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## 22. Institutional crisis and the policy agenda

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### WHEN INSTITUTIONS STORM THE AGENDA

In the policy literature, crisis plays a common role in explaining policy change. The standard insight in the agenda setting literature holds that crises force issues onto the political agenda (Kingdon, 1984; Keeler, 1993). These issues slip through a briefly opened "window of opportunity," cracked open by a crisis. Crises are thus an important independent variable, as they help to explain what so many theories cannot explain: the punctuation of stable policy frameworks.

But sometimes, the independent variable – crisis – becomes the phenomenon that needs to be explained. This happens when the institutional character of an entire policy sector is called into question (Boin and 't Hart, 2000; Alink, Boin, and 't Hart, 2001; Ansell and Vogel, 2006). We refer to these situations as institutional crises. It is not so much the details of policy that become politicized and climb the agenda; it is a broad-based challenge to institutional arrangements that takes over and temporarily consumes multiple agendas. An institutional crisis gives rise to a distinctive kind of agenda setting process that needs to be distinguished from the standard process of policy change.

An institutional crisis occurs when "the institutional integrity of a policy sector is at stake" (Boin and 't Hart, 2000, p.12). Ansell and Vogel (2006) refer to these situations in terms of "contested governance": a "particularly intense and broad-based conflict about the fundamental assumptions and institutional frameworks through which a policy domain is governed" (p.12). In both cases, intense criticism erupts over the basic institutional arrangements and orienting assumptions that govern a policy sector. The legitimacy of that sector – what it stands for and how it functions – declines rapidly, exposing its institutional core (Boin and 't Hart, 2000).

Hurricane Katrina provides a textbook example. When Hurricane Katrina struck in August 2005, it revealed structural deficiencies in the U.S. federal disaster response system (Cooper and Block, 2006).<sup>1</sup> One could argue that the magnitude and complexity of the catastrophe would have defied any level of preparedness. The federal government delivered

“record levels of support to Hurricane Katrina’s victims, states and emergency responders” (OIG, 2006, p.2). Yet, the Inspector General of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) would conclude six months later that “the federal government, in particular the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), received widespread criticism for a slow and ineffective response to Hurricane Katrina. Much of the criticism is warranted” (OIG, 2006, p.1).

Since FEMA had been absorbed by the much larger DHS in 2001, it had lost much of its budget and its autonomy. Congress and the President moved FEMA’s previous responsibility for preparedness programs to a new office within DHS. As a result, “turf wars put distance between the preparedness, response and recovery offices” (Roberts, 2006a, p.24). The Bush administration filled the agency with political appointees – such as successive FEMA directors Allbaugh and Brown – who lacked the Congressional contacts, experience and expertise of their predecessors (Roberts, 2006b, pp.77, 83). FEMA’s ranking dropped over the years to the bottom of a 2003 survey and to 29 out of 30 in a 2005 survey on worker satisfaction in government agencies (Barr, 2005). Increasing personnel turnover sapped the agency’s force of highly qualified and experienced employees (Roberts, 2006a, p.24). All these characteristics and structural shortcomings were revealed, amplified, and scrutinized in media coverage, political hearings, and formal investigations after Katrina attracted attention to FEMA.

The Katrina disaster became the symbolic incident that laid bare FEMA’s perceived state of decomposition (Roberts, 2013). Simplified comparisons and causalities, bold statements, accusations and a flood of incriminating examples of the agency’s failure dominated the headlines and news coverage for weeks on end. Suddenly, FEMA had transformed “from a leading light of public administration into a laggard” (Roberts, 2006b, p.57). State and local authorities had lost so much faith in FEMA after Katrina that they ramped up their own preparations for the next disaster (Bliss and Niquette, 2011).

An institutional crisis is likely to have some or all of the following characteristics:

- intense critical media and public scrutiny of existing institutional arrangements;
- interpretation of specific institutional errors or failures as reflections of the chronic or systemic failure of governing arrangements;
- a serious challenge to basic authority patterns and to the legitimacy of the policy sector’s governing arrangements as a whole;
- calls for broad-based reform and opportunities for significant institutional innovation; and

- reform proposals driven by the need to restore authority, trust, and legitimacy.

