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Crisis and public policies

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Definition

Crises in public policies are those unanticipated events or situations that disrupt 'normal' policy-making, threaten societal interests or values, and put extra pressure on decision-makers to resolve them with urgency. Crises constitute a major contemporary challenge for public policy: their multiplication challenges the effectiveness of regular policy tools and the legitimacy of decision-makers; they require policy-makers to become crisis managers; and they accelerate the pace of and transform policy-making as more and more problems are framed as crises and as crisis policies become institutionalised.

Introduction

Rather than punctuated events that disrupt the regular and predictable day-to-day life, crises seem to have become the norm in recent times. The contemporary era is characterised by a pervasive sense of political turbulence, societal crisis, impending disasters to the extent that some speak of a 'polycrisis.' Climate change-induced disasters, armed conflicts, cyber-attacks, inflation, pandemics, but also the rise of populism, geopolitical tensions and increased polarisation are some of the defining features of a 'world in crisis.' These challenges are said to disrupt and strain everyday policy-making and governing. The mounting costs associated with crises and disasters push welfare states to their limits. The interconnectedness of systems, societies, networks, and economies make crises more transboundary and harder to tackle by any given public authority. Furthermore, crises may also be creeping or slow-burning, thereby adding permanent uncertainty for policy-makers, and contributing to a 'turbulent' governance environment (Ansell et al. 2017). Crises have become a pivotal concern for public policy, both in terms of how they affect routine policy-making and of the necessity for policy-makers to resolve crises to maintain their ability to govern.

First of all, it is important to define crises, especially as the concept covers such a wide range of phenomena that it sometimes loses its explanatory value when everything becomes a crisis. Rhinard (2019: 617) even speaks of 'crisisification' which refers to the increased identification of 'urgent' events by policy-makers to accelerate procedures, usher in new constellations of stakeholders, and emphasize specific problem frames for preferred solutions. In relation to public policy, crises are in essence a political construct – some even go as far as to consider that social problems only become crises when those in power personally feel affected by them

(Strolovitch 2023). This would explain why pandemics that threaten everyone – such as COVID-19 – are defined as crises, whereas obesity or diabetes type 2, that primarily affect underprivileged minorities, are not. A related interpretation is that crises are those that threaten to disrupt what is vital to the functioning of society, as determined by those in power in the light of what they deem critical to the state. Hence, disruptions that affect critical infrastructures are much more likely to be elevated to the status of crises than poverty-related diseases.

It has long been recognized that crises are in the eye of the beholder. In their groundbreaking work, Rosenthal and others (1989) defined crises as serious threats to the basic structures or fundamental values and norms of a social system, that urgently require critical decisions, under conditions of high uncertainty. They emphasized the need for both objective and subjective assessments of a situation to spur policy-makers into action. Their classic definition is still in use and of great value. It implies that crisis management includes all the activities undertaken to prevent, prepare for and respond to crises. These definitions of crisis and crisis management focus on the more acute type of situations, or the threat thereof. Crisis management research focuses on actions in the phase where the threat and damage can still be averted or mitigated.

When crisis management is conceptualized or perceived as pertaining to everyday policy issues and structural societal problems (Borraz and Cabane, 2017), three questions arise. First, how do policy makers deal with crises? Second, what do crises imply for public policies? Third, what happens when the definition of crisis used (both in academia and in practice) becomes so widespread that it includes the imminent, the acute, the creeping, the exceptional and the structural? In other words, what are the consequences of crisisification for public policy?

How do policy makers deal with crises?

In many ways, crises are a test of policy-makers' ability to govern, and therefore, how they deal with crises is in many ways crucial, not only for the well-functioning of government and policy, but also for their own survival in policy-making functions. Therefore, what matters for policy-makers when dealing with crises? Broadly speaking, policy-makers have to address two main sets of challenges, which involves finding a balance between 1) their approach to crisis solving and crisis politics in the short run; 2) the means they use for restoring order and ensuring democratic legitimacy in the long run.

