

# From crisis to reform? Exploring three post-COVID pathways

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## Abstract

Crises are often viewed as catalysts for change. The coronavirus disease crisis is no exception. In many policy sectors, proponents of reform see this global crisis both as a justification and an enabler of necessary change. Policy scholars have paid ample attention to this crisis-reform thesis. Empirical research suggests that these proponents of crisis-induced change should not be too optimistic. The question remains why some crises give rise to reform whereas so many others do not. This paper focuses on one particular factor that crisis researchers have identified as important. Crisis research suggests that the outcome of the meaning-making process—the efforts to impose a dominant frame on a population—shapes the prospects of postcrisis change. The paper offers three ideal-typical framing scripts, which researchers can use to study postcrisis trajectories.

**Keywords:** crisis reform; COVID-19; crisis management; policy reform

There is a persistent belief, both in academic thinking and popular discourse, that crises give rise to renewal (Hogan et al., 2022; Keeler, 1993; Kingdon, 1984; Mintrom and True, 2022). We may call this the crisis-reform thesis (cf. Boin & Otten, 1996). It builds on the idea that a crisis or disaster causes what sociologists call “collective stress” (Barton, 1969). This collective stress helps to “unfreeze” powerful and institutionalized perceptions of an ostensibly well-functioning government delivering successful policies ('t Hart, 1993). In this perspective, a crisis unleashes “negative energy” (cf. Turner, 1978) that washes away structures of power, creating room for renewal.

After Hurricane Katrina destroyed New Orleans in 2005, politicians and policymakers recognized all sorts of opportunities, which ranged from abandoning the city all together to building back a city that could be the engine of innovation in the Southern United States. After each crisis that besets the European Union (EU), savvy policymakers propose to enhance the competences of the EU in order to enhance integration (which is argued to strengthen safety and security of EU citizens). The belief in renewal after crisis is, in fact, so deeply engrained that policymakers openly admit that they view crises as opportunities to do things that they thought were impossible before the crisis. “You never want a serious crisis go to waste,” Rahm Emanuel, President Obama’s chief of staff, explained to journalists in a conversation about the administration’s response to the financial crisis.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The quote can easily be found on Youtube.

The notion that crises may serve as levers for social change is not a new one (Almond et al., 1973; Cortell & Peterson, 1999). It has been buttressed by academic theorizing in the fields of public administration, sociology, and political science. The most-cited theories on policymaking routinely cast crises in the role of game changer. Crises push problems on the policy agenda (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; Downs, 1972). The joining of Kingdon's (1984) streams is enabled by crises (and savvy policy entrepreneurs, Hogan & Feeney, 2012). Crises help to breach the walls of institutionalized policy venues (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). Crises also play an important role in explaining the dislocation of "deep core beliefs" (Hall, 1993; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith [1999, p. 147] speak of "significant perturbations").

The crisis-reform thesis is so widely accepted and employed that we may forget to ask whether it is confirmed by empirical research findings. It is not (Hogan et al., 2022). A recent study, for instance, found that disasters rarely lead to a change in disaster policies (Nohrstedt et al., 2021). Crisis analysts find that crises are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for policy change, but can serve as important precursors of it (Birkland, 2006; Cortell & Peterson, 1999; Nohrstedt & Weible, 2010; Rinscheid, 2015; Rinscheid et al., 2019). This empirical state of play can be interpreted as a "call for more careful theorizing regarding the role and impact of crises in public policymaking" (Nohrstedt & Weible, 2010, p. 3).

The clarion call for renewal has been heard often and in many policy domains during the coronavirus disease crisis. The articles in this special issue describe calls for change in domains such as education, work–life balance, health policy, social policy, public finance, the protection of women against violence, disruptive technologies, and aging populations. The coronavirus disease crisis thus provides an excellent opportunity to investigate if and how the coronavirus disease crisis will indeed cast a "long shadow" ('t Hart & Boin, 2001) on public policies and institutions around the world.