All governance is contested to a lesser or greater extent, but such contestation rarely shifts from the details of policy to the basic foundations of the policymaking system. When it does, the resulting crisis not only influences policy agendas or provides a critical push to pending policy reform plans; institutional crises bring to the fore the content of policymaking as well as the philosophy behind the policy and the structures, rules, and organizations governing a policy sector. Following Alink, Boin, and ‘t Hart (2001), we refer to this distinction as the *software* (policy and philosophy content) and the *hardware* (structures, rules, governing arrangements) of a policy sector. When both software and hardware are contested, the future of a policy sector is at stake.

The question we seek to answer in this chapter pertains to the process through which such crises emerge. When and how do fundamental institutional arrangements come to dominate political and policy agendas? How does this happen? What can policy leaders do to prevent this? In addition, we are interested in the consequences of these institutional crises. The policy literature suggests that crises create windows for policy reform. But is the same true when the basic institutions that govern a policy sector lose critical support? Do crisis-driven reform efforts emerge and, if so, under which conditions?

## TOWARDS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In our effort to sketch a theoretical framework that can help address these questions, we draw on earlier work (Boin and ‘t Hart, 2000; Ansell and Vogel, 2006; Kuipers, 2006) and combine this with insights from the agenda setting literature. Our model owes much to Kingdon’s (1984) multiple streams approach (MSA), as well as the punctuated equilibrium theory (PET) developed, in particular, by Baumgartner and Jones (1991). We borrow key concepts from these perspectives to understand the functioning of a policy sector as an institutional field: policy venues, policy images, positive and negative feedback, among others. But we argue that the mechanisms of institutional agenda setting are different from those that pertain to policy agendas. To be clear, the agenda setting literature aims to explain certain patterns of policy change and as such is highly valuable. But these approaches do not fully illuminate some of the key dynamics and mechanisms of an institutional crisis.

Our perspective builds on the classic idea that policy sectors vary in

terms of the strength of their institutionalization. Following Selznick (1957), we understand a strongly institutionalized policy sector as having well-articulated organizational and governing structures with clearly defined goals, rules, values, and tasks. Integration is perhaps the key dimension of Selznick's concept of institutionalization. A strongly institutionalized policy sector is highly integrated across multiple institutional dimensions, with a good fit between skills, resources, and organizational structures on the one hand, and tasks and problems on the other. It enjoys well-established authority and leadership structures, a supportive political environment, and a well-defined, respected, and normatively sanctioned mission. By contrast, a weakly institutionalized policy sector is more fragmented and suffers from contested authority and legitimacy gaps. Strong and weak institutionalization, of course, are understood here as two end points on a continuum.

Our key point is quite simple. The strength of the institutionalization of a policy sector will affect both its propensity to undergo an institutional crisis and its ability to adapt to and weather a crisis. Institutionalization will shape the incubation period leading up to the crisis, the precipitation of the crisis, the agenda for institutional reform, and the closing of the crisis. Contrary to the standard interpretation of punctuated equilibria in the agenda setting literature, our argument is that institutional inertia is only one facet of how institutionalization affects crisis. Institutionalization may contribute to and escalate institutional crisis by creating recalcitrance and hence triggering calls for more systematic change. However, an alternative reading of institutionalization is that it facilitates pre-emptive, cooperative, and adaptive change. We argue that taking both interpretations into account yields a more nuanced and powerful understanding of institutional crises and their associated agenda setting processes.

The outcome of these crisis-induced processes also depends on how institutions cope with the storm. The crisis management capacities of these institutions matter (Boin and 't Hart, 2000). We speak of "high agency" and "low agency" to denote the institutional capacities to manage these institutional crises.

We develop this argument in the following sections. First, we explain how institutional crises come about: the incubation before escalation. We then probe the nexus between institutionalization and agency because we argue that incubation may lead to upheaval, negative media attention, and a shift of priorities (in other words: escalation) on the political agenda, and yet it will impact different sectors in different ways because of the existing capacity to respond to a crisis. Hence, various reform paths may come about. We conclude with a brief reflection on the possible consequences of our thinking for theory and practice.

