P128 / What's New in Evidence-Informed Policymaking? Rethinking Theories of Knowledge, Power and Policy

Topic : Knowledge, Science and Expertise in Policy Process

Chair : Justyna Bandola-Gill (University of Birmingham)

Second Chair : Brian Head (University of Queensland, Australia)

Third Chair : Paul Cairney (University of Stirling)

Fourth Chair : Johan Christensen (Leiden University)

5th Chair : Justin Parkhurst (London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Over recent decades, a range of institutional arrangements have developed to connect scientific evidence and expertise with policymaking. Yet the traditional assumptions underpinning this model are eroding. Among the challenges reshaping evidence-informed policymaking are the rise of populism, 'post-truth' politics and democratic backsliding, which unsettle assumptions about institutional stability and the political value of expertise (Craft, Head and Howlett 2024; Perl; Bauer et al. 2021), and rapid digitalisation and the emergence of generative AI, which are transforming how evidence is produced and who is recognised as an expert (Tyler et al. 2023; Messeri and Crockett 2024). This is a pivotal moment when the historically established and institutionally stabilised systems of evidence provision are becoming disrupted. This is not only an empirical and normative challenge but also a theoretical one, as existing theories and concepts may be insufficient to explain these ongoing transformations. Therefore, **this panel's key objective is to explore new theoretical approaches to capture this rapidly changing landscape of evidence-policy interactions.**

Several theoretical traditions have advanced our understanding of these relationships, yet their contributions have often developed in parallel rather than in dialogue with one another. Institutional approaches examine how advisory arrangements and governance structures shape evidence use and the conditions for its legitimate and effective mobilisation (Parkhurst 2017). Relational and constructivist perspectives foreground the practices through which knowledge is co-produced, translated and made actionable (Boswell and Smith 2017; Rhodes and Lancaster 2019; Bandola-Gill, Arthur and Leng 2023). Interpretive and narrative approaches show how stories, values and competing truth claims shape what counts as evidence and how it acquires political meaning (Crow and Jones 2018; Fischer 2021). Systems and complexity approaches, in turn, offer ways to examine interactions across actors, institutions and processes (Rutter et al. 2017; Haynes et al. 2020). Yet important questions remain about how these perspectives relate to one another, what each makes visible or obscures, and how they can account for contemporary political and technological change.

This panel is concerned with both theoretical developments in the study of evidence use such as systems- and institutional perspectives as well as communicative and narrative approaches (questions 1-3) but also how the use of evidence in policymaking is changing in relation to contemporary shifts (questions 4-5)

1. Which new concepts and theories best capture contemporary evidence–policy relations?
2. What do systems-based and institutional approaches add to theories of evidence use?
3. How can we theorise political communication, storytelling and narratives in the uptake of evidence by policymakers?
4. What theoretical tools explain the changing role of evidence under populism and democratic change?
5. How does AI reconfigure evidence-based policymaking, and what does this demand of our theories?

By consolidating an emerging theoretical agenda, the panel offers scholars a shared vocabulary for comparing cases across sectors and political systems, and gives practitioners a firmer conceptual basis for strengthening evidence institutions.

CALL FOR PAPERS

We invite conceptual, theoretical and empirical papers that advance understanding of evidence–policy

relations through critical engagement with existing theories and the development of new concepts and frameworks. We particularly welcome contributions that move beyond applying established approaches to individual case studies to examine their explanatory limits, connect theoretical traditions, or generate new conceptual insights from empirical research.

We are interested in how changing political, institutional and technological conditions reshape the production, authority, communication and use of knowledge in policymaking. Contributions may address these transformations individually or examine how they interact. We particularly encourage papers that use empirical cases to develop, challenge or refine theory, including cases from under-researched policy domains, levels of government and political systems.

We particularly welcome papers on:

New theories and novel applications of existing theories. We seek papers that propose new concepts or frameworks for explaining how evidence is produced, contested and used in policymaking. Equally welcome are papers that apply established theories in unexpected ways, for example by bridging public policy scholarship with sociology, organisation studies or political theory.

New forms of evidence and expertise. Policymaking increasingly draws on lived experience, citizen and deliberative knowledge, Indigenous knowledge but also big data, computational models and AI-generated syntheses alongside conventional research. We welcome papers that theorise how these forms of evidence gain or lose authority, how they are combined with or set against scientific expertise, and what they mean for who counts as an expert.

Evidence in a changing political and technological environment. We seek new approaches to understanding evidence for policy as populism, democratic backsliding and AI reshape the conditions under which it is produced and used. Relevant questions include how illiberal governments capture, sideline or repurpose expertise and advisory bodies; how evidence institutions resist or adapt; and how AI tools redistribute epistemic authority among researchers, officials and technology providers. We are especially interested in concepts that capture these dynamics together rather than treating them as separate threats.

Learning from policy success. Research on evidence use has largely been built on barriers, gaps and failures. We invite papers on what can be learned from policy success: how evidence contributes to successful policies, how it is used to construct, defend or contest narratives of success, and how theories of policy learning and success might change the way we explain evidence use.
We welcome conceptual, comparative and empirical papers from public policy, public administration, political science, science and technology studies and related fields. Papers that combine analytical and normative ambitions – explaining how evidence–policy relations are changing while asking how valuable features of policymaking can be protected – are particularly encouraged.