P290 / Governing Policy and Organizational Crisis

Topic : Crises, Risks and Wicked Problems

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

While crises have been the subject of substantial research in the field of organizational sociology (Perrow 1984; Weick 1993; Vaughan 1996; Borraz & November 2025) and crisis management (Rosenthal, Charles and ‘t Hart 1989; Boin et al. 2005; Ansell, Boin and Keller 2010), they remain comparatively understudied in public policy (Capano and Toth 2024; Capano et al. 2026). Paradoxically, Policy Studies have built a large literature showing how problems emerge, are defined, framed, and tamed, exploring the complex link between problem agenda-setting and policy formulation (Rochefort and Cobb 1994; Kingdon 1984; Blum 2021; Zittoun et al. 2021). Yet this literature has essentially treated crisis as an exogenous “focusing event”, shock, or critical juncture that pushes problems onto the agenda or punctuates policy equilibria (Kingdon 1984; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Birkland 1997; Zittoun 2025).

In this panel, we propose to revisit this question by examining crisis as both a policy and an organizational phenomenon. Rather than separating, on epistemological grounds, the definition of a crisis from its policy and organizational management, we consider crisis as a specific experience in which the ordinary policy process, and the organizations that carry it, no longer work (Zittoun 2025b). Crisis is a trial in which policymakers confront events that their usual ways of knowing, deciding, and legitimizing cannot grasp. Following Dobry’s continuity hypothesis (1986), crises should be studied with the same tools as ordinary policymaking in a stable organizational world.

In ordinary times, policymaking consists in translating disruptive events into treatable problems that fit established frameworks, often by defining them in terms of solutions already at hand (Wildavsky 1979). This translation relies on a stable organizational order where problems are “domesticated” by being grasped through definitional devices, being attached to a policy sector or domain and to the bureaucratic division of labor among ministries, departments and agencies, identifying who owns the problem and who is legitimate to address it (Gusfield 1981; Zittoun 2025a). Each organizational segment carries its own expertise and knowledge devices to make it intelligible and predictable (Zittoun and Hassenteufel 2026). It also carries its own standard operating procedures and repertoires of solutions (Allison 1971; Cohen, March and Olsen 1972).

Crises begin when events overflow this policy and organizational order (Arnhold 2023; Callon 1998). Events that cannot be understood within established knowledge devices challenge the expertise on which organizations rely, as organizational sociology has shown in its analyses of incubation and the collapse of sensemaking (Turner 1978; Weick 1993). Crises may become situations in which ordinary institutional or sectoral boundaries are questioned (Dobry 1986). They are also intrinsically related to critique: Crises are the result of a “second-order judgment” (Roitman 2014) that implies a statement of failure, and therefore a potential for critique of public actors (Arnhold 2026) and their capacity to govern crisis. Crisis can thus be seen as the moment when the organizational order of policymaking is both disrupted and revealed.

We hypothesize that crises in public policy can be understood as “trials of delegitimation” (Zittoun et al. 2026; Capano et al. 2026), in three different ways. When events cannot be made intelligible in regular knowledge devices, they constitute a problematization trial that destabilizes the process of problem definition. When no available solution can be coupled with these events, the institutionalized way of policy-making is put to the test and becomes a policy-ization trial. When these events circulate across sectors, organizations, and levels of government, they blur the boundaries that assign problems to owners and become a political trial, in which the legitimacy of those in charge is called into question (Zittoun and Hassenteufel 2026).

Considering crisis as a trial of delegitimation of a policy process that relies on diverse organizational configurations makes it possible to revisit the responses governments put in place once they have lost their grip on events. Drawing on the three forms of governing crises proposed by Capano, Zittoun and Profeti (2026) (governing during the crisis, governing the crisis and governing by the crisis), we propose to examine how crisis governance deals with the policy and organizational boundaries that the crisis has blurred, and

how it recomposes, or fails to recompose, new grips on events and new boundaries.

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· Crisis and problem. When, how, and by whom is a situation labelled a “crisis” rather than a “problem”? How is a crisis attached to, or detached from, a policy sector and an organization?

· The ordinary organizational order and its overflow. How do the definitional devices, expertise, routines and repertoires of solutions of policy organizations make some events intelligible and treatable, and others invisible or ungovernable? Which organizational configurations (bureaucratic organization of the State; public/private boundaries and interdependencies; public policy actors and their audiences) are more or less prone to crises? How do organizational crises become policy crises, and vice versa?

· Crises as trials. How do problematization, policy-ization and political trials unfold within and across organizations? How do policymakers experience the failure of their usual ways of knowing, deciding and legitimizing? How do policy actors attempt to contain undesirable events and reduce the scope of crises? What happens to preparedness and crisis management devices when events exceed what was anticipated?

· Blurring and redrawing boundaries. How do crises question institutional boundaries? How do they circulate across sectors, organizations and levels of government? How do they call problem ownership and the legitimacy of those in charge into question? Which actors gain or lose authority in the process?

· Forms of governing and organizational recomposition. How do governing during the crisis, governing the crisis and governing by the crisis mobilize, suspend or reconfigure organizational dynamics? Which organizational arrangements (crisis cells, task forces, inter-agency coordination, public–private or expert hybrid spaces, centralization around the executive) do they rely on? How do governments recompose, or fail to recompose, new grips on events and new boundaries?

· After the crisis. Do these recompositions remain temporary and reversible, or do they durably reshape the organizational order of policymaking, its sectoral boundaries and its distribution of authority?

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