Re-thinking the coronavirus pandemic as a policy punctuation: COVID-19 as a path-clearing policy accelerator

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Abstract

This article joins with others in this special issue to examine the evolution of our understanding of how the coronavirus disease (COVID)-19 pandemic impacted policy ideas and routines across a wide variety of sectors of government activity. Did policy ideas and routines transform as a result of the pandemic or were they merely a continuation of the *status quo ante*? If they did transform, are the transformations temporary in nature or likely to lead to significant, deep and permanent reform to existing policy paths and trajectories? As this article sets out, the literature on policy punctuations has evolved and helps us understand the impact of COVID-19 on policy-making but tends to conflate several distinct aspects of path trajectories and deviations under the general concept of "critical junctures" which muddy reflections and findings. Once the different possible types of punctuations have been clarified, however, the result is a set of concepts related to path creation and disruption—especially that of "path clearing"—which are better able to provide an explanation of the kinds of policy change to be expected to result from the impact of events such as the 2019 coronavirus pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19; policy; change; ideas; punctuations; path; clearing; creation

Introduction: COVID-19 and theories of policy change

> *"Coronavirus is recognised as being a potentially path-changing disruption to existing [policy] trajectories in terms of the adaptations to business practices, industry structures, ways of working and the public finances"* (Marsden & Docherty, 2021, p. 1).

This potential is also true of policy-making. But a lack of understanding of the precise dynamics of policy change processes and outcomes constitutes a significant obstacle to further progress in our understanding of how policies evolve and develop in the face of crises in general and the coronavirus pandemic in particular.

This gap in knowledge hinders our efforts to gain deeper insights into how policy processes enacted around the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted policy and society, where such impacts have occurred and where they have not, and whether any such impact is likely to persist in future. As other articles

in this special issue examine, have policy responses to the worldwide emergence of the novel coronavirus opened new opportunities for redesigning the role of the State across all policy sectors, or only some? And in either case, what changes are likely to remain in place for the foreseeable future? Has coronavirus disease (COVID)-19 led to profound and permanent changes in specific realms of state activity or merely to a temporary reshuffling of policy priorities and policy strategies?

Analyzing policy change: path dependency, punctuated equilibrium and policy punctuations

Understanding how public policy develops is "complex and difficult" (Hogan & Howlett, 2015, p. 5) and the main topic explored in this special issue is the policy implications of the eruption of COVID-19 in late 2019. Answering questions about what any "New" post-COVID-19 normal will look like requires acknowledging that policy change is a multifaceted process, one that must be understood in the context of larger societal/political change but whose outcome is far from certain (Feldstein, 1994). But the multidimensional nature of policy dynamics means, as Capano and Howlett (2009, p. 7) noted, "policy change is a very ambiguous area of academic study, and one full of pitfalls" when it is the subject of analysis.

It must be recognized that the 24-month duration (at the time of writing) of the pandemic is insufficient time in which to attempt to answer the questions posed above (Smith et al., 2020). COVID-19 possesses the potential to undermine policy paradigms and policy-making traditions and trajectories. But it is difficult to discern after such a short period, for example, which changes are merely disruptive and likely to revert back to their pre-pandemic status and which are likely to proceed henceforth on a new trajectory of events and developments and if so, of what kind. The construction of durable political and policy coalitions required for a significant change in direction of policy, for example, typically takes longer to build and consolidate than 1–2 years, or may fail to consolidate, making predictions not only difficult but also potentially error-prone (Donnelly & Hogan, 2012). Nevertheless, this remains a task worth attempting, and the literature on policy dynamics and policy trajectories provides some guidelines and pointers which can be followed in this effort.

So how can we go about discerning what exactly has been the impact of the pandemic on government policies and how has this varied between sectors?

In this article, in seeking to enhance the analytical toolkit used to understand the relationship between crisis and policy change, we examine COVID-19 impacts through the lens of current thinking about policy change and elaborate theoretical concepts from the perspective of path dependency and especially "path disruption" (Howlett, 2009; Mahoney, 2000; Pierson, 2000).