## RIGIDITY AND CHANGE: EXPLAINING THE EMERGENCE OF INSTITUTIONAL CRISIS

The agenda setting literature is underpinned by a view of institutional path dependence that regards institutional equilibria as robust and inertial. The equilibrium is regarded as internally self-reinforcing and hard to dislodge. It can only be disrupted by external shock, the impetus for reform. Thus, this perspective distinguishes rather sharply between periods of stability and periods of change. An external shock (or crisis) sets off a period of change that eventually leads to a new equilibrium. Punctuated equilibrium approaches focus on the policy paradigm (the software), the exogenous shock, (external) entrepreneurs, agenda shifts, and policy changes that follow. The sudden breakdown of support for a certain policy and its supporting institutional arrangements are, in other words, very much taken for granted. While we acknowledge the importance of external shocks, we understand the breakdown of external support for the institutional arrangements of a policy sector primarily as a result of endogenous developments. More specifically, we explain institutional crises as the outcome of *institutional erosion*: an incubation process in which institutional performance slowly comes to be seen as problematic by key stakeholders. This happens not only because these stakeholders change their views of the policy sector in question; it happens because the policy sector in question does not adapt to a changing world.

An institutional crisis revolves around what we refer to as "performance deficits." No policy is perfectly executed; there is no policy sector that meets all its goals, as that is simply impossible (Hood, 1976; Wilson, 1989). There is, in other words, always a gap between what policy sectors promise to deliver and what they actually do. A "performance deficit" is not necessarily problematic. In fact, we might say that a performance deficit is both assumed and accepted: we do not expect the police to catch all criminals, nor do we expect schools to graduate all students or hospitals to heal all patients. As long as public organizations keep the performance gap within reasonable limits, support for the sector and its arrangements should not be affected (cf. Hong and Sohn, 2014).

Critiques of this gap are typically fragmented. They may nibble away at the legitimacy of the sector, but they rarely align in a single storm of critique and touch the "core logic" of a policy sector. An example is agricultural policy in the U.S. This is built on a complex set of government support policies for farmers, designed to overcome various kinds of agricultural market failures. It has led to a strong clientelist relationship between the U.S. Department of Agriculture and farmers. There has been direct critique of these institutional arrangements for years that argues

that this is corporate welfare as opposed to support for family farmers. However, this direct attack on the core logic of this sector has had little impact. Nevertheless, a range of critiques operating at the margins of this sector has had more traction. An example is the expanding critique of obesity, which has been attributed to the strategies of subsidization of “industrialized agriculture” (Nestle, 2013).

An institutional crisis denotes the moment that a performance deficit has become a perceived problem. When citizens, media, and stakeholders construe its performance deficit as indicative of deeper problems in the sector, support for that sector and its policies will wane. When the performance deficit attracts political attention, the problems for the sector will mount. The Baumgartner and Jones (1991) framework provides us with the conceptual tools to describe this crisis process: tone and venue change mark the escalation; it is the critical phase in which Kingdon’s (1984) streams merge. The crisis comes into full view when a “focusing event” symbolizes the performance problems of the sector and channels the latent criticism; it marks the moment that the performance gap comes to be understood as a “blameworthy failure.” In the media frenzy that ensues, this failure is quickly elevated to a major political concern (Boin and ‘t Hart, 2000).

But why does one policy sector become the subject of intense politicization, whereas others sputter forward unnoticed (and usually unloved)? The performance deficit itself cannot explain this variance. We know of cases in which the performance of a policy sector had actually *improved* in the years leading up to an institutional crisis. The Dutch prison sector, for instance, became the subject of an institutional crisis in the early 1990s. A series of dramatic escapes put the prison sector in the spotlight. Media attention rose, political venues changed, and reforms were imposed. One might conclude that a “focusing event” had punctuated the status quo and created a window for change. But the actual performance of the Dutch sector had been on the rise: when the crisis broke, the number of escapes had never been so low. In fact, the number of escapes had consistently dropped in the preceding decade, starting with 4 out of 1,000 inmates escaping in 1984, to 2 per 1,000 in 1990, and 1 per 1,000 in 1992 (Boin and Otten, 1996).

This example brings home an important point: the absolute performance of a policy sector is often less important than the *perceived direction* of the performance deficit. To illustrate this point we must return to the status quo, which marks the moment in time that the sector’s performance is taken for granted and only routinely discussed in technical venues. This stability is of course temporary and always under threat. Vulnerability to an institutional crisis is created by conditions that disrupt the fit between

an institutionalized policy sector and its environment. This dealignment can occur either because policy sectors change while their environment stays the same or because environments change while policy sectors remain the same.