In this article, we propose a way to study why in some of these policy domains reform initiatives will see the light and take root, whereas nothing might change in other domains. We offer a perspective that strongly draws from crisis research, which has paid quite a bit of attention to the ways in which polities, societies, and policy sectors try to escape from a crisis with minimal damage and, in some cases, manage to "build back better" (see f.i. Heyse et al., 2006; Resodihardjo, 2009).

We set the stage by providing a brief overview of classic and emerging insights in crisis research. We then conceptualize the relation between crisis and policy change as the result of competing attempts to frame the nature and effects of the crisis, and the need for reform. We mine the crisis literature and infer three "framing scripts" linking "crisis" to policy and institutional impacts. Taken together, they form a suite of interpretive possibilities for thinking about the long-shadow dynamics of the coronavirus disease crisis. We conclude by pondering which of these three scripts is most likely to unfold and under which conditions.

## Crises as politicized critical junctures

Political scientists and public administration scholars generally speak of a crisis to denote situations when policymakers and/or politicians perceive a *threat* against the core values or life-sustaining functions of a social system which, in their understanding, requires *urgent* remedial action that must be decided upon and implemented under conditions of high *uncertainty* (Rosenthal et al., 1989, p. 10). This definition of crisis encompasses a wide variety of manifestations of acute adversity: natural and industrial disasters, financial meltdowns, terrorist attacks, critical infrastructure breakdowns, major riots, and pandemics.

Policymakers typically experience a crisis as a "rude surprise" (LaPorte, 2007). They feel forced to act: everybody looks at them to "do something" to address the threat or reduce the damage already done. But what to do? In less extreme circumstances, policymakers may take time to reduce crisis-induced uncertainty—by investigating, experimenting, and learning to adapt—before deciding how to deal with the perceived threat. In most crises, however, they don't have that time. Meanwhile, the pressures to act build up to a point at which the perceived societal and/or reputational risks of doing nothing trump those of enacting suboptimal policy responses.

Crises come in many guises and scholars have developed all sorts of typologies (see f.i. Rosenthal et al., 1989). One very simple typology appears to be highly relevant for our research question. This typology is based on time and differentiates between "flash crises" (emerging and ending quickly) and protracted crises. The latter type may emerge slowly (they are called "creeping crises") and may or

may not have long-term consequences (“long-shadow crises”) (Boin et al., 2020; ‘t Hart & Boin, 2001). Creeping and protracted crises provide policymakers with more time to make decisions, but uncertainty typically evolves (and sometimes deepens) as the threat develops over time. A protracted crisis generates a series of flash crises. Coronavirus disease is a prime example of such a protracted crisis (in most countries, except China and Italy, it was also a creeping crisis).

As crises unfold and defy quick solutions, the level of politicization grows. The very occurrence of a major crisis conjures up images of policy failure, regulatory complacency, sloppy management, legacies of willful neglect or ill-advised cutbacks, and backroom politics. Incumbent leaders face critical questions: Why did they not see this coming? Why weren’t they prepared? Why didn’t they know what to do? Creeping crises like coronavirus disease—developing slowly and arriving in plain sight—prompt existential questions about the rules and practices that are supposed to guard society against precisely those types of threats (Boin et al., 2020).

The mechanisms of monitory democracy go into overdrive: Emergencies are almost instinctively—and, not seldom, plausibly—reinterpreted as violations of the Hobbesian social contract between governments and their publics (Boin et al., 2008; Keane, 2018). Postcrisis inquiries find that there had indeed been indications of growing vulnerabilities and developing threats that were not effectively acted upon. Social media trigger howls of public outrage about alleged government ineptness, flawed oversight, and insidious inaction. Journalists and opposition parties dramatize their indignation. Watchdogs pronounce that their warnings of years ago have gone unheeded. Victims demand justice and punishment. Vocal interest groups demand change, while supporters of the status quo work to prevent that from happening (Resodihardjo, 2020; Stark, 2018).

