P151 / WHAT DO GOVERNMENTS WANT? POLICY GOALS IN POLICY DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION AND CHANGE

Topic : Policy Design, Formulation & Instruments

Chair : Marko Kovacic (University of Rijeka)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Governments increasingly govern through goals. National strategies, the Sustainable Development Goals, EU headline targets, climate neutrality pledges, mission-oriented innovation policies and performance-based funding schemes such as the EU's National Recovery and Resilience Plans all ask policymakers to state, often in numbers, what they want to achieve. Yet policy goals remain one of the least examined elements of public policy. Classic policy analysis took goals as given, as the starting point for choosing among alternatives or evaluating results, and policy design research has invested far more in instruments and policy mixes (Hood, 1983; Lascoumes and Le Galès, 2007; Capano and Howlett, 2020) than in the aims they are meant to serve.

Knowledge about goals exists, but it is scattered across communities that rarely talk to each other. Policy design scholars treat goals as levels of aims, objectives and specifications (Howlett, 2009) and as markers of deeper policy change (Hall, 1993). Public administration research has measured goal ambiguity and studied the effects and pathologies of performance targets (Chun and Rainey, 2005; Bevan and Hood, 2006). Implementation research shows how ambiguous goals shape what happens on the ground (Matland, 1995), political scientists have long noted the symbolic uses of policy aims (Edelman, 1964), and global governance scholars study governance by goal-setting (Biermann, Kanie and Kim, 2017). More recently, empirical work has begun to classify and measure goals in strategic documents (Petek et al., 2021, 2022, 2026). What is missing is a shared conversation that connects these strands.

The panel offers a space for that conversation around a broad question: what are policy goals, how are they made, and what difference do they make for the design, implementation and outcomes of public policy? Rather than testing a single theory, it invites papers that examine, support or challenge competing expectations, for example:

H1 (design or politics): goals are specified to guide the choice of instruments, or they are kept deliberately vague to build coalitions and avoid blame.

H2 (precision): more precise and measurable goals improve implementation and accountability, or they invite gaming and the displacement of aims by indicators.

H3 (diffusion): international goal frameworks lead to convergence in national goals, but the convergence stays in words rather than in instruments and practice (Meyer and Rowan, 1977).

H4 (change): goals change more slowly than instruments, and new goals are added to old ones rather than replacing them (Streeck and Thelen, 2005).

The panel has three aims: to bring together scholars of policy design, public administration, implementation, comparative politics, global governance and specific policy fields who study goals under different names; to build shared concepts and methods for analysing goals across countries, sectors and levels of government; and to lay the ground for a collaborative research agenda on policy goals. We particularly hope to attract early career researchers and colleagues working outside Europe.

CALL FOR PAPERS

We invite theoretical, methodological and empirical papers on policy goals from any policy field, country, region or level of government. We are interested in goals under all their names, including aims, objectives, targets, priorities, missions and pledges, and in every setting where they are set, from local and national strategies to EU and international frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals. Papers on recent goal-heavy initiatives, such as National Recovery and Resilience Plans or mission-oriented policies, are as welcome as studies of long-standing sectoral strategies.

Depending on submissions, sessions may be organised around three broad themes. The first is concepts and measurement: what counts as a policy goal, how goals can be classified, and how their ambiguity, precision, hierarchy or coherence can be measured and compared. The second is the making of goals: who

sets them and how, the role of politicians, civil servants, experts, stakeholders and citizens, the politics of ambiguity and symbolism, and the influence of international templates. The third is goals in action: how goals relate to instruments and policy mixes, how they shape implementation, accountability and evaluation, when targets displace the aims behind them, and how goals change, accumulate or are quietly abandoned over time.

We welcome papers that engage with the hypotheses outlined above, but also papers that open new questions. Single-case and comparative studies are equally welcome, as are qualitative, quantitative, experimental, computational and mixed-methods designs, from document analysis and interviews to text-as-data, surveys and process tracing. Conceptual and methodological papers, sector-specific studies (for example in education, health, climate, social, youth or innovation policy) and work in progress by early career scholars are all encouraged.

Paper proposals should state the research question, the material and the method, and briefly explain what the paper contributes to our understanding of policy goals.