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978-1-009-56520-2 — Policy Entrepreneurs, Crises, and Policy Change
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1 Policy Entrepreneurs in a Crisis Context

1.1 Introduction

Crises test the resilience of societies, economies, and polities. Whether it is an economic downturn, a major disaster, a public health emergency, or political turmoil, crises often expose vulnerabilities and highlight the need for public policy change. These challenging events force governments, organizations, and individuals to reassess their current practices, approaches, and strategies to respond and recover effectively. As a result, crises serve as catalysts for change, incentivizing decision-makers to reevaluate existing policies, introduce new measures, and implement reforms to address the immediate crisis and prevent similar situations from happening in the future (Nohrstedt and Weible, 2010). The question that emerges is how policy actors, groups, and institutions use crises in their efforts to achieve policy change. In this Element, we investigate specifically how policy entrepreneurs do just that.

While we know much about how policy entrepreneurs attempt to bring about public policy change during normal times, we know relatively little about how they behave during crises. We know crises are, by definition, extraordinary events, so it is logical to expect entrepreneurial action to be equally extraordinary or at least different in strategy or intensity, if not aims. To understand the difference, we examine policy entrepreneurial action during diverse crisis contexts to ascertain the strategies and effectiveness of entrepreneurs in extraordinary circumstances. We argue that despite some similarities, important differences in entrepreneurial approaches and action must be specified and elaborated to gain a better and more nuanced understanding of how and why entrepreneurs bring about policy change during crises. To organize the analysis, we use two factors that contribute to understanding entrepreneurial engagement during crises: entrepreneurial action (proactive vs. reactive) and crisis emergence (fast-burning vs. creeping). We proceed inductively and use the case studies to generate hypotheses and construct a framework, which we flesh out in some theoretical detail in Section 5.

Policy entrepreneurs, these energetic actors who engage in collaborative efforts in and around government to promote policy innovations (Mintrom, 2019a), have long been recognized as agents of policy change (Kingdon, 2011; Mintrom, 2000; Roberts and King, 1991; Schneider and Teske, 1992; Schneider et al., 1995). For this reason, in the past few decades, they have attracted considerable academic attention, enriching scholarship that is constantly evolving (Arnold, 2015, 2021; Cohen, 2021; Cohen et al., 2023; Frisch Aviram et al., 2020; Mintrom, 2019a, b; Mintrom and Norman, 2009; Petridou, 2017; Petridou and Mintrom, 2021). The policy entrepreneur gained purchase in public policy studies with the publication of Kingdon's seminal 1984 book *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies,*

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where entrepreneurs were defined as "advocates for proposals or for the prominence of ideas" (Kingdon, 2011, p. 122); they are the actors without whom the coupling of the independent policy, politics, and politics streams in the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) would not be possible. Policy entrepreneurs constitute a distinct kind of political actor (Mintrom, 2019a, b; Petridou and Mintrom, 2021), but they also have other identities in and around government. They may be elected or non-elected officials (Carter and Scott, 2009, 2010; Svensson, 2019), members of civil society or interest groups (Anderson et al., 2019; Verduijn, 2015), or concerned, engaged citizens (Callaghan and Sylvester, 2021).

The arena in which policy entrepreneurial action plays out, the policymaking process, increasingly takes place against the backdrop of one or more unfolding crises. The time available for decision-making is consequentially truncated, and levels of uncertainty are heightened (Boin et al., 2017). The original word, derived from the Greek for "judgment" or "trial," also conveys the notion of critical juncture as a delineation of time and space necessitating complex decision-making under time pressure and an imminent threat in the face of uncertainty and ambiguous choices (Petridou and Sparf, 2017).

Much scholarly attention has been paid to the role of policy entrepreneurs in delivering policy innovation when the right opportunity arises or when the entrepreneurs themselves create the right opportunity. The dual aspect of crisis as a devastating event for those directly affected by it and as an impetus for innovation in the public sector and the market lends itself as a propitious opportunity structure for policy entrepreneurs. For example, David (2015, p. 159) recounts how George W. Bush and Dick Cheney "seized and exploited the opportunities created by the post 9/11 political climate and became the public face of the argument for a firm link between Saddam Hussein and Al-Qaeda, and for evidence of weapons of mass destruction (including nuclear arms) in Iraq" resulting in the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the legal redefinition of torture. Similarly, in a very different policy area, national context, and crisis, Nygaard-Christensen and Houborg (2023) demonstrate how the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated – and resulted in – increased coordination among bureaucracies dealing with health care, which in turn was used by policy entrepreneurs to initiate innovation in treatment services geared towards patients with drug addiction. A third example of the interaction between crises and policy entrepreneurship is in Saurugger and Terpan (2016), who show how complex institutional contexts such as the European Union require coherent entrepreneurial coalitions to achieve policy change.

