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INTRODUCTION



Policymaking in times of crisis

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ABSTRACT



Governments consistently deal with crises, but some are larger than others, some are endogenously created, and some are exogenously imposed. This article introduces a Special Issue of the Journal in which 14 sets of contributors assess various elements of policymaking in times of crisis. We divide the contributions into those assessing public opinion responsiveness, institutional design and response, and identity-politics. As crises appear to be increasingly common, we assess their impacts on the policy process, concluding that no understanding of policymaking in general can be complete if it does not apply to policymaking in times of crisis.

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Policymaking in times of crisis

This special issue brings together 14 original contributions that explore how crises – whether economic, humanitarian, political, or public health – affect the policymaking process. Taken together, these articles offer a multidimensional view of crisis-driven change, revealing not only moments of disruption and responsiveness but also the enduring constraints that shape and often limit the transformative potential of crises. Collectively, these contributions demonstrate that while crises often serve as focusing events that challenge existing policy equilibria, their capacity to produce lasting change depends on institutional structures, leadership agency, and political incentives. Crises can disrupt policy stability, break feedback loops, and open windows of opportunity – but they can also reinforce inertia, magnify existing inequalities, or provoke symbolic rather than substantive responses. Rather than assuming that crises automatically lead to policy innovation or responsiveness, the articles included in this special issue stress the conditional and selective nature of crisis-driven change. Whether in migration, welfare, public

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health, defence, or budgetary governance, the articles reveal a common tension: crises raise expectations for transformation, yet often yield constrained, fragmented, or performative outcomes.

The idea for this special issue derives entirely from Jeremy Richardson, long-time editor of this journal. Over dinner with Baumgartner in spring 2024, after friendly discussion of the many contributions of their mutual friend Prof. Grant Jordan, Richardson suggested the need for such an evaluation. For Baumgartner, policymaking and crisis go hand in hand, even when outsiders might not see a crisis. In various works with Bryan Jones (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, 2015; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005), he has argued that the policy process is routinely disrupted by crises; policymakers generally ignore most issues, leaving them to bureaucratic actors to handle using standard operating procedures, because they are too busy responding to a few issues that urgently demand their attention. The entire theory of punctuated equilibrium is based on the idea that policymakers are overwhelmed with too much information, too many things on their agendas, so that they are forced to pick a few topics for their more sustained and focused attention. These change over time, of course, as issues come and go on the agenda. What does not change is that policy leaders lack the capacity to respond to incoming signals, concerns, problems, and priorities in a manner that is consistent with or proportionate to their importance. As policymakers ignore most issues, they are left to be dealt with by lower-level officials who may lack the authority to make important decisions. Occasionally, however, such decisions are necessary. As governments have grown into ever-more complex networks dealing with more and more complex social, economic, and scientific policy issues, the importance of this perspective has only increased.

Therefore, when Jeremy Richardson suggested the need for attention to policymaking in times of crisis, Baumgartner's reaction was that the time is always ripe for such an analysis. Someone is always in crisis. Policymakers use crises as the opportunities to enact policy reforms they have wanted to champion. Policies are occasionally transformed in moments of crisis as old paradigms are thrown away and new ones are adopted; sometimes these have great staying power (see Hall, 1993). Crises come in all sizes, of course, and most recently western countries have been faced with crises of substantial proportions in the forms of threats to liberal democratic norms. So, while Baumgartner's perspective on crisis is that they are an important and constant part of the policy process, Richardson's idea was more timely, to focus on the current moment in democratic politics. Could we bring together a set of authors to assess how the current and widespread threats to traditional democratic norms are affecting the policy process? Of course, the answer was an enthusiastic yes.

Shortly after meeting with Richardson, Baumgartner recruited Chaqués Bonafont as co-editor and issued a call for papers at the annual meeting of

the Comparative Agendas Project in June 2024. The papers we have compiled here result from that call, reflecting the successful cases after what was a robust and substantial review process consistent with normal standards at this journal.

Contributors to this special issue have addressed various elements of the policy process and its relations to crisis. Crises are both dependent and independent variables in the analyses to follow; some crises, after all, are manufactured by governments, and some are thrust upon them. We can place the articles into three groups. The first set addresses public opinion responsiveness; the second, institutional factors associated with responses to crisis; and the third, issues related to social identity and the treatment of identity-based issues (e.g., migrants or racial minorities) during crises. Of course, we could divide the articles in different ways such as which particular crisis provides the empirical focus of the study (e.g., Covid-19; the war in Ukraine; European migration crises; and so on). But this distinction seems most theoretically relevant. Of course, many of the articles address more than one of these general themes.

