Policy Innovation
An Introduction from the Special Section Editors

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Policy Innovation: An Introduction from the Special Section Editors

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ABSTRACT *This editorial marks the relaunch of the Policy Innovation section of this journal, responding to the urgent need for innovative public policy amid global challenges such as climate change, economic inequality, and technological disruption. It reflects on the journal's pivotal contributions to the subject and underscores the importance of comparative analysis in driving policy innovation. The section invites submissions that push theoretical and methodological boundaries, expand research into underexplored geographies and domains, and tackle the implications of policy innovation for equity, fairness, and justice. By broadening the scope of policy innovation, the journal aims to inspire cutting-edge, rigorous, and actionable research.*

1. Why Comparative Policy Innovation?

In designing, enacting, and implementing effective policies, policymakers increasingly face challenges that require them to go beyond routine solutions. When existing policies lack legitimacy or fail to deliver the desired results, policy innovations – radical or transformative changes in public policy – become crucial. These innovations can involve changes in problem framing, policy instruments, processes, practices, or structures (Mulgan and Albury 2003; Howlett 2014; Goyal and Howlett 2024). Examples such as citizen assemblies (Fournier et al. 2011), nudges (Benartzi et al. 2017), and policy innovation labs (Wellstead et al. 2021) – among several others – reflect the growing interest in novel solutions among practitioners and scholars alike.

Policy innovations are increasingly seen as necessary for addressing the root causes of grand challenges and steering societal transitions (UNRISD 2016; Goyal 2019). Given

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the unprecedented complexity of these challenges, understanding the drivers of policy innovations, their enabling conditions, and their impacts on various actors is critical. Yet, despite the growing body of research on policy innovation (see, for example, Kemmerling 2023), there remains a lack of systematic knowledge from a comparative perspective (see, for example, Jordan and Huitema 2014; Goyal et al. 2022). This gap is unfortunate because comparative analysis offers much for policy innovation research and practice.

A comparative study can assist in identifying and developing potential innovations in public policy when a given intervention is no longer satisfactory. By analyzing how policy innovations in different jurisdictions or over time have succeeded or failed, policymakers can avoid repeating mistakes and develop more effective interventions (Brans and Pattyn 2017; Geva-May et al. 2018). A comparative lens can also highlight the contextual factors that influence success or failure (Radin and Weimer 2018), and help clarify which aspects of successful innovations are specific to a given context and which can be transferred elsewhere (Mahroum 2013). Furthermore, tracking the impact of policy innovations over time provides valuable lessons for durable policy design (Cashore and Goyal 2019; Goyal 2021a).

The urgent need for policy innovations, combined with the benefits of a comparative perspective, constitutes the rationale for relaunching the Policy Innovation section by the *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis* (JCPA). "Comparative perspective" refers broadly to theoretical or methodological triangulation; comparisons over time, across policies, or across jurisdictions; or extrapolation and lesson drawing beyond specific cases (see also: Aims and Scope statement of JCPA). In this editorial, we reflect on how previous research in the journal has contributed to this growing field and shaped academic debates on policy innovation. By building on past contributions, this relaunched section aims to chart new directions in policy innovation research.

2. JCPA and Policy Innovation

Over the past three decades, JCPA has played a central role in fostering theoretical development, empirical exploration, and methodological novelty in the research area of policy innovation.

A foundational theme in the journal's scholarship has been the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of policy change. Scholars have laid the groundwork for comparative policy analysis by refining this key concept. For instance, Howlett and Cashore (2009) refined the conceptualization of policy change from a positivist perspective, while Zittoun (2009) emphasized the "subjective" dimension of the phenomenon. Building on these, Bauer and Knill (2014) nuanced the discussion further by examining not only policy change but also policy reduction, broadening the scope of what constitutes policy innovation. Capano (2009) complemented these efforts by exploring the epistemological and theoretical choices involved in studying policy change, solidifying the journal's contribution to debates on how to conceptualize and measure policy innovation.

While policy innovation is often equated with policy change, articles in JCPA have offered a broader interpretation. Guo and Ba (2020), for example, argued that the

decision to adopt a policy and the process of designing that policy are distinct stages of the innovation process, each influenced by different characteristics. Mahroum (2013) further expanded this view by highlighting the significance of process innovation and political innovation, suggesting that these types of innovation are just as vital as programmatic innovation in shaping policy outcomes. More recently, Cai et al. (2024) analyzed the institutionalization of policy innovation, underscoring the need to view it as an ongoing practice rather than one-time adoption. These contributions have laid the foundation for future research that seeks to conceptualize policy innovation in a more systematic and nuanced manner.