	<i>Short term</i>	<i>Long term</i>
<i>Functional</i>	Crisis solving	Restoring order
<i>Political</i>	Crisis politics	Ensuring legitimacy

First, when it comes to crises and public policy, there is a fundamental tension in approaches between crisis solving from a functional perspective and crisis exploitation from a political

perspective. From a functional perspective, crisis management can be defined as the process of decision-making under conditions of uncertainty and pressure. This means that policy-makers seek to act fast to prevent damage and losses while they may not have all the information (as in the early days of the 2008 financial crisis when even the banks did not understand the extent of their financial exposure), or when information is uncertain (as in a pandemic when the contagiousness and lethality of a new virus may not yet be known). The functional perspective characterizes crisis management as problem-solving under stress, in a turbulent political environment—as opposed to regular policy-making which is characterised by a more stable and predictable environment, that structures decision-making per policy system. In this perspective, crisis management could be seen as the ‘firefighting’ mode of public policy. This echoes works in international relations, where crises are often interpreted in terms of suddenly increasing tension or escalating violence, creating destabilizing effects on the existing (international) order. Relatedly, psychologists taught us much about the effects of stress and uncertainty, perceptions, and small-group dynamics on critical decisions made during the ‘high stakes games’ that a crisis constitutes.

Conversely, crisis management is also a matter of high politics. Policy-makers are not only rational problem-solving actors, but they also pursue their own political interests as famously expressed in the saying ‘never let a crisis go to waste’. Sociology and public administration brought along insights into the politics of crisis management at different levels of governance, issue attention and focusing events, noting the impact of institutions and organizations on crisis leadership (see Boin et al, 2006 for further references). Put differently, bureaucratic turf battles will take place during crises and determine the reputational outcomes of crisis management. Crises also can be exploited by politicians for their personal gain, whether to advance their own interests, ideas, or desired policy reforms. For example, federal spending on disaster relief in the US tends to increase in presidential election years as incumbent presidents hope to gain electoral support by being seen to be helping the victims. But crises can prove to be a pitfall from which individual reputations never recover. Crises bring accountability debates to the fore and they are therefore ‘ideal settings’ for blame games of and among crisis managers.

In addition to the short-term functional / political tension, policy-makers face a second set of longer-term challenges in a crisis, that have broader implications for politics and governance. They have to walk a tightrope between restoring order with all the emergency means at their disposal and at the same time maintaining democratic legitimacy by catering for the needs and interests of the population when dealing with a crisis, as political theory and political science research has shown.

In his discussion of the state of emergency, Carl Schmitt (1985) noted that some situations pose such significant threats to order in democracies that political leaders may have to resort to extraordinary means of action. The sovereign power is precisely characterized by the ability to use exceptional power beyond regular democratic means and the rule of law. From this perspective, crisis management is the exact opposite of regular day-to-day policy-making: disruptive, urgent, destabilizing, outside of regular policy-making procedures, which suggests that the temporality of crises and that of democratic politics are at odds. State of emergency declarations enable national governments to face exceptional crisis situations calling for urgent action to prevent significant disruptions or threats and allow them to derogate from normal democratic procedures

based on checks and balances designed to guarantee fundamental rights and freedoms. They provide governments with an exceptional mandate to act before it even receives parliamentary approval – for instance by imposing interventions that severely limit people’s freedoms such as a lockdown during Covid-19 (Henette Vauchez 2022). States of emergency prioritizes speed in decision-making, which might be useful in some situations, but runs the risk of being exploited for political gain or maneuvering. If extended for too long, they can lead to criticism from parliament, the media and voters as the legitimacy of crisis response erodes. They are in essence a threat to the rule of law and contribute to democratic erosion as seen on multiple occasions after terrorist attacks (Agamben 2005).

At the same time, as political theory pointed out in the 1970s, crisis management is fundamentally about the legitimacy of the state through its ability to regulate tensions and protect the population (Offe 1976). Actually, crisis management policies were developed to prevent decision-makers from resorting to extra-ordinary politics and safeguard democratic values by getting them to ‘stick to the plan’ (Lakoff and Collier 2021). Democratic leaders must therefore consider their legitimacy and accountability when dealing with a crisis, so crisis management cannot be considered only from the perspective of ‘emergency politics’.

The required balance between restoring order and demonstrating an ability to respond to civil demands and protect populations has long term effects. Long term considerations require, in particular, a legitimization effort on the part of crisis managers. After all, they face a crisis that just exposed the vulnerabilities of the state. Political elites can frame a crisis in such a way that enables the prioritized solutions (wearing facemasks, keeping distance) by forging a shared understanding of the threat and by appealing to community values such as solidarity and private responsibility. They execute leadership through ‘meaning-making’, a crucial challenge that can make or break a political career (Boin, t’Hart, Stern and Sundelius 2016). Incumbents and opponents, policy entrepreneurs, advocacy coalitions, all attempt to respond to focusing events not only to avert a threat or mitigate any damage but also in line with their own preferred crisis narrative and way forward. If meaning making lands well, it can create synergy between extraordinary measures and mandates, acceptance thereof and legitimacy of the way forward when emergency powers no longer apply.