Public opinion responsiveness

Several papers address various ways in which government responsiveness to public opinion is affected by crises. Schnatterer and Durovic ([this issue](#)) offer novel insights into how governments selectively engage with public opinion in times of crisis, using government-commissioned polls as a proxy for issue attention. By analyzing models of issue selection in German government surveys, the authors uncover how institutional capacities, policy types, and issue salience interact to shape governmental responsiveness during turbulent periods. These findings demonstrate how crises sharpen the strategic dimensions of governmental attention, particularly in multi-level governance systems. The federal government's constrained interest in issues beyond its jurisdiction – even when they are urgent and salient – underscores how crisis policymaking is filtered through existing institutional structures. At the same time, the strong effect of salience and the differentiated treatment of policy types show that crises can disrupt usual patterns of responsiveness, prompting governments to recalibrate their tools of engagement, such as public opinion polls, to either extend legitimacy or manage blame.

Borghetto et al. ([this issue](#)) challenge the assumption that populist parties serve as champions of the underprivileged during crises. Despite a political climate marked by economic inequality, repeated shocks, and widespread discontent, populist parties across Europe do not devote more parliamentary attention to welfare issues than their non-populist counterparts. Crises do not necessarily prompt more inclusive or redistributive agendas, even from actors who rhetorically claim to speak for 'the people'. The paper illustrates populist

parties ‘talk the talk’ during campaigns but fail to ‘walk the walk’ once elected. It also shows that even in moments that seem ripe for change – economic downturns, rising inequality, or political upheaval – the agenda-setting behaviour of parties remains stable.

Bevan and Greene ([this issue](#)) offer several critical insights into how crises and transitions affect the policy-making process through the lens of secondary legislation in the UK (statutory instruments) between 1987 and 2022. The authors highlight how both endogenous (elections, partisan shifts) and exogenous (Brexit, economic turmoil) crises act as punctuations in the policy process. The paper demonstrates that government changes (e.g., 1997, 2010, 2015, 2020) serve as internal political shocks that reshape bureaucratic agendas, often in line with parties’ manifesto priorities. It underscores how the intersection of institutional constraints and political shocks creates unintended consequences – such as reduced legislative productivity, misalignment between stated priorities and actual policies, and bureaucratic overload. In particular, the 2015 transition, followed by the Brexit crisis, is shown to cause a steep decline in productivity across nearly all policy domains. The paper reinforces a central theme for the special issue: that crises do not just change the substance of policy – but also the capacity, rhythm, and structure of policymaking itself. Exogenous crises amplify institutional bottlenecks, strain bureaucratic capacity, and distort policy agendas. Although party manifestos shape expectations, the actual output of statutory instruments does not always align – particularly during times of institutional stress or external crises.

Richter and Safra ([this issue](#)) make several important contributions to the study of policymaking in times of crisis, particularly by illuminating how public perceptions of policy issues evolve under conditions of acute disruption such as war. They show that during the Ukraine war, the perceived importance of defence issues in France was initially shaped by emotional intensity, tangibility (concreteness), and visibility (obtrusiveness). Yet, as the crisis evolved, emotional intensity lost its explanatory power and more pragmatic assessments took precedence. This evolution suggests that, even amidst acute crises, public perceptions can move from emotion-driven reactions to more evaluative and grounded judgments. The study further reinforces the ‘thermostatic’ view of public opinion and complements the notion of permissive consensus in defence policy. It suggests that while crises may trigger short-term attention spikes, they do not necessarily produce enduring shifts in public support for defence agendas. Policymakers may respond selectively to public opinion during crises, relying more on long-standing priorities than on short-term fluctuations.

Cavari and Efrat ([this issue](#)) provide extensive evidence based on new survey evidence in Israel about the effects of different types of crises on public opinion. Constitutional crises may divide opinion, while national

security crises can unite it. Partisanship as well as trust in government play important roles in determining public response to crisis. Israel recently experienced two distinct crises in short succession. First, in January 2023 a constitutional crisis followed the announcement that the new conservative government would restrict judicial independence. Second, in October 2023, Hamas surprised Israel and the world with an attack leading to the ongoing military conflict there. Using 19 separate national polls from April 2022 to April 2024, the authors assess public response to these separate crises. For one, partisanship and trust in government powerfully coloured the response; for the other, they did not. The authors therefore provide an important caution in the literature as all ‘crises’ are definitely not the same.