These are two of several key concepts in the policy sciences dealing with policy change which frame discussion around the idea of policy-making and sequences of events forming trajectories, and their disruption and changes. Policy theories which focus on trajectories include not only path dependency theory, but those of punctuated equilibrium, paradigm shifts, and path dependency, among others (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Birkland, 1997; Collier & Collier, 1991; Hall, 1993; Pierson, 2000; Valenzuela & Valenzuela, 1981).

The concepts deployed in these theoretical apparatuses were all developed in or adapted to policy studies from other fields such as economics, sociology, and history in order to marshal insights from these fields into long-term social processes and help bring into sharper focus the combination of routine and extraordinary dynamics that policies also exhibit over time (Baumgartner & Jones, 2002; Hall & Taylor, 1996). Besides helping to explain how periods of relative stability change into those featuring more robust shifts in policies (Pierson, 1993), these theories and their concepts have the potential to help explain and predict whether the consequences of processes, such as those inspired or impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, are temporary, or here to stay. But since they draw from many different fields and scholarly traditions, they must be handled with care.

When it comes to the concept of path dependence, the key insight being explained is "why history matters." The very idea of path dependence is a recognition that early choices can have a long-lasting influence in creating the foundations or impetus for a future path of events and activities, an influence that can persist long after the conditions that gave rise to those choices change.

The key initial insight in path dependency theory, for example, is that policy paths or trajectories—that is, sequences of linked events which exhibit some regularity and direction—exist and that they

develop and entrench themselves through positive and negative feedback processes (Howlett, 2009; Mahoney, 2000; Pierson, 2000). Outcomes at a formative moment are said to trigger positive feedback mechanisms that reinforce the recurrence of a particular outcome and pattern of behavior (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002). And once an option or alternative is selected, it becomes progressively more difficult to return to the initial starting point (Levi, 1997).

That is, a second key insight of path dependency theory is that lock-in or stability exists due to various kinds of feedback mechanisms which promote stability by making changes progressively more costly or benefits greater ("increasing returns") as paths become entrenched (Howlett, 2009; Pierson, 2000; Wilsford, 1994).

These insights and concepts can be applied to policies and policy-making in specific issue areas which, once initiated, tend to continue until a sufficiently strong force alters their path, allowing them to be deflected away from it onto a new or altered one (Krasner, 1984, p. 240).

From the perspective of path dependency theory, then, policies thus are viewed as moving along a "trajectory" or sequence of events, typically divided into long periods of relative stasis on an established path, punctuated by brief instances of path transformation. The stasis or path-conforming events and activities can result from the inability of policy-makers to manage more than a limited number of issues simultaneously, or from the capacity of the monopolies or policy actors to restrict debate and discussion to the existing path, dampen new ideas, limit new actors and generally stifle change (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). This overall pattern of path dynamics has been described as a "punctuated equilibrium" one and has often been argued to be a key feature of policy-making, while also fitting the expectations of path dependency and paradigm change theory (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Hall, 1993).

Given the propensity of policies toward endogenous lock-in, explanations for radical change found in these approaches have traditionally looked to exogenous factors to explain why and when the conditions for punctuations become ripe, such as external or internal crises, from earthquakes to party or government upheavals. As Howlett (2009, p. 241) pointed out, "most attention to date has focused upon homeostatic models in which exogenously-driven shocks undermine institutionally entrenched policy equilibria."

Many sudden policy discontinuities have been attributed, in a cause-and-effect manner, to economic and other forms of crises (Jones, 2001; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999). However, other views of policy evolution and change also exist, such as that policy paradigms form around the content or ideational structure of policies and constitute a shared model of reality that guides understanding of public policy and public policy-making, moving forward only those changes which are congruent with an existing paradigm. This occurs until the paradigm changes (Baumgartner, 2013, 2014; Hall, 1993) altering a policy trajectory.