Despite the notion that policy entrepreneurs and crisis events interact, especially in the context of some policy frameworks, for example, the MSF (Herweg et al., 2023; Zahariadis et al., 2023), as we will demonstrate later in this section there have

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been few systematic attempts to understand the timing, extent, and substance of policy entrepreneurial action in crisis contexts. This Element thus constitutes a theoretically based and empirically supported joint investigation of policy entrepreneurs and crisis interactions. In the remainder of this section, we briefly introduce the concepts of policy entrepreneur, policy entrepreneurship, and crisis, followed by a brief literature review at the intersection of these terms. We conclude with a roadmap for the remaining four sections of the book.

1.2 Defining Policy Entrepreneurs, Policy Entrepreneurship, and Crises

1.2.1 Policy Entrepreneurs and Policy Entrepreneurship

Policy entrepreneurs have been theorized extensively in the policy studies scholarship, and their importance as a heuristic for agency has been recognized not only in theories of the policy process but also as a stand-alone concept (Petridou, 2014). All entrepreneurs in the public sphere perform three functions: they discover unmet needs and select suitable solutions for them; they bear the risk (personal, political, or economic) associated with introducing these solutions, and they build teams of individuals willing to work together towards the realization of the proposed solutions (Schneider and Teske, 1992; Schneider et al., 1995). Additionally, policy entrepreneurs are creative and strategic in that they must be able to think ahead how their proposals may influence the policy debate not only in the short run but also in the long run. These actors are socially competent and able to read cues so that they may anticipate how others will receive their proposed solutions, for which they must be able to argue persuasively in well-maintained and broad networks. Finally, policy entrepreneurs are expected to be competent leaders of the coalitions they assemble (Mintrom, 2000). Necessary requirements for the success of policy entrepreneurial action include (i) telling a persuasive story which frames the problem in a way that is attractive to policymakers, (ii) ensuring the preferred solution is available prior to entrepreneurs drawing attention to a problem, and (iii) exploiting a propitious moment in time, a window of opportunity, during which policymakers are willing to listen in order to realize their policy solution (Cairney, 2018).

Less scholarly attention has been paid to the concept of policy entrepreneurship. This is not necessarily surprising, given that the policy entrepreneur has widely been used as a heuristic for agency, which in turn is often treated as a residual variable explaining change when structural variables fail to do so (Capano and Galanti, 2018). In other words, public policy scholars are interested in the entrepreneur as an actor, not in entrepreneurship as a process. Yet, understanding entrepreneurship can further the understanding of the entrepreneur. We follow Kirzner (1973), who

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viewed entrepreneurship as a process rather than an end state. We define policy entrepreneurship as the process that enables entrepreneurs to discern the most expedient instance to act in order to achieve their goal of affecting change.

1.2.2 What Is a Crisis?

A crisis is an unusual situation that presents some extraordinary challenges for those directly affected (Almond et al., 1973). Early political science literature drawing from international relations, defined a crisis as:

> a situation where three necessary and sufficient conditions derive from a change in a state's external or internal environment. All three are perceptions held by the highest level of decision-makers of the actor concerned: (1) *a threat to basic values*, along with (2) the awareness of *finite time for response* to the external value threat, and (3) *a high probability of involvement in military hostilities*. (Brecher et al., 1988, p. 3, emphasis in the original)

Even in the contemporary crisis landscape, where threats include a host of non-state actors and implications that are broader than the engagement in military hostilities, the basic tenets of this definition still hold. Moreover, while there are examples of definitions that allude to the idea that crises are not entirely bad – including the notion crises present opportunities (Dror, 1993; Stranks, 1994), that crises contain an element of duality (Drennan et al., 2015) consisting of a historical period of rupture (from the business-as-usual) and a framed event (Gotham and Greenberg, 2014), or that they constitute a turning point or critical juncture (Petridou and Sparf, 2017), the idea of crisis as a predominantly negative situation prevails (Shaluf et al., 2003). Broadly, the term implies an undesirable and unexpected situation that possesses current or latent harm to people, organizations, or society, engendering feelings of panic, fear, danger, or shock (Darling, 1994).

In the crisis management literature, a crisis constitutes "a serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making vital decisions" (Rosenthal et al., 1989, p. 10). Boin et al. (2017) draw from this definition to conceptualize crises as "critical junctures in the lives of systems – times at which their ability to function can no longer be taken for granted" (Boin et al., 2017, p. 5). Boin et al. (2017) go on to say that during a crisis, a community, organization, region, or country (all of which constitute a system) experiences an urgent threat to the values that they consider fundamental for their existence. This threat necessarily contains a host of unknown contingencies and necessitates urgent action.

