Long-term policy impacts of the coronavirus: normalization, adaptation, and acceleration in the post-COVID state

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Abstract

This paper offers an analysis of the theoretical and empirical challenges the coronavirus pandemic poses for theories of policy change. Critical events like coronavirus disease are potentially powerful destabilizers that can trigger discontinuity in policy trajectories and thus are an opportunity for accentuating path shifts. In this paper, we argue that three dynamic pathways of change are possible and must be considered when analysing post-COVID policymaking: normalization, adaptation, and acceleration. These different pathways need to be explored in order to understand the mid- and long-term policy effects of the pandemic. This introduction contextualizes the articles in this special issue, situating them broadly within two broad categories: (a) assessment of how the coronavirus disease pandemic should be understood as a crisis event, and its role in relationship to mechanisms of policy change; and (b) mapping the future contours of the pandemic's impact on substantive policy areas, including education, health care, public finance, social protection, population ageing, the future of work, and violence against women.

Keywords: covid-19; policy change; path dependency; policy punctuation; coronavirus

Coronavirus disease is an epochal event, similar to the Great Depression and World War II in many countries, that has affected social and economic lives of populations around the globe. But its effects have varied considerably across countries and sectors, as have the responses of governments to it.

From a public policy perspective, coronavirus disease is a natural experiment for gaining rare insights into large exogenous events as it allows us to directly observe and compare changes along different dimensions. The variations in government responses as well as the similarities offer an exceptional opportunity for social scientists to test political, economic, and social theories about how crises and other similar events alter policy outputs, outcomes, and trajectories over time.

The magnitude of coronavirus disease is so great that it can be reasonably expected to be a powerful trigger for changes in many aspects of state behavior and even affect the overall role of the state in the post-pandemic period. Indeed, coronavirus disease might be expected to shape the "post-COVID" state in the same way that World War II affected the "Post-War" state in terms of not only reshuffling policy priorities and policy strategies but also the mix of policy tools across a wide variety if not all sectors and subsectors.

From a public policy perspective, the disruptions triggered by the pandemic offer a once-in-a-lifetime possibility to test the expectations and assumptions of theories of policy change, potentially generating a new theoretical and empirical corpus of knowledge in the discipline. Among other things, coronavirus disease allows us to test directly the nature and extent of path dependences and institutional lock-in of many policies and how these combine with the crisis to impact any desire to return to normal, or to lock in new changes, in a post-pandemic world.

Will the policy changes that appeared during the management of the pandemic continue to remain in place, will the *status quo ante* return as the conservative aspects of policy resilience prevail over the opportunities for change, or are we likely to see a mix of the new and the old—and if so, what does this tell us about stabilizing and disruptive effects of events of this kind (Capano & Woo, 2017)? If changes are on the cards, will these occur incrementally or radically? For example, will the heightened concerns over inequities that emerged during the pandemic lead to significant reforms to society in the future or will these concerns subside once the pandemic is behind us or reduced in impact?

The purpose of this issue is to explore potential policy pathways to the future and forward-map the post-COVID era. It comprises several theoretical and conceptual discussions of policy change and the impact of crises of different kinds on policy integration, accumulation, and disintegration, as well as several case studies of key issue areas which could be thought to be strongly affected by the pandemic, in elder care, gender relations in the workplace, education, economic management, social policy, and, of course, healthcare. These cases serve as empirical tests of the propositions and observations contained in the theoretical and conceptual studies.

In the following section, we summarize and assess the explanations of policy changes resulting from events such as coronavirus disease culled from the extant literature on the subject of policy dynamics and policy legacies. In the third section, we show how these theoretical frameworks of policy change can be applied to the coronavirus disease pandemic and to the likely direction and content of its consequences. In the fourth section, we outline the content of the theoretical and empirical papers included in this special issue and discuss what lessons policy scholars can draw about the post-COVID state and policy change in general on the basis of these studies.

The unforeseeable path of policy change

Understanding how and why policies change has been at the centre of policy studies for decades (Capano, 2012). Despite this, policy change remains insufficiently understood. The first major hurdle to comprehension is the difficulty of defining exactly what is the dependent variable, or the aspect of policy that changes and should be the subject of analysis (Green-Pedersen, 2004; Howlett & Cashore, 2009). Reconciling theories of policy change with theories of policy stability, which often highlight different processes and drivers, is also a major impediment to the understanding of these phenomena (Capano & Howlett, 2009; Clemens & Cook, 1999).