Some work has attributed such changes to sudden shocks where ideational change is also seen as happening "as a rational reaction in response to external stimuli in the form of a destabilizing shock" (Flockhart, 2005, p. 262). Hall (1993, p. 291), for example, argued that exogenous shocks, and policy failures, discredit an old paradigm, leading to a re-examination of the belief systems through which that policy was created. Other work, however, has found paradigmatic change processes to be much slower and to develop through longer-term, almost incremental, processes in which paradigms slowly lose their legitimacy and are replaced after a more or less lengthy period of contestation with newer ideational constructs and the actors supporting them (Hall, 1993; Hogan & Howlett, 2015; Howlett, 1994; Wilder & Howlett, 2014).

In either case, however, these moments of paradigmatic stress and change lead paradigmatic change theories back in the same direction as theories of path dependency and punctuated equilibrium, looking for what it is exactly that constitutes a punctuation and how one comes about, or not, and how such a potentially path-disrupting phenomenon leads, or not, to an actual path-altering process.

Distinguishing different kinds of policy punctuations: moving beyond critical junctures and crises

Each of the major approaches to policy change discussed above relies on the idea of some sort of "punctuation" altering a trajectory, paradigm, or equilibrium. But the nuances between different types of punctuations have often been lost in a tendency to focus not only on external events but also on a single

kind of punctuation; the "critical junctures" often emphasized by studies of path dependence (stability) and path creation (novel or innovative actions creating new paths) and conflated with moments of paradigmatic change and loss of equilibrium.

The idea of a "critical juncture" is not well defined and is often used as a synonym for any kind of policy punctuation or moment of change. But it has a specific meaning within theories of path dependence—as a special kind of "fork in the road" type decision dynamic within a trajectory (Kay, 2005; Mahoney, 2000, 2001)—which precludes its general use as a "moment of change" indicator and which is critical to its use to describe and understand policy processes and paths in the wake of COVID-19.

A critical juncture in this sense is an event, prior to which a range of possibilities exist but after which these possibilities will have mostly vanished forever, depending on the path selected. Thus, in path dependency theory not all events, even seemingly significant events, can reasonably be called critical junctures. While the failure of extant policies often provides a window of opportunity to contest their viability, the nature of this window can vary considerably in terms of its actual impact on subsequent policy-making and policy outcomes (Howlett, 1998; Kingdon, 1995). It is only at the narrowing point where possibilities close that we define a critical juncture. Hence, as Mahoney (2001, p. 112) argued "not all choice points represent critical junctures; only those choice points that close off important future outcomes should be treated as critical junctures."

This insight differentiating critical junctures from other types of activities or events is important in applying a path dependency framework to a phenomenon such as COVID-19. But even the path dependency literature, unfortunately, has also been inconsistent on how it differentiates various forms of policy punctuations.

For some, a critical juncture can constitute an extended period of reorientation that can last even for decades (Collier & Collier, 1991; Mahoney, 2003), while for others it is a brief period when one direction or another is taken followed by stability and adoption (Capoccia, 2015; Hogan, 2006). Thus, for Garrett and Lange (1995, p. 628) electoral landslides that sometimes can take decades to create also create critical junctures by producing overwhelming mandates for change. And Casper and Taylor (1996) argued that critical junctures can be used in analyzing sometimes lengthy periods when authoritarian regimes are vulnerable to liberalization. Examining the watershed in American trade policy that was the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act of 1934, Haggard (1988, p. 91), however, argues that unanticipated events (crises), in this case an economic depression, quickly brought into question existing institutions and resulted in dramatic change.

Re-thinking the role of crises in policy change: a more nuanced view of policy punctuations

As the discussion above has highlighted, the idea that "crises" undermine policy trajectories or paths introducing "punctuations" into otherwise relatively stable and long-term policy paradigms or "equilibria" remains widespread and is embodied in much work on crises and "focusing events" in policy-making, for example (Birkland, 1997; Hall, 1993; Kingdon, 1984; Krasner, 1984; Pierson, 2000). However, the different accounts set out above also highlight that while students of institutional change, critical junctures, and policy punctuations have often focused on the importance of crises—such as COVID-19—as drivers of policy change, they have done so without clearly understanding or conceptualizing their impact (Cortell & Peterson, 1999, p. 184).

