

# Unpacking the multidimensional relationship between crisis and policy change: a systematic review

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## Abstract

This article presents a systematic review of how the relationship between crisis and policy change is conceptualized, operationalized, and analyzed in public policy literature. We analyze five dimensions: crisis definitions, the causal mechanisms linking crises to change, the types and intensities of change, the political and ideological effects, and the modes of governing crises. The review reveals persistent conceptual ambiguity, limited attention to political dynamics, and a dominant focus on ideational mechanisms. Furthermore, by adopting a typology of the politics of governing crises as an analytical tool, the study also identifies recurring patterns across mechanisms, political strategies, and outputs. This theory-informed review offers a foundation for systematic, comparative research on crisis-driven policy change.

**Keywords:** crisis; policy change; political change; causal mechanisms; systematic literature review

In public policy literature, crises are often seen as powerful drivers of policy change. Crises function as visibility tools for institutional shortcomings and policy instrument deficiencies to create reform opportunities, according to Kingdon (1995) and Zahariadis (2003). Crises drive accelerated decision processes which modify political priorities while allowing new power blocks to emerge and facilitate transformative policies beyond normal circumstances (Nohrstedt & Weible, 2010). Policy stasis, symbolic gestures, and status quo arrangement reinforcement appear as potential results of crisis situations (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016; Pierson, 2004). Political crises are considered critical junctures that can facilitate relevant changes in institutional and political arrangements (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). Although the link between policy change and crisis is often invoked, it remains fragile in both the conceptual framework and the toolbox for empirical research in terms of testable hypotheses and operationalization.

The increasing frequency of crises in economic, epidemiological, geopolitical, and environmental domains has changed how public policymakers operate. Disruptions to political and administrative systems are no longer viewed as rare external disturbances but as integral components of policy processes (Ansell et al., 2010; Genschel et al., 2021). The distinctive features of crises differentiate them from regular problems and risks since crises disrupt systems and create intense decision-making pressures. The academic community shows general agreement about the crisis definition consisting of threat, urgency, and uncertainty (Boin et al., 2005; Hay, 1996). However, crisis scholarship shows extensive conceptual fragmentation, inconsistent terminology, and multiple research methods, hindering knowledge accumulation, and reducing analytical study comparison (Peters et al., 2011; Zahariadis, 2014).

This article aims to provide a systematic analysis of the literature on crisis and policy change. We believe such an analysis maps existing gaps in the literature and potentially reveals unexpected patterns. In our systematic review, we have two main research objectives.

On the one hand, we focus on five analytical categories including crisis definitions, policymaking mechanisms, types of policy change, effects and types of politics governing crises to investigate existing literature in the field. On the other hand, we use the three types of politics of governing crises (Capano et al., 2026) in analyzing the studies included in our analysis to examine whether recurrent patterns emerge across these five categories.

The article is structured as follows. The second section briefly summarizes the current state of research on the problematic relationship between crises and policy change. The third section is a methodological overview in which we present the rationale for the systematic review, along with all the methodological details (search strategy and selection criteria, conceptualization of adopted analytical categories, and classification of contents). Section four presents the findings, while section five briefly discusses the results, drawing out relevant theoretical and analytical implications. In the conclusion, we will sketch out some lines of future research.

## Crisis and policy change: drivers and causal pathways

Public policy scholars have long been fascinated by the connection between crises and policy changes. Crises serve as both “critical junctures” and “windows of opportunity” to transform established policies while causing disruption. The disruptive nature of crises creates essential moments for policy change and opportunities to implement new policies. According to Boin et al. (2009), Hay (1996), and Zahariadis (2014), among others, the essential connection between crises and policy transformations remains difficult to define and lacks theoretical unity. Therefore, focusing on how crises are defined (or not) is key to understanding how their conceptualization aligns with analytical frameworks used to explain policy change. Engaging in definitions is therefore necessary to respond to the “call for more careful theorizing regarding the role and impact of crises in public policymaking” (Nohrstedt & Weible, 2010, p. 3).

Even if the literature generally views crises as disruptions that destabilize established policymaking processes, it often fails to consider how specific features of a crisis can impact the subsequent policy responses. The onset of a crisis is often seen as a valuable opportunity to introduce new ideas and solutions through policy innovation. Yet, what follows is frequently attributed to institutional context and contingent factors. This dependence on explanations specific to individual cases restricts the discovery of consistent patterns, thus curtailing the creation of theoretical hypotheses and more extensive generalizations. Crisis-driven policy change is neither uniform nor inevitable. It may involve redefining the problem, altering processes and actors’ interactions, or redesigning policies through the introduction of new policy instruments or the calibration of already existing ones, and can vary from marginal to major, radical to incremental. A thorough mapping of its dimensions is essential for a systematic, theory-informed analysis.

Major policy theories acknowledge crises as catalysts for change, though they conceptualize their causal effects differently. In the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF), crises are seen as focusing events that enable policy entrepreneurs to couple problem, policy, and political streams, thereby creating policy windows (Kingdon, 1995; Zahariadis, 2007). The Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET) views crises as external shocks that disrupt policy monopolies, prompting sudden departures from incrementalism (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009). Similarly, the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) interprets crises as external disruptions that weaken dominant coalitions and challenge core beliefs, enabling new coalitions to emerge, albeit contingent on coalition cohesion, resource access, and subsystem stability (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993).

While the existing literature assumes a causal relationship between crises and policy change, it is less clear in establishing mechanisms, conditions, and specific outcomes. The lack of robust causal theorization leads scholars to rely on post hoc interpretations instead of sound analytical frameworks (Capano, 2009; Nohrstedt & Weible, 2010). Unlike comparative politics, much public policy literature neglects the mechanisms linking crises to policy change (van der Heijden et al., 2019). This gap overlooks the complex, institutionally embedded, and politically contested processes activated by crises. Crises should be seen not merely as triggers, but as pivotal events that set mechanism-based dynamics in motion.

Focusing on mechanisms is the key to grasping the potential causal role of crises with respect to policy dynamics, outputs, and outcomes. As we know, mechanisms are conceptual constructs that enable us to understand the processes occurring within the “black box” of social processes (Capano & Howlett, 2019; Falletti & Lynch, 2009). Studying crisis-activated mechanisms can reveal if and how crises transform the policy process, its actors, institutions, and ideas, either facilitating or limiting policy transformation. This would enable us to move beyond the vague and often overused metaphors such as “policy window,” “catalyst,” or “critical juncture”.

From a theoretical point of view, another issue arises: analyzes of crises often overlook the link between policy and political change. Crises’ effects deserve attention because crises modify policies while transforming both political and ideological systems. Institutional routines get disrupted by crises, which create opportunities for transformation in the “politics” and “polity” domains (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). Economic and fiscal crises lead to public trust erosion, which results in either reform or regime transitions (Streeck & Schäfer, 2013). Political actors use crises to push their agendas through the uncertainty that surrounds them (Klein, 2007). State and class structure crises in historical revolutions demonstrate their ability to drive political transformations (Skocpol, 1979). Executive power becomes more centralized during crises (Agamben, 2005), and democratic activism emerges (Tilly, 2004) while inequalities grow (Tooze, 2021) and governance systems face legitimacy tests (Huntington, 1991; Pierson, 2004) which determine political outcomes and institutional responses. Thus, mapping these types of crisis-related effects is highly relevant for understanding the characteristics of the processes leading to policy change.

