

Laudation

For the 2025 Jean Blondel PhD Prize

The Jury has this year chosen to award the prize to Laura Nordström of University of Helsinki.

The jury had the following to say:

Laura Nordström's PhD dissertation is a remarkable contribution to the various sub-disciplines of contemporary political science concerned with actual politico-administrative decision-making and the ways in which our postmodern polities are genuinely governed. This is particularly relevant in an era marked—especially during crises—by the intense cross-border circulation of policy ideas, paradigms, and expertise among increasingly interconnected nations. More precisely, by adopting the rich theoretical perspectives of cognitive studies, discursive institutionalism, and the study of knowledge regimes, Laura's masterful work examines and measures with great subtlety the ideational role and tangible influence of experts in crisis decision-making.

Challenging the simplistic understanding of major crises as events that open wide windows of opportunity for policy paradigm shifts, Laura's work is truly innovative in its research puzzle: why did the austerity-focused, ordoliberal EMU (Economic and Monetary Union) paradigm remain so stable during the 2010 eurozone crisis, the largest economic crisis in the EU's history? As the author writes, "My doctoral research is a case study of the stability of a paradigm in a crisis."

The Jury attests that her undertaking is exceptionally well executed, offering a deep and nuanced analysis that excellently combines refined theoretical discussions, substantial empirical field observations, and elegant, original findings (e.g., "power over ideas" and "power in ideas"). The text unfolds coherently throughout its 460 pages. This extensive manuscript, impeccably written, jargon-free, and perfectly clear, already reads like a published book—and indeed, a page-turner.

Crucially, Laura goes beyond the classic argument that "institutions matter." Through a highly systematic and skillful application of theory-testing process-tracing to a single, illuminating case study—namely, the Greek crisis—she tests and validates a causal mechanism wherein the lack of consideration for alternative policy options explains the resilience of the EMU paradigm.

She also provides empirical evidence that this unquestioned preference for austerity, regardless of the social cost to the Greek people, stemmed from the insularity of a very small milieu of "in-house experts": those comprising the famous "Troika" (the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund, and the European Central Bank). She convincingly tells a significant story in the tradition of Graham Allison, in which great uncertainty, exceptionality, haste, and pressure contributed to a bricolage.

In this environment, the Troika experts, relying on pre-existing beliefs, precepts, and recipes, monopolized policy advice and became the de facto decision-makers, (almost) substituting for the Greek government—an almost pure and perfect case of technocracy pro tempore, as she convincingly argues.

The strengths of Laura's causal mechanism lie in the fact that it is explicit, falsifiable, and priors-updating: it forces the reader to reconsider the degree of agency these experts, equipped with their firmly entrenched ideas and preferences, possess during critical moments when one would typically expect political contestation. With great originality, especially when compared to the multitude of works that analyze the symbolic and rhetorical dimensions of policy narratives, Laura demonstrates the genuine power of ideas in action, arranged into highly structured knowledge regimes and embedded within institutions, ultimately producing major practical consequences.

The Jury members were also particularly impressed by the empirical solidity of her purely qualitative research, which is based on a multi-site study. Laura has generated a vast body of empirical data drawn from no fewer than 133 interviews with the main actors involved, alongside content and discourse analysis of an extensive corpus of official EU and German documents.

Finally, beyond its scientific excellence, Laura's work is notable from a civic standpoint. It serves as a plea for more open, diverse, pluralistic, and therefore legitimate policy advice systems—systems in which structures of diverse expertise are already in place before the need for crisis decision-making arises and time is too scarce to acquire external input.

In sum, Laura's work is a remarkable demonstration of how a fine-grained, empirically grounded qualitative monograph on a significant, well-chosen case can address major research questions. It provides us with a portable framework of findings that will enrich the study of policymaking and governance under the pressure of "permacrisis."

Jean-Michel Eymeri-Douzans

On behalf of the Jean Blondel PhD Prize Jury
European Consortium for Political Research