This tense political environment raises the political heat on incumbent governments and established institutions to make changes, if only to demonstrate contrition, responsiveness, or resolve. The pressure to do something can be immense. It increases “a government’s willingness to attempt remedial measures and the public’s tolerance for them” (Haggard & Webb, 1993, p. 153).

Crises also offer possibilities. A crisis arouses widespread attention and delegitimizes the status quo. Savvy policymakers will realize that if the public wants action, any kind of action, this is the time to present a course of action that they have long coveted but always seemed out of reach. They will gamble that resistance against seemingly logical initiatives—we should make sure this will never happen again!—will seem futile. They will recognize the “window of opportunity” and will understand that it may close quickly (cf. Kingdon, 1984).

As soon as the worst phases of a time-defining crisis such as coronavirus disease slip into the past, discussion about the future of many policy sectors intensifies. Long-simmering issues rise to the top of the agenda, while paradigmatic certainties show signs of erosion. The pandemic demonstrated the need for government intervention and brought to light deep fault lines in policy sectors. For advocates of change, the perfect policy window comes in view. The question is whether change will actually come and whether it will stick.

## From crises to reform: the importance of framing

The impact of a crisis, or sometimes its very occurrence, can shift the way people perceive problems and solutions. The widespread use of emotive labels such as “crisis,” “scandal,” or “fiasco” helps to create a “dislocation” of the social, political, and administrative discourses that underpin existing power and authority relationships (Stavrakakis et al., 2000; Wagner-Pacifci, 1994). While such crisis-induced cracks in institutional hegemony and stability can be conducive to reform, they cannot produce it autonomously. They may even work against it (pushing the need for repair into view). Why some policymakers succeed in initiating change whereas others find the window shut before they change is even contemplated remains a bit of an enigma.

The crisis literature suggests that the level of success depends to a considerable degree on the framing of the crisis (cf. Weiss, 1989). Crises offer discursive and political opportunities for people with an agenda (initiating or preventing change) to exploit the shared sense of crisis. Crises, like problems and policies, are socially constructed political phenomena (‘t Hart, 1993; cf. Yanow, 1996). The “facts [of the events] never speak for themselves... [and] always await the assignment of meaning” (Spector, 2020, p. 305). Both policymakers and stakeholders can apply the crisis label to “impose meaning” by staking

out “claims of urgency” (Spector, 2019), to question the system’s safety, reliability and integrity, and to call for urgent measures.

If a certain frame becomes widely accepted, it shapes the way people think back in time (how was this possible?) and forwards (what lessons should we learn?). When crisis language begins to dominate public and official discourses, this has the effect of *moving the relevant policy system(s) into a critical juncture*, a moment to reconsider the nature of a policy or even the entire system, what it does, what it could or should do, whether and how it should adapt or be changed (Alink et al., 2001).

In any given crisis, multiple accounts of the causes, consequences, and desired responses are on offer. Through active communication (or refraining from it), policy actors try to define the situation. They may push the crisis frame or they may actively work against labeling the situation as a crisis. They may use language to convey the existence of a threat to the common cause. They may launch appeals to reconfirm and repair the status quo, or they may try to repudiate it (Mintrom & O’Connor, 2020). We refer to the efforts of policymakers and stakeholders to impose a particular crisis definition on the public discourse in terms of meaning-making (Boin et al., 2017).

Many crises give rise to a “meaning-making battle” between multiple policy actors who sponsor a variety of crisis frames. The prize is tantalizing: The winner of this contest gets to select the pathway that is taken at the critical juncture that the crisis has brought into view. It is hard to predict who will produce the winning frame. That depends on the quality of the frame, the match with the dominating crisis context, the skills of the frame deliverers, and the reception by various audiences.

The contest between the various frames usually converges around a select set of storylines (Boin et al., 2008; Kuipers & Brändström, 2018; Liu & Boin, 2020). One archetypical storyline employed by politicians emphasizes *exogenous forces* such as geography, weather, foreign powers, other agencies or levels of government, international markets, multinational corporations, and technological dependencies. It reminds audiences of the “limits of control” that policymakers can exercise over faraway domains in which the causes of crisis see the light. It also highlights the *unforeseeability* of the crisis, pointing towards the “unknown unknowns” that lurk in large, complex, and nonlinear systems (Perrow, 1999).