Interestingly, when crisis as a driver of change is analyzed, there is a clear distinction in the types of change examined: policy scholars focus primarily on policy changes, while political scientists focus mainly on political-institutional changes. This split, though grounded in different research aims, fragments the analysis and risks obscuring the political dimensions of governing crises from a public policy perspective. The decision to focus on the politics of governing crises (Capano et al., 2026) assumes that crises are inherently political phenomena because people expect crises to be governed in one way or another. The governing of crises requires special political measures, including the concentration of power, the temporary suspension of established rules, and the pursuit of accountability (Boin et al., 2005).

Three modes of politics of governing crises are envisaged: *governing during the crisis* type looks at crises as temporary disruptions governable with short-term responses; *governing the crisis* type sees crises as longstanding threats governable through targeted interventions; *governing by the crisis* type interprets crises as systemic failures used to speed up major changes and government shifts. Mapping the politics surrounding crises provides a more comprehensive understanding of their connection to power relations, institutional logics, and strategic behavior.

## Methodology: systematic literature review approach

### The rationale for this systematic review, search strategy, and selection criteria

Systematic literature reviews are literature reviews that comply with methodological standards used in primary research (e.g., transparency, rigor, comprehensiveness, reproducibility, and bias limitation) and that aim at identifying, screening, and analyzing a set of studies to answer one or more research questions (Daigneault et al., 2014; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). They differ from non-systematic literature reviews in that they are treated as full-fledged primary studies but have existing research as their unit of analysis, which is subject to secondary observation (Dacombe, 2018).

The aims of this systematic review are to address theoretical and analytical fragmentation and identify potential patterns, conceptual commonalities, or underexplored theoretical propositions that may advance our understanding of the crisis-policy change nexus.

To this end, the review is guided by two primary research objectives:

1. To map key analytical elements characterizing the relationship between crises and policy change;
2. To test potential recurrent patterns linking the crisis-change relationship to the politics of governing crisis.

The first objective is addressed by focusing on five core dimensions recurrent in the literature (Boin et al., 2005; Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Nohrstedt & Weible, 2010):

- a. Crisis definitions, alongside their conceptual applications and theoretical foundation;

- b. Policymaking mechanisms triggered by crises;
- c. Different types of policy changes that occur after crisis events;
- d. Political and ideational effects of crises;
- e. Political patterns of governing crises (and that can lead to them).

To achieve the second objective, we employ a typology of three modes of politics of governing crises as a heuristic framework through which to classify and interpret the strategies identified in the reviewed studies. This analytical approach enables us to examine whether and to what extent the modes of governing crises are systematically aligned with recurring configurations of policymaking mechanisms, types and effects of policy change, and broader political dynamics. By doing so, the review moves beyond merely cataloguing individual instances of crisis response, instead addressing the deeper question of how politics and policy interact to shape crisis governance. This contributes to closing a long-standing gap in the literature on crisis management and public policy.

To minimize bias and maximize reproducibility, validity, and transparency, we have adopted the PRISMA-S checklist (Rethlefsen et al., 2021), and we have summarized our research process in a PRISMA-S flowchart (Figure 1). We have selected two databases, namely Scopus and Web of Science, providing a wide coverage and a fair representation of studies in the social sciences (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016; Prancukuté, 2021). We have limited our search to the social sciences subject area<sup>1</sup> for both databases.

As the objective of our systematic reviews is to address crisis conceptual fragmentation in relation to its definition and theoretical foundation, policymaking mechanisms, types of policy change, effects and types of politics governing crises, we have searched results containing crisis AND policymaking OR policy change. In such a way, we have not only included contributions directly dealing with the crisis–change nexus but also with the implicit mechanisms eventually activated by crises.

The search query has been performed only on the abstracts, titles, and keywords of English-language research articles, and the timespan covered includes the last 20 years, to have an inclusive understanding of whether and how this field of research has developed<sup>2</sup>. The search has produced 1,998 identified records from which duplicates have been removed before the screening process, resulting in a total of 1,388 records.

Three coders have been randomly assigned one-third of the identified records. We have excluded records in which crisis refers to a corporate crisis (i.e., crises affecting private organizations) and records in which crisis is used in an evocative, contextual and generic way (such as “the crisis of values”, “the crisis of the education system”, etc.). Therefore, we have included records in which there is an explicit elaboration, either theoretical, empirical or both, of the relation between crisis and change, not only in terms of the types of changes eventually triggered by crises but also in light of possible mechanisms developing from crises and crises effects. Throughout this screening process, 960 records have been excluded.

## In-depth screening of the sources: conceptualization of categories and classification of contents

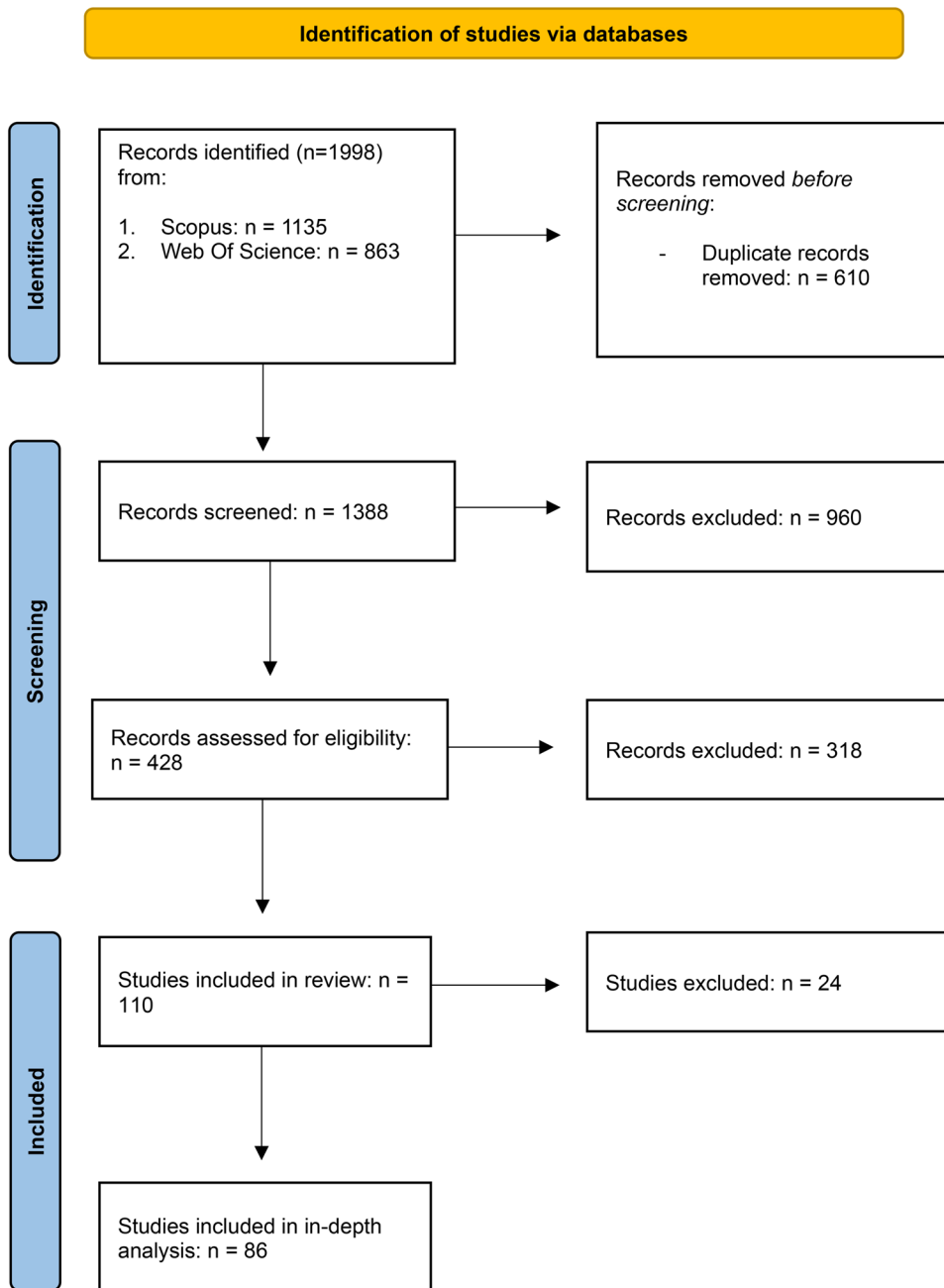
Following the first phase of the screening process, we have developed a codebook for a full-text quantitative and qualitative content analysis of the remaining records ( $n = 428$ ). The elaboration of the codebook has relied on the five core dimensions recurrent in the literature (as exemplified in paragraph 3.1) as well as inductive coding from preliminary screening process and its stabilization during the first coding phase.

