Stream #31

Causal Inference in Social Policy Analysis

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At its heart, social policy analysis is interested in identifying causal relationships. We are interested in the reasons for policy changes, we are interested in policy effects, we are interested in why some policies are more popular than others. Yet social policy analysis has struggled to establish causal relationships because it must contend with a distinct set of problems. We often encounter issues such as collinearity, multiple alternative explanations, and limited variation in our explanatory variables due to the country-comparative setup of our research. Over the past decades, the social sciences have seen a surge in studies aimed at isolating causal effects. By applying the so-called potential outcomes framework of causality, this wave of research does not overemphasize advanced econometric models but focuses on research design. Based on the "gold standard" of randomized experiments, it brings a distinct way of thinking about how to set up studies and how to identify causal relationships. Moreover, with the emergence of additional practical tools and methods, such as directed acyclic graphs, and improved data availability, more and more analyses of social policies have begun to tackle these issues and identify causal relationships in our field. This stream aims to foster exchange between researchers in comparative social policy analysis who put a special focus on causal analysis. We invite contributions relying on natural or quasi-experiments, survey experiments, matching, instrumental variables, fixed eVects panel designs, diVerence-in-diVerences approaches, and regression discontinuity designs.

The stream invites paper proposals from all fields of social policy research. Paper proposals should include the research question, theoretical background, and (first) results, but also provide specific details on the analytical approach used to establish causality. The stream is also open to contributions that aim to present research proposals and discuss research designs. Based on experience from previous years, we are usually able to group papers into sessions that also share a common substantive research focus.