The definitions above are not dissimilar to each other in that they all contain the key elements of a crisis: the *threat* it poses to a system, the *time pressure* that crisis managers experience when dealing with a crisis, and the *uncertainty* and

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the concomitant *ambiguity* regarding both the causes of the crisis and the "best" ways to manage and contain it in a way that limits harm done. The extent of harm done – in other words, the magnitude of the framed-as-crisis-event – depends on the existing landscape of risk and resilience in a given society, which in turn is informed by power differentials and degree of inequality of environmental protections (Gotham and Greenberg, 2014). Failure to successfully manage the crisis raises important questions about the competence of the governing coalition and can bring governments down. The so-called Partygate Scandal in 2020–2021, for example, eventually led to the resignation of UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and considerable leadership turmoil in the governing party in 2023. In the United States, the poor response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 led to significant criticism of the Bush administration and greatly weakened its second term.

By definition, the crisis management literature offers guidance regarding how disasters should be managed – that is, how their adverse effects can be prevented, mitigated, or controlled. Successful crisis management is generally good for society because it can guide society away from harm. Still, successful crisis management is often framed in terms of its value to the entity managing the crisis. The historical trajectory of crisis management spans an extensive and intricate timeline characterized by the gradual evolution of strategies and practices employed by civilizations to navigate and mitigate a variety of crisis events. The origins of crisis management can be traced as far back as in ancient civilizations such as the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans (Rainbird, 1976), and success or failure reflected accordingly on the ruling entity governing the crisis management efforts.

In the contemporary era, crisis management has seen significant advancements in dealing with emerging complexities such as terrorism, cybersecurity vulnerabilities, and pandemics. National and international institutions and private sector organizations have produced comprehensive crisis management plans and strategies. Over time, the field of crisis management has demonstrated a capacity to evolve in response to the dynamic characteristics of crises, resulting in the establishment of more formalized and specialized approaches. Currently, the management of crises encompasses not only governmental entities but also international organizations such as the European Union Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC), which is the heart of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, non-governmental organizations, and the business sector, fostering collaborative efforts to alleviate, address, and recover from diverse forms of emergencies (Drennan et al., 2015). This is not surprising in an era where the state has essentially declared its inability to keep citizens safe (Evans and Reid, 2014) and calls upon the entire society to contribute to its own resilience and safety.

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An important threshold question in this literature concerns the extent to which a crisis is endogenous – that is, an *organizational* crisis brought on by failures, shortcomings, and malevolent behavior in a particular organization – or whether it is an exogenous shock to a political or governance system that should be controlled, but that is not credibly *caused* by the entity seeking to manage the crisis. As Seeger et al. (1998, p. 233) argue, "organizational crises are conceptually distinct from disasters, which are usually defined in the research literature as non-organizationally based events generated by natural or mass technological forces".

This distinction may be naive. Organizations are normatively expected to be prepared to protect people from a dizzying array of financial, technological, and environmental risks (Beck, 1992; Birkland and Nath, 2000; Perrow, 1999). The legitimacy of the responsible organizations or the social, political, and economic system of which these organizations are a part may be eroded if these organizations fail to address a crisis effectively, particularly if the crisis is either caused, somehow, by poor decisions made by an organization or whether, once confronted with a crisis they did not cause, they fail to respond effectively or fail to even imagine that the event could happen. For example, a food poisoning crisis may implicate the supplier of food to a restaurant, the restaurant that prepared the food, and the government organization that regulates food safety. In such a case, while the restaurant may not have caused the food to be tainted, they should have anticipated the *possibility* that food could be unsanitary and should have systems in place to prevent their serving contaminated food, even though the fact that the food was tainted was the fault of a supplier (Birkland and Nath, 2000). The September 11 terror attacks in the United States were a crisis because of the physical harm they did, the increased sensitivity to the possibility of mass-casualty terrorism, *and* the Bush Administration's failure to detect and thwart the plot in the face of a growing realization that terrorism poses a threat to the United States. In the contemporary policy environment characterized by networked governance and in a complex risk environment, efforts to claim that a crisis event is unforeseeable and uncontrollable for which an organization cannot be expected to prepare is, at best, unrealistic. As Darling (1994) notes, successful firms anticipate potential crises and seek to manage risks before they develop into crises. This is true of any organization, including the public sector.