Some progress toward better understanding policy dynamics has been made in recent years, however, with scholars broadly agreeing that policies are composed of a multilayered combination of goals and means, including high-level ideological and governance ideas, program-level objectives and instruments, and micro-level specifications and (re)calibrations, which can change individually or together (Hall, 1993; Howlett & Cashore, 2014). Similarly, the development of concepts such as punctuated equilibrium, policy paradigms, and path dependency perspectives have brought into sharper focus how routine and extraordinary dynamics—or policy stability and policy change—combine, helping explain how policies commonly exhibit periods of relative stability relative to those featuring more robust shifts in their configurative elements (Baumgartner & Jones, 2002; Pierson, 1992).

This latter approach is especially germane in the case of coronavirus disease as it highlights both how some policies can remain locked in or relatively impervious to even large external shocks while others may either be reinforced or undermined by these same forces (Daugbjerg, 2003; Skogstad, 2017). Such works emphasize the need to focus upon and understand the manner in which past actions set the trajectory of policymaking in relatively permanent and impervious ways, with positive feedback locking in the status quo (Arthur, 1989; Kline, 2001). And they also highlight how these trajectories can sometimes be undermined and focus attention on the role played in this by exogenous shocks or internal (negative) feedback processes such as the counter-mobilization of opponents to the status quo

or other actor behaviors, including opportunistic or entrepreneurial linking of crises and opportunities (Blyth, 2002; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Pierson, 2000; Sabatier, 1988).

The belief that a policy will likely continue on its present course unless a path is disrupted is now a mainstream assumption in the field (Lindblom, 1959; Migone & Howlett, 2015). The corollary is that when a path is disrupted, new and different trajectories are likely to emerge (Grossman, 2015; Williams, 2009). Described as "path dependency" theory by many (Mahoney, 2000), the idea that many policies develop their own self-reinforcing trajectory—or "path"—helps make sense of empirical observations such as how, for example, long-term abstract policy goals or "paradigms" emerge and lock in common elements of policy regimes. But it also helps to explain how the normative and cognitive/ideational beliefs that underlie those paradigms can change, along with the policy instruments and settings that characterize their content (Hogan & Howlett, 2015; Howlett, 2019; Howlett & Tosun, 2019).

However, such a conceptualization must be applied carefully (Deeg, 2001; Dobrowolsky & Saint-Martin, 2005; Kay, 2005). It cannot simply be assumed that policies never change or, alternatively, change constantly; rather, the conceptualization provides an overarching framework for understanding these and other forms of policy change. Importantly, it provides purchase for the analysis of how the internal dimensions of policies are affected by exogenous and endogenous events, including mega-events such as coronavirus disease.

One persistent problem path dependency perspectives have faced, for example, is the lack of clarity on precisely when and how the paths break or shift, a subject of key concern with envisioning the future of the post-COVID state. The recent literature on "critical junctures" as "triggers" of path change, however, has offered new insights into this subject which are germane to the case of coronavirus disease (Capoccia, 2016; Pierson, 1996; Stark, 2018). In this work, critical junctures are said to be characterized by the emergence of some permissive conditions (e.g., rapid economic growth or collapse, a change of government, international pressure) that destabilize important aspects of an existing policy regime such as key institutions, politics, policy ideas, or governance arrangements. When these "permissive" conditions are accompanied by "conducive" conditions—such as the presence of new ideas, leadership, or entrepreneurship of certain policymakers, the lobbying activities of interest groups, etc.—a juncture may trigger policy change despite path dependency (Donnelly & Hogan, 2012; Hogan, 2006). As a result, at certain points in time and not always, and only in specific sectors and circumstances, will the policy legacies which constitute and hold a "path" together be superseded by new possibilities arising out of a confluence of conducive conditions (Soifer, 2012).

But how often this occurs, where and why remain poorly understood, which is why a once-in-a-lifetime natural experiment such as coronavirus disease provides an exceptional opportunity for assessing the impact of a mega-event on policy trajectories. *Ceteris paribus*, such a massive cross-sectoral event can be expected to serve as a critical juncture in many areas and lead to many path disruptions.

But the outcomes of external shocks in general and in specific sectors are unpredictable, as many empirical studies have shown that even major crises may or may not precipitate significant across-the-board policy changes or even changes in those most proximate sectors which might otherwise be expected to be the most severely affected (Boin et al., 2019; McConnell & Stark, 2021). And even when change does occur, it does not necessarily develop in a radical way: it could follow an incremental sequence whose real effects may not be recognized for a long time. Moreover, even when the impact of an external shock is large, it can produce differentiated medium- to long-term effects according to the specific characteristics of the policy sector. The different magnitudes to which policy sectors are directly or indirectly affected by the event are a major subject of interest in the policy sciences and within path dependency approaches highlights the need to carefully examine the nature of the crisis, the kind of critical juncture it is, the degree to which policy elements are entrenched, and the proximate or distant nature of policy sectors from the impact of the event itself. This is what the articles in this special issue investigate.