### Crisis definitions, their conceptual applications, and theoretical foundation

To identify the crisis object, both in theoretical and empirical terms, the codebook includes the object of a crisis, namely which crisis or crises have been studied (e.g., COVID-19, refugee crisis, financial crisis); the sector impacted by a crisis—policy area(s) studied in relation to the crisis (e.g., COVID-19 and education policy); the country or geographic area in which the study has taken place; whether the coded study names the crisis with a specific label (e.g., “window of opportunity”, “critical juncture”, “shock”,

<sup>1</sup> For Scopus, we have limited our search to the subject area “SOCI”. For Web Of Science, within the Web Of Science Core Collection, we have limited our search to the Social Sciences Citation Index.

<sup>2</sup> Scopus search strings: SUBJAREA (soci) TITLE-ABS-KEY (“crisis” AND “policymaking”) AND PUBYEAR > 2004 AND PUBYEAR < 2026 AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “ar”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, “English”)) | SUBJAREA (soci) TITLE-ABS-KEY (“crisis” AND “policy change”) AND PUBYEAR > 2004 AND PUBYEAR < 2026 AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, “ar”)) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, “English”)) | Web of Science search strings: (((TS=“crisis”) AND TS=“policymaking”) AND PY=(2004-2025)) AND LA=(English)) AND DT=(Article) | (((TS=“crisis”) AND TS=“policy change”) AND PY=(2004-2025)) AND LA=(English)) AND DT=(Article)



**Figure 1.** The selection tree.

etc.); the presence or absence of a specific conceptualization/definition of crisis, either original or by referencing existing studies, and adjacent elaboration; six consolidated dimensions on which crises may be defined (building on existing literature in the field: e.g., Profeti and Toth (2026), namely origin (internal or external to the subsystem), cause (natural or man-made), time (sudden or creeping), speed (fast-burning or slow-burning), whether there is an attribution of responsibility (dummy variable: 0/1), and knowledgeability and/or tractability (how much it is known about the crisis and/or how much it is manageable: low, medium, high). We have also given space to any other possible dimension emerging from the data.

### *Policymaking mechanisms*

Moving to the policymaking mechanisms activated by crises and drawing on the existing literature, we have focused on three types of mechanisms, namely dynamics, political, and ideational mechanisms. Dynamics mechanisms entail mechanisms activated by crises that mainly have as their foundations the temporal aspect (e.g., acceleration, deceleration, accumulation, normalization, lock-in, path breaking, and bouncing back) (Capano et al., 2022; Knill and Steinebach, 2022; Mahoney, 2000; Pierson, 2000). Political mechanisms are crisis-induced mechanisms that include political and power realignment features (e.g., blame shift, empowerment, disempowerment, mobilization, manipulation) (Falletti & Lynch, 2009; Tilly, 2000; Weaver, 1986). Finally, ideational mechanisms are mechanisms initiated by crises that build on the role of ideational approaches—e.g., framing, learning, and emulation (Béland, 2005; Hall, 1993; Shipan & Volden, 2008). The three types of mechanisms are not mutually exclusive: a crisis may activate an ideational mechanism such as framing together with a political one as empowerment. It is also acknowledged that more than one mechanism for each type may be activated. However, in line with this article analytical purposes, we have coded the predominant one for each type (if present). For each dimension, we have also included the possibility of expanding on any other mechanism emerging from the data.

### *Different types of policy change*

Regarding the different types of policy change, we have included both process and output changes. Firstly, we are interested in whether a change is identified in relation to a crisis. Secondly, we have moved more in-depth by pointing out different types of changes in the process (e.g., problem definition or actors' interactions) and/or in the output (e.g., calibration or new instruments) and their intensity (minor or major). As with the other core dimensions, we have included the possibility of expanding on any other process and/or output changes also in this case.

### *Political and ideational effects*

Shifting to the effects of crises, we have grouped them into two categories. On the one side, we have political effects, including realignment, trust/distrust in government, political legitimation/delegitimation, and coalition building (Hay, 1996; Tilly, 2004). On the other side, we include ideational effects implying an ideational or a paradigmatic shift (Hall, 1993).

### *Types of politics that govern crises and can lead to them*

Finally, we have built on Capano et al.'s (2026) three-modes framework to further investigate the different politics of governing crises:

- “Governing during the crisis” type looks at crises as temporary disruptions governable with short-term responses;
- “Governing the crisis” type sees crises as longstanding threats governable through targeted interventions;
- “Governing by the crisis” type interprets crises as systemic failures used to speed up major changes and government shifts.

The coding process has encountered two equivalent phases during which the records have been equally distributed among the three coders. Between the two phases a control period has occurred in which 50% of the coded records have been randomly and anonymously distributed among the coders to check for intercode reliability (Cohen's Kappa = 0.928).

During the in-depth coding process, 318 records have been excluded based on the same inclusion and exclusion criteria applied during the abstract screening phase. Given the objectives of our systematic literature reviews, we have further excluded studies that do not explicitly refer to any crisis labelling and/or definition ( $n=24$ ), resulting in a total of 86 studies included for the in-depth analysis<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> During the in-depth coding process, studies that presented more than one crisis case and/or that investigated more than one country have been coded for each crisis and/or each country. This results in a total of 121 cases for the in-depth analysis.

## Findings

Given the two-level objectives of this research and to improve the readability of our findings, we have organized them by following the five core dimensions identified in the Introduction of this article.

### Crisis definitions, their conceptual applications, and theoretical foundation

How crises are defined, both theoretically and conceptually, helps determine whether they are viewed generically (as amplifiers or limiters of actors' opportunities) or as embedded in causal processes. Table 1 summarizes how crises are labeled relative to the presence or absence of an explicit definition. Only 35.5% of the cases in our sample explicitly refer to existing or original definitions. Most studies instead rely on a combination of well-established labels such as window of opportunity, shock, critical juncture, or focusing event without offering a clear conceptualization. Consequently, crisis dimensions are hardly found in the included studies, with very few entries (a mean of 8) bringing up at least one established dimension (e.g., origin as external, or cause as natural, or knowledgeability and/or tractability as low) or a new one (e.g., symmetric, transboundary, systemic).