When a policy sector changes core arrangements (hardware) or alters its interpretation of formal policy aims (software), it invites critical scrutiny.<sup>2</sup> But when a sector keeps everything the same, because it always worked nicely and was appreciated widely, a crisis may eventually be in the offing as well. The Selective Service System, led by General Hershey since 1941, rigidly held on to its administrative practices of military conscription throughout the Vietnam War and faced major domestic unrest regarding the draft practices until President Nixon promoted the General out of office in 1970 and abolished military conscription.

Perceptions and preferences change over time. As a result, public expectations will shift. As expectations gradually shift, the performance deficit widens. In complexity theory terms, this change might be characterized as moving “far from equilibrium.” It usually is a slow process and there are few markers of shifting expectations, which may lead to growing discontent and widening gaps. This process, when left unattended, will eventually reach a “tipping point” and “punctuate” into a crisis (and to the untrained eye it will seem like this crisis comes out of nowhere). This has been described elsewhere in terms of an incubation process in which the pathogens for future crisis begin to build (Turner, 1978; Boin and ‘t Hart, 2000).

To explain why this incubation process affects some sectors and not others, we return to the work of Philip Selznick (1957). Selznick’s ideal-typical institution (described earlier) maintains a perfect balance with its environment. The key here is responsible adaptation: institutions have to change to maintain the trust and support of their environment, but they strive to do so without altering the core values and critical technology (Thompson, 1967) that make up their identity. Selznick viewed this “preservation of institutional integrity” as the most important, but also most difficult, task of institutional leadership. From Selznick’s (1957) perspective, responsible adaptation will not only keep the performance deficit in check, but will also deepen institutionalization as it strengthens the trust between the institution and its environment. At the same time, a failure to adapt can be seen as a symptom and a cause of deinstitutionalization (Kay and Boxall, 2015). Figure 22.1 depicts the process of institutional erosion, adaptation, and crisis.

The critical phase here is erosion, by which we mean the growth of the performance deficit. Ansell and Vogel (2006, p.22) argue that this erosion is most likely to happen in “extensively institutionalized policy sectors in which routine decisions are delegated to experts or administrators

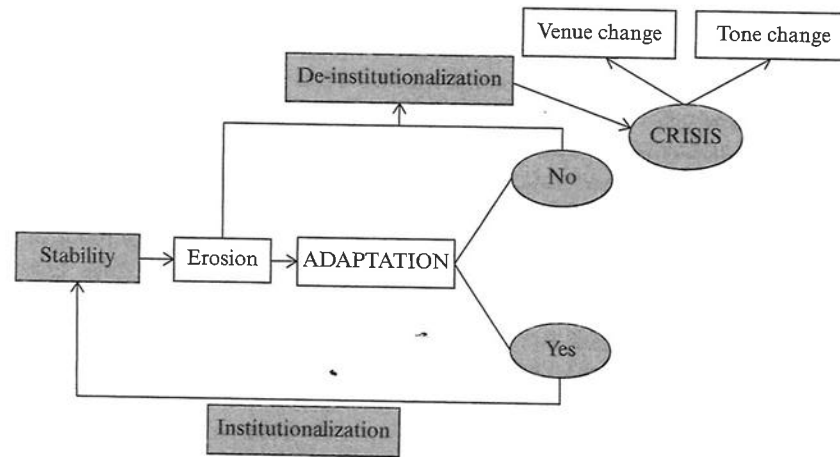


Figure 22.1 *The incubation process*

with little on-going attention or interest from the public.” In institutions, mission-driven professionals build on a track record of success. The legitimacy of institutional arrangements is high. It is precisely these institutions in which the notion of responsiveness – serving the environment and perceiving societal change – may get lost. Hence the notion that “nothing fails like success.”

This does not mean that highly institutionalized policy sectors will inevitably fail and meet with an institutional crisis. We argue that a highly institutionalized policy sector is vulnerable to these incubation processes: as people come to trust a policy sector (the hallmark of institutionalization), the potential for disappointment is higher than it is for weakly institutionalized policy sectors, in which subpar performance and a lack of responsiveness make up the policy image.

