P277 / Legitimation in the Policy Process: Expertise, Leadership, and Public Discourse in Crisis Preparedness

Topic : Crises, Risks and Wicked Problems

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Legitimacy is a central concern of public policy because the latter is the means through which governments ask citizens to comply, often against their immediate interests. Policy legitimacy rests less on an objective correlation between a policy and the public good than on whether affected publics experience the policy as meeting real needs and addressing perceived problems (Hanberger, 2003). Procedure matters as well: the incubation of ideas, the framing of appeals, and stakeholder engagement can explain the fate of a reform when effectiveness cannot (Wallner, 2008). Crises bring legitimacy and legitimation to the forefront. The COVID-19 pandemic and (in some contexts) the threat posed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine required compliance with restrictive measures under uncertainty, and the speed demanded compressed the consultative processes that normally generate legitimacy. Survey evidence from six European democracies indicates that perceived procedural transparency shapes trust and compliance more than objective performance does (Coroado & Frateur, 2025). Preparedness is therefore a policy problem and a legitimation problem at once (Christensen et al., 2016).

The panel adopts legitimation as its organizing concept. Legitimacy has often been treated as a property that an actor or institution possesses (Suddaby et al., 2017). A process perspective asks how beliefs in legitimacy come to be held, by whom, and through which interactions (Galán, 2018), and it gives weight to agency. Actors can gain, maintain, and repair legitimacy, and each strategy carries characteristic risks. Policymakers also operate in an arena where epistemic, managerial, and political claims to legitimacy compete and can undermine one another (Galanti, 2023). The type of crisis matters: transparent communication and expert involvement helped one government keep a situational crisis from becoming an institutional one (Petridou et al., 2020). Studies of the pandemic add the contrast between pluralistic and monotonous public discourse (Baekkeskov et al., 2021), the visibility of experts and political leaders (Rubin et al., 2021), and the role of policy capacity and trust (Zahariadis et al., 2023). These literatures remain separate, concentrate on the acute phase of crises, and rarely compare a prolonged crisis with a security threat.

The panel therefore asks: How do the legitimation of policy processes, policy outcomes, and expert knowledge shape the design and acceptance of crisis preparedness, and how does this change as crises unfold and normalize? Additional questions concern which actors perform these functions and which transition points punctuate legitimation.

Papers may explore research questions such as the following:

• How does the balance between procedural and substantive justification, including effectiveness and proportionality, shape the acceptance of preparedness policy as crises become prolonged?

• How do epistemic, managerial, and political claims to legitimacy interact, and what follows for governments that rely on one of them?

• How does public discourse, from pluralistic to monotonous, relate to legitimacy across the phases of a crisis?

• How does legitimation differ between health crises and security threats, given differences in the openness of the epistemic communities involved?

The panel welcomes comparative and methodologically pluralistic contributions from any national or sectoral context.

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel invites papers that advance the study of legitimation in the policy sectors of crisis preparedness and management. We understand legitimation as an interactive, contested process through which governmental interventions, actors, and knowledge claims come to be accepted or rejected, and we are interested in where (locus) and how (mode) this process occurs.

We welcome theoretical, conceptual, and empirical contributions that address one or more of the following themes:

• The legitimation of expert advice and scientific knowledge under uncertainty, urgency, and divergent policies across neighboring jurisdictions.

• The legitimation of crisis leadership, including formal and emergent forms, and the relationship between

elected officials, appointed officials, and experts.
• The legitimation of entrepreneurial action.
• Public discourse and the justification of policy interventions, including the contrast between pluralistic and monotonous debate in media and social media.
• Transition points in legitimation as crises evolve, normalize, or recur, and the implications for policy learning and institutional memory.
• Comparisons between different types of events, such as public health crises, security threats, and climate-related disasters, and between national governance traditions.
• Links between legitimation, policy design, policy capacity, and trust.
We particularly seek papers that offer explicit propositions or hypotheses, that engage with the process-oriented legitimacy literature, and that relate their findings to other approaches in the study of crisis governance and the policy process. Methodological pluralism is encouraged. We encourage submissions that examine diverse contexts, including federal systems, the Global South, and non-democratic regimes, as well as papers that translate findings into lessons for practitioners responsible for preparedness.

References

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