P99 / The Politics of Public Participation in Policymaking

Topic : Citizens, Participation and Social Movements

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Since the turn of the millennium, public authorities have established various forms of participatory arrangements, often referred to as democratic innovations, to create opportunities for citizens to participate in collective decision-making beyond electoral channels (Elstub and Escobar 2019). These include participatory budgeting, citizens' juries, citizens' assemblies, and popular votes. Against the backdrop of the crisis of electoral representation, these participatory arrangements have attracted considerable scholarly attention for their capacity to embody procedural democratic ideals in policymaking, such as inclusion, respectful exchange, rational justification, openness, and transparency (Dryzek et al. 2019). Empirical studies have examined both the democratic potential and the limitations of these processes, notably their capacity to reproduce existing inequalities.

While this scholarship has significantly advanced our understanding of the democratic qualities of participatory arrangements, further attention is needed to understand how they are embedded in, and interact with, broader policymaking processes (Boswell et al. 2023; Jacquet et al. 2023; Pogrebinschi and Ryan 2018). Participatory arrangements are not only procedural settings; they also produce substantive output in the policymaking process. Yet, how these arrangements connect with decision-making processes, interact with political actors, and operate within prevailing power relations remains insufficiently understood (Bua and Bussu 2023; Escobar and Bua 2026).

This panel brings together contributions that analyse public participation as an integral part of policymaking, embedded in interactions among political and social actors, including social movements, interest groups, political parties, and public administrations. It seeks to move beyond an understanding of participatory arrangements as merely procedural mechanisms and to examine how they operate within broader political dynamics, how they shape and are shaped by existing power relations, and the extent to which they contribute to transforming contemporary policymaking.

References

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CALL FOR PAPERS

Call for papers

To advance our understanding of the role of public participation in policymaking, we invite contributions

addressing three main research areas:

1 – What influence do public participation arrangements have on policymaking, and how can it be explained?

This axis brings together empirical approaches that examine the influence of public participation arrangements on policymaking, understood broadly, from agenda-setting to policy formulation, decision-making, and implementation. It seeks to identify the mechanisms and conditions that explain why, and under what circumstances, participatory arrangements influence policy processes and outcomes. Contributions may explore how elected representatives and public administrations take up, reinterpret, or disregard participatory outputs, as well as the institutional and political factors that shape their influence.

2 – Which political agendas are advanced or challenged through public participation?

The development of citizen participation often tends to be associated with a “progressive” agenda. Yet the political orientations of participatory arrangements and their implications for competing agendas remain open questions. Which political agendas are advanced, legitimised, or challenged through public participation? Addressing this question requires examining both the substantive orientations of proposals emerging from participatory processes and the actors who endorse, appropriate, or contest them. Do these proposals promote particular orientations on issues such as climate change, wealth redistribution, or gender equality? Who claims ownership of these proposals, and how are they mobilised in broader political debates? This axis invites contributions examining how participatory outputs relate to the major political cleavages structuring contemporary societies.

3 – How do social movements engage with participatory arrangements?

Participatory arrangements may offer social movements opportunities to advance their claims and influence policymaking. However, movements may also choose to bypass these arrangements in favour of other forms of political action, or to contest them altogether. Under what conditions do social movements choose to engage with, bypass, or challenge participatory arrangements? How do these arrangements reshape the opportunities and constraints faced by movements seeking to advance their claims? This axis invites contributions examining how social movements navigate their relationships with institutionalised forms of public participation.