Selznick (1957) offers a way out of this conundrum. A strongly institutionalized sector has, at least in theory, the capacity to produce the responsible adaptation that can keep a performance deficit in check. While some features of strong institutionalization may encourage strong resistance to change, others enhance the capacity for institutional adaptation. Strong institutions can produce the agency, reflexivity, and dynamic capacities that make governing institutions anything but inertial. Because they are strongly institutionalized, sectors may have the capacity, motivation, and agency necessary to guide significant change processes. We have developed this argument in more detail elsewhere (Ansell, Boin, and Farjoun, 2015), but recap some major points here.

Strong institutionalization may entail elements of routinization, cognitive biases, systemic interdependence, and vested interests; but it also tends to entail the institutionalization of strong leadership, distinctive competences, and a well-integrated normative framework. While these features may produce inertia, they also produce a high degree of collective and reflexive agency. In theory, strong institutionalization allows for everlasting equilibrium. But that requires a certain type of leadership (Selznick (1957) referred to the importance of protecting institutional integrity), which balances institutionalized values against changing circumstances. This would require leaders to scan their environment for threats, make pre-emptive sacrifices to preserve core values, and rapidly forestall serious threats. This high degree of collective and reflective agency enables strongly institutionalized sectors to act responsively to avoid institutional crises. We have referred to this process as “dynamic conservatism” – strongly institutionalized sectors are motivated to conserve the integrity of their institutions, but are capable of dynamic response in order to do so (Ansell, Boin, and Farjoun, 2015).

Paradoxically, the more effective institutional leadership is, the harder it will be to sustain. Long-term success in preserving institutional integrity tends to make people forget the importance of the balance between immediate and long-term benefits. When the institution changes too fast or adapts too little vis-à-vis its environment, institutional erosion kicks in and the legitimacy gap is bound to widen.

### RECONSIDERING THE “CRISIS–REFORM THESIS” (OR WHY REFORM IS NOT A GIVEN)

The concept of punctuated equilibrium suggests a sharp distinction between periods of stability and change or between “old” and “new” equilibriums. The new equilibrium looks different from the old one, which has been washed away by crisis and the subsequent reforms that see the light. In this view, a causal relation between crisis and reform is simply assumed. This dominant view we refer to in terms of the “crisis–reform thesis” (Boin and Otten, 1996; Resodihardjo, 2009).

This crisis–reform thesis assumes institutions are inertial. Policy is controlled by relatively stable policy subsystems, which create stable institutional venues for decision-making (Baumgartner and Jones, 1991). These stable subsystems are supported by the maintenance of positive “policy images.” In stable policy areas, policy elites keep tight control over policy image and exclude regime opponents from participation in policy formation. In the face of challenges, they shut out opposing forces, hunker

down, and resist change. Opponents must escalate conflict and shift the venue if they are to gain control of the policy agenda. A crisis helps to dislodge the status quo.

One proposed reason for this inertia is that institutionalization nurtures routinization. Strong institutions have well-established ways of doing things, often developed through extensive experience. Breaking away from routines can be highly disruptive, undermining established patterns of working. New training and possibly new personnel will be required and this can be expensive. A second and often related reason is cognitive. Institutions guide our ways of knowing the world. They entail “taken for granted” understandings of how things should be done and powerful “logics of appropriateness.” A third argument for the inertia is systemic interdependence. Strong institutionalization often goes together with tightly coupled technologies or procedures that make it difficult to change one element of a system without producing reverberating consequences for the rest of the system (Perrow, 1984). A fourth type of argument for inertia is “vested interests.” From this perspective, a strongly institutionalized policy sector is a policy monopoly with powerful patrons, or it produces benefits for a clientele that will resist forces for change (this is the “positive feedback” path dependence argument; Pierson, 2000).

In this perspective, the odds are stacked against opponents of vested interests and powerful elites. As Baumgartner (1989) argues in his discussion of nuclear power in France, their efforts are likely to be Sisyphean. In a strongly institutionalized subsystem, it will be extremely difficult to gain allies or to shift venues. Thus, change is expected only with a “big bang” shock to the system – a Fukushima or a 9/11. If such an exogenous shock does occur, this theory predicts new policy images, new policymaking venues, and a new dominant coalition in control of an emerging policy subsystem. Out with the old and in with the new.

