P288 / Understanding conflict and polarisation in public policy

Topic : Policy Process Theories

Chair : Eva Wolf (Tilburg University)

Second Chair : Vilém Novotny

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Background

Conflict is an inherent feature of public policymaking. Whether it concerns climate transitions, migration, housing or public health, conflict brings competing perspectives on the nature, and sometimes the very existence, of public problems and their possible solutions into sharp relief. Policy conflicts may generate stalemates, erode trust and deepen societal divisions. At the same time, they can bring neglected issues and perspectives to the fore, stimulate learning and create opportunities for policy change. Understanding policy conflicts is therefore essential to explaining how public policies develop and what their effects are.

Yetconflictsarenotstaticoruniform.Theyemergeindifferentinstitutionalandpolitical contexts, involve a variety of actors, and change in intensity, scope and meaning over time. A disagreement over a specific proposal may expand into a broader struggle over identities or trust in government. Conversely, seemingly entrenched disputes may open up space for dialogue, compromise or the reconsideration of established policy goals. Such dynamics connect policy conflict to processes of polarisation, yet how the two relate remains underexplored.

Positioning the panel

Conflict is hardly new to the study of public policy. Established policy process approaches typically examine it within broader explanations of agenda setting, policy stability and change (e.g., Weible, 2023), while planning scholars have long studied conflict and mediation in planning processes (e.g., Forester, 2009; Laws et al., 2014). Morerecently,policyscholarshavebeguntotreatconflictasanobjectofstudyinitsown right. Examples are the Policy Conflict Framework (Weible & Heikkila, 2017; Heikkila & Novotný, 2026), interpretive approaches to conflict development (Wolf & Van Dooren, 2017;Verhoeven&Metze,2022;DeRoeck&VanDooren,2024)andresearchonconflict within collaborative governance (Torfing et al., 2026; Boon & Wolf, 2025). These approaches explain policy conflict differently,for instance through competing interests and beliefs, diverging perspectives and meanings, emotions, institutional arrangements and the interactions among actors. They also differ in what they recognise as conflict, where they draw its boundaries, and how they explain its development and consequences.

Across these traditions, however, policy conflicts are often not explicitly defined or systematically identified (Schröder & Wolf, 2026). This makes it difficult to compare findings,assessexplanationsandbuildcumulativeknowledge.

The panel adds to existing work in two ways. First, it makes conflict itself the primary object of analysis, rather than a background condition or an intermediate step in explainingpolicychange.Second,itbuildsoncallsfordialoguebetweenmainstream and interpretive policy studies (Durnová & Weible, 2020). It brings different traditions together and asks how their conceptual and methodological choices shape what they can observe and explain: where findings are comparable, where they complement each other, and what each overlooks.

The panel addresses two linked questions. How do different approaches conceptualise andexplainpolicy conflicts?Andhowdothese choices shape ourunderstandingofhow conflicts emerge and develop, and of the conditions under which they deepen divisions or create opportunities for learning and change?

CALL FOR PAPERS

We welcome papers that place conflict at the centre of policy analysis. We invite three types of contributions:

· Conceptual papers that define policy conflict, clarify its dimensions, or develop theoretical explanations. Example questions include: How is conflict understood across research traditions? What distinguishes it from, or connects it to, related phenomena such as disagreement, controversy and polarisation? Do conflict and polarisation reinforce each other, and how can they be told apart?

· Methodological papers that propose or assess ways of identifying and studying policy conflicts, including research designs, analytical strategies and lessons from online and offline fieldwork. Such papers might ask: What do different methods make visible, and what might they overlook? How can conflicts be recognised when actors themselves do not frame them as such?

· Empirical papers that analyse specific conflicts or compare conflicts across policy sectors, governance levels or theoretical approaches. Relevant questions include: How do conflicts emerge, escalate or de-escalate, polarise or depolarise, and how do actors, institutions, ideas, emotions and power relations shape these dynamics? Under what conditions do conflicts lead to stalemate, distrust or deepening divisions, and when might they instead stimulate learning, inclusion or policy change?

Contributions may draw on diverse theoretical traditions and on qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods. Contributors are encouraged to make their conceptual and methodological assumptions explicit and to reflect on how their findings advance the broader study of policy conflicts. We particularly welcome papers that connect detailed analyses of specific conflicts to wider questions about how conflict shapes policymaking and governance.
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