It is quite typical to view crises as either exogenous or endogenous events or processes which act as policy disrupters. Wars, revolutions, coups d'etat, economic crises, changing balances of power, electoral landslides, demographic changes, and social movements are all examples of the kinds of crisis-driven processes which observers have suggested can produce an overwhelming mandate for policy and/or structural change. In the same category, can be placed natural events such as floods, earthquakes and tsunamis, epidemics, plagues, and pandemics which can have a similar effect on policies and policy-making (Cortell & Peterson, 1999). Any of these unanticipated events or processes can potentially serve to discredit existing institutions and policies due to their association with, or inability to right, the emergent situation, triggering policy change (Tilly, 1975).

Klein (2007), for example, focuses on how national crises (disasters or upheavals) can be exploited to establish new policies or regimes. But many empirical studies have also found that most crises are

followed either by policy continuity or incremental change and do *not* serve as critical junctures or lead to trajectory altering policy shifts (Baumgartner, 2013; Birkland, 2004; Boin et al., 2020; Donnelly & Hogan, 2012).

These studies emphasize the difficulties involved in policy change and stress the resilience of existing trajectories. Thus, Castles (2010), to take one notable case, provides an overview of how "black swans" (crises) collide with "elephants" (established welfare states) and finds little evidence that major natural or political shocks including war, hurricanes, and coups d'etat lead to lasting change in more developed policy regimes. This analysis stresses that strong path dependencies are indeed difficult to override and that this process should never be taken for granted, even in the face of the most serious shocks.

Starke et al. (2013) assessment of the impact of four crises over the previous 50 years, in four different welfare states, reinforces this view and also does not find path-breaking change to have occurred despite many adverse events and calamities. As a result, the authors conclude, like Castles (2010), that the relationship between external shocks and path-departing ("fundamental") change is weak. In fact, contrary to the notion of crises commonly providing "windows of opportunity" for discontinuous reform, they posit instead a "threat-rigidity" hypothesis, which suggests that "during moments of emergency and uncertainty, humans tend to stick to what they know best" (Armingeon, 2012; Chung & Thewissen, 2011; Starke et al., 2013, p. 10; Staw et al., 1981).

Of course, the extent to which either response occurs depends on the nature of the crisis. As mentioned above, typically not all crises serve as critical junctures as for example occurs with policy paradigms when the ideas underlying a policy are undermined by alternative ideas over a longer period than just a crisis phase (Howlett, 1994). This long-term undermining process can slowly discredit extant policies, leading to a different non-crisis-induced pattern of significant trajectory change. Béland and Powell (2016) in assessing continuity and change in social policy thus differentiate paradigmatic change from path dependency and offer an explanation for observed differences in behavior and choices by focusing on the concept of "disruptive change" and its varying nature. Béland et al.'s (2021) global comparative assessment of government reactions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, suggests, consistent with the financial and economic crisis of 2008, that social security is used as an automatic stabilizer without challenging the core institutions of welfare capitalism.

These and other examples suggest the need to revisit the literature on policy pathways and policy punctuations to better assess the factors that lead to policy change and stability and the different outcomes that may occur in a given situation.

Five types of policy punctuations: from path initiation to termination

In generating a better model of policy punctuations, it bears repeating that paths not only are created and change direction but also allow for changes in the speed of change and end, among other things (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Hall, 1993; Lodge & Hood, 2002; Mahoney, 2000; Marsden & Docherty, 2021; Salles-Djelic & Quack, 2007). Path dynamics therefore include at least five different kinds of "punctuations" from moments of path initiation to termination. These are events or moments which occur (a) to start a trajectory ("Path Initiation"); (b) to continue its development ("Path Reinforcement"); (c) to change its direction (the classical "Critical Juncture"); (d) to change the speed of change possible on a path ("Path Clearing"); or (e) to end it ("Path Termination").