At the other end of the meaning-making continuum, we find a cluster of interpretive frames that *endogenise the causes of crisis*. These frames go against the idea that crises are “Acts of God,” isolated incidents or other people’s faults. They instead portray a crisis as a symptom of endemic, or underlying, problems. This type of frame shifts the spotlight on administrative elites. It highlights issues of power, privilege, inequality, and injustice. It implies that learning, change, and reform are in order. In their most trenchant form, these frames advocate wholesale repudiation of the status quo: think of calls for a complete abandonment of intrinsically dangerous industries (Perrow, 1999) or (neo-)Marxist and critical theory accounts of the “crises of capitalism” and the detrimental effects of systemic racism.

The long duration of the coronavirus disease crisis made it even harder than usual to produce a winning frame—one that was both convincing and consistent, remaining dominant for the entire crisis span (cf. Perry et al., 2020). Whether it was on the infectiousness and lethality of the virus, the effects of face masks and school closures, the relative merits of compulsory versus voluntary containment regimes, the benefits of contact-tracing technologies, or the social, economic, political, and geostrategic impacts of the crisis, each crisis frame had to be adapted as new evidence came to light and with each shift of the crisis dynamics.

Counter-narratives emerged as the social costs of the imposed crisis regime mounted. Unease about the use of emergency powers and the quality of democracy found expression in violent demonstrations, legal challenges, critical reports by legal scholars and human rights groups, as well as “robust” discourse across both the traditional and social media (Bieber, 2020; Seyhan, 2020; The Lancet, 2020). Conspiracy theories emerged with regard to the origins of the virus and the “agendas” that were purportedly facilitated and spurred by the pandemic (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020; Islam et al., 2020; Mian & Khan, 2020). The appeal of these conspiracy accounts was particularly strong in countries or among groups with low trust in public institutions (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). The ongoing frame competition gradually undermined the authority that many governments had enjoyed in the early phase of the pandemic (cf. Boin et al., 2021).

## Casting the shadow of crisis: framing pathways

To understand how crises may give rise to renewal (or smother it), we now turn to crisis research. The great bulk of early crisis research, especially the research emerging from within the field of public

administration, adopted what we may describe as a structural-functionalist perspective on the relation between crisis and postcrisis (Rosenthal et al., 1989; 't Hart, 1993). The adaptive capacity of governments was considered a *sine qua non* for “bouncing back” to a state of normalcy. Recovery and a return to the status quo were a given end in this perspective.

A key premise in this research holds that citizens look to their governments for charting pathways back to normality and minimizing community impacts of the crisis. In this line of thinking, governmental crisis preparedness and crisis response make the difference between life and death, chaos and order, breakdown and resilience. When governments and their leaders respond well to a crisis, the damage is limited. When crisis–response efforts are slow, disjointed, misguided, and poorly executed, negative societal impacts increase and compromise the prospects for recovery. The upshot: If governments do their job, people and systems will recover from the damage sustained.

This traditional perspective cast crisis management as a technocratic activity that is effective when a combination of tasks is accomplished (cf. Boin et al., 2017): the emerging crisis is swiftly detected, responders understand what is happening, critical decisions are made by the right people, the efforts of responders are orchestrated, government communicates with its citizens, and the aftermath of a crisis is marked by proper accountability procedures and a willingness to collectively learn the lessons of that crisis. Researchers operating within the structural-functional mode of crisis analysis have produced a veritable mountain of work yielding robust generalizations about the determinants of public sector resilience in the face of extreme adversity (Boin et al., 2017; Drennan et al., 2015).

Over the past three decades, researchers have come to realize that a return to normalcy—defined as the absence of crisis—is not a given nor is it always desirable ('t Hart, 1993). Sociologists pointed out that crises can have long-term traumatic effects on a society (Erikson, 1994). Crises were increasingly viewed as a resultant of existing societal fault lines: born from the traumas of previous crises. A clean and smooth recovery increasingly looked like a functional myth.