In certain cases, institutional crises are indeed followed by large-scale reform proposals. But this is not always the case. An institutional crisis can lead to a fundamental redesign of institutional arrangements in a policy sector, but it may also be followed by the restoration of a rejuvenated status quo. Moreover, reform efforts are not invariably successful. When reforms are ineffective, they may produce further disillusionment or stagnation (Patashnik, 2008). While it is possible that the old equilibrium is fully restored or that an entirely new set of institutions is produced, it is far more likely that the old and new are interwoven.

Our argument builds on the conceptualization of crises as “turning points” that connect the past to the future rather than “breaking points” that mark a clear disjuncture between the past regime and the reform regime (Boin and ‘t Hart, 2000, p.26). The effects of crises depend on the

levels of institutional resilience they meet. This level of resilience, in turn, is related to the level of institutionalization of that policy sector and the crisis management strategies employed by the elites therein (cf. Boin and ‘t Hart, 2003; Zahariadis, 2013).

Our argument distinguishes between strong crisis management (*high agency*) and weak crisis management (*low agency*). A strongly institutionalized sector with high collective agency may be expected to respond (perhaps late in the game) to the threats to the status quo that become manifest in times of crisis. The leaders of these sectors will try to preserve certain institutional elements by radically changing others, or they may try to realign, recombine or repurpose existing institutional elements to suggest a fair degree of responsiveness (Ansell, Trondal, and Øgard (forthcoming) refer to “institutional syncretism”; see also Berk and Galvan, 2009). Different institutional crisis dynamics and agenda setting patterns may be expected in weakly institutionalized policy sectors. Weak institutionalization may produce stagnation and polarization and hence result in inertia; instability and weak coordination may also result in shifting and relatively incoherent responses over time.

In an institutionalized sector, we expect policy elites to be motivated to defend their institutional order (Boin and Goodin, 2007). If they are, they can adopt the strategy of cooptation: incorporating threats that they cannot ignore or reframe while preserving key values or competences. The result is institutional syncretism. The old will not be thrown out for the new, but rather there will be an emerging amalgam of old and new elements that responsively incorporates the challenging elements into legacy institutions. This is close to the story told by Selznick (1949) about the institutional crisis faced by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) in its early years. It also relates to the idea that strongly institutionalized policy sectors will be inclined towards symbolic changes (cf. Meyer and Rowan, 1977).

An example of high institution–high agency would be the Federal Bureau of Prisons (Boin, 2001; DiIulio, 1994). The Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP), which came into existence in 1929, expanded from a handful of prisons in the 1930s to well over 100 facilities across the country. In each prison, guards and wardens worked according to a long-standing correctional philosophy, which translated a few selected core values into a sophisticated way of prison management. This shared culture stood the test of time. The BOP managed to hold on to its philosophy of prison operations, which was formulated by its early leaders Sanford Bates and James Bennett. This was no coincidence. As a responsive institution, the Bureau maintained excellent working relations with Congress, the media, and the judiciary. Bureau leaders steered the BOP through changing

societal demands, a string of presidents, new interpretations of combating crime and the legitimacy of prison labor, and ever-decreasing budgets (Boin, 2001). While such changes put a severe strain on the BOP way of working, they enabled the Bureau to preserve its institutional identity.

By extension, conventional accounts would argue that weak institutionalization implies flexibility and less resistance to change. Weakly institutionalized settings are characterized by pluralism, fragmentation, and weak integration of different elements. Weak institutionalization reduces the cost of change and produces the flexibility that allows for rapid adaptation and improvisation. We may surmise, then, that adaptation is easier for weakly institutionalized policy sectors (that entirely lack the characteristics of adaptive capacity, laid out earlier). In a weakly institutionalized sector, in which there is no mission and core values are not widely or deeply shared, a change of direction is much easier to initiate from the outside. An adaptive response depends on entrepreneurial energy to align and organize the loosely coupled elements of the system. Kingdon's (1984) "multiple streams" approach (MSA) describes this logic: separate activities in the problem, policy, and politics streams are joined by a policy entrepreneur at a "window of opportunity" to produce policy change. The policy entrepreneur injects agency into a weakly institutionalized setting.