Coronavirus disease: drivers and dynamics of change
The coronavirus disease pandemic: a critical crisis?

As a wide-ranging, fast-spreading global phenomenon that affected millions of people around the globe in roughly equivalent ways, the coronavirus disease pandemic that erupted in 2020 serves as a major

potentially path-altering event that provides fertile ground for generating and investigating hypotheses related to both policy change and stability (Capano et al., 2020; Weible et al., 2020). As noted by many (Boin & McConnel, 2021), coronavirus disease was a creeping crisis which evolved over time—indeed is still evolving (Boin, Ekengren, Rhinard, 2020). It was also a transboundary crisis which spanned all corners of the world. In addition, it was a highly unequal crisis in which public health measures were a financial boom for those with jobs and resources and a ruin for small businesses and those in casual employment. It also exposed and accentuated existing policy problems such as social vulnerability (Perri et al., 2020), racial cleavages (Abedi et al., 2020), income and wealth inequality (Clouston et al., 2021; Patel et al., 2020), educational and social divisions (Grewenig et al., 2020), weak healthcare (Butler, 2020), and policy blind-spots such as elder care (Bach & Wegrich 2019).

From a policy theory perspective, coronavirus disease can thus be thought of as potentially a significant path disrupter as well as a direct cause of policy problems, undermining traditions, reorienting trajectories, and altering prevailing policy paradigms and practices across countries and sectors. That is, the emergence and persistence of coronavirus disease is an archetypal example of an exogenous shock with endogenous carry-on characteristics potentially affecting a wide swath of social and state behaviors, institutions and policymaking activities and deliberations. Unlike other crises such as earthquakes, financial shocks, or other epidemics which have affected only particular sectors or locations or are short-lived, coronavirus disease is a rare event, like a major war or long-lasting financial depression, whose effects have been widespread and deep, disrupting many different aspects of social, economic, and political life (Boin et al., 2018; Rhinard, 2019) "all at the same time."

Like with a war or depression, whose impacts may last for generations and affect policies in many initially unexpected ways (Peacock & Wiseman, 1961), it is still early to ascertain all the specific problems the emergence and spread of the coronavirus caused and all its long-term ramifications. For example, the initial response to the coronavirus was, on the one hand, determined by existing decision-making and policy processes or implementation styles (Capano, 2020; Maor & Howlett, 2020; Mazey & Richardson, 2020; Mei, 2020; Nguyen, 2020; Ruiu, 2020) and in most cases reinforced those already existing styles (Howlett, 2021; Howlett & Tosun, 2019). But at the same time, the content of many economic and social policies, in addition to public health measures, did change deeply as the pandemic progressed and show all signs of retaining their present shape and new trajectory going forward into the future. For instance, working from home quickly became a norm in many knowledge-based industries, with major implications for family and work life, without much discussion or thought of their long-term effects on family well-being, and in many cases is only reverting slowly, if at all, back to pre-COVID work norms and labor practices.

Some of these changes in key sectors immediately impacted by the virus, such as healthcare, were reinforced by repeated deployment of emergency measures in the face of intermittent surges in infection, which created a snowball effect reinforcing initial changes, augmenting the likelihood of long-term changes to policy trajectories. In healthcare, new public health initiatives, delivery vehicles, and communications strategies appeared swiftly along with pioneering new technologies and intervention modalities that are unlikely to recede quickly as the pandemic wanes. This also is true, for example, in social protection, where many new programs offering income support without means-testing were launched quickly, altering the existing policy mixes and changing their rationale and orientation. Many governments in wealthier countries stumbled into launching basic income support programs after years of hesitation due to concerns about their costs and fiscal sustainability.

The situation with respect to these changes in the "proximate" sectors most closely and quickly affected by the pandemic are relatively clear. However, in more distant sectors, the situation is more murky. For example, the same pattern is potentially true in the fiscal realm, where considerations about debts and deficits, which had been a central feature of neo-liberal budgeting and deficit fighting for decades, disappeared overnight as governments assumed unparalleled levels of debt to fund programs and offset the economic impacts of lockdowns. But whether or not these changes will persist in the face of feedback processes such as increased inflation is uncertain. This is true in other areas such as technology policy, where in some countries opportunistic governments sometimes took advantage of a public desire for better communication and data to reduce the scope and scale of existing privacy laws and restrictions on data access—although this backsliding may be temporary. And the same is true of changes in educational practices, which often moved off-line or to home schooling but quickly "bounced back" to their previous arrangements once the worst of the pandemic had passed.