Crisis researchers began to realize that crises are deeply political at heart (Boin et al., 2017). It is now widely realized that our understanding of crisis—its causes and its effects—shapes our understanding of future possibilities and necessities. It is also widely accepted now that our understanding of crises is shaped as much by framing contests as by on-the-ground, material realities. Policy researchers have already explained that dominant frames or problem definitions shape the way we think about solutions (Hay, 1996; Weiss, 1989). It follows that the combination of administrative action and collective interpretation shapes the prospect of postcrisis reforms and thus the chances that a crisis may lead to something “better”.

What needs more study is the effect of meaning-making on the postcrisis trajectory of a policy or a policy sector. Below we identify three types of “framing pathways” that connect the world of crisis with a postcrisis world. Neither do we claim to say anything about the prevalence of these frames, nor do we expect these scripts to be found exactly in the way we present them below. We merely suggest that these ideal-typical pathways can serve as heuristics for policy scholars who seek to study how crises shape the societies in which these crises unfold. We do expect to see recognizable parts of these ideal types in framing strategies employed by strategic policymakers.

### **Pathway #1: the crisis→learning→adaptation script**

At the heart of this pathway lies the notion that meaningful adaptation is the resultant of an organized effort to learn. The idea is that policy failures trigger a need for instrumental learning (May, 1992). Boin et al. (2017, p. 128) define crisis-induced learning as “purposeful efforts to (re)examine, (re)assess, and (re)calibrate existing and proposed beliefs, policies, and institutional arrangements” in the wake of crisis experiences. Birkland (2006, p. 166) explains that “learning can be said to have occurred when the proximate causes of the policy failure revealed by the event are subsequently addressed by changes in policy.”

These efforts are best managed by professionals who lord over a depoliticized, “evidence based” process of reflection, evaluation, and lesson-drawing with the aim of improving performance during (intra-crisis learning) and following (inter-crisis learning) crisis episodes (Moynihan, 2009; Witting & Moyson, 2015). The underlying logic is still quite functionalistic: It casts crises as stress tests or “trials” that expose systemic or organizational “errors” in the lead up to a crisis or in the course of responding to them.

That does not mean crisis-induced learning is easy. In fact, there is broad consensus in the literature that learning from crisis is hard (Stern, 1997). The so-called threat-rigidity hypothesis, for instance, asserts that people tend to respond in a rigid and inflexible manner to threats and uncertainty (Staw et al., 1981). They can no longer process information in an adequate manner; they fall back on learned routines and instilled reflexes. Fear is another impeding factor: Leaders who fear for their position and organizations that dread negative publicity are unlikely to encourage others to investigate thoroughly what exactly went wrong before and during the crisis.

Intra-crisis learning is thought to be particularly hard, especially when not performed in carefully orchestrated professional environments (Moynihan, 2009; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). It is also risky. Once crises cast a poignant light on apparent weaknesses or unintended consequences of current policy settings, there is strong pressure—including that of political expediency—to be seen to be taking swift remedial action. This strategy has the virtue of simplicity and cognitive parsimony, but there is a big risk of “over-learning” from an  $N = 1$  experience: It often amounts to one-sided and hastily drawn inferences (Brändström et al., 2004). This means that no causal links have been established between cause and effect; the strategy draws on a presumed analogy with the most immediate past but is untested as to its relevance and robustness across a much wider palette of possible scenarios.

In this perspective, framing serves to depoliticize a critically important activity—learning from a crisis—that is best served by expertise and time. Organizations that were heavily taxed by their immersion in crisis response need time to calm down and reexamine their experiences. Political systems need to work through the accountability process before the more reflective work of “what really makes sense next” can be productively undertaken (Broekema et al., 2019). Framing serves to create a political imperative to “get to the bottom of this,” which creates a license to operate for expert bodies conducting rigorous inquiries and formulating recommendations without second-guessing the politics of their acceptability.

