P43 / Understanding the Explanatory Value of Policy Micro-Design

Topic : Policy Design, Formulation & Instruments

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

General objectives

The panel aims to advance the study of micro-design by shifting the focus from description to explanation. While research on policy details has grown rapidly, it is scattered across policy design, policy mix studies, institutional analysis, legislative studies and sectoral research. Much of this research describes how instruments are constructed rather than testing the explanatory power of these details. The panel has three objectives.

Firstly, the panel will assess the explanatory value of micro-design in relation to the effects of policies, in particular, whether the specifications and calibrations can account for differences in implementation, compliance, outputs, and outcomes that cannot be explained by the type and number of instruments adopted.

Secondly, it incorporates micro-design into the study of policy mixes by asking whether the consistency and performance of a mix depend on how its instruments are designed at the micro level.

Thirdly, it examines micro-design as a source of policy change by asking whether small adjustments to existing instruments can produce changes that would be missed if only the goals and the types of adopted instruments were observed.

By bringing together scholars from different fields who study policy details using varied approaches, the panel aims to compare evidence across sectors and countries and assess whether micro-design should become a central factor in explaining policy outcomes and dynamics.

Scientific relevance

The idea that details matter is not new. Hall (1993) distinguished among instrument settings, instruments themselves, and goals. Cashore and Howlett (2007) placed calibrations at the most concrete level of a taxonomy of policy components. Research on tools has shown that the same tool can rest on different assumptions about how its targets behave (Schneider and Ingram, 1990). Subsequent research has examined details in various ways:

- Through the intensity of instruments, such as the strictness of a standard or the number of actors covered (Knill et al., 2012; Schaffrin et al., 2015; Schmidt and Sewerin, 2019).

- Through the institutional grammar, which breaks rules down into their components (Crawford and Ostrom, 1995; Siddiki et al., 2011), and through more detailed classifications of rule types (Arahuetes-de la Iglesia et al., 2026).

- Through the level of detail and restrictiveness of legal provisions (Thomann, 2015; Hurka et al., 2025).

Capano and Howlett (2024, 2026) combined these features by distinguishing between specifications (target population, expected outcome, and timeframe) and calibrations (coercion, visibility, automaticity, resources, implementing agencies, and monitoring and accountability). A growing number of studies now analyse the micro-level of design in fields such as EU forest policy (Galicia Cruz et al., 2026), payments for ecosystem services (Sainz-Santamaria, 2024), public subsidies for private schools (Zancajo and Fontdevila, 2026), energy-efficiency rebates (Scott et al., 2026), urban transport (Pham, 2026), and net metering laws in US states (Ambrose and Gregoire-Zawilski, 2026). Taken together, these studies suggest that:

- the same instrument can take very different forms;

- vague targets and undefined calibrations can hinder implementation;

- rules hidden in the small print can change whom a policy actually targets;

- each step through which an instrument is expected to work depends on specific design choices;

- much policy change occurs through small adjustments to existing instruments rather than new ones.

Micro-design is especially important for policy mixes. Instruments in a mix can support or undermine each other (Gunningham and Sinclair, 1999; Flanagan et al., 2011). Mixes are judged by their consistency, coherence and credibility (Howlett and Rayner, 2013; Rogge and Reichardt, 2016; Kern et al., 2019), yet they are often described in terms of the number of instruments, goals and levels of government (Howlett and del Río, 2015), which tells us little about their content (Migone and Howlett, 2024). Several studies, including some of the recent ones mentioned above, highlight the importance of design details in how mixes work (del Río, 2010; Rogge and Schleich, 2018). Grohmann and Feindt (2024), for example, show that in the German implementation of the EU Common Agricultural Policy, instruments linking farm support to environmental behaviour were calibrated with low stringency and specificity, which weakened the integration of environmental goals. Micro-design may therefore be the missing link between individual instruments and the performance of the entire mix.