Each of these punctuations is distinct and needs to be carefully demarcated from the others. At the start of a path, for example, Kingdon (1984) suggested that the earliest punctuation or moment of change is often a "focusing event." As Birkland (1998, p. 54) noted, "focusing events serve as important opportunities for politically disadvantaged groups to champion messages that had been effectively suppressed by dominant groups and advocacy coalitions." They can "lead interest groups, government leaders, policy entrepreneurs, the news media, or members of the public to identify new problems, or to pay greater attention to existing but dormant problems, potentially leading to a search for solutions in the wake of apparent policy failure" (Birkland, 1998, p. 55).

Focusing events, as Kingdon (1984) noted, are often random events which can open a window of opportunity for policy entrepreneurs to change patterns of government attention toward specific issues and problems and lead to the consideration of alternative policies to those in place in the existing *status quo*. But these are not always as random or contingent as one might think (Howlett, 1998; Kingdon, 1984) and may exist in a predictable pattern of iterated problem-solving (Haydu, 1998). Nevertheless, they do provide a window of opportunity to introduce new ideas and options into policy debates which can lead

to a process of "path initiation" that can see the creation of new policies and the consequent initiation of a policy pathway.

The second type of punctuation is linked to "path reinforcement." Once begun, a path needs to be advanced (Garud & Karnoe, 2001; Garud et al., 2010; MacKinnon et al., 2019; Schienstock, 2011; Sydow at al., 2012; Wang et al., 2016). As noted above, in orthodox path dependency theory, the outcomes of actual policy effort at the formative moment in policy-making are said to trigger feedback mechanisms that can reinforce the recurrence of a particular pattern of policy-making. These self-reinforcing sequences see a policy pattern, once adopted, delivering increasing benefits to policy-makers or targets over time, creating a trajectory which can prove increasingly difficult to change (Mahoney, 2000).

Central to path reinforcement is the active role of entrepreneurs in shaping paths by setting in motion processes that actively shape emerging social practices (Lovio et al., 2011). The creation of new paths thus often does not spring from exogenous shocks but from strategic agency in groups of heterogeneous actors that work to reinforce and lock-in structures, routines, and policy content (Boschma et al., 2017). Entrepreneurs can recognize those aspects of policy-making which create dependency in the current path and then take action to reinforce, or deviate, from that path (Garud & Karnoe, 2001). Transformative change in the form of new entrenched policy paths thus can arise through incremental, but cumulatively significant, reinforcement pressures on an extant or emerging path (Carvalho & Vale, 2018; Salles-Djelic & Quack, 2007).

Of course, not all attempts at path creation or reinforcement succeed (Garud & Karnoe, 2001; Garud et al., 2010). And paths can remain very "crooked" if they are made up of an accumulation of recombinations of policy elements resulting from processes such as layering and conversion rather than a clear ideational content (Salles-Djelic & Quack, 2007). The shape that a path will take thus cannot be precisely predicted at the beginning of the process but can only be identified and ascertained *post hoc* as the process of path reinforcement occurs (or not). The result is an element of unpredictability when it comes to path development (Bothello & Salles-Djelic, 2017) which can occur at multiple moments as a path trajectory unfurls.

The third type of punctuation occurs once a path has been initiated and reinforced and begins to evolve. This is a moment when a path changes direction, such as what happens in a "classical" *critical juncture* or the "fork-in-the-road" moment discussed above. Paradigmatic changes, for example, are "classic" critical junctures in this sense (Hall, 1989; Weir & Skocpol, 1985). These are important moments in the evolution of a trajectory and, as Blyth (2011, p. 86) noted, the processes of ideational change in policies provide many examples and opportunities to study how such junctures come about and how policy trajectories change direction, or not, as the case may be.

A fourth kind of punctuation occurs when barriers on a policy path are removed (or put in place) and policy changes correspondingly speed up or slow down. In a "path clearing" punctuation, an analogy can be made to removing blockages on a road, for example a snowplow or a bulldozer clearing or extending an existing roadway or grading it in order to make its transit more efficient, allowing policy choices which would have been otherwise more difficult to make to occur, speeding up or accelerating event sequences along the pathway. Similarly, "path blocking" may occur if more impediments are erected to slow down change, such as institutionalizing particular kinds of policy deliberations, thus preventing or precluding others. While an increasing returns concept might suggest that an acceleration of events can always occur on a path, paths may still be blocked in important ways since they reflect an accumulation of struggles, negotiations, and pressure points.