The interaction among institutional environments, power, and knowledge has emerged as a recurring theme in the study of policy innovation. Zohlnhöfer (2009) stressed the inherently political nature of policy change, where political parties often act as veto players, while Skogstad (2021) demonstrated that parties can also be drivers of innovation when their electoral and ideational objectives align. However, these dynamics are highly contextual, and parties are constrained by their institutional environment (Evrard 2012). Consequently, the role of policy learning becomes complex, with interaction between power and knowledge shaping who learns, what is learned, and to what effect (Dunlop and Radaelli 2022). This is where comparative research becomes crucial in unpacking how diverse institutional, political, and knowledge systems influence policy innovation.

Theories of the policy process have been central to understanding policy innovation, and JCPA has been instrumental in applying and refining these theories in diverse contexts. The advocacy coalition framework (ACF), for example, has featured prominently in JCPA, with scholars extending its use beyond North America and Western Europe (Gupta 2014; Han et al. 2014; Henry et al. 2014). Further, the journal has fostered theoretical triangulation, such as between the ACF and the multiple streams framework (Bandelow et al. 2017), demonstrating the value of combining theories to enhance the explanatory power of comparative research. These theoretical contributions underscore the importance of applying and refining policy process theories to understand innovation across diverse contexts.

As a leader in comparative policy analysis, JCPA has consistently promoted methodological advancement in the study of policy innovation. For instance, Castiglioni (2018) employed a method of difference design with process tracing to identify the determinants of major policy change, while Koops (2011) used a within-case longitudinal comparison to explain changes in privacy legislation in the Netherlands. More recently, research has expanded the methodological toolkit by incorporating techniques such as Qualitative Comparative Analysis – for example, to compare policy change at the local level (Cai et al. 2024) – and topic modelling – for example, to analyze the evolution of multi-level policy "mixes" (Goyal and Howlett 2021). Such methodological innovations have enriched comparative policy analysis, offering more nuanced and context-specific insights into policy innovation.

In an increasingly interconnected world, the transnationalization of policy innovation has emerged as an important theme. Illustratively, scholars have examined the effect of Europeanization on national policy change (Vukasovic and Huisman 2018) and the "practice" of European Union policy at the national level (Prontera 2010), as these determine the degree and direction of innovation. However, recent scholarship has called

for a more global perspective on policy innovation. Kemmerling (2023), for example, has challenged the research community to go beyond inter- and transnational learning and consider South–North learning, which has been underexplored despite its potential to inform more equitable and innovative policies.

In summary, JCPA has made significant contributions to the study of policy innovation by fostering conceptual clarity, advancing theoretical frameworks, and promoting methodological diversity. Through its comparative lens, the journal has deepened our understanding of how policy innovation unfolds across varied contexts, offering critical insights for both academia and policymaking.

3. Our Invitation to Contribute to the Policy Innovation Section

Building on the legacy of JCPA, the relaunched Policy Innovation section invites research that responds to emerging challenges and pushes the boundaries of what we know about policy innovation. As governments worldwide confront complex issues such as climate change, economic inequality, and technological disruption, the need for policy innovations has arguably never been more urgent. We welcome contributions that clarify concepts, develop theories, employ cutting-edge methods, and explore policy innovations across diverse contexts from a comparative perspective.

Despite the surge in studies on policy innovation, the literature remains conceptually underdeveloped. Many studies still equate policy innovation with policy change, without clearly specifying the scale or nature of the change. This lack of clarity is a critical oversight, as distinguishing incremental or routine changes versus radical or transformative innovations is essential for both academic rigor and effective policy learning. Moreover, limiting the notion of policy innovation to policy design change neglects significant innovations in policy structures, processes, and practices. These, while less visible, are pivotal in determining policy success or failure. The growing literature on democratic innovation (Smith 2009; Elstub and Escobar 2019), governance innovation (Hartley 2005), and public sector innovation (De Vries et al. 2016; Torfing 2019) reflects the importance of exploring these dimensions. We invite scholars to further develop this more comprehensive conceptualization of policy innovation and explore its theoretical and practical implications.