**Table 1.** Crisis definition.

Count of doi	Crisis definition		
	0	1	Grand total
<b>Crisis label</b>			
<b>Window of opportunity</b>	<b>19,83%</b>	<b>6,61%</b>	<b>26,45%</b>
Opportunity	0,83%	0,83%	1,65%
Opportunity + Challenge	1,65%	0,00%	1,65%
Policy window	0,83%	3,31%	4,13%
Policy window + Shock	2,48%	0,00%	2,48%
Reform opportunity + Paradigm shattering	0,83%	0,00%	0,83%
Window of opportunity	7,44%	2,48%	9,92%
Window of opportunity + Catalyst	4,13%	0,00%	4,13%
Window of opportunity + Critical junctures	0,83%	0,00%	0,83%
Window of opportunity + Focusing event + Catalyst	0,83%	0,00%	0,83%
<b>Shock</b>	<b>12,40%</b>	<b>7,44%</b>	<b>19,83%</b>
Shock	12,40%	7,44%	19,83%
<b>Other</b>	<b>14,05%</b>	<b>9,09%</b>	<b>23,14%</b>
Accelerator of change	0,83%	0,00%	0,83%
Accident	1,65%	0,00%	1,65%
Catalyst	4,13%	0,00%	4,13%
Disaster + Punctuating event	0,83%	0,00%	0,83%
Disruption	0,00%	0,83%	0,83%
Emergency	0,83%	0,00%	0,83%
Failure	1,65%	0,00%	1,65%
Institutional destabilizer	0,00%	0,83%	0,83%
Master variable of policy change.	0,83%	0,00%	0,83%
Other	0,00%	1,65%	1,65%
Piece of a reform sequence	0,00%	1,65%	1,65%
State of emergency	0,83%	0,00%	0,83%
Trigger + Catalyst	0,83%	0,00%	0,83%
Crisis + adjective	1,65%	4,13%	5,79%
<b>Focusing event</b>	<b>8,26%</b>	<b>1,65%</b>	<b>9,92%</b>
Focusing event	5,79%	0,83%	6,61%
Focusing event + Policy window	0,83%	0,00%	0,83%
Focusing event + Problem surfing linkages	0,83%	0,00%	0,83%
Focusing event + Window of opportunity	0,00%	0,83%	0,83%
Focusing event + Critical juncture + Opportunity	0,83%	0,00%	0,83%
<b>Critical juncture</b>	<b>9,92%</b>	<b>1,65%</b>	<b>11,57%</b>
Critical historical event	0,83%	0,00%	0,83%
Critical juncture	9,09%	1,65%	10,74%
<b>0</b>	<b>0,00%</b>	<b>9,09%</b>	<b>9,09%</b>
0	0,00%	9,09%	9,09%
<b>Grand total</b>	<b>64,46%</b>	<b>35,54%</b>	<b>100,00%</b>

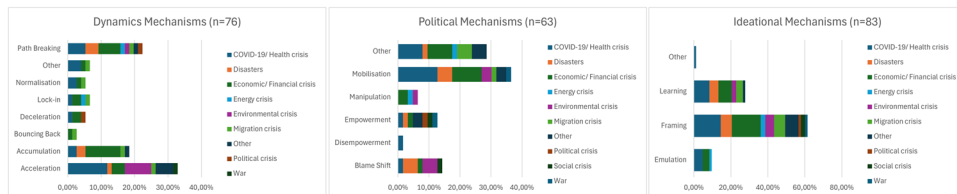
## Policymaking mechanisms triggered by crises

Crises do not come as isolated events, but they may activate mechanisms affecting the configuration of actors, institutional settings and ideas in policy processes, enabling or constraining policy changes within the process and/or in the output. Among the three types of mechanisms identified (i.e., dynamic, political, and ideational), the ones that have better performed throughout our sample are the ideational ones, with an overall percentage of approximately 70%, followed by the dynamics one with slightly more than the 60% and, finally, the political ones with approximately the 50%. All three types of mechanisms are found in the 30% of cases.

Breaking down the three types into their embedded mechanisms<sup>4</sup>, Figure 2A–C summarizes their distribution in relation to the crisis object. To clarify the mechanism categories, we provide some illustrative examples from our sample. Among dynamic mechanisms, Copeland and James (2014) show path-breaking via overlapping policy windows during the Greek debt crisis, enabling the EU Commission to revive reforms. Accumulation is seen in Japan's renewable energy politics, where gradual coalition and belief shifts consolidated during crises (Watanabe, 2021). Acceleration occurred in Portuguese healthcare reform, where the financial crisis spurred swift actions unlikely under normal conditions (Asensio & Popic, 2019). China's Zero-COVID response shows normalization, as exceptional measures became routine under regime constraints (Keng et al., 2024). Lock-in is evident in Germany's 2022–23 energy response, where manufacturing-led coalitions reinforced existing policies (Di Carlo et al., 2024).

Regarding political mechanisms, blame shifting marked Central European pandemic politics, with incumbents deflecting responsibility (Saxonberg et al., 2024). Mobilization appears in divergent refugee crisis responses: Hungary used crisis narratives to consolidate power, while Germany adopted inclusive coalitions (Kriesi & Moise, 2024). Crises may empower actors, as in Italy's healthcare reforms under New Public Management, where authority shifted to technocrats (Mattei, 2006). Conversely, crises may disempower institutions, as Euroscepticism and constraints limited EU integration (Fabbrini, 2019).

Finally, ideational mechanisms highlight how crises reframe issues, foster learning, and disseminate policy models. Nohrstedt (2008) shows framing in Swedish nuclear policy post-Chernobyl, with the event seen as both government failure and external shock. Learning is illustrated by the IMF's post-crisis shift to institutionalized monitoring (Moschella, 2011). Emulation occurred in Italy's financial crisis response, relying on past templates and instruments instead of innovation (Di Mascio et al., 2013).



**Figures 2.** Distribution of mechanisms: (A) dynamics mechanisms, (B) political mechanisms, and (C) ideational mechanisms.

As discussed in previous paragraphs, understanding the relationship between crises and the eventually activated mechanisms may help us to understand the causal paths between the two further. Within dynamic mechanisms, acceleration mechanisms are the ones which perform better, both in percentage points (approximately 33%) but also in their relation to seven out of nine crisis object types. Path breaking and accumulation mechanisms respectively represent around 20%; however, they largely differ in the types of crises they come after. Accordingly, path breaking mechanisms act upon a larger set of crises (even larger than acceleration mechanisms), while accumulation ones are limited to a few crisis types. All other identified mechanism types remain below the 10% and are limited to specific kinds of crisis objects (mainly COVID-19/Health crisis and/or Economic/Financial crisis and/or Migration crisis).