How do crises affect public policies?

Crises have a significant impact on public policy. Their status as critical events or high-stakes games means that crises can notoriously lead to policy change and substantial reform. After all, they ‘storm the political agenda’ and expose vulnerabilities that need to be addressed. Punctuated equilibrium theory has systematized this argument by showing that policy agendas are governed by crisis dynamics: long periods of stability alternate with periods of turbulence that lead to policy change and significant departures from the previous policy trajectory (Baumgartner, Jones and Mortensen 2018). To explain why crises generate policy change, scholars argue that they are focusing events that open a window of opportunity and break down barriers to policy reform by destabilising regular policy and decision-making (Kingdon, 1984; Birkland and Schwaeble 2019). The focus of attention on a given crisis allows political actors to push through reforms that they might not otherwise have attempted. Moreover, crises imply a weakening of normal political and policy boundaries, either because they cannot be solved at a

particular level of government requiring the ‘higher’ level to step in (leading to a ‘centralisation’ of decision-making), or because external actors intervene, leading to a new constellation of actors, decision-making venues, and narratives. Crisis responses also unleash resources, speed up decision-making, allow cumbersome procedures to be bypassed, and create a ‘rally around the flag’ effect, at least in the short term. What more could ambitious policy makers, keen on change, want?

However, crisis scholars have shown that the relation between crises and reform, although intuitively logical, is not so clear-cut and seldom causal (Boin et al. 2016). Crisis-induced reforms may lack the necessary popular support and political deliberation, may represent a form of overreaction, may not stand up to judicial scrutiny, may violate legacies, entitlements, agreements that form an intricate web of ties to the pre-crisis status quo. Furthermore, the notion of change may be too broad to capture what happens during a crisis, and it may be more productive to analyse the conditions and types of change. Crises can open different pathways or policy trajectories (Capano et al. 2022), such as reversion (bouncing back to where the policy was before the crisis), normalization (where marginal changes are made in light of the crisis that occurred), adaptation (where incremental changes are adopted after a learning process to adapt to a new environment or prevent a similar crisis), and acceleration (where major changes take place that can be characterized as a punctuation or a critical juncture). The impact of a crisis on the entire policy system and not just within the affected policy area also greatly matters. Indeed, a crisis in one policy area may reduce the opportunity for change in other policy domains as the attention of policy-makers is ‘captured’ by the main crisis of the moment, leading to neglect other policy issues – as was the case during COVID-19 or the 2008-2009 financial crisis when critical reforms needed in unaffected policy areas were delayed or simply not adopted.

In sum, crises challenge policy-making by disrupting the status quo and providing important conditions for policy change which may or may not take place in different ways. The assumed qualities of crises – exposing government failures and limitations, plus other change-inducing, process accelerating, mandate expanding, venue shifting, mass mobilizing traits – influence which political issues are labelled as such by politicians, and their motivation for doing so.

The crisisification of public policy

Increasingly, crisis management has come to affect public policy and governance beyond the acute emergency moment when policy-makers have to turn their attention to crises. Why did this happen and what are the theoretical and practical implications of the seeming proliferation of crises, to the point of potentially encompassing everything? Three processes are noteworthy to explain why crises have become ubiquitous: the crisisification of politics, the proliferation of crisis management policy instruments, and the multiplication of turbulences which challenge normal policy-making and governance.

The concept of crisisification was first developed by Rhinard to characterise recent trends in EU policy-making, whereby leaders not only navigate from one crisis to another, but also perceive and deal with many issues as crises. Rhinard defined crisisification as ‘a determined focus on finding the next urgent event, a prioritization of speed in decision-making, new perceptions of

which actors matter and new narratives on the role and purpose of the EU' (2019: 629). This 'crisisification' upholds just as well in national public policy settings, where political leaders face similar problems.

