P124 / The Agenda-Setting Morality Policies: Specific Dynamics or Politics as Usual?

Topic : Agenda-Setting/Problem Definition

Chair : Sophie Jacquot (Université Catholique de Louvain)

Second Chair : Juliette Damaso-Biesmans (Université Catholique de Louvain)

Third Chair : Louise LARTIGOT-HERVIER (Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Morality policies constitute a distinctive mode of governing: public authorities intervene in individual conduct and help define collective values to be imposed (Meier, 1999; Mourão Permoser, 2019). They can be defined as policies that regulate individual behaviour and provoke intense value conflicts rooted in fundamental moral convictions, which are often difficult to reconcile. They regulate concerns such as life and death (abortion, reproduction, euthanasia, death penalty), gender and sexuality (sexual preferences, prostitution, consent, gender identity) or addictions (drug decriminalization or legalization, addictive behavior). Yet, whether this mode of intervention makes morality policies a distinct category of public policy remains unresolved.

This panel addresses the debate through an analytical entry point: agenda-setting. Its objective is to determine whether morality issues reach, remain on, or disappear from public and governmental agendas through mechanisms that differ from those identified by mainstream policy analysis scholarship.

The literature offers competing answers, notably focusing on three dimensions.

The first strand relates to framing in agenda-setting (Mooney and Schuldt 2008; Mucciaroni, 2011). Framing is particularly important because it shapes the scope of the ensuing debate: when a problem is framed as a matter of sin that the state must combat, a more permissive policy becomes much harder to defend publicly (Mooney, 1999; Mooney and Schuldt, 2008; Meier, 1994). It revolves around binary oppositions (just – unjust, good – evil, virtue – vice). Thus, invoking moral principles restricts choices and possesses real coercive capacity (Dufournet, 2015, p. 264). A gap may emerge between citizens' actual preferences and the demand for regulation in political debate.

The second strand emphasizes the role of institutional constraints, electoral processes, and partisan dynamics, particularly in highly polarized societies, where the moral dimension of almost any issue can become more salient (Dombrink, 2015; Putnam, 2020; Kreitzer et al., 2019). This question arises in increasingly polarized Western societies, some of which have seen far-right parties come to power.

The third strand insists on religion's impact on public policy (Engeli, Green-Pedersen, & Thorup Larsen, 2012; Engeli & Rothmayr Allison, 2013; Fink, 2008, 2009; Minkenberg, 2002 and 2003). For some scholars, the religious dimension is central to the definition of moral values, which are often experienced as private and non-negotiable. Yet the role of religion in shaping moral controversies remains insufficiently theorized (Mourão Permoser, 2019).

However, these insights have not resolved whether morality policies require a separate analytical toolkit – a question this panel aims to assess.

The panel asks: Does the moral character of an issue generate specific agenda-setting dynamics? If so, through which mechanisms and under what conditions? Or are morality policies, policies like any other?

Three hypotheses will structure the discussion. First, moral framing redistributes agenda-setting power by enabling some actors to capture the debate while delegitimizing others. Second, moralization narrows policy alternatives and may either constrain state action or open opportunities for intervention in private conduct. Third, these effects are conditional rather than intrinsic to issues framed as “moral”: they vary with religious-secular cleavages, party competition, polarization, or issue trajectories.

CALL FOR PAPERS

The objective of this panel is to determine whether morality issues reach, remain on, or disappear from public and governmental agendas through mechanisms that differ from those identified by mainstream policy analysis scholarship.

We invite papers examining how morality issues emerge, gain attention, are reframed or kept off the public

and governmental agendas.

Papers should engage directly with the panel’s central theoretical question: Do morality policies display agenda-setting mechanisms that require specific analytical concepts, or can they be analyzed through established public policy approaches?

We welcome studies of policy areas involving public intervention in individual conduct and contested values, including issues linked to life and death (abortion, reproduction, biotechnologies, euthanasia, death penalty), gender and sexuality (sexual preferences, prostitution, consent, freedom to choose one's gender) or addictions (illicit drug use, drugs decriminalization or legalization, addictive behavior).

Expected papers may focus on agenda access and exclusion; issue framing; advocacy coalitions and counter-mobilization; religious and secular actors; party competition and the specific role of radical-right populist actors; polarization; institutional opportunities and veto points; the opening and closing of policy windows; in short, all types of links between moral conflict and agenda-setting mechanisms and outcomes.

Comparative designs are particularly encouraged, even though single case studies are also welcomed. These may include:

- Cross-national comparison to understand why some issues become “moralized” in one country but not in another (Green-Pedersen, 2007); or to study the role of the religious-secular divide (Engeli, Green-Pedersen and Larsen, 2012).

- Longitudinal comparison to examine whether morality issues enter the agenda at a specific time; or if they are “post-materialist” policies (Frendreis & Tatalovich, 2020).

- Cross-sectoral comparison to test whether similar mechanisms operate across different morality issues.

- Comparisons between morality and non-morality policies.

The panel is open to qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method research from different regions and levels of governance.

Proposals from early-career researchers are particularly encouraged, just as much as those from more experienced researchers.