P20 / Public Policy and Democratic Backsliding

Topic : Politics, Institutions and Political Regimes

Chair : Michelle Morais de Sa e Silva (The University of Oklahoma)

Second Chair : Michelle Fernandez (Universidade de Brasília)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

This panel is anchored in a central question: how do autocratic governments reshape public policy processes, and what does this reveal about the dynamics of contemporary democratic backsliding? While democratic erosion has received growing scholarly attention, the panel advances the debate by placing public policy, rather than political institutions alone, at the center of the analysis. Democratic backsliding is understood not only as a political or constitutional process but also as a policy-driven phenomenon, unfolding through the reconfiguration, weakening, or elimination of policy arrangements and the institutions that sustain them (Peters & Pierre, 2019; Bauer et al., 2021; Oliveira & Fernandez, 2021; Morais & Gomide, 2024).

The panel examines how policymaking changes under autocratic and illiberal governments, where political survival may take precedence over institutional continuity and problem-solving. Policies can be strategically dismantled through material retrenchment, including budget cuts and institutional restructuring, as well as discursive strategies that delegitimize expertise, science, and minority rights. These processes can also erode policy capacities by weakening bureaucratic autonomy, politicizing administrative structures, and undermining accountability mechanisms. Importantly, such transformations often occur incrementally, preserving the formal appearance of democratic institutions while hollowing out their substantive functioning.

This panel also extends policy dismantling approaches (Bauer & Knill, 2014) by examining strategies such as non-decision, symbolic action, active dismantling, and institutional hardball (Morais & Gomide, 2024), as well as other practices that undermine the pluralist foundations of policymaking. By bringing together research across countries and policy subsystems, the panel seeks to identify both common mechanisms and context-specific variations in how democratic backsliding reshapes policymaking.

Ultimately, the panel shifts attention from whether democratic backsliding occurs to how it is operationalized through the state, its institutions, and policy processes. It conceptualizes policies as both targets and instruments of political transformation and examines how governance arrangements, administrative routines, state capacities, decision-making, and implementation are reconfigured under autocratic and illiberal governments. By combining theoretical, comparative, and empirical perspectives, the panel seeks to advance the study of the intersection between politics and public policy and illuminate the long-term institutional, administrative, and societal consequences of democratic backsliding.

Bauer, M. W., & Knill, C. (2014). A conceptual framework for the comparative analysis of policy change: Measurement, explanation and strategies of policy dismantling. Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice, 16(1), 28–44.

Bauer, M. W., Peters, B. G., Pierre, J., Yesilkagit, K., & Becker, S. (Eds.). (2021). Democratic backsliding and public administration: How populists in government transform state bureaucracies. Cambridge University Press.

Morais, M., & Gomide, A. (Eds.). (2024). Public policy in democratic backsliding: How illiberal populists engage with the policy process. Palgrave Macmillan.

Oliveira, V., & Fernandez, M. (2021). Políticas de saúde no governo Bolsonaro: Desmonte e negacionismo. In L. Avritzer, F. Kerche, & M. Marona (Eds.), Governo Bolsonaro: Retrocesso democrático e degradação política (pp. 113–128). Editora Autêntica.

Peters, B. G., & Pierre, J. (2019). Populism and public administration: Confronting the administrative state. Administration & Society, 51(10), 1521–1545.

CALL FOR PAPERS

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policy-driven phenomenon, unfolding through the reconfiguration, weakening, or elimination of policy arrangements and the institutions that sustain them (Peters & Pierre, 2019; Bauer et al., 2021; Oliveira & Fernandez, 2021; Morais & Gomide, 2024).

The distinctive contribution of the panel lies in bridging democratic backsliding and policy process research. It develops an integrative framework for examining how autocratic governments operate within policy subsystems and how policy, institutional, and implementation changes interact.

We welcome contributions that examine how democratic backsliding reshapes public policy and the policy process. Works that expand on the concepts of policy dismantling (Bauer & Knill, 2014) and institutional hardball (Morais & Gomide, 2024) are especially welcome. We encourage theoretical, comparative, and empirical work exploring the following questions:

1. Through which mechanisms do autocratic and illiberal governments transform policy-making processes, state capacities, implementation dynamics, and institutional arrangements?

2. How are the democratic and pluralistic premises of the policy process impacted and transformed by illiberal autocratic leaders?

3. What are the effects of democratic backsliding on policy advisory systems and on their roles in the policymaking process?

4. How does democratic backsliding affect policy capacities at the individual, organizational, and systemic levels?

5. How do autocratic and illiberal governments use policy dismantling, institutional hardball, and policy instruments to advance and consolidate democratic backsliding?

6. How does democratic backsliding reshape bureaucratic autonomy, discretion, and the role of public officials in the policy process?

7. Are some policy subsystems more vulnerable to democratic backsliding than others? If so, how do these differences shape patterns of policy change across countries and contexts?

8. How do bureaucracies, civil society actors, policy networks, and other policy agents resist, mitigate, or adapt to attempts by autocratic and illiberal governments to radically transform public policies and policy processes?

This panel aligns with a Special Issue being organized by the panel chairs at the Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis (JCPA).

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