P261 / Science–Policy Interfaces Under Pressure? Science Skepticism and the Future of Evidence-Informed Policymaking

Topic : Knowledge, Science and Expertise in Policy Process

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

A fundamental assumption of modern democratic governance is that public policy should be informed by scientific knowledge and expertise to effectively address complex societal challenges. This applies across policy domains, including climate and environmental policy, public health, and transportation. Yet policymaking is never solely driven by scientific evidence. Political decisions are also shaped by values, competing interests, institutional constraints, limited resources, and incomplete information. Consequently, the relationship between scientific knowledge and political decision-making has always been complex and contested (Head, 2016).

In recent years, however, science–policy relations have come under increasing pressure. Political actors who openly question the credibility, legitimacy, and relevance of scientific expertise have gained influence within parliaments, governments, and other political institutions. Particularly in the context of rising populism and political polarization, scientific knowledge is increasingly challenged, selectively appropriated, or publicly delegitimized. Recent scholarship on populism and science has highlighted the political dynamics underlying these developments and their implications for public trust in science (Eslen-Ziya & Giorgi, 2022; Zapp, 2022).

These developments raise fundamental questions about the changing role of scientific expertise in policymaking and the conditions under which evidence-informed public policy remains possible. Science–policy interfaces (SPIs), understood as the institutional arrangements, practices, and interactions connecting scientific knowledge production with political decision-making, are particularly relevant in this context.

The panel aims to explore how science–policy interfaces are being challenged, transformed, and potentially reconfigured in response to growing science skepticism, anti-science politics, and changing political environments. It seeks to advance theoretical and empirical understanding of the relationship between scientific knowledge, political authority, and evidence-informed policymaking across different policy sectors and levels of governance.

The central research question is: How do growing science skepticism and changing political conditions affect the functioning, legitimacy, and effectiveness of science–policy interfaces?

The panel invites contributions examining several potentially competing developments: whether political contestation weakens established science–policy interfaces; whether it encourages new forms of knowledge exchange, participation, and institutional adaptation; and whether the political use of scientific expertise differs between public discourse and less visible decision-making arenas.

By bringing together comparative, theoretical, and empirical perspectives, the panel seeks to contribute to broader debates on knowledge utilization, science–policy relations, democratic governance, and the future of evidence-informed policymaking.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Science–policy interfaces are increasingly confronted with political contestation, declining trust in scientific expertise, and the growing influence of actors who challenge the legitimacy of scientific knowledge. At the same time, governments continue to rely on scientific evidence to address complex policy problems. This tension raises important questions about the resilience, transformation, and future of evidence-informed policymaking.

This open panel invites theoretical, conceptual, methodological, and empirical contributions exploring how science–policy interfaces operate and evolve under conditions of growing science skepticism and political polarization.

We particularly welcome papers addressing one or more of the following questions:

Sectoral differences: In which policy domains are science–policy interfaces particularly contested or under pressure? How do these challenges differ across sectors, and how do institutions and actors respond?
Levels of governance: How do challenges to scientific expertise and evidence-informed policymaking manifest at local, national, European, and global levels?
Institutional adaptation and participation: Can broader science–policy–practice interfaces or science–society interfaces, involving practitioners, civil society, and the wider public, strengthen the legitimacy and resilience of knowledge-informed policymaking?
Research funding and scientific autonomy: How are changing governmental and European research funding priorities reshaping the production, selection, and political use of scientific knowledge? What are the implications for academic freedom and scientific independence?
Populism and the politics of expertise: How do populist actors engage with scientific evidence in different political settings? Does their public rejection of scientific expertise reflect strategic political communication, or does it also shape their behavior in less visible arenas of policymaking, such as parliamentary committees, advisory bodies, and closed-door negotiations?
We welcome contributions from diverse theoretical and methodological perspectives, including comparative and cross-sectoral studies. Papers examining cases from different geographical contexts are particularly encouraged.

The panel aims to foster an interdisciplinary exchange on the changing relationship between science and politics and to identify the conditions under which science–policy interfaces can support effective, legitimate, and evidence-informed public policy.