P127 / Proportionality for whom? The process and politics of designing proportionate public policies

Topic : Policy Design, Formulation & Instruments

Chair : Giulia Bazzan (Tilburg University)

Second Chair : Carsten Daugbjerg (University of Copenhagen)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Policy design is a long-standing research field within the policy sciences. It is widely recognised that public policy design is not a technocratic and rational process aimed at finding an optimal balance or fit between the ends and means of government intervention. Rather, it is a political process in which multiple dimensions of policy design are at play, such as competing understandings of the policy problem, the availability of evidence and of feasible solutions.

Maor's pioneering work on disproportionality in public policy over more than a decade has highlighted that proportionality is a crucial dimension of policy design. Perhaps nowhere were challenges of proportionality more evident than during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which it was widely debated which measures were proportionate to contain the spread of the disease. However, proportionality is not confined to pandemics, epidemics, or one-off crises such as the global financial crisis of the late 2000s. Disputes about proportionality are evident in many other policy fields and even in much routine policy-making, such as food safety regulation.

A particular merit of Maor's research is its insights into policy-makers' motivations for over- and underreaction. Yet, we still lack a complete picture of the role that proportionality plays in policy processes, let alone how policy-makers conceive of proportionality and disproportionality in specific policy contexts. Policy actors often hold divergent views on the severity of policy problems, and these differences influence which measures they regard as proportionate responses. For instance, a climate activist and a climate sceptic are likely to disagree fundamentally on the scale and urgency of measures needed to address global warming. What appears proportionate to one may appear excessive to the other.

This raises the question of proportionality for whom. Whose perception of proportionality eventually prevails in the policy process, and how does that influence the design of policy? Answering these questions requires attention to how policy processes unfold and provide opportunities for certain perspectives on proportionality to prevail. Institutions play a key role in defining standards of proportionality within a policy domain. Institutional research has highlighted how institutions shape policy formulation and design. They embody standard understandings of the policy problems they were formed to address and shape perceptions of what are considered proportionate responses to policy problems.

Policy process theories offer analytical frameworks and concepts that can help explain why particular actors and their perceptions of proportionality influence policy. Bearing in mind that many policies are compromises (sometimes uneven compromises), a key question is how coalitions are formed, what role perceptions of proportionality play in coalition formation, and how different perceptions may be traded off in pursuit of a majority coalition. The panel starts from the expectation that what counts as proportionate is not given but shaped by institutions and coalition dynamics, and asks how far this holds across different theoretical lenses. This panel invites contributions that explore these questions and advance our understanding of the role of proportionality in policy processes and policy design.

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel welcomes theoretical, conceptual and empirical papers that examine how proportionality is understood, contested and influences policy processes and design. We are particularly interested in contributions that shed light on whose perceptions of proportionality shape policy outcomes, and through which processes and institutions this happens. Proportionality is often treated as a legal principle or a technical yardstick; here we approach it primarily as a political question. This means paying attention to who takes part in defining what is proportionate, which arguments carry weight, and how disagreements are eventually settled.

Papers may address, among others, the following questions.

· How do policy-makers, interest groups, experts and other actors define proportionate and disproportionate

responses in specific policy contexts?

· How do institutions embed standards of proportionality, and how do these standards change over time?

· What role do perceptions of proportionality play in coalition formation and in the compromises on which policy design rests?

· How do evidence, risk assessment and uncertainty feed into judgements about proportionality?

· How do media attention, public opinion and expert advice shape what is seen as a proportionate response, and do these effects differ between crisis and routine policy-making?

· Under what conditions do policy-makers overreact or underreact, and how do they justify these responses?

We welcome papers drawing on different policy process theories, such as the Advocacy Coalition Framework, the Multiple Streams Framework, punctuated equilibrium theory or historical and discursive institutionalism, as well as papers that develop new concepts or measures of (dis)proportionality. Empirical studies may focus on crisis responses as well as on routine policy-making. We welcome contributions from any policy domain and accept single-case, comparative and quantitative analyses.

The panel aims to bring together scholars working on policy design, policy process theories and institutional analysis to develop a more systematic understanding of the politics of proportionality. We hope the panel will encourage exchange between scholars from different fields within policy studies. Both established and early-career scholars are encouraged to submit.