P12 / Policy Learning in Contemporary Policymaking: Theories, Practices, Methods, and Frontiers

Topic : Policy Process Theories

Chair : Claudio Radaelli (European University Institute)

Second Chair : Bishoy Zaki (Universiteit Gent)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Learning has become a staple of contemporary policymaking, both as a practical aspiration and as an analytical lens through which scholars understand the policy process. This is due to two distinct, yet closely connected features.

First, learning carries a powerful normative promise. From Lindblom's account of the "intelligence of democracy" to conceptions of intelligent policymaking, pragmatist democracy, experimentation, and reflexive governance, learning has been associated with governments' ability to recognize problems, revise assumptions, mobilize knowledge and experiences and improve policy through participation and deliberation. Hence learning is integral to the capacity of political systems to identify and correct errors and respond intelligently to changing societal conditions. This acquires particular significance amid democratic backsliding, political polarization, post-truth politics, and declining trust in expertise, and contestation. Yet learning is not inherently benign. Actors may learn to resist evidence, entrench exclusionary policies, manipulate institutions, or pursue objectives that undermine public value. Hence, understanding when learning contributes to (or detracts from) better governance is itself an important contemporary question.

Second, learning offers fundamental analytical leverage for explaining policy processes. Taking the policy actor as a homo discens, whose beliefs, understandings, strategies, and practices evolve through experience and interaction, directs attention toward a deceptively simple question: why do policy actors do what they do as a function of what, how, when, and from whom they learn about policy problems and possible solutions? From this perspective, learning constitutes an underlying mechanism through which actors make sense of problems, interact with knowledge and one another, adapt strategies, reproduce existing policies, or generate change.

Learning's scholarly growth also raises important conceptual, theoretical, and empirical questions. What counts as learning, and what does not? Who learns: individuals, organizations, coalitions, networks, governments, or political systems? How does learning occur and travel across levels? Under what institutional, political, emotional, and epistemic conditions is learning enabled, blocked, distorted, or strategically governed? How should it be identified and measured?

This panel welcomes contributions across four broad areas:

Learning across policy problems, sectors, and contexts: Contributions focusing on different domains including climate, sustainability, health, crisis governance, migration, social policy, technology and AI, security, and morality policy, including research on how problem and sector characteristics shape learning processes and outcomes.

Theoretical, conceptual, and analytical advances: Contributions that develop, refine, critique, or connect concepts and theories of policy learning; investigate mechanisms and micro-foundations; examine learning across levels; or connect learning to broader approaches in policy studies and adjacent fields.

Methods and measurement: Contributions that identify, observe, measure, and explain learning across qualitative, quantitative, experimental, computational, comparative, longitudinal, mixed-method, and other designs.

The politics, conditions, and consequences of learning: Contributions on when learning is enabled, constrained, blocked, manipulated, or governed; the roles of power, institutions, expertise, evidence, participation, emotions, narratives, and contestation; and consequences for policy change, stability, democratic governance, and public value.

We welcome different ontological, epistemological, theoretical and methodological approaches, regions,

units and levels of analysis, and encourage work that challenges conventional assumptions about what policy learning is, where it occurs, and what it does.

CALL FOR PAPERS

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