In the weakly institutionalized, low-agency situation, we can expect lower motivation and lower capacity to resist imposed change. The barriers to the introduction of new agendas are lower than in highly institutionalized sectors, but the capacity to implement those agendas is also weaker. The fragmented and loosely coupled character of these regimes means that responses to crisis conditions flow through them quickly, affecting component parts in a heterogeneous fashion. As a result, new agendas may be layered on old agendas, without displacing them. The result may be the increasing complexity of the institutional sector, without enhanced rationality. This dynamic is likely to produce policy drift, with the sector lurching from issue to issue depending on circumstance, responding to crisis events like reeds blowing in the wind. While ad hoc responses may stem criticism in the short term, they also lead to a slow burn that periodically erupts. Alternatively, new agendas may rise and fall relatively easily and quickly, but without substantial effect, producing policy churn. The U.S. educational policy sector is a good example of this kind of situation. In fact, it was here that the term "policy churn" was coined (Hess, 1997). This kind of sector then experiences a long-term low-grade institutional crisis, with ongoing change, but without resolving the underlying issues.

In a weakly institutionalized sector with high agency, we might still see another pattern of institutional crisis dynamics. Whereas in the previous case there is a reaction to crisis, it is not a truly responsive reaction.

By contrast, in the weakly institutionalized, high-agency context, we are likely to see periodic bursts of entrepreneurial energy transforming the sector. New agendas will be used to temporarily unite the sector behind a common enterprise. This agenda is not likely to be entirely new, nor a mere reframing of the legacy agenda. Nor is it a layering of new ideas without fully integrating them into old agendas. Instead, it is likely to take elements of existing agendas and reorganize them around a common unifying framework. This form of institutional innovation or bricolage may take policy sectors towards a more strongly institutionalized domain. However, the policy sector is likely to remain fragile if its response rests solely on the relational capital of entrepreneurs rather than on deeper patterns of institutionalization.

Roberts (2013, 2006a) provides a vivid example of this last pattern in his description of the reorganization of FEMA during the Clinton administration. Originally created during the Carter administration, FEMA was a mish-mash of different civil defense and disaster preparedness programs with little internal cohesion or professionalism (that is, weakly institutionalized). A 1992 interim Congress report asserted that "FEMA is widely viewed as a political dumping ground, a turkey farm, if you will, where large numbers of positions exist that can be conveniently and quietly filled by political appointment" (Gertz, 1992). The failure to deal with hurricanes in the early 1990s led to the injection of entrepreneurial energy during the Clinton administration. With the support of President Clinton, Director James Lee Witt realigned the disparate elements of the agency under a unifying agenda of "all hazards response." This strategy downgraded civil defense programs within FEMA and upgraded the disaster preparedness programs:

FEMA has developed a sterling reputation for delivering disaster-relief services, a far cry from its abysmal standing before James Lee Witt took its helm in 1993. How did Witt turn FEMA around so quickly? Well, he is the first director of the agency to have emergency-management experience. He stopped the staffing of the agency by political patronage. He removed layers of bureaucracy. Most important, he instilled in the agency a spirit of preparedness, of service to the customer, of willingness to listen to ideas of local and state officials to make the system work better. (*Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 1996)

This pattern survived as long as Witt continued as leader and until FEMA's mission was again shifted when it was incorporated into the DHS (Roberts, 2013). In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, FEMA's celebrated focus on all hazards was perceived to be at odds with the urgent aim of strengthening civil defense and counterterrorism. The previously independent agency (with direct access to the White House under Clinton)

was absorbed by the much larger DHS and its leadership was replaced by political appointees with little affinity with emergency management. Soon its strong reputation to provide immediate disaster relief effectively seemed to be all there was left of its prior standing.

Table 22.1 summarizes our argument. It captures the notion that institutionalization cuts two ways. Strong institutionalization can encourage institutional inertia, but it can also create capacity for preemptive change. If inertia is high and capacity for preemptive change is low, we are in the