Overall, political mechanisms are the weakest performers in our sample (around 50% of cases), with mobilization mechanisms accounting for about 37%, evenly spread across crisis types. Notably, 28% fall

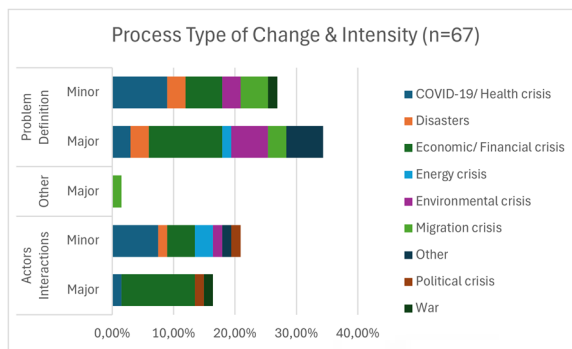
<sup>4</sup> Percentages are calculated on the grand total excluding 0 values in all the following figures.

under the previously undefined “Other” category, which includes mechanisms like reward claiming, entrepreneurship, and external coercion. Manipulation, empowerment, disempowerment, and blame shifting each remain below 13%.

Ideational mechanisms show the strongest presence, with framing mechanisms slightly exceeding 60%. These not only have the highest share but also the broadest distribution across crisis types. Despite the dominance of framing, learning mechanisms are also significant, approaching 25%, while emulation remains more marginal at around 10%.

### Different types of policy change that occur after crisis events

Crises can generate different types of change at both the policy process and output levels. Among the 86 studies analyzed, output changes are the most common (85%), while process changes appear in 65%. Notably, over half of the records report both types of change. Regarding the relationship between crisis type and process-level change (Figure 3), problem definition emerges as the most frequent across all crises. Changes in actor interactions are most prominent during economic/financial and COVID-19/health crises, which also show the highest rates of problem redefinition. Political crises, understood as crises of institutional stability or constitutional order (e.g., regime breakdowns, governmental collapses, or systemic legitimacy crises), are the only case where changes in actor interactions occur without corresponding shifts in problem definition. Other types of process change (i.e., bureaucratic routine) appear only in response to migration crises.



**Figure 3.** Process types of change and intensity.

Regarding the intensity of policy change, Figure 3 indicates a relatively balanced distribution between minor and major changes in both problem definition and actor interactions, with no clear trend. However, when examining change intensity by crisis type, economic and financial crises most often drive major changes in both dimensions, followed by environmental crises. In contrast, COVID-19 and health-related crises most commonly lead to minor changes, followed by economic, environmental, and migration-related crises.

Moving to the relationship between crisis types (and their object) and the nature of changes in policy outputs (Figure 4), the distribution between calibrations and the introduction of new instruments appears more nuanced compared to changes in the policy process. Specifically, if we set aside the high proportion of output changes linked to the health and economic crises caused by the pandemic, the difference between calibrations of existing instruments and the adoption of new ones is generally limited across the remaining crisis types. Nevertheless, new instruments tend to prevail over calibrations in all crisis types except in cases related to migration and war.

Regarding the intensity of policy output changes (Figure 4), consistent with existing literature, major changes are mostly linked to introducing new instruments, while calibrations typically result in more limited adjustments. However, in about 16% of cases involving calibrations, even minor adjustments led to significant change. This suggests that incremental trajectories based on micro-adjustments can still produce meaningful reform outcomes (Coleman et al., 1996). In terms of crisis types, the distribution of major changes parallels that of policy process changes: economic and financial crises are most likely to drive major shifts in policy design, followed by health and environmental crises. Health crises, however,

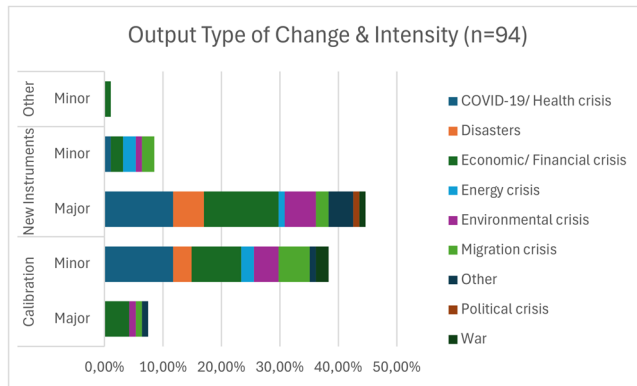


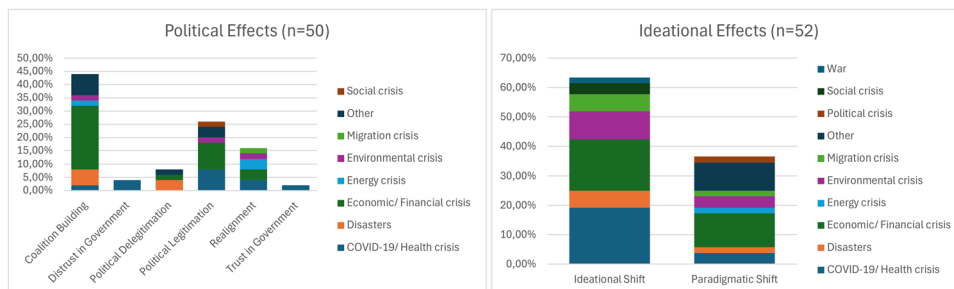
Figure 4. Output types of change and intensity.

slightly surpass financial ones in prompting minor output changes, followed by migration and environmental crises.

### Political and ideational effects of crises

Crises not only have an impact in activating dynamics, political, and/or ideational mechanisms, or in triggering different types of policy process and output changes, but they also shape broader political and ideological structures. However, compared to mechanisms and policy change types, political and ideational effects are less represented in our review, appearing in 45% of studies, with political and ideological effects each around 20%.

Figure 5A and B summarizes these effects by crises types. Coalition building is the most frequent for political effects, particularly following economic/financial crises. These crises also account for a notable share of political legitimization effects (26%) alongside COVID-19/health crises. As for ideational effects, ideational shifts are the most recurrent, cutting across most crisis types. Here too, economic/financial and COVID-19/health crises play a central role. Economic crises also frequently precede paradigmatic shifts, though they are not the only ones to do so.



Figures 5. Political and ideational effects: (A) political effects and (B) ideational effects.

### Types of politics of governing crises

We analyzed how the politics of governing crises were reflected in the content of the selected articles, using the three ideal types—governing during the crisis, governing the crisis, and governing by the crisis—proposed by Capano et al. (2026). The coding procedure was mainly based on the authors’ explicit framing and interpretation of each article/case, assessed against the definitions of the three ideal types and applied to the content of the analyzed material.

The typology proves highly effective, applying to over 85% of the records. “Governing the crisis” is the most frequent (45%), while “governing during the crisis” is the least (23%). Notably, “governing by the crisis” appears in nearly one-third of cases where a distinct political mode of governing is identified.

Figure 6 illustrates how these types are distributed across different crisis categories.

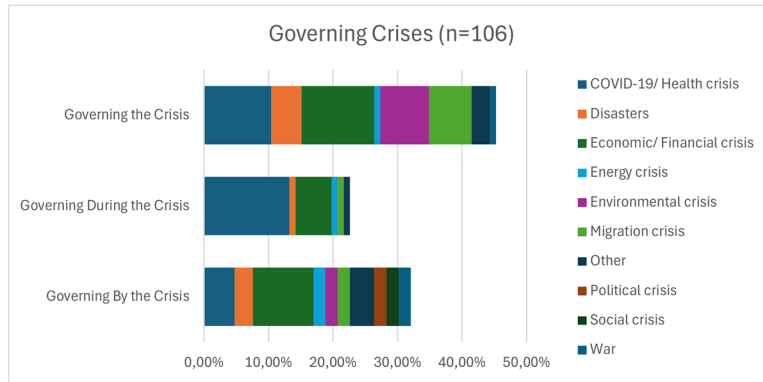


Figure 6. Types of governing crises and types of crises.