## Pathway #2: the crisis→blame games script

Another way to view postcrisis change is to understand it as the outcome of a political blaming contest (Boin et al., 2009; Busuioc & Lodge, 2016, 2017; Hinterleitner, 2020; Hood, 2011; Kuipers & Brändström, 2018; Resodihardjo, 2020; Vliegenthart & Damstra, 2019; Zahariadis et al., 2020). During the postcrisis phase, public policies, governing arrangements, and individual powerholders will be criticized in “blame showdowns” (cf. Stark, 2018). To escape blame, some will call for reform whereas others will argue for a return to the status quo. In this perspective, reform initiatives are just an accidental product of the messy and politicized “crisis after the crisis.”

A crisis offers a stage for political drama: Innocence and guilt, competence and ineptness, heroism and cowardice are the key elements. The meaning-making process is viewed as a political game between incumbent policy elites and their critics. Both sets of players face strategic choices. Oppositional forces will have to decide whether or not they will try to lay blame on incumbents for the occurrence and severity of the crisis. They will have to decide whether they want to call for the wholesale removal of those office-holders, or merely undermine their authority by damaging their reputations.

The calculus for officeholders involves a similar political trade-off: fighting to come away unscathed, even claiming credit by “cashing in” on rally-around-the-flag momentum, or accepting responsibility for alleged errors of omission or commission that allowed the crisis to develop and escalate. Depending on their assessment of the opposition’s determination and ability to inflict major damage on them, they may consider proactively accepting responsibility, and come out looking strong, fair, and self-reflective. If they make the assessment that the opposition is going to attack them, they may be better off opting for a blame avoidance strategy and a protracted political struggle.

Preemptive, symbolic, and disproportionate policy changes are all part of the political armory of participants in these showdowns (cf. Maor, 2020). Some will call for the return to a precrisis situation that in hindsight looks promisingly stable (rather than frustratingly placid). Others will argue that this is the moment for new futures that will prevent similar crises from occurring again. The currency in this contest is blame; the winners of the blaming contest define the future, even if they never intended to do so. In their escape from blame, they stumble into reform.

Policymakers typically prefer the exogenous crisis frame to de-escalate and divert attention away from deeper flaws and tensions in the institutional design of the existing system (Boin et al., 2008). It directs negative emotions about what is happening and why it is happening down (to lower level staff),

out (to other actors, sectors, foreign powers, known enemies) and, depending on the narrator's vantage point, *up* (senior management, corporate "fat cats," international institutions). The implicit message is that people should support the government and its leaders at a time when dark forces are conspiring against the common cause. If policymakers succeed in imposing an exogenous frame, they also dim the prospect of reform by pointing out that the causes of the crisis are found elsewhere.

Critical stakeholders tend to wield the endogenous crisis narrative. It serves to animate an activist politics of investigation, accountability, and blame that is often welcomed by those who are on the outer edge of the system and those who hitherto have felt powerless to change it. Endogenous crisis narratives can generate, feed, and canalize public anxiety and anger (Coombs et al., 2010; Jin, 2010). When taken up by many people, endogenous crisis narratives can fuel the call for massive, structural reform (Boin et al., 2008).

### Pathway #3: the crisis→exploitation→reform script

The crisis-exploitation pathway also assumes that the political winners of a crisis define the future. But in this script, the winners are known: They are the incumbents who exploit power constellations to do what otherwise would be impossible. This pathway rests on the sound observation that crises often facilitate if not dictate the centralization of power in the hands of incumbent politicians. Centralization enables swift crisis decision-making, while temporarily removing or relaxing key institutional constraints that normally militate against non-incremental decisions. It can be tempting to wield these newly acquired powers to drive through long-coveted reforms.

To be successful, attempts at reformist crisis exploitation must articulate an urgent need for change, propose a set of radical objectives, see to it that these are politically sanctioned, and guard their integrity during implementation. In short, reformist crisis exploitation requires dramatizing the institutional nature of the crisis at hand, whilst selling ideas for doing things differently to diverse audiences, and building momentum to see them enacted. This may require a pivot from being respected defenders of the status quo to becoming credible harbingers of disruptive innovation of that status quo (Goldfinch & 't Hart, 2003; Moon, 1995).