For an accelerated trajectory to emerge from path clearing, a number of incremental and cumulative steps are needed that, like path reinforcement, can extend over multiple moments and long stretches of time (Salles-Djelic & Quack, 2007, p. 168). A path that is cleared still might not exactly be straight, for example, but it will nevertheless have a reduced number of obstacles or impediments to specific kinds of events along the pathway. In this sense, crises can serve to remove normal blockages and constraints on policy development, clearing roadblocks and allowing policy proposals to be developed that might have been languishing for some time (Lodge & Hood, 2002).

Finally, there may be a moment or punctuation that ends a trajectory. This is "path termination," which is similar to policy termination (Bardach, 1976; Kirkpatrick, Lester, Peterson, 1999). It, too, is different from a critical juncture where the path continues in an altered form but is rather more definitive in ending the existence of a path altogether—turning it into a cul-de-sac. This can also occur all at once,

or over time, as for example is the case with gradual policy dismantling (Jordan et al., 2013; Pollex & Lenschow, 2019).

Discussion: Classifying COVID-19 as a policy punctuation: path clearing in practice

As noted in the quotation at the outset of this article (Marsden & Docherty, 2021), from the perspectives of either path dependency or policy paradigms COVID-19, constituting a "long-tailed rapid-onset" crisis (Boin et al., 2020) or a "paradigmatic punctuation" (Amri & Drummond, 2020) can be thought of as at least potentially a significant path disrupter, one possibly capable of undermining traditions and trajectories of policy-making as well as prevailing policy paradigms and practices in many countries and sectors.

Moreira and Hick (2021), for example, stress the significance of the speed of the current pandemic and the related agility (or not) of different governmental crisis responses. The authors argue that it is uncertain whether agile short-run responses create pressures for wider-ranging and more long-term change but stress the potential for significant "policy disruption" to occur given the immediate and fast-moving nature of the crisis (Tosun & Howlett, 2021).

But exactly what kind of punctuation the pandemic has been is open to multiple interpretations. The initial response of government to the coronavirus, for example, may have been determined and reinforced by existing decision-making and administrative policy or implementation styles (Howlett & Tosun, 2019; Maor & Howlett, 2020; Mazey & Richardson, 2020; Mei, 2020; Nguyen, 2020; Ruiu, 2020), reinforcing existing trajectories, not disrupting them, while the content of many policies, not only in the public health and medical sectors but throughout society, may not have changed deeply at all (Capano et al., 2020). Policies, for example, could have been altered by the reiteration of emergency interventions (due to the ceaseless waves of the contagion in many different countries and regions) which could create a snowball effect augmenting changes in policy trajectories, but these same responses could also simply have reinforced existing trends and tendencies in many areas. And the impact of the pandemic could also vary greatly between sectors, with some policies more "proximate" to exogenous and endogenous change forces and more directly affected, while others were more distant and affected less directly or reinforced (See Knill & Steinebach, 2022). In this sense, the COVID-19 crisis may represent a punctuation, or not, in different sectors and even when it does may not necessarily take the form of a "classic" critical juncture or fork-in-the-road.

The idea that COVID-19 has not affected all policy areas equally across-the-board should not be surprising. A crisis can create a situation where extant policies and associated ideas are called into question by change agents. But such agents may not exist or emerge, resulting in the perpetuation of the *status quo* and the reemphasis of already known options (Marsden & Docherty, 2021). And even if such agents emerge, subsequent displacement of the extant paradigm and the consolidation of a new/alternative set of ideas on how policy should operate, which could lead to radical policy change, is by no means certain (Wilder & Howlett, 2014). In this view, the presence of outside influencers, policy entrepreneurs, and political entrepreneurs championing new/alternative ideas is crucial in driving policy change toward a punctuation, but such a coalition may not exist.

