02 / Solidarity in public policy: potential and limits of an evolving concept

Topic : WORKSHOPS

Chair : Elias Weiss (University of Vienna)

Second Chair : Elisabeth Saulnier (University of Vienna)

Third Chair : Jensen Sass (University of Vienna)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

This workshop explores how solidarity can contribute to democratic renewal in contexts marked by polarization, social fragmentation, institutional distrust, and the overlapping crises that define our era. We examine how solidarities are imagined, contested, and mobilised in politics and policy across democratic and non-democratic settings.

We understand solidarity as enacted, cost-bearing commitments through which people support others whom they take to be like themselves in a relevant respect (Prainsack 2026). This understanding treats solidarity not as a fixed principle but as a contested social and political practice whose meanings are negotiated through policy discourses, institutions, and everyday interactions. While solidaristic practices have long underpinned some welfare provisions and collective responses to risk, they also shape policymaking in areas such as public health, migration and integration, climate governance, and digital governance.

The workshop examines what solidarity contributes to policy analysis beyond related concepts such as justice, care, and social cohesion, and how interpretive approaches, in particular, can illuminate the lived experiences and political effects of solidaristic practice.

It pursues three main objectives:

(1) to advance conceptual and methodological understandings of solidarity within interpretive policy analysis;

(2) to explore how practices of solidarity or their absence shape policymaking across sectors; and

(3) to critically assess the limitations, contradictions, and unintended consequences of discourses, practices, and institutions of solidarity.

In doing so, it will explore the following questions:

how are solidarities constructed, enacted and contested in policy processes? Under what conditions do practices of solidarity foster inclusion, participation, and democratic problem-solving? When do they reinforce exclusion, domination, or depoliticisation?

By bringing together conceptual, empirical, and methodological contributions, the workshop aims to strengthen interpretive scholarship on solidarity, and foster engagement on related topics, including collective action, democratic governance, and public problem-solving. In doing so, it contributes to understanding how solidarity can help renew democratic capacities and build connections in turbulent times.

CALL FOR PAPERS

We invite conceptual, empirical, and methodological contributions that examine solidarity as a contested yet potentially productive resource for public policy and democratic renewal. We are particularly interested in how solidarities are interpreted, enacted, and challenged within policy processes, and how they foster connections across social, political, and institutional divides.

Conceptual papers may explore: the meanings, forms, and boundaries of solidarity; its relationship to justice, care, rights, social cohesion and democracy; and its role in fostering - or constraining - democratic dialogue and collective action.

Empirical contributions are welcome across a wide range of policy fields, including welfare and health policy, migration governance, climate policy, and data governance. We particularly welcome submissions that

examine how solidarities are formed, negotiated, and experienced across diverse publics and settings, and how they navigate tensions between inclusion and exclusion.

Methodological papers may advance interpretive approaches to studying solidarity, including discourse, narrative, ethnographic, participatory, and co-productive methods. Contributions that develop tools for evaluating solidaristic practices and their democratic implications are also encouraged.

We will explore the possibility of publishing papers in a special issue of an international peer-reviewed journal after the panel - when you submit your abstract, please indicate whether you would potentially be interested in contributing to the Special Issue.