P37 / The Politics of Expertise in the Policy Process: A Comparative Perspective

Topic : Bureaucracy, Administration and Policy Process

Chair : María Alejandra Costa (Fundaçao Getulio Vargas- Brazil)

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

General objectives

The relationship between Public Administration and politics has long reflected tensions between political control and bureaucratic autonomy. Classical approaches assigned elected officials responsibility for setting political goals and ensuring democratic responsiveness, while professional administrators were expected to implement those goals based on legality and specialised knowledge (Weber 1946; Wilson 1887). In practice, however, this division is less clear-cut: bureaucrats contribute to policy formulation, interpret political priorities, and exercise discretion beyond implementation (Aberbach et al. 1981; Overeem 2005).

This blurring of the politics–administration boundary suggests that technical expertise and political influence are not mutually exclusive. Bureaucrats may exercise influence precisely through the specialised knowledge and professional authority they bring to policymaking. Bureaucracies derive authority not only from their formal position within the state, but also from their capacity to produce, interpret, and communicate specialised knowledge (Carpenter 2001; Christensen 2024). In Wildavsky's terms, bureaucratic experts may "speak truth to power" by providing professional advice even when it challenges political preferences (Wildavsky 1979; Tonon 2008).

Because expertise can provide an independent basis of authority, it also creates persistent questions of political control. Research has examined politicisation, discretionary appointments, patronage, and restrictions on bureaucratic discretion, as well as how bureaucracies preserve professionalisation and autonomy (Bersch et al. 2022; Mikkelsen 2018). Relations between bureaucratic experts and elected politicians may therefore involve bargaining and conflict over the authority of knowledge itself (Christensen 2024; Dargent Bocanegra and Lotta 2025).

These tensions have gained renewed relevance as bureaucratic expertise has become increasingly contested under populism, democratic backsliding, and political polarisation (Rich et al. 2024). Political leaders may challenge experts, career bureaucracies, and established administrative knowledge, raising questions about who is recognised as authoritative, what counts as legitimate evidence, and when bureaucratic expertise retains influence over public policy (Costa et al. 2026; Head 2019).

Yet we know less about how bureaucrats respond when their expertise is challenged and how they seek to sustain or reconstruct expert authority. The panel therefore focuses on how bureaucrats navigate conflicts over expertise and how these responses vary across political contexts and stages of the policy process.

Research Questions

The panel asks: Under what conditions does expertise become a source of political influence, and how is this authority legitimised or contested? Moreover, how do bureaucrats respond when their expertise or autonomy comes under political pressure? It also examines how these dynamics unfold across problem definition, agenda-setting, policy formulation, and implementation, including how competing actors establish what counts as valid or authoritative evidence.

Scientific Relevance

The panel advances policy process research by treating the contestation of bureaucratic expertise as a mechanism that can alter policymaking itself. Struggles over expert authority can shape which problems gain attention, which evidence is accepted as legitimate, which policy alternatives are considered viable, and how decisions are implemented. By connecting bureaucratic politics and expertise with policy process research, the panel seeks to explain how bureaucrats defend, renegotiate, or lose authority under political pressure and how these dynamics affect policy agendas, formulation, implementation, and democratic governance.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Call for Papers

We invite theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions examining when and how bureaucratic expertise translates into political influence, how expert authority is contested by political actors, and how bureaucrats respond when their professional knowledge or autonomy comes under pressure.

We are especially interested in papers that trace these dynamics within specific stages of the policy process. Contributions may examine, for example, how bureaucrats shape the definition of policy problems, establish which forms of evidence are treated as credible, narrow or expand the range of policy alternatives under consideration, influence political decision-making, or exercise discretion during implementation. Rather than treating expertise simply as a resource held by bureaucrats, we encourage research that investigates the mechanisms through which expertise acquires—or fails to acquire—authority in concrete policymaking settings.

A second focus concerns the political contestation of bureaucratic knowledge. Papers may analyse how elected officials, political appointees, parties, advisers, or other actors challenge, bypass, selectively use, or replace established bureaucratic expertise. We are particularly interested in the conditions under which political actors defer to expert advice, attempt to control the production or circulation of evidence, privilege alternative sources of knowledge, or seek to weaken the authority of career officials and professional administrations.

The panel also welcomes research on bureaucratic responses to such pressures. These may include compliance, accommodation, strategic adaptation, negotiation, resistance, exit, or attempts to defend and reconstruct professional authority. Contributions may examine why different bureaucrats or organisations respond differently to similar political pressures and how these responses affect subsequent policy choices, implementation, and administrative capacity.

Relevant contributions may focus on variation across types of bureaucrats, including career officials, political appointees, technocrats, and hybrid profiles; across organisational positions and levels of hierarchy; or across different forms of expertise, such as legal, economic, scientific, technical, or experiential knowledge. We also encourage work examining how institutional arrangements—including appointment rules, career systems, ministerial structures, professional norms, and organisational autonomy—condition the political authority of expertise.

Comparative research across political systems, administrative traditions, policy sectors, and levels of government is particularly encouraged, especially where comparison helps identify why expert authority is preserved in some settings but weakened in others. We also welcome theoretically informed single-case studies that identify mechanisms with broader comparative relevance, including work from both the Global North and Global South.

Methodologically, we welcome qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method research, as well as contributions developing new ways to identify and measure bureaucratic expertise, expert authority, political pressure, and bureaucratic influence across the policy process.