Framing a crisis as the symptom of endemic problems helps to delegitimize and thus deinstitutionalize existing policies and structures. If people can be persuaded that the system, or crucial parts thereof, is under a severe threat "of its own making," and that conventional ways of counteracting the threat are not working, their willingness to accept unconventional reform proposal increases. For example, the nuclear disaster in Fukushima (2011) led to rapid and deep change in Germany's energy policy. Rinscheid (2015, pp. 59, 62) argues that the impact of the Japanese disaster eroded the credibility of an already besieged policy paradigm:

"The credibility resources of the dominant coalition regarding its policy image of cheap and safe nuclear power were depleted, providing significant incentive for the government to change track after 3/11." [...] "Since the nuclear hostile policy image employed by the previous minority coalition captured almost all subsystem stakeholders after 3/11, the dominant coalition collapsed, leading to a less polarized configuration. Because most dominant coalition members could not resist the propagation of pro-change proposals and demands after 3/11, a major policy shift was finally decided upon in a consensual atmosphere."

Reformist crisis exploitation needs to be constructive and destructive at the same time: burn down the bridges to the past, build up the case for reform, and disqualify competing visions of the future. To some extent, therefore, reforms need to be "oversold" to persuade constituencies that a sharp break with the past is in their interests.

Fostering a sense of urgency for change is merely a first step in a strategy of reformist crisis exploitation. Another essential component is communicating a personal commitment to making non-incremental changes to the status quo. This builds upon Moon's (1995) concept of political will and Bennister et al.'s (2017) notion of spending leadership capital. Both entail "a determination to pursue policies beyond those which arise by force of circumstance" (Moon, 1995, p. 2). The effectiveness of reform commitment increases markedly when reform is not pushed by a sole, heroic leader but by resourceful reform tandems within cabinet (Strangio et al., 2014) or broader reform coalitions.

If the initiation of new reform initiatives turns out to be a bridge too far, policymakers may at least exploit the crisis momentum to smoothen the way for existing reforms that have stalled along the way. By “clearing the hurdles,” they can give these initiatives a new lease on life (Hogan et al., 2022). This option allows policymakers to employ a form of “policy bricolage” to deliver change.

## Future-casting the coronavirus disease crisis

Which of the three pathways sketched above is more likely to unfold (and under which conditions) in the wake of coronavirus disease? We might expect a rational exercise resulting in reforms (pathway #1) where the crisis is depoliticized and the public accepts the notion that the causes of the crisis must be analyzed before new policies are announced or standing ones are resumed. A good example is the 1953 flood in Zeeland (the Netherlands): A huge disaster, a fairly depoliticized aftermath, and an analysis that gave rise to an expansive (and expensive) network of protective waterworks.

Advocates of change might rather bet on “policy entrepreneurs” who exploit crisis momentum to make things happen (pathway #3). The “never waste a good crisis” maxim is one of the most overused phrases when a crisis winds down. Like all clichés, the crisis exploitation maxim contains a kernel of truth. Crises can “unfreeze” the status quo: Practices and processes that once seemed solid become fluid, malleable, vulnerable, and thus negotiable. The coronavirus disease crisis has given rise to many such policy entrepreneurs who recognize opportunities to improve the world.

But we should not overestimate the degree to which any singly policy actor can exploit a crisis to purposefully “shift” and then “refreeze” a policy subsystem in a new and greatly altered state by dominating the meaning-making process. Political leaders do not “own” the stage, certainly not after a long-lingering crisis that defied a variety of policy interventions. For incumbent political leaders to set the course, a conducive set of political conditions has to be in place: In addition to reform-minded leaders with a cogent reform program, plenty of resources and support of powerful external actors, the mapped-out course must align with popular opinion (Rinscheid et al., 2019; Vilpišauskas, 2009).