Institutional design

Whereas the first set of papers assess public opinion responsiveness in one way or another, several authors address various issues relating to institutional design. How do institutional structures affect the ability of a government to respond to crisis? Casey and Maley ([this issue](#)) argue that crises can act as catalysts for policy learning – but only when organisational leaders actively construct meaning from them, confront cultural failures, and communicate lessons in a way that allows them to travel across institutions. Without this, the window for reform quickly closes, and the policymaking process reverts to pre-crisis routines. Crises that touch on cultural or normative issues (e.g., the balance between loyalty to ministers and public interest) are less likely to lead to real change unless those deeper issues are explicitly confronted. The article highlights inaction or failure to communicate about a crisis by leaders often conveys that the event is irrelevant, resolved, or not worth reflecting upon. Absence of meaning-making is itself a form of meaning-making – it reinforces the status quo and limits the scope of policy feedback effects.

Cavalieri ([this issue](#)) makes a significant contribution to the central question of the special issue – how crises affect the policymaking process – by offering a nuanced and empirically grounded analysis of how political, institutional, and supranational factors shape budgetary responses to crises across European countries. The paper distinguishes between two major recent crises – the Eurozone crisis and COVID-19 – and demonstrates that they produced divergent policy responses. While the former led to austerity and retrenchment, the latter was addressed with investment-oriented policies. The paper shows that the magnitude and direction of budget changes during crises are not only crisis-driven but strongly conditioned by domestic political structures (e.g., government type, ideological coherence, number of parties, bicameralism) and EU-level constraints (e.g., fiscal rules, oversight). As in the other articles, Cavalieri notes that crises do not

operate in a vacuum – they interact with existing institutional and political configurations, thereby altering or reinforcing policymaking trajectories. The findings support the idea that the Eurozone crisis, in particular, served as a critical juncture that strengthened the EU's influence on national budget policymaking. It also strengthens the theoretical integration of punctuated equilibrium theory (PET) with crisis research by demonstrating how PET dynamics (bursts of change amid stability) manifest under crisis conditions, and how institutional and political 'frictions' influence the size and direction of those punctuations.

Shafi and Mallinson ([this issue](#)) contribute to our understanding of how crises affect policymaking by investigating whether institutional characteristics – namely federalism and party fragmentation – shape the pattern and effectiveness of policy responses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on the punctuated equilibrium theory, the authors explore the expectation that greater institutional friction (in federal or multi-party systems) produces more erratic, punctuated policy change. Surprisingly, their analysis of 80 countries reveals that policymaking was similarly punctuated across regimes, regardless of federal or party structures, suggesting that the urgency and salience of the COVID-19 crisis overrode institutional constraints typically associated with friction. However, while patterns of policy change did not vary significantly, performance outcomes did: federal systems experienced significantly higher mortality rates, pointing to implementation challenges rather than agenda-setting failures. By decoupling policy change from policy performance, this article highlights the importance of governance capacity and legitimacy during crises and suggests that institutional fragmentation undermines not the policymaking response itself, but its coordination and public uptake. As such, this study deepens our understanding of how institutional context conditions the policymaking process under acute stress, especially by distinguishing between decision-making and execution during crisis governance.

Spaitzman and Gilad ([this issue](#)) assess the abilities of Prime Ministers to amend the cabinet agenda of a coalition government during crises. Looking at over 21 years of cabinet meetings in Israel, across three important national crises, they find that Prime Ministers rarely make last-minute changes to the cabinet agenda during crisis. They lay these findings out to the influence of coalition politics and the importance of the agenda of regular cabinet meetings to negotiated agreements among the parties making up the coalition. Thus, crises may constrain, not liberate, leaders in certain ways.

Policy crises can generate budgetary windfalls and large expenditures may follow national emergencies. This was certainly the case in the US (as elsewhere) with respect to public responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. Workman and Thomas ([this issue](#)) assess the impact of budgetary volatility

in local governments through a deep dive into a single US state's local (county) budgetary patterns. Poorer counties in particular were more likely to take advantage of the opportunity to expand their spending dramatically. Thus, crises create opportunities for those who are motivated to take advantage.

Immigration and identity politics

Finally, a set of papers address issues of identity. Of course, much of the current crisis in western democratic norms is based on a challenge to cultural norms of inclusivity by promoting hostility to immigrants or other marginalised groups. Therefore, it is imperative to consider how identity-politics have been affected.

