcome: (a) theoretical perspectives such as bureaucratic cultures, epistemic communities, advocacy coalitions, networks, the “three I’s” (ideas, interests, and institutions), and historical and discursive neo-institutionalism; (b) empirical objects of analysis, including councils, civil society, participatory policies, and sectoral, intersectoral, and intersectional policies; (c) analyses of policy change, diffusion, and implementation, as well as the roles played by institutions, actors, social movements, political parties, and bureaucracies at different levels of government; and (d) normative themes such as democracy, citizenship, justice, and political projects.

Grounded in an interdisciplinary approach, the panel welcomes both quantitative and empirical qualitative methodologies, including survey and indicator analysis, interviews, case studies and comparative studies, ethnographic research, and studies of policy instruments, among others.