But if COVID-19 is not a critical juncture then what kind of punctuation might it be?

There is little doubt that COVID-19 was a focusing event and forced changes in government attention to certain key affected areas such as public health and related issues, leading to new combinations of policy tools in the service of pandemic control and recovery (Goyal & Howlett, 2021). But most of these tools and policies already existed and were not initiated *de novo* as a result of the crisis (Capano, 2020). Many, in fact, were processes or agencies for dealing with diseases and associated social and economic issues which were reinforced by their activation during the pandemic, as was the case with earlier disease outbreaks, such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) (Lai, 2012).

Importantly, given the discussion of punctuation types set out above, observers such as Marsden and Docherty (2021) found that in the UK the Covid-19 pandemic *accelerated* reforms in tangentially related areas, such as the rail franchise. The overhaul of that franchise system had already been proposed prior to the pandemic and was widely accepted, but experienced delays. COVID-19 sped up that process, *clearing* an already reinforced policy pathway. This path-clearing type of policy punctuation, in which a crisis serves as a path accelerator (and also as a possible brake on change), was also visible

in some early pandemic era studies, with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2021), for example, projecting the pandemic would serve as a somewhat uneven accelerant and McKinsey (2021)[1] finding the pandemic to have accelerated digital developments by up to 7 years. Mezzadra (2020) similarly argued the pandemic unleashed spatial and temporal dynamics in many, but not all, areas of policy, accelerating some processes and stalling others, as path clearing or blocking punctuations do.

This emphasizes the point made above that a crisis can call into question existing policies, bringing about the possibility of change (Haggard, 1988) but this also may occur or may not be realized. Once a crisis is identified, the failure of a policy impels policy-makers to look for a solution but this does not necessarily lead to a completely new sequence of policy. Rather in many cases the extant policy paradigm can be stretched to incorporate elements of other paradigms in order to ensure a policy's survival, continuing the path on which it was traveling (Blyth & Matthijs, 2017; Donnelly & Hogan, 2012). A paradigm must possess some malleability due to the regularly changing political context (Schmidt & Thatcher, 2013). If stretched too far, an extant paradigm's logic may collapse completely (Hogan, 2019) but this does not happen frequently. Although "occasionally people come up with new ideas for policy solutions, (…) for the most part they work with old ideas, thinking about ways to reformulate them or combine them with others" (Mintrom, 2000, p. 43).

Thus, not all crises lead to new policies, radical policy changes, or critical junctures, and this is the case with the COVID-19 pandemic. That is, it is certainly the case that "COVID-19 has spawned a surge in the number of public policies adopted, the forms in which they are adopted within and across governments, and (affected) the range of their designs and contents" (Weible et al., 2020). But studies of specific issue areas have also found less change than anticipated (see the essays in this special issue). Marsden and Docherty (2021), for example, found that while the UK government accelerated transport policies already planned, the pandemic generated few new policies and policy-makers did not deviate from pre-pandemic planning assumptions. Indeed many "novel" pandemic policy responses continue to exhibit strong path dependencies with existing paradigms and policy trajectories (Hick & Murphy, 2021).

The case of care is instructive. Given the degree to which inequality and in particular a care crisis underpinned the lived experience of the pandemic, for example, feminist scholars have found the COVID-19 crisis to have acted as both a brake and accelerator on policy change in this sector. Griffin (2015), for example, reveals how gendered techniques of governance were key elements of crisis management and current pandemic responses, just as they were in the past. Branicki (2020), similarly, examined COVID-19 through the lens of ethics of care and feminist crisis management. She identified how rationalist approaches to crisis management (utilitarian logics and linear processes) could have been replaced by alternative approaches. Crisis management informed by a feminist ethics of care and a relational logic that sought deeper social transformation could have occurred and more lasting change could have emerged, but it did not (Cullen & Murphy, 2020). Instead, forms of regulatory power intertwined and overlapped throughout the crisis and carried forward dynamics of inequality and privilege with gendered effects despite the presence of a punctuation when such practices might have changed (Global Institute for Women's Leadership, 2020). Smith (2021), too, surveying pandemic responses in the UK more generally, argued that the pandemic will not re-baseline the future. While existing policy might be challenged by the pandemic, little evidence was found of the scale of ideational shift needed for paradigmatic or transformational change in many sectors or issue areas (Smith & Judd, 2020).

