P23 / Policy Experimentation Revisited: Sandboxes, Adaptive Instruments, and the Frontiers of Experimental Governance

Topic : Policy Design, Formulation & Instruments

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Topic and rationale

Policy experimentation is a well-established concept in policy science, anchored in traditions ranging from Campbell's "experimenting society" to Heilmann's "experimentation under hierarchy," and Sabel and Zeitlin's "experimentalist governance". Yet in the past decade, a qualitatively new wave of experimental policy instruments has emerged and proliferated at remarkable speed. Regulatory sandboxes, experimentation clauses, policy labs, regulatory testbeds, and adaptive licensing regimes now span dozens of jurisdictions and policy domains. These instruments share resemblance with earlier forms of piloting and trial, but they also exhibit distinct institutional logics, governance architectures, and political rationalities that sit uneasily with received theoretical frameworks.

In this panel, we aim to take stock of this new wave and ask what it means for our understanding of policy experimentation, policy design, and governance under uncertainty. Technological disruption is a major catalyst of this new wave in two ways: First, emerging technologies are often the object of experimentation, and second, digital data infrastructures, modelling and automated monitoring increasingly shape how experiments themselves are observed, evaluated and adapted. This latter development alters the conditions of experimentation and expands the scope for real-time and granular learning, while also raising questions about data access, measurement bias, opacity and whose outcomes become visible in experimental evidence.

The new wave is also marked by its multi-level character: while regulatory authority may sit nationally or supranationally, experimentation is frequently organized, implemented and evaluated in subnational settings, where administrative capacities, political mandates and relations with affected communities vary.

We identify **four areas of theoretical significance**:

(1) The meaning of "experiment" requires conceptual clarification. Unlike RCTs or controlled policy pilots, sandboxes and labs are better understood as structured regulatory interactions or institutionalized learning processes. What analytical work does the concept of experimentation perform in these contexts?

(2) The pilot-evaluate-scale model presumes linearity. Many new instruments operate differently: some function as permanent infrastructure; others produce incremental regulatory adaptation rather than discrete scaling decisions. The relationship between experimental episodes and institutional change remains under-theorized.

(3) The rapid global diffusion of specific formats - especially the sandbox - invites examination through lenses of policy transfer, mobility, and institutional isomorphism, including attention to the role of international organizations in standardizing and promoting particular templates.

(4) Experimental instruments do not generate learning autonomously. Their effects depend on the capacities and infrastructures through which experimentation is organized.

CALL FOR PAPERS

In this panel, we aim to take stock of a qualitatively new wave of experimental policy instruments that has emerged and proliferated at remarkable speed. We ask what that means for our understanding of policy experimentation, policy design, and governance under uncertainty. The panel seeks to renew long-standing debates about experimentation in governance. The literatures on policy learning, experimentalist governance, and policy piloting developed in a pre-digital institutional context; the rise of AI, platform economies, and cascading global uncertainties has fundamentally altered the conditions under which governments experiment, demanding not merely application of existing frameworks to new cases but a

rethinking of core concepts - *what experimentation means, what institutional capacities it presupposes, and under what conditions it produces genuine learning rather than symbolic legitimation.*

We invite contributions addressing, but not limited to, the following **questions**:

~ Conceptual foundations: What distinguishes the new experimentation from earlier forms? Is there analytical value in a unified concept of policy experimentation, or do we need differentiated frameworks? How does the new wave relate to, and challenge, experimentalist governance, policy learning, and reflexive governance theories?

~ Design and architecture: What design choices shape experimental instruments' capacity to generate learning, manage risk, and maintain legitimacy? What capacities, data infrastructures and intermediary arrangements are required for experimental instruments to generate learning? How are these capacities distributed across jurisdictions, organizations, and affected populations?

~ Experimentation and scaling: Under what conditions does experimental learning translate into broader policy change? When and why does experimentation fail to scale?

~ Governance and legitimacy: What accountability mechanisms operate when policy is explicitly provisional? How do affected publics participate in or contest experimental governance?

~ Diffusion and transfer: How and why have specific formats diffused so rapidly? How do instruments mutate as they travel across jurisdictions and sectors?

~ Evidence and knowledge: What kinds of knowledge do these new experimental instruments produce? How do data infrastructures, models and automated monitoring reshape the evaluation and adaptation of experimental instruments? What kinds of effects, and whose experiences, become visible or invisible through these infrastructures? Who controls interpretation, and how does experimental evidence enter subsequent policy decisions?

Scope of contributions

We welcome empirical and theoretical contributions, including comparative studies, theoretically ambitious single-case analyses, and conceptual or framework-building papers. We encourage methodological pluralism. All contributions must engage with the theoretical questions outlined above and be positioned to advance cumulative knowledge in policy science. We particularly welcome papers that combine empirical depth with theoretical ambition - using specific cases to generate broader claims about policy processes, institutional design, or the state's regulatory function in an era of rapid technological change.