The “governing the crisis” type is the most represented, particularly in response to COVID-19/health, economic/financial, environmental, and migration crises. This is expected, as these crises pose persistent and escalating threats requiring timely intervention to prevent long-term consequences. Given our review’s focus on the crisis–change nexus, it is unsurprising that “governing during the crisis”, which implies no structural change, is the least frequent. The strong presence of COVID-19/health crises in this category may seem counterintuitive, but reflects the initial phase of the pandemic, widely viewed as a temporary disruption requiring short-term action. Finally, “governing by the crisis” includes the broadest range of crisis types, with economic/financial crises most prominent. This aligns with established public policy literature that sees crises as strategic windows of opportunity for advancing policy change.

### Patterns of politics of governing crises

To test the three politics of governing crises and analyze whether stable patterns exist in how crises are governed, we relate our five analytical categories with this three-mode framework.

Figure 7 illustrates the distribution of dynamic mechanisms. Excluding type 0 cases, mostly from studies on “governing during the crisis” and “governing the crisis”, some key differences emerge. “Governing by the crisis” is marked by the prevalence of path-breaking, acceleration, and, to a lesser extent,

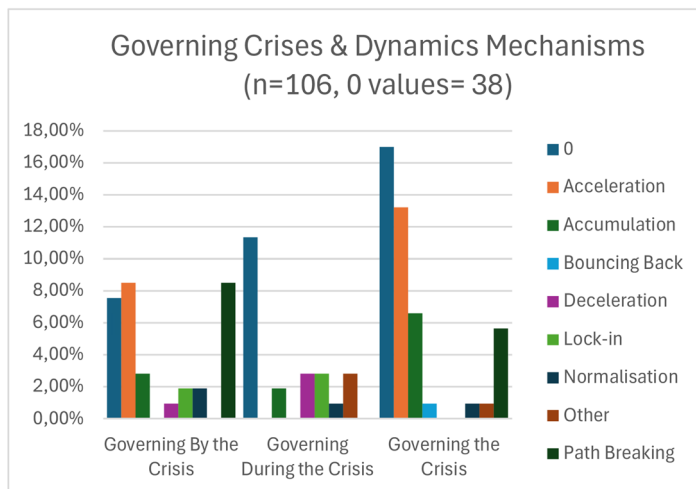
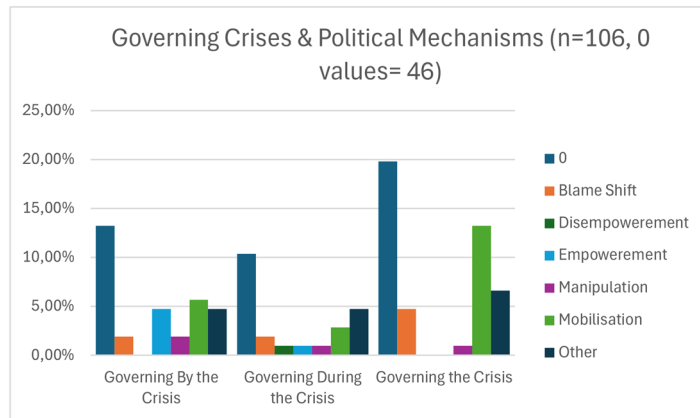


Figure 7. Types of politics of governing crises and dynamics mechanisms.

accumulation mechanisms. “Governing during the crisis” shows a more balanced mix of deceleration, lock-in, accumulation, and “other” mechanisms (e.g., adaptation). In contrast, “governing the crisis” mainly features acceleration, followed by accumulation and path-breaking.

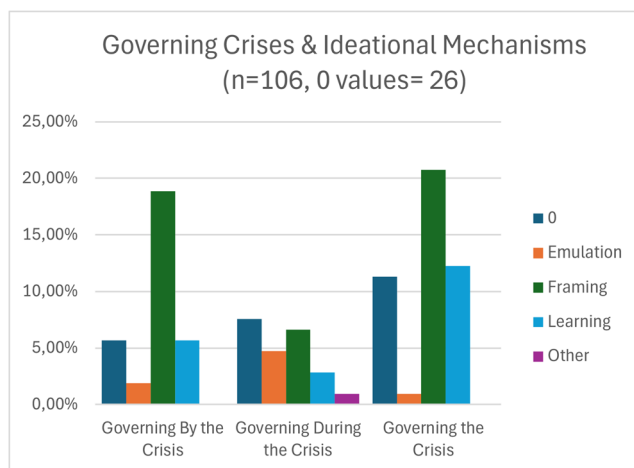
These findings suggest that major policy changes are more likely under “governing by the crisis” and “governing the crisis”, while this is less likely in cases of “governing during the crisis”.

Shifting to political mechanisms, Figure 8 shows that mobilization, empowerment, and “others” (e.g., engagement, reward claiming, and entrepreneurship) characterize governing the crisis and by the crisis. Others (i.e., credit claiming, mobilization, and blame shifting) are the prevalent political mechanisms in governing during a crisis. Accordingly, no noteworthy differences or patterns appear to emerge.



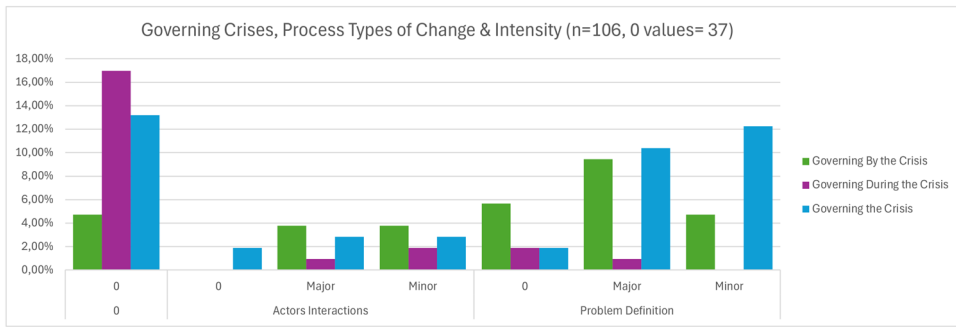
**Figure 8.** Types of politics of governing crises and political mechanisms.

Instead, regarding ideational mechanisms, as shown in Figure 9, framing is neatly dominant in both “governing the crisis” and “governing by the crisis” (followed by learning), while there is no clear pattern in “governing during the crisis”.