Expanding the definition of policy innovation also opens the door for more rigorous comparative analysis. There is significant potential for cross-fertilization of knowledge between the relatively siloed research areas of policy change/innovation, public sector innovation, governance innovation, and democratic innovation. For instance, public sector innovation can offer important insights into how administrative reforms shape policy design and implementation. Similarly, governance innovation, with its focus on process change and multi-level dynamics, offers richness to the study of policy innovation. Meanwhile, democratic innovation, emphasizing citizen participation, provides a deeper understanding of how public engagement shapes policy processes and outcomes. We particularly invite conceptual and empirical research that synthesizes insights from these areas to deepen comparative policy analysis.

Another critical gap is the limited engagement with theory. While explanatory theories exist, they are often applied inconsistently across different strands of policy innovation research. This presents an opportunity for comparative theory building and

testing. We urge scholars to develop theories that explain innovations in processes, practices, and structures across the entire policy process – from agenda setting to formulation, adoption, implementation, and evaluation. A more systematic theoretical reflection will not only strengthen the academic foundations of policy innovation research but also generate more cumulative knowledge to benefit scholars and practitioners alike.

One underexplored area is the relationship between technological innovation and policy innovation (Goyal Forthcoming). While technological advancements such as artificial intelligence and digitization are reshaping how governments operate, there has been insufficient attention to how these developments interact with policy innovation. This is a critical gap, as technological innovations not only open up opportunities for improving policy design and implementation, but also reshape the politics of policy innovation by altering values, interests, and power dynamics (Schmidt and Sewerin 2017; Goyal et al. 2021; Goyal and Iychettira 2022). We encourage submissions that examine the co-evolution of technological and policy innovations, especially from a comparative perspective.

On the methodological front, the dominance of case studies, interviews, and surveys in the literature suggests a need for methodological diversification. While these methods remain valuable, we encourage scholars to explore medium- and large-*n* research designs – such as Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) or regression analysis – to enhance the robustness of findings. The growing potential of machine learning and natural language processing techniques should also be leveraged to analyze policy-relevant text at scale, uncovering new patterns and insights more efficiently (Hooper et al. 2024). Additionally, mixed-method or multi-method designs can provide novel insights by examining different units of analysis and perspectives (Goyal 2021b), and account for a more comprehensive view on the effectiveness of policy innovations (Pattyn et al. 2022). We also urge within-case studies to employ comparative frameworks to allow the generation of middle-range theories (Fontaine 2020; Beach et al. 2022).

Empirically, there is a clear need for greater diversification of contexts in policy innovation research. Certain policy domains – such as culture, land use, defense, economics, social welfare, and transportation – remain underexamined. Geographically, most research continues to focus on Europe and North America, with significant under-representation of the Global South, particularly Africa and South America. We call for more studies focusing on understudied domains and geographies – including autocracies (Tosun and Croissant 2016; Van Den Dool and Schlaufer 2024) – through a comparative lens, to offer fresh perspectives and important lessons for the rest of the world (Kemmerling 2023).

In addition, research on the outcomes of policy innovation remains rare. Even when conducted, such research tends to focus on the effectiveness of innovations in achieving specific policy objectives. How policy innovations impact equity, fairness, and justice has hardly been examined in a systematic manner. We invite research that goes beyond traditional measures of success to investigate the impact of policy innovations on the broader goals of equity and social justice (McConnell et al. 2020). Comparative analysis can help identify how different institutional contexts and actor constellations promote or inhibit equitable policy innovations.

Finally, we encourage scholars to examine the potential "dark side" of policy innovation (Howlett 2020). Innovation is often framed positively, but it can also lead to unintended or harmful consequences, such as exacerbating inequalities or excluding marginalized communities from decision-making processes. For example, digital governance might widen the digital divide, or climate policy innovations might disproportionately burden low-income groups. Studying these "negative" outcomes can provide valuable insights for designing and implementing policy innovations while minimizing harm. We welcome critical research that contributes to a more balanced understanding of policy innovation.

In conclusion, our relaunched Policy Innovation section aims to spark the next wave of research by embracing a broader conceptualization, encouraging deeper theoretical engagement, promoting methodological innovation, and expanding empirical applications to new contexts and issues. We look forward to receiving submissions that push the boundaries of our knowledge and contribute to tackling the grand challenges of our time.

Disclosure Statement

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