The evidence of the pandemic serving mainly as a path-clearing punctuation and trajectory accelerator, on the other hand, is mounting. Lewis et al. (2020), for example, found that the pandemic led to an acceleration of British National Health Service policies that had previously only made incremental progress. And Meunier and Mickusb (2020) similarly found that COVID-19 accelerated European Union (EU) decisions and implementation of initiatives that had been reached before the pandemic struck (Wolff & Ladi, 2020). This was the case, for example, with European Competition Policy (Meunier & Mickusb, 2020) and EU climate policy, in which the pandemic was found to have acted in a fashion "strengthening and advancing previous policy trends" (Dupont et al., 2020, p. 1107).

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[1] https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/how-covid-19-has-pushed-companies-over-the-technology-tipping-point-and-transformed-business-forever

Conclusion: post-COVID policy change—less (and more) than first meets the eye

Historical, constructivist, and discursive institutionalist researchers have developed better understandings of how punctuations occur, what defines them, and how to differentiate them from other forms of change which can be put to good use in analyzing the COVID-19 pandemic and the likely direction of the post-COVID state.

The concept of critical junctures, caused by exogenous crises, has been relied upon many times in the past to explain sudden punctuations to extant policy equilibria or shifts in policy paradigms (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Krasner, 1984). The concept offers a framework for examining those rare moments of political openness in the evolution of an institution when new and enduring legacies can be formed (Capoccia, 2015) and can plausibly be applied to the COVID-19 pandemic (Amri & Drummond, 2020). During a crisis, various types of agents increase their activities, exercising as carriers of ideas and drivers of policy change as they engage in coordinative and communicative discourse (Schmidt, 2008, 2010). Extant policies can be discredited due to their implication in, or inability to resolve, a crisis and may be profoundly altered or terminated and new paths initiated. Such "anomalies" (Wilder & Howlett, 2014) can undermine a paradigm, leading to a classical "critical juncture" when the content of policies change and a new direction for policy is established. But this does not appear to apply to the COVID-19 case.

This is not necessarily surprising as paradigmatic change is not an automatic process put into motion by crisis, as some would have it. Just because there is a crisis, or policy failure, it does not mean change will result. As Mintrom (2000, p. 43) reminds us, for the most part people work with, reframe, and combine old or existing ideas.

A better understanding of the different kinds of possible policy punctuations which can affect a policy trajectory, however, enables us to more usefully explain and comprehend the complex public policy dynamics arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 has served less as a critical juncture than as a path accelerator in proximate issue areas, removing the legitimacy of blockages (legal, procedural, and otherwise); removing actors who were blocking the pathway (e.g., elections and trade union vetoes); and reinforcing changes *already* underway. In more distant issue arenas, it may have had little impact or served to create additional blockages to change, not least by focusing government attention elsewhere for the duration of the pandemic (See Knill & Steinebach, 2022).

It bears repeating that the COVID-19 pandemic was not caused by, and did not foment, a general crisis in existing institutions (O'Connor, 1987). Rather it was a truly exogenous shock on a par with a tsunami, massive earthquake, or medium-sized meteor impact but with a long-lasting and continuing impact on society and the economy. Responses to it have highlighted the inadequacies and faultlines in some existing institutions but have not themselves been adequate to drive significant policy change across multiple sectors where that change had not already begun. It was rather in many cases at best a "path clearing event," a kind of policy punctuation which serves as an accelerator that can lead to change in proximate areas where change was already underway.

And it also bears repeating that this movement is not uniform across-the-board as responding to the urgency of the pandemic has also served as a brake on change in other more distant areas of state activity. Thus, detailed empirical case studies of the kind contained in Part II of this special issue are crucial for determining which sectors have been impacted in which way and why by this very specific kind of policy punctuation.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

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