**Figure 9.** Types of politics of governing crises and ideational mechanisms.

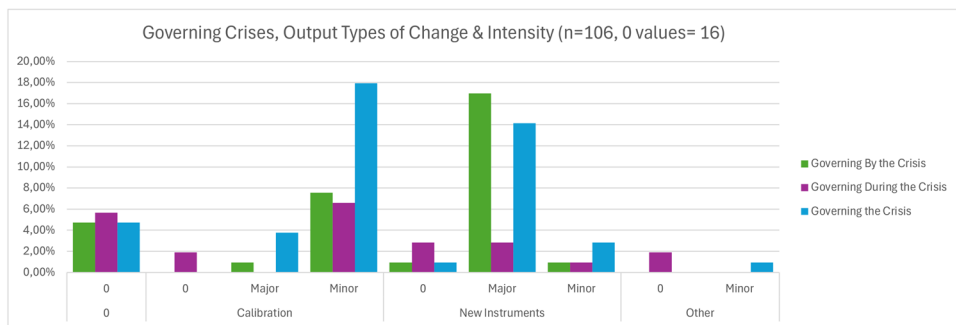
As far as the type of policy change is concerned, Figure 10 shows the characteristics of changes in the process and their intensity.



**Figures 10.** Types of politics of governing crises and changes in the policy process.

Interestingly, both “governing the crisis” and “governing by the crisis” are more often linked to changes in problem definition than in actor interactions. In contrast, “governing during the crisis” shows fewer changes overall. In terms of intensity, the first two types include a notable share of major changes, though minor ones are more common under “governing the crisis” than “governing by the crisis.”

Figure 11 further illustrate this divide: “governing during the crisis” is associated with minimal policy output change, mostly limited to minor instrument calibrations rather than substantial adjustments. “Governing the crisis” is linked to a considerable number of output changes, which is expected given governments’ role in addressing urgent problems. Most involve calibrations rather than new instruments. While many are minor, a notable share involves major adjustments, showing that refining existing tools can still mark significant policy shifts. By contrast, “governing by the crisis” mainly features the adoption of new instruments, often with high intensity—though about a quarter are still of minor scale.



**Figures 11.** Types of politics of governing crises and changes in the policy outputs.

## Discussion

The map resulting from the analysis of the selected 86 studies through five core analytical dimensions reveals multiple patterns and gaps that help to diagnose and advance theoretical understanding.

### Crisis definition

A key issue in the crisis literature is the lack of clear conceptualization. Despite being a key concept in contemporary public policy discourse, policy researchers fail to provide a sufficient theoretical definition of this term. Two-thirds of the sample describe crises using generic analytical terms without offering theoretical insights into their fundamental components. There is a failure to recognize crises as analytical constructs forming part of theoretical frameworks, as they are instead treated as external events that trigger change. The literature continues to face the critical issue of researchers failing to integrate crises as key factors in explaining policy transformations. Overall, [Nohrstedt and Weible's \(2010\)](#) call for better theoretical integration of crises in policymaking studies still appears to be largely unheeded.

## Mechanisms

The predominance of ideational mechanisms (around 70% of cases) and the frequent activation of framing dynamics highlight the central role of discursive processes in shaping crisis perceptions and driving agenda change (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016; Schmidt, 2010). This underscores the importance of open problem definition and causal interpretation. As seen in the ACF framework, minority coalitions may use crisis framing to challenge dominant ones, as in Sweden's nuclear policy shift after Chernobyl (Nohrstedt, 2008). Similarly, leaders may amplify crises (regardless of scale) to legitimize preferred policies, such as in the Czech response to the Syrian refugee crisis (Saxonberg et al. 2024).

The lower visibility of political mechanisms may seem surprising, given the inherently political nature of crises (Boin et al., 2009; Hinterleitner, 2015). Yet, this may reflect a bias in policy process theories, which often favor institutional and cognitive factors over power dynamics, downplaying political agency and conflict. Still, the findings confirm that ideational mechanisms are seen as primary drivers of crisis responses.

## Types of policy change

Two key insights emerge on policy change. First, crises primarily influence the policy process by activating problem definition and redefinition, more than by altering actor interactions, a pattern also reflecting the broader direction of the crisis—policy change literature. Second, while major output changes often involve new instruments, they can also result from recalibrating existing tools. As shown by Mattei (2006) on healthcare and Di Mascio et al. (2013) on administrative reforms, certain crises (like Italy's 1992 systemic crisis combining political collapse and fiscal strain from EU integration) can trigger sequences of micro-reforms that, over time, reshape policy goals and paradigms. Moschella (2011), analyzing post-2007 IMF surveillance reforms through Mahoney and Thelen's (2010) framework, similarly finds that "policy change appears as firmly rooted in previous trajectories, with the result that gradually unfolding changes may be hugely consequential as causes of other outcomes" (p. 138). Major reforms tend to follow specific types of crises, especially financial and economic ones. This supports the idea that large-scale, cross-sector disruptions generate the strongest reform pressures. At the same time, since these crises often center on how problems are framed rather than changes in actor configurations, they highlight areas where the "framing contest" (Boin et al., 2009) is particularly intense. For instance, the Eurozone crisis allowed EU elites to reframe labor policy around a new definition of competitiveness, focused on cost and price reduction (Mirò 2021).

## Political and ideational effects

The political and ideational effects appear less frequently in the literature we analyzed. As we noted earlier, it is interesting to observe that this may be because policy scholars pay less attention to political change than policy change. Looking at our data, articles dealing with economic crises are—again—numerically prominent among those that—at least—mention political and ideological effects of the crisis. This seems to confirm that this type of crisis can be considered a critical juncture when it occurs. However, upon closer inspection, 13 out of the 20 items with these characteristics specifically refer to the 2008 global financial crisis (see, in particular, Asensio & Popic, 2019; Flynn & Montalbano, 2024; Moschella, 2011; Spanou, 2020), i.e., a crisis whose scale and impact—particularly in terms of the political legitimacy of government decisions across various areas of public policy—can be considered quite exceptional. Therefore, formulating robust hypotheses about this dimension based on the available data proves to be rather challenging.

## Modes of governing crises

This study uses the three modes of politically governing crises developed by Capano et al. (2026, this issue) primarily as an organizing tool to structure the empirical findings across the other dimensions. Rather than serving as a normative model, the typology's function is the identification of recurring patterns of policy change linked to distinct strategies of governing crises.

"Governing the crisis" tends to occur in the context of long-term or protracted threats (e.g., pandemics, climate change, and migration). "Governing during the crisis", which is less frequently observed, typically relates to short-term disruptions. "Governing by the crisis" is the most strategic and ideationally charged mode, where crises are used to pursue reforms or break political deadlock. Although this mode is more prevalent in economic crises (e.g., Asensio & Popic, 2019; Donnelly & Hogan, 2012; Mirò, 2021; Szelewa, 2014), it also emerges in various other cases, such as China's 2013 "Airstorm" and subsequent air

quality reforms (Schwabe, 2017); Hungary's response to the Syrian refugee crisis (Kriesi & Moise, 2024); and the collapse of Jerusalem's Versailles Banquet Hall in 2001, which exposed regulatory failures and prompted public criticism (Schwartz & McConnell, 2009).

These examples demonstrate that crises of any type can be strategically framed to influence policy trajectories. Finally, the typology has proved useful in ordering the empirical literature and highlighting how different modes of governing crises correlate with specific mechanisms and types of policy change, acknowledging that some cases may plausibly fit more than one mode of politics of governing crisis depending on authors' framing. Table 2 summarizes these recurring associations, as identified through our systematic review.