Table 22.1 *Institutional crisis and agenda change*

	Path dependence/ Punctuated equilibrium <i>High inertia/low agency</i>	Institutional syncretism  <i>Low inertia/high agency</i>
<i>Strong institutionalization</i>	<p><b>Agenda replacement</b></p> <p>Classic punctuated equilibrium case; resistance to pre-crisis threats until major shock challenges system legitimacy</p> <p>Change occurs through loss of control of agenda; dominant coalition replaced by opposition, which introduces new agenda</p>	<p><b>Agenda renewal</b></p> <p>Dynamic conservatism; responsive to pre-crisis threats through selective adaptation and cooptation</p> <p>Traditional agendas adaptively reframed to deal with new threats; dominant coalition maintains control of agenda</p>
<i>Weak institutionalization</i>	<p><b>Agenda drift or churn</b></p> <p>Reforms occur through ad hoc layering of new elements or through ever-shifting policy objectives; periodic low-grade crisis</p> <p>Agendas become more complex or unstable, without fundamental change; stagnant or polarized political situations; unstable coalitions</p>	<p><b>Agenda reinvention</b></p> <p>Reforms occur through recombination, realignment, and active improvisation</p> <p>New unifying agendas produced through entrepreneurial realignment of existing coalitions, sometimes in ways that transgress prior cleavages</p>

situation described by the traditional PET model of agenda setting. In this case, policy sectors are able to resist change until they are overwhelmed by a major exogenous shock and the outcome will be agenda replacement. But strong institutionalization may also produce the institutional capacity and leadership to anticipate and adapt to threats. Here the policy sector pre-empts a major crisis by being selectively responsive. The result is agenda renewal that incorporates some new elements while aligning them with traditional institutions (dynamic conservatism). The same logic can be applied to weak institutionalization. While weak institutionalization might lower barriers to change, outcomes will depend on the capacity for leadership. Where it is high, policy entrepreneurs may seize on the opportunity to reinvent agendas. This is the world of Kingdon's policy windows. However, in weakly institutionalized sectors in which leadership is more limited, reform efforts are themselves likely to be fragmented, producing policy churn or drift.

## CONCLUSION: INSIGHTS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

In this chapter, we have sought to characterize the nature of agenda setting and institutional change that arises in so-called institutional crises. We believe the imagery of PET, dominant in the crisis-reform thesis, hides some important institutional dynamics. It misses the processes of change that precede institutional crises. These changes may deepen the vulnerability of a policy sector to an institutional crisis. We argue that change does not always materialize as an exogenous shock from outside the system. It is more likely to arise from an interaction of "internal" or endogenous change and "external" or exogenous change.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, the crisis-reform thesis assumes that crisis will simply be followed by change. Coincidentally or not, this change is perceived as long awaited and mostly beneficial to the organization or sector under discussion; crises emerge in these narratives as forces of good, which bring necessary reforms that were not possible under the normal conditions of institutional inertia. This chapter offers a more subtle relation between crisis and reform. In our perspective, the outcome of these processes may vary on the axis of change and restoration. Rarely is one policy image vanquished to be replaced by an alternative policy paradigm that justifies a new institutional equilibrium. Instead, agendas themselves are likely to preserve some core elements, while relinquishing or reframing others. The outcome will depend on such factors as the level of institutionalization and the strength of agency. The institutional syncretic view that we offer



in this chapter thus leads to a different conception of institutional and agenda change.

This perspective brings agency – especially the role of policy elites – back into the picture. It suggests that policy leaders can prevent institutional crises by focusing on processes of institutional erosion, which will stretch performance deficits to the breaking point of crisis. Whereas leaders of weakly institutionalized sectors may indeed exploit a crisis to adopt reforms, our perspective suggests that policy leaders in highly institutionalized sectors should be especially sensitive to the necessity of continuous adaptation.

## NOTES

1. The media coverage of Hurricane Katrina was ten times higher than the total press coverage on the four devastating hurricanes that struck Florida in 2004. There was a significant relation between coverage on FEMA and waste or fraud, suggesting a negative tone of coverage on the federal response (Freedman Consulting, 2006).
2. An example of such a trajectory is TVA's policy shift to produce nuclear energy (Hargrove, 1994).
3. This leads of us to conceive of the stressors that initiate a crisis phase as more like catalysts than triggers. A catalyst sets off a self-sustaining set of reactions that eventually leads to an institutional crisis, whether by setting off a media blitz or a series of failures. The catalyst interacts with the institutional vulnerabilities that have developed in the pre-crisis incubation phase as the institutional order drifts farther from equilibrium. See for an example Kuipers' (2006) study on the incubation of an institutional crisis concerning the Dutch disability benefit scheme in the 1990s.

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# Handbook of Public Policy Agenda Setting

*Edited by*

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*Department of International Studies, Rhodes College, USA*

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*To Karolina,  
Safe travels . . .*

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