The crisis management literature also implicitly recognizes that labeling an event a crisis is a political act (Boin et al., 2017; Edelman, 1977), as contestants in the policy process engage in framing contests in an effort to elevate or block issues from reaching the agenda. Participants may claim that a current situation – such as the large number of migrants at the Mexico-US border – is

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a current crisis, or more forward-thinking actors anticipate policy problems before they arise (DeLeo, 2016).

1.2.3 Crises as Focusing Events

Crises can be characterized as *focusing events* or as having been triggered by such an event. A potential focusing event is an event that is "sudden, relatively rare, can be reasonably defined as harmful or revealing the possibility of potentially greater future harms, inflicts harms or suggests potential harms that are or could be concentrated on a definable geographical area or community of interest, and that is known to policymakers and the public virtually simultaneously" (Birkland, 1997, p. 22). We cannot know in advance whether a particular event will be a focusing event; that is, we do not know that the event will have a substantial effect on the political agenda. The logic of MSF suggests that a focusing event is an event that opens up the agenda to new contestants in policy debates, and those contestants – often as policy entrepreneurs – find that the event is an opportunity to couple solutions with problems. Kingdon (2011) identified focusing events as one way in which issues gain greater attention, along with changes in indicators and spillovers from other domains, though he never provided a definition of focusing events as narrowly focused as Birkland. But regardless of how we conceive of focusing events, they typically reach the agenda because they reveal policy failures and may, therefore, trigger policy learning (Birkland, 2006). Disasters create learning opportunities because they create "cognitive openness" to change (Stern, 1997) on the part of actors in the policy subsystem. As Birkland argued, "focusing events can be used to demonstrate the existence of policy failure; that is, participants in policymaking can reasonably argue that a focusing event would not have happened or would not have been so severe 'if only' something had been done" (Birkland, 2004, p. 343).

In MSF, the interaction between the policy entrepreneur and crises is articulated in detail. By coining the term *focusing event*, Kingdon (2011) pointed to the window of opportunity for policy entrepreneurs to link policy prescriptions to the new appreciation of a problem that is revealed by a focusing event. On the other post-event side, the conceptualization has had implications for policy learning. To simplify the conceptualization, we can assume that individuals are the agents of learning. Busenberg (2001, p. 173) defines learning as "a process in which individuals apply new information and ideas to policy decisions." The information need not be new to the policy domain or subsystem – indeed, a great deal might already be known in the problem stream – but the problems revealed by the event may be new to the most important decision-makers within a policy community. Peter May argues specifically that *policy failure* can yield three different

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kinds of learning: instrumental policy learning, social policy learning, and political learning. In all three types of learning, policy failure – politically and socially defined – provides a stimulus for learning about how to make better policy (May, 1992) and may be used by a policy entrepreneur in their quest for change.

Instrumental policy learning concerns learning about the "viability of policy interventions or implementation designs." This sort of learning centers on policy tools, such as the use of subsidies, sanctions, or incentives. If an event reveals that something about the implementation of an otherwise sound policy has failed, instrumental learning will yield improved policies. For example, after the September 11 attacks in the United States, legislation that removed passenger screening at airports from the private sector to the federal government is a change in the policy tool intended to prevent hijackings. Conversely, social policy learning goes beyond changes to policy instruments and seeks to better understand the problem itself. It can result in a better understanding of the causes of public problems, which can yield "policy redefinition entailing changes in policy goals or scope – e.g., policy direction, target groups, rights bestowed by the policy" (May, 1992, p. 336). These first two types of learning are not likely to lead to innovative policies because they emerge as a result of incremental change.

Finally, a third type of learning is political learning, which is learning about "strategy for advocating a given policy idea or problem," potentially leading to "more sophisticated advocacy of a policy idea or problem." In simplest terms, political learning is manifest when advocates for particular policy prescriptions learn how to make better arguments for adopting those policies. Policy entrepreneurs can be such advocates as they seek to realize dynamic change.

1.3 Policy Entrepreneurs and Crises: Mapping the Literature

The literature on policy entrepreneurs and, to a lesser extent, on policy entrepreneurship has grown considerably during the past four decades (see Faling et al., 2018; Frisch Aviram et al., 2020). However, it aims mainly to understand policy entrepreneurship in normal policymaking contexts in a variety of policy sectors. In this section, we focus on a subset of this literature at the intersection of policy entrepreneur(ship) and crises. In August 2023, we conducted a search on SCOPUS for journal articles (in English) with the search string ["Policy entrepreneur*" AND crisis] in their title, abstract, or keywords, thus capturing policy entrepreneur and policy entrepreneurship. The search yielded seventy-one articles, with the first one having been published in 1990. As illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, the publication trend of peer-reviewed articles combining the terms policy entrepreneur(ship) and crisis follows the publication trend of research on policy

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