- *Governing during the crisis.* During acute temporary disruptions, this type of politically governing crises emerges to protect institutional stability and prevent crisis escalation. The short-term response serves containment goals instead of pursuing structural changes in the crisis. This type is characterized mainly by lock-in and deceleration mechanisms to maintain existing systems instead of seeking new paths. During political crises, actors primarily activate emergency resources while using blame to shift responsibilities to avoid accountability during uncertain times. Ideational mechanisms remain limited, as framing and learning exist without sufficient integration for long-term policy development. Policy change under this mode is low in intensity, typically involving minor technical or symbolic adjustments, with no significant shifts in problem definition or policy tools. The emphasis on institutional maintenance results in policy inertia rather than innovation. A clear example of this pattern is provided by the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia. Despite differences in objective conditions and political contexts, policymakers in all three countries did not seize the opportunity to implement path-altering social policy changes. Instead, changes were generally minor and mostly temporary (Saxonberg et al. 2024).
- *Governing the crisis.* This mode involves deliberate and continuous strategies for dealing with persistent threats that could have systemic effects. The main goal is to control crisis development through targeted actions to achieve operational stability and avoid long-term damage. This approach relies on mechanisms such as acceleration and accumulation. While it may occasionally produce path-breaking outcomes, it generally remains anchored within existing institutional structures. Ideational processes play a key role by reframing the crisis situation and enabling adaptive learning that supports change. Compared to “governing during the crisis,” this mode features stronger ideational coherence and greater instrumental effectiveness, though its core aim remains adaptive stabilization rather than transformation. Policy change tends to be moderate, focusing on problem redefinition and adjusting existing tools. A clear example is found in the COVID-19 responses of several Asian countries, which introduced targeted innovations in services for older people—such as telemedicine, home delivery of medical supplies, and remote caregiver support. These changes enhanced existing programmes without altering core institutional structures (Gietel-Basten et al., 2022).
- *Governing by the crisis.* This mode reflects a strategic and opportunistic use of crisis events to advance transformative policy agendas. It involves defining crises as triggers for systemic transformations instead of treating them as problems to solve. Prevalent dynamic mechanisms are path-breaking and acceleration, which indicate purposeful efforts to break institutional barriers and create

**Table 2.** Recurrent patterns of mechanisms and policy change corresponding to the three types of politics of governing crises.

Type of politics of governing	Dynamic mechanisms (ranked)	Political mechanisms (ranked)	Ideational mechanisms (ranked)	Type of policy change (prevailing dimensions)	Intensity of policy change
<i>Governing during the crisis</i>	Lock-in, deceleration	Mobilization Blame Shift	Framing Emulation	Not significant	Minor
<i>Governing the crisis</i>	Acceleration Accumulation Path-breaking	Mobilization Blame Shift	Framing Learning	Problem definition Calibration	Mixed
<i>Governing by the crisis</i>	Path-breaking Acceleration	Mobilization Empowerment	Framing Learning	Problem definition New policy instruments	Major

opportunities for reform. Politically, this approach features mobilization and empowerment as governments aim to strengthen their authority and rewrite governance responsibilities under crisis response conditions. Framing plays a crucial ideational role by portraying the crisis as evidence of a broader systemic failure, thereby justifying the need for far-reaching policy responses. This mode very often drives policy transformation through extensive changes that both redefine the nature of problems and introduce new policy instruments. A clear example of “governing by the crisis” can be found in the Swedish government’s U-turn on refugee reception policies following the 2015 migration crisis. During this period, the issue was reframed as a border control issue rather than a humanitarian matter, leading to the introduction of restrictive measures that remained in place even after the crisis (Hagelund 2020). Another example is the successful attempt by the (former) minority anti-nuclear coalition in Germany to capitalize on the wave of public emotion and attention triggered by the Fukushima disaster, pushing the government to decide to phase out its nuclear energy policy by 2022 (Rinscheid, 2015).

## Conclusions

All in all, our systematic review provides a substantial and robust body of evidence to take stock of what is already known, what new insights have emerged, and what future research directions could be pursued regarding the relationship between crises and policy change.

First and foremost, the analysis confirms a persistent lack of attention to the conceptual definition of what constitutes a crisis, as well as to the dimensions that would enable the classification of crisis types independently of their specific object. The various labels and evocative metaphors drawn from leading policy process theories (e.g., shock, policy window, catalyst, etc.) and used in lieu of a proper operational definition of crisis prove inadequate for supporting rigorous empirical analysis and meaningful comparison. This shortcoming hampers both the cumulative advancement of knowledge and the development of robust theoretical frameworks.

Second, the analysis supports established claims in the policy change literature: major or paradigmatic changes often result from introducing new policy instruments and redefining the problem at stake. However, it also shows that, in a notable number of cases, even marginal adjustments can lead to substantial transformations when accumulated over time along a coherent trajectory. This interpretation, consistent with historical neoinstitutionalism, has seen limited application in crisis studies and remains mostly confined to economic and financial crises. Notably, these crises represent most major change cases in our dataset.

Third, the analysis reveals an epistemological bias in crisis-policy change research, with a predominant focus on ideational mechanisms, often neglecting political conflict and political agency. A similar imbalance is evident in how crisis effects are assessed, with few studies addressing political change as a consequence. We view this as an epistemological orientation that shapes knowledge accumulation in the field. The prioritization of problem definition over actor interactions is both an empirical finding and a theoretical insight, revealing a consistent emphasis on ideological dimensions of crises, while political agency is underexplored. This focus on ideas and discourse often neglects power dynamics and institutional struggles. It reflects not only individual study framings but also the broader trajectory of crisis-policy change research, risking a one-sided view of how crises matter.

In light of this imbalance, the main theoretical contribution of our systematic review is to test whether the ideal-typical tripartition of political strategies for governing crises (Capano et al., 2026) can help to redress it by providing an analytical lens that foregrounds political agency and conflict, while also identifying recurring patterns of policy change mechanisms, types and intensities.

The test conducted through our systematic review appears promising: indeed, nearly all articles examined could be associated with one of the three strategies, and the data analysis allowed us to identify the regularities outlined in the previous section and in Table 2. Our review reveals that the three types of politics of governing crises are not only empirically applicable to most of the cases examined, but also conceptually fertile. They provide a parsimonious yet integrative framework that brings coherence to a previously fragmented literature, while illuminating the strategic logics of crisis management, containment, and exploitation. By distinguishing among these modes, the typology conceptualizes crises as exceptional disruptions to be endured, bounded problems to be solved, or political opportunities to be

seized, thereby clarifying the political principles and timeframes that shape crisis responses. This analytical lens helps explain why similar crisis events can yield divergent policy outcomes depending on the mode of governance at play. It also paves the way for further research into the structural and agential conditions under which each mode emerges, and the implications these dynamics have for democratic accountability, institutional resilience, and long-term policy development.

Beyond these analytical contributions, our review also has important implications for research and practice. For scholars, it highlights the need to move beyond ad hoc accounts of crisis response and to develop comparative, mechanism-based frameworks that systematically integrate politics and policy. For policymakers, the evidence suggests that crises are rarely neutral triggers but are instead actively framed and strategically mobilized by political actors. Recognizing this can help decision-makers to anticipate how crises may be used to justify continuity, incremental adaptation or major reforms, and to better understand the political risks and opportunities that accompany emergency action.

To sum up, this review represents a solid starting point for developing a theoretical framework that can also be translated into an analytical tool suitable for empirical (and comparative) analysis of the relationship between crises and policy change, one that does not overlook its inherently political dimension.

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## Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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