P281 / Who Delivers Net Zero? Policy Intermediaries, State Capacity, and the Politics of Evidence

Topic : Implementation/Street-Level Bureaucracy

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Governments may announce net-zero targets, convene transition partnerships, and produce detailed roadmaps without changing investment decisions, industrial assets, or emissions. Conversely, observed emissions reductions may reflect economic shocks or falling technology costs rather than the institutions credited with delivering them. The resulting public-policy puzzle is not simply the familiar gap between ambition and action: it concerns who influences implementation, who defines evidence of success, and how institutional contributions can be distinguished from declarations of progress.

Existing scholarship offers complementary explanations. Meadowcroft and Rosenbloom (2023) present net zero as politically contested, sector-specific transitions; Rosenbloom et al. (2025) show why promising interventions may create dead-end pathways. Schott and Schreurs (2021) reveal how fossil-fuel legacies shape different political settings. Policy-capacity research distinguishes analytical, operational, and political capabilities (Wu, Ramesh, and Howlett, 2015), while Kivimaa et al. (2019) and Arcand (2025) examine intermediaries and the tensions between flexibility and government control. Ryan (2022) demonstrates that judgments about facts and policy values cannot be neatly separated. Recent ex-post reviews of climate policies document heterogeneous impacts (OECD, 2025). Yet the institutional mechanisms linking these literatures to the evidence used to judge delivery remain open to debate.

Our central question is: Under what conditions do policy intermediaries strengthen public capacity to implement net-zero transitions, and when do they instead create fragmented authority or misleading accounts of progress? The panel introduces a shared comparative heuristic, the “implementation evidence chain”: commitments; binding instruments; budgetary and administrative decisions; material changes in projects and practices; and environmental and distributional outcomes. This is not a linear theory or an attribution technique. It provides common points at which to investigate the actions of intermediaries, observable bottlenecks, and rival explanations.

Four propositions invite scrutiny. First, intermediaries complement state capacity when mandates, financing, and political authority align, but may produce dependency where those conditions are absent. Second, autonomy facilitates experimentation under credible public accountability, yet can enable capture or goal displacement without it. Third, intermediaries act as evidence brokers as well as implementation brokers: control over indicators, reporting, and expertise may create a divergence between visible activity and independently verifiable change. Fourth, workers, Indigenous peoples, and affected communities may reshape both delivery pathways and the standards by which success is judged, with consequences for legitimacy, distribution, and durability. None of these effects is assumed; policy phase, elections, prices, and technology costs offer alternative explanations.

We welcome studies across energy, industrial decarbonization, transport, and place-based transitions, including resource-dependent, northern, and lower-income contexts. Evidence may combine fieldwork, administrative records, expenditure, network data, or evaluation designs. Human-validated AI-assisted coding can help assess large policy corpora, but cannot independently establish causal impact or replace situated knowledge. The goal is a genuinely comparative debate over how net-zero policy is implemented, contested, measured, and held accountable.

CALL FOR PAPERS

How can we tell whether a climate-policy intermediary has helped deliver change rather than merely helped document it? This panel invites original research on the organizations, capacities, and political struggles linking net-zero commitments to implemented decisions and observable consequences. The focus is public-policy implementation, including the politics of deciding what counts as evidence of success.

We welcome papers on government-affiliated transition agencies, regional partnerships, industry and labour associations, Indigenous and community-led organizations, civil-society networks, and researchers acting

between policy design and delivery. Papers may examine energy, industrial decarbonization, transport, buildings, or regional economic transitions. Cases from fossil-fuel-dependent, northern, and lower- and middle-income settings are particularly encouraged.

Contributions should engage at least one connected debate: (1) whether intermediaries complement or substitute for analytical, operational, and political state capacity; (2) how autonomy, public oversight, and incumbent power shape implementation; (3) whether organizations also act as evidence brokers, influencing the indicators, reports, and narratives by which outcomes are evaluated; or (4) how distributional conflict and community participation affect policy durability and legitimate standards of success.

Empirical papers are encouraged to trace a sequence from targets and binding policy instruments through funding, decisions, delivery, and outcomes, while explicitly considering delays, reversals, unintended effects, and alternative explanations. We invite comparative research and analytically informative single cases, as well as conceptual contributions that specify contestable mechanisms. Suitable methods include interviews, process tracing, participatory inquiry, administrative-data analysis, network analysis, quasi-experimental evaluation, and mixed methods.

We also welcome carefully validated text-as-data and AI-assisted approaches that link policy statements to budgets, procurement, permits, projects, or independently collected indicators. Such methods should disclose validation procedures, uncertainty, and ethical safeguards, including relevant Indigenous data-governance requirements. AI use is not required, and automated coding is not evidence of causal impact on its own.

Proposals should state a clear public-policy question, theoretical contribution, evidence or analytical strategy, and implications for comparative implementation research. Negative findings and critical perspectives are welcome. Our aim is an open, focused exchange across methods, sectors, and political contexts—not a showcase of unrelated climate case studies.