It is not at all clear that these conditions occur easily or often. Moreover, crisis exploitation is not without risks. Policymakers who seek to gain momentum for reform may gain public approval but at the same time will likely antagonize many of the stakeholders they must work with on a day-to-day basis long after the crisis is over.

The most likely scenario, then, may be the one of “accidental reform” (pathway #2). In the chaos of a deeply politicized postcrisis phase, a reform initiative is a mere strategy to escape blame: promising golden mountains without a clear plan how to enact change. If this prognosis is correct, we should see a wide variety of outcomes, ranging from long-term planning exercises to botched reform initiatives and a sprinkling of incidental reforms that resemble a strategic effort to exploit the crisis for a better future.

## Conclusion: studying post-COVID trajectories

The coronavirus disease crisis has caused untold damage and hurt. This protracted crisis has been interpreted as a clear signal that some practices common to the developed world—such as endless travel and unbounded consumption—must be adapted. We will have to change the world and policymakers must lead the way. The US climate envoy, John Kerry, expressed this sentiment well when he called for a “‘wartime mobilization’ of resources to fight the climate crisis, saying it was ‘a massive opportunity to rebuild our economies in the aftermath of a historic pandemic’” (Hook, 2021). That’s the world we live in, where one crisis must be exploited to rebuild from another.

Will the coronavirus disease crisis give rise to changes that many people long desired but politicians and policymakers failed to deliver? This is the question that animates both public and political discourse in many policy arenas. We have argued that the prospect of such changes hinges on the framing efforts of policy actors. These framing efforts can work out in different ways, giving rise to different futures. We sketched three pathways, but it is easy to think of others.

For each pathway, we may wonder how a winning policy narrative translates in structural reform. Crisis research suggests that there are essentially two main variables that determine if and how a policy sector is affected by a crisis in a major way. One is the thrust of the dominant crisis narrative that emerges from the framing contest. A restorative narrative aims to take the system back to the “old normal” of the precrisis period; a reformist narrative heralds attempts to terminate or redesign programs, policies and



governing arrangement in order to ensure a new “fit” with an indelibly changed environment (Alink et al., 2001). More often than not these meaning-making strategies are simultaneously pursued by different policy actors while the crisis evolves and inquiries, debates and lesson-drawing exercises take place in different (formal and informal) venues and arenas.

The other is the *degree of political and bureaucratic momentum obtained for competing postcrisis policy strategies*. Why can governments sometimes “control the narrative” about what the crisis of the hour is going to entail for existing policies, programs and institutions almost without challenge, whereas on other occasions narrative dominance eludes them entirely (Boin et al., 2021; Olsson & Nord, 2015; You & Ju, 2019)?

Contextual factors likely play an important role (Coombs, 2015). One factor revolves around the placement of a crisis in political time (‘t Hart, 2011): Governing elites are more likely to lose the framing contest when the crisis unfolds towards the end of an electoral cycle, or when it follows on the back of a recent or otherwise vividly remembered historical precedent. Another factor is media slant: When key news media have already turned highly critical about incumbent elites, any new incident will help to push “endogenised” crisis narratives. A third factor concerns duration: It is much more difficult for governments (or any other actors) to achieve and maintain meaning-making dominance in protracted, slow-burning crises as opposed to relatively short and episodic ones (‘t Hart & Boin, 2001).

In addition, we must consider how citizens “make meaning” of a crisis over time, both individually (Park, 2016) and collectively (Fischer-Preßler et al., 2019). Which messaging and which speakers draw the attention of mass publics? Who is believed and who is mistrusted by which audiences? Which narratives are adopted and repeated in the deliberations of political forums (Damstra et al., 2021)?

In short, the literature offers up plenty of hypotheses that await testing in comparative research. The coronavirus disease crisis provides the perfect context for engaging in such research. As we write this, political battle lines are being drawn. coronavirus disease has given rise to the politics of order and change, continuity and disruption. Studying post-COVID trajectories is therefore critically relevant to understanding the relation between societal disruption and the promise of a better future.

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