P73 / Vicious and Virtuous Circles of Policy Advice: Power, Institutional Dynamics & Expert Quality

Topic : Knowledge, Science and Expertise in Policy Process

Chair : Caner Bakir (Koc University)

Second Chair : Michael Howlett (Simon Fraser University)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

General Objectives

This panel examines why vicious and virtuous circles emerge, coexist and change in policy advisory systems (PASs). It seeks to explain how relations between experts and political leaders shape policy advice, policy outcomes and institutional dynamics across different political regimes.

Building on third-generation PAS research on the management and quality of advice (Howlett et al., 2025), the panel brings together behavioural and institutional perspectives. Migone and Howlett's (2025) Hirschman 2.0 model helps identify advisory behaviours and their implications for quality. The structure–institution–agency (SIA) framework (Bakir, 2022a, 2022b) directs attention to the causal conditions under which these behaviours emerge, persist or change. The broader objective is to understand why some advisory practices become self-reinforcing while others remain fragile or give way to different practices.

Research Questions

The panel addresses four interrelated questions:

Under what conditions do vicious and virtuous circles emerge, coexist and compete across political regimes and policy domains?
How do structural and institutional complementarities, together with enabling conditions, motivate and empower actors to engage in particular advisory practices?
What explains transitions between vicious and virtuous circles? Why do some advisory practices become institutionalised while others remain vulnerable to change?
How do policy outcomes and political legitimacy feed back into expert–ruler relations, reinforcing or disrupting existing advisory practices?

Scientific Relevance

PAS research has increasingly examined advisory quality, management and expert behaviour. Yet much of this literature focuses on established democracies. Less is known about how advisory practices vary across political regimes, coexist within the same system and change over time.

This panel contributes to addressing these gaps in three ways. First, it extends PAS research to include illiberal and authoritarian settings. Second, it treats vicious and virtuous circles as dynamic and potentially competing processes rather than fixed characteristics of advisory systems. Third, it moves beyond identifying advisory behaviours to explaining the causal conditions under which these behaviours shape policy and institutional outcomes.

An important issue is the asymmetry between the two circles. Vicious practices may become self-reinforcing through institutionalised repression, co-optation and expert compliance. Virtuous practices may depend more heavily on political support for credible advice. Moreover, effective policy advice does not necessarily imply democratic governance.

The panel welcomes comparative and within-case studies using different theoretical and methodological approaches. It seeks to advance a context- and process-sensitive research agenda connecting comparative public policy, public administration and political economy. Its central concern is to explain when expertise informs political authority, when political authority distorts expertise, and why these relationships change over time.

Proposal

Why do political leaders seek expert advice in some policy areas but marginalise it in others? Why does expertise sometimes improve policy performance while, at other times, it serves to legitimise decisions already taken? Under what conditions do these practices persist or change?

This panel invites contributions examining the vicious and virtuous circles of policy advice across different

political regimes and policy domains. It focuses on how relations between political authority and expertise shape the production, use and influence of policy advice. Particular attention is paid to the conditions under which advisory practices emerge, coexist, become institutionalised or change over time.

Recent research on policy advisory systems (PASs) has shifted attention towards the management and quality of policy advice (Howlett et al., 2025). Migone and Howlett's (2025) Hirschman 2.0 model offers insights into how advisory behaviours influence quality. Building on this research, the panel seeks to explain why different advisory practices arise and how they affect policy and institutional outcomes.

Vicious circles may emerge when political leaders control expertise through repression, co-optation and selective rewards. Advisers may respond by withholding inconvenient evidence or adapting their recommendations to political preferences. Such practices can legitimise political authority in the short term while contributing to policy failures over time. Virtuous circles may emerge when political leaders support credible advice and its effective implementation. Yet these circles are neither mutually exclusive nor necessarily permanent. Even authoritarian regimes may display virtuous advisory practices in particular policy fields or periods (Bakir, 2023).

The structure–institution–agency (SIA) framework (Bakir, 2022a, 2022b) offers one approach to explaining these dynamics. It directs attention to how structural and institutional complementarities motivate actors, and how enabling conditions empower them to act. The panel also welcomes alternative theoretical perspectives.

We particularly encourage papers addressing the following questions:

Why do vicious and virtuous advisory circles emerge, coexist or compete within and across political regimes?
How do political authority, institutional arrangements and advisory behaviours shape the quality and influence of expertise?
Under what conditions do advisory practices become self-reinforcing, and what explains transitions between vicious and virtuous circles?
How do crises, political leadership, policy entrepreneurs and transnational advisory networks influence these dynamics?
How do policy successes and failures feed back into expert–ruler relations, policy learning and political legitimacy?
We welcome theoretical and empirical contributions from comparative public policy, public administration, comparative politics and political economy. Papers may examine democratic, illiberal or authoritarian settings and different policy sectors, including economic policy, social protection, public health, climate change and national security. Comparative studies, within-case analyses, process tracing and longitudinal research are particularly encouraged.

The panel aims to advance a comparative, context- and process-sensitive understanding of policy advice. Its central concern is not simply whether advice is good or bad, but why particular advisory practices emerge, how they shape policy outcomes, and when they reinforce or challenge existing relations between expertise and political power.

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