However, there is still limited systematic evidence linking micro-design to implementation, compliance, outputs, outcomes, and performance. Most of the studies cited above describe how instruments are built or examine single cases, and some explicitly call for tests to determine what these details explain. Such tests require a clear causal argument. Rather than acting directly on outcomes, instruments trigger mechanisms that alter the behaviour of targets and implementers (Capano and Howlett, 2021). The specifications and calibrations determine whether and to what extent these mechanisms are triggered. For instance, a subsidy will only be effective if it is substantial enough to influence choices, and an obligation will only be effective if it is monitored. Therefore, the causal claim is conditional: micro-design only explains outcomes to the extent that it activates, weakens or blocks the mechanisms on which an instrument depends. Testing this claim raises two problems. Firstly, the effect of the design must be separated from the effect of the context, since the same calibration may be effective in one setting but ineffective in another. Secondly, designs are not random: governments may select calibrations in response to conditions that influence outcomes. Comparisons of the same policy intervention across countries or over time and process tracing from design to behaviour can address these issues.

This panel addresses these gaps by asking whether micro-design adds explanatory power to policy design research or merely descriptive detail.

Research questions

1. Do specifications and calibrations explain implementation, compliance, outputs and outcomes beyond the type and number of instruments? Through which mechanisms?

2. How does the micro-design of individual instruments influence the consistency and performance of policy mixes? Can tensions within a mix be traced back to the way its instruments are calibrated?

3. Do changes in calibration reveal forms of policy change that would be missed if only goals and instruments were observed? Can changes in calibration lead to changes in goals and instruments?

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CALL FOR PAPERS

Call for papers

The same policy design can lead to very different implementation, compliance, and goal-achievement outcomes when adopted in different countries, sectors, or levels of government, or at different times. Part of the explanation lies in the political, institutional and economic context. Another part lies in how the policy mix and its instruments are designed: who is targeted, what is expected and by when, how binding the rules are, which agency is in charge, how compliance is monitored and who is held accountable for the results. This panel invites papers that examine these features and consider what they explain.

We refer to these features as the 'micro-design' of policy. Attention to these features dates back to the distinction between instruments and their settings (Hall, 1993), as well as to the notion of calibrations as the

most concrete level of policy content (Cashore and Howlett, 2007). Building on this, Capano and Howlett (2024, 2026) developed a framework that distinguishes between specifications (target population, expected outcome, and timeframe) and calibrations (coercion, visibility, automaticity, resources, implementing agencies, monitoring, and accountability). A growing body of research now looks at the micro-level of design in fields as different as forest policy, school subsidies, energy-efficiency rebates, urban transport and payments for ecosystem services (Galicia Cruz et al., 2026; Zancajo and Fontdevila, 2026; Scott et al., 2026; Pham, 2026; Sainz-Santamaria, 2024). We welcome papers that use this framework or other approaches to instrument microdesign, such as instrument intensity, institutional grammar, and legislative design, as well as new ones, especially those that address explanation.

The panel welcomes theoretical, methodological, and empirical papers; case studies; comparative work; and qualitative and quantitative designs from any sector, level of government, and region. We are especially interested in the following themes:

- *Micro-design as a cause.* Do specifications and calibrations help to explain implementation, compliance, outputs and outcomes beyond the type and number of instruments? Through which mechanisms?

- *Micro-design and policy mixes.* Most policies combine several instruments. How does the design of each instrument affect the performance of the mix in achieving its goals? When instruments in a mix work against each other, is this due to their type or the groups they target, the agencies that run them, or how they are monitored? Can a mix be improved by adjusting calibrations rather than adding new instruments?

- *Micro-design and policy change.* Do changes in specifications and calibrations reveal forms of change that are missed when only goals and instruments are considered? Can many small adjustments add up to a major change?

- *Isolating the effect of micro-design*. Which research designs can separate the effect of micro-design from that of context? How can the same policy intervention, whether a single instrument or a mix, be compared across countries, sectors or periods to show how differences in its specifications and calibrations shape results? How can micro-design be linked to evidence on implementation and outcomes, and how can process tracing follow the steps from a design choice to the behaviour of implementers and targets?