Carammia and Stefano ([this issue](#)) investigate how policymaking responds to crisis conditions through an in-depth analysis of Italian migration policy over a thirty-year period, with a particular focus on the so-called migration crisis of 2015–2016. Drawing on a dynamic, multi-dimensional dataset – including indicators of migration flows, public opinion (migration mood), salience, and policy restrictiveness – it examines the interplay between public attitudes, migration dynamics, and political decision-making under both ordinary and crisis conditions. The authors demonstrate how crisis conditions expose the fragility of representative policymaking, disrupt established feedback mechanisms, and generate decoupled or performative policy responses. It contributes to broader debates on crisis governance, policy responsiveness, and the politicisation of migration, showing how democratic systems may become less responsive – and more erratic – when operating under perceived emergency.

Hartzell ([this issue](#)) also assesses the possible thermostatic public opinion response to legislative activities on immigration, using a new database on the direction of legislative activity on immigration (e.g., restrictive, permissive) and public opinion on immigration in four countries (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, and the Netherlands). She finds little support for the idea that public opinion systematically moves in the direction opposite of public policy changes. Rather, positive immigration legislative actions follow periods with increased public opinion support; she documents some support therefore for legislative responsiveness, but not for public opinion backlash. The paper adds to our collective knowledge of how political leaders may handle immigration issues going forward. There may be less public opinion cost to progressive immigration policies than sometimes imagined.

Filindra and Burnett ([this issue](#)) focus on a key element of a focus of right-wing populists in the US, 'anti-woke' education policies such as banning certain types of materials in classrooms or promoting citizen (parental)

review of educational policies. Their large survey-experiment shows that such policies are supported in the area of education but not in policing, and that within education they are supported more in areas of history and social studies than in math and science. A key predictor of support for such policies: racial resentment. The paper addresses key issues of identity-politics and shows how radical policy ideas can gain favour in large segments of the population through the use of identity-based cues.

Sebok et al. ([this issue](#)) provide new and sophisticated tools to assess political speech, particularly speech focusing on ‘illiberal’ frames or arguments. These are un – or anti-democratic arguments common in populist rhetoric in most western countries. The method therefore will be of interest to many. Looking at political speech in the US, Austria, Hungary, and Germany, and across two policy areas associated with crisis (immigration and Covid-19), the research shows that illiberal speech, such as that contesting the value or evidence of effectiveness of vaccines, is generally unrelated to the prevalence of more severe problems. That is, illiberal speech is endogenous; it is not a response to worsening crisis. Political leaders use it as part of a strategy of political communication, not as a response to shifts in real-world conditions. This paper has as much of a positive methodological innovation as it does a troubling substantive and normative conclusion.

Conclusion

Crises are all around us and have been for quite some time. Some are created purposefully by political leaders, and others are exogenously imposed on entire nations by natural or man-made events beyond the control of any single actor. Some affect the entire political system; some are international or even global in scope; some affect only a region or a single policy domain. No matter the scale or nature of the crisis, policymakers, political parties, and members of the public respond to them. Some policymakers have plans at the ready as they wait, like the surfer waiting for the perfect wave, to use the crisis in order to justify the adoption of a plan they have been thinking of for years (see Kingdon, 1984). Others are caught off guard, not able to respond effectively. Some are of the opinion that ‘no good crisis should go to waste’ (variously attributed to Winston Churchill and more recently to Rahm Emanuel, former Chief of Staff to US President Barack Obama), making it hard to know what policy solution will be connected to what particular policy crisis.

In the 14 contributions that we have collected on this topic, an international group of scholars has explored many of these strategies. Policymaking in times of crisis, it seems, bears considerable resemblance to policymaking in times of relative normalcy. Problems are only loosely connected to solutions; government programmes are supported or opposed by members of the public

who may not know very much about the substance of the programmes but who may have strong feelings about certain parts of them, such as we have seen in the articles included here within the theme of social identity and immigration. Crises certainly play a role in institutional (re-)design and the evolution of public opinion, and they are affected by cognitive processes where identity-politics may play a key role. As national and international crises appear to be so common, it may be helpful to reconsider these insights about policymaking in times of crisis. Perhaps policymaking in times of crisis is not so different from policymaking in normal times. In any case, we certainly benefit from having a sharp understanding of how governments operate during times of crisis and any theory that purports to address policymaking generally should be applicable to periods of crisis.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Frank R. Baumgartner is the author of numerous books on punctuated equilibrium theory and one of the founders of the Comparative Agendas Project.

Laura Chaqués Bonafont is the founder of the Spanish Agendas Project. Together, they are authors (with Anna Palau) of *Agenda Dynamics in Spain* (Palgrave, 2015).

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