P159 / Policy Blindness: Blind Spots, Institutional Inaction, and Structural Erasure in Public Policy Design

Topic : Policy Design, Formulation & Instruments

Chair : Justa Mwangi (University of Sussex)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

General Objective

The primary objective of this panel is to critically interrogate the conceptual, structural, and institutional dimensions of "Policy Blindness"—the systematic failure of policy instruments, administrative frameworks, and decision-making bodies to perceive, evaluate, or respond to critical socioeconomic realities, marginalized social groups, or emerging systemic threats.

The panel seeks to examine policy blindness across three critical vectors—identity/neutrality traps (e.g., gender, race, or class-blind policymaking), epistemic and cognitive blind spots (e.g., algorithmic bias, reliance on Western-centric models, and technocratic myopia), and structural institutional inaction (e.g., intentional or systemic turning a blind eye to regulatory failure).

The aim is to diagnose how policy "blind spots" are engineered, sustained, and contested within modern governance architectures (Jordan & Huitema, 2023) and discuss future directions.

Research Question

The panel seeks to investigate the following core research question:

How are policy blind spots structurally produced and perpetuated within institutional design, and how can public policy scholarship operationalize new analytical toolkits to expose, unlearn, and correct institutional blindness in hyper-complex, diverse, and fast-changing societies?

Scientific Relevance

Analyzing policy blindness carries urgent theoretical and empirical relevance for contemporary public policy and administrative science for three reasons:

Deconstructing the Myth of Policy "Neutrality": Conventional public policy frameworks frequently operate under the assumption that universal, "blind" policy instruments (such as procedural color-blindness or gender-neutral administrative delivery) guarantee equal treatment. However, empirical evidence demonstrates that procedural neutrality applied across structurally unequal contexts actively reinforces social stratification and marginalization (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004; Cairney, et al, 2022; Abbott & Teti, 2022). Policy scholarship needs to unpack how "neutrality" functions as a form of institutional blindness.

Epistemic Injustice and Algorithmic Blindness: The rapid incorporation of artificial intelligence, big data, and automated decision-making into street-level administration has created novel, codified blind spots. Algorithms trained on historically biased data (such as racially biased data, e.g Perez, Beam & Small, 2026) encode institutional blindness into invisible, high-speed automated policy instruments, requiring new frameworks for public accountability and governance design.

Explaining Policy Failure and Systematic Inaction: Studies show that policy failure is not always the result of bad implementation or sudden exogenous shocks but that it is frequently rooted in foundational blind spots where state apparatuses misread, under-measure, or actively ignore complex socio-ecological and structural problems until catastrophic breakdown occurs (McConnell & ’t Hart, 2019).

Context and Brief State of the Art

Public policy literature has long analyzed cognitive and organizational limitations in decision-making—ranging from Simon’s bounded rationality to Lindblom’s incrementalism and Kingdon’s agenda-setting frameworks. However, the contemporary study of policy blindness shifts the focus from individual cognitive constraints to institutional, epistemic, and political architectures that systematically blind state actors. Recent governance scholarship divides policy blindness into three interrelated traditions:

Socio-Political Neutrality Traps: Grounded in critical policy studies, feminist political economy, and critical

race theory, scholars demonstrate how "identity-blind" policies (e.g., color-blindness, gender-neutral budgeting, or class-blind urban planning) erase the lived realities of marginalized populations, resulting in policies that entrench existing power asymmetries (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004; Perez, Beam & Small, 2026).

Institutional and Epistemic Blind Spots: Administrative literature (e.g., McConnell & 't Hart, 2019; Cairney et al., 2022) explores how dominant analytical tools (such as cost-benefit analyses, econometrics, or top-down key performance indicator systems) create "epistemic blinders" that censor indigenous knowledge, qualitative field insights, and complex socio-ecological feedback loops.

Strategic and Bureaucratic Inaction: Work on policy inaction (McConnell & 't Hart, 2019) highlights that policy blindness is often not an accidental oversight but a strategic, institutional choice—a calculated "willful blindness" designed to depoliticize contentious issues, avoid fiscal obligations, or defer responsibility.

This panel bridges these complementary traditions to establish a state-of-the-art research agenda on how institutional vision is constructed, distorted, or purposefully obscured in contemporary public policy, and discuss future directions.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Call For Papers

We invite theoretical, methodological, and empirical paper submissions from public policy scholars, early-career researchers, sociologists, political scientists, and policy practitioners. We welcome qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, and comparative research designs. Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

Gender-Blind and Color-Blind Policy Designs: Deconstructing the distributional impacts of "neutral" public policies in health, fiscal planning, social security, and criminal justice.

Algorithmic and Automated Blind Spots: Critical examinations of AI, automated street-level decision-making, and digital administrative systems that encode administrative or structural blindness.

Policy Inaction and Willful Blindness: Conceptualizing institutional mechanisms where state actors intentionally ignore emerging systemic crises, corruption networks, or human rights abuses.

Decolonizing Administrative Epistemologies: Addressing the "Western-centric blind spots" embedded in universalist policy transfer models, development interventions, and indigenous/local governance interactions.

Crisis-Induced Policy Myopia: How short-term emergency responses (e.g., during pandemics, climate events, or economic shocks) cause systemic long-term policy blindness regarding vulnerable populations.

Methodologies for Detecting Policy Blind Spots: Innovative methodological frameworks (such as process tracing, policy audit tools, intersectional impact assessments, and counterfactual analysis) for exposing invisible policy gaps.

References

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