Another important explanation of the increasing salience of crises in day-to-day policy-making and politics is the fact that crisis management has been vastly incorporated in many policy domains, and at various levels of government (Borraz and Cabane, 2017). Such crisisification is driven by the diffusion of crisis management policy tools, with the increasing use of horizon-scanning detection systems, early-warning systems, crisis management platforms, on pandemics, cyber vulnerabilities and attacks, animal diseases, food safety issues, border patrol threats, and risks to critical infrastructure protection amongst others. Crisis management has become a dedicated policy area incorporating security actors, civil protection, emergency services, and high-level governmental dedicated bodies. At the same time, crisis management tools can also now be found across all policy areas, from health to environment, finance, infrastructure. In the EU, such systems, tools and platforms have multiplied across EU agencies and institutions (for health, finance, humanitarian affairs, electricity, transport, migration, etc.), which also instigate the creation of similar systems, policies or institution at the national level. The diffusion of the all-hazards approach to crisis management and civil protection in the EU and member states (Kuipers et al, 2015) makes policy makers better equipped to address transboundary crises, as they are more likely to define crises widely, increase attention to a vast array of risks, and act upon it as to "affirm their role as providers of protection and security" (Rhinard, 2019: 629). This plays a role at the domestic level as much as at the EU level.

The approach befits the challenges facing political leaders at many levels of governance in many countries: a fragmented political party landscape, an unstable electoral support base (swing voters), the emergence of single-issue political parties (anti-migration, rural, animal rights, anti-EU) and, as a consequence, a shorter time horizon and more uncertain coalition to get things done. Wicked problems (child poverty, organized crime, affordable housing, health care equality) have always been ubiquitous for public policy makers, but currently they need to be framed as a crisis to be addressed at all. Such challenges are more acute than ever in these turbulent times when societal problems interact and/or accumulate such as seen with rising energy prices, geopolitics resulting in scarcity or boycotts and climate change interventions. Turbulences – understood as the uncertain and complex interaction between problems and events – create a chaotic environment for policy-making as there is not necessarily time between crises to conduct a normal policy, requiring policy-makers to crisis-proof their governing tools to maintain their ability to govern (Ansell et al. 2022). Frameworks such as resilience or policy robustness have been developed to identify the features that would make policies withstand crises (Capano and Woo 2017).

Conclusion

Crisis is now a common feature of policy-making, both in the sense that any policy-maker is likely to experience a crisis at some point, and in the sense that it is now a common tool of what 'good' governance is supposed to look like. To sum up, crisis management can be understood as decision-making under specific conditions of emergency, uncertainty, and salience as opposed to the regularity of day-to-day policy-making. Yet, it also involves politics, as policy-makers can

use crises to advance their political agenda, make electoral gains, or maneuver to retain (or abuse from) power. More generally, when dealing with crises, policy-makers have to strike a balance between restoring order, using emergency powers to control disruptions in their societies, and ensuring democratic legitimacy either by protecting the population or maintaining democratic accountability. Policy-makers even have the power to define crises and shape their meaning. Crises threaten the democratic order, either because tensions and disruptions in society expose the inability of the state to regulate it, or because leaders exploit the situation to adopt out-of-the-ordinary policy measures, by extraordinary means.

Because of their characteristics, crises affect public policy in many ways. By disrupting the regular political order, crises can affect political dynamics and normal policy-making. They can also lead to policy change by opening a window of opportunity or simply open different pathways or policy trajectories. One recent consequence of the accumulation of crises has been the ‘crisisification’ of politics, either through the fact that policy-makers deal with problems with the speed and urgency normally attributed to crises, or through the diffusion and institutionalization of crisis management policy tools across levels of government and policy domains. Crisisification has consequences too. Similar to the risks of using emergency powers, the eagerness to ‘crisisify’ in politics can lead to erosion of trust and legitimacy of government in the long run. Fragmentation and polarization in politics may increase the temptation to use crisis frames in order to get issue attention, forge unstable coalitions and exploit acute and ever shorter policy windows. An important agenda for future research is whether achievements through crisis politics and legitimacy thereof are as short-lived as the windows that crisis managers use or whether they can have more long term effects.

To conclude, crisis management is one of the key contemporary challenges for public policy, both from a research or practice point of view. Crisis management is about more than restoring a sense of normality; it is fundamentally about the ability of the state to legitimate itself and manifest its sovereignty when its ability to govern is challenged by economic or social crises and vulnerabilities are exposed. As governance faces a turbulent environment, the ability to manage crises effectively has become a critical aspect of contemporary policy-making.

Cross References

Wicked Problems in Public Policy

Governance in Public Policy

Multiple Streams Framework

Policy Change

Policy Instruments

Punctuated Equilibrium Theory

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