On the other hand, perhaps the greatest potential change linked to the pandemic is in the area of social policy and gender relations with respect to working conditions, which may prove very difficult to reverse. With a large share of the workforce being allowed to work from home and thus retain income (while others lost their sources of livelihood due to the nature their jobs which had to be performed on-site), large-scale changes in working conditions and practices remain widely popular and affect many other sectors, such as education, as well as primordial aspects of gender and other kinds of social relations.

Thus, a key question to which many policy scholars, including those included in this issue, have turned their attention is to whether and why these changes occurred in proximate and distant areas of government and social activity, and which will stay in the post-COVID era. Many new programs and initiatives that began as short-term reactions to the crisis may not disappear with the end of the crisis as many governments and observers initially expected. The expectations of path-dependency-inspired policy change theory highlighted above, however, suggest that many of the changes in fact may be trajectory-altering and thus very unlikely to revert to status quo ante, although it is not yet clear exactly how they might be institutionalised over the long term.

Assessing and understanding the long-term impacts of COVID-inspired changes and their long-term endurance represents a significant challenge to policy scientists and is the central concern of the articles in this thematic issue.

Potential post-COVID policy trajectories: normalization, adaptation, acceleration

To begin this process of understanding the impact of coronavirus disease as a crisis event shaping future policy trajectories we need go back to define what is meant by a "crisis."

Crises are typically understood as exogenous events or a collection of events that cause "collective stress" (Barton, 1969; 't Hart & Boin, 2022). But not all situations of "collective stress" necessarily produce crises, since collective stresses such as racial or ethnic tensions can often be resolved or addressed through existing social, political, institutional, and policy processes. For this reason it is better to define a crisis in the context of a "collective stress" (within an organization, policy system or subsystem, or sector) in situations where, to drawn on Lukton's schema, the existing means of problem solving, the existing tools, institutional resources and policy frames no longer work in a given situation, requiring new configurations of policymaking, potentially drawing in new actors and ideas, in order to address events (Lukton, 1974, p. 385; Howlett & Ramesh, 1998).

As we have seen, coronavirus disease's precise impact on policymaking and policy content has varied substantially across governments and sectors (Capano et al., 2020; Howlett, 2021). We know, for example, that many countries in the Asia Pacific (including China and Australia) locked down their borders and effectively blocked the spread of the virus in the early stages of the pandemic. In those countries, then, *ceteris paribus,* we would expect to find much less across-the-board disruption than in countries such as Brazil, Italy, Sweden or the UK and USA, which underwent significant shocks and disruptions in repeated "waves" over a long period of time, meaning existing policy frames, tools and institutional resources experienced repeated "collective stress." *Prima facie,* we would expect even "strong" COVID-inspired phenomena such as post-COVID rates of working from home to vary significantly across these nations. Similarly, it may be expected that basic income programs are more likely to proliferate in hard-hit jurisdictions than in less-impacted ones.

Empirical study of such questions is needed to establish the accuracy of these assumptions. However, such studies require analytical frameworks which allow them to capture the significant aspects of the variations in impact, outcome and future policy trajectories.

After a large crisis, understood as an episode of "collective stress" on institutional resources, know-how and extant policy frames and approaches, three different policy dynamics can be conceptualized according to the various political, social, economic, and policy characteristics of any resulting policy impacts. These can be characterized as "normalization," "adaptation," and "acceleration." While these three dynamics are treated here separately, they may coexist and overlap in reality.

"Normalization" occurs when new social and policy practices and ideas developed during a crisis become the "new normal." When this occurs, they are taken for granted or as "natural" in everyday life, despite their only very recent provenance. This process of normalisation can also have a direct

effect on public policies, especially their design. coronavirus disease, for example, impacted not only the content and structure of various regulations in education, health, social care, labor and public transportation, but also individuals' behavior. The concept of a "new normal" which some have mooted (El-Erian, 2010) assumes that coronavirus disease will stay with us for a long time in some form and that the pandemic risk will be interiorized by people, becoming not only a reference point for assessment of governmental policies but also a catalytic activator for reconceptualizing social practices and behaviors (World Health Organization, 2020). This process is equivalent to what occurs when a new path develops in path dependency theory. The degree and extent of "renormalization" in specific policy areas remains an empirical question and subject to empirically informed theorization about causes and effects and the precise mechanisms which bring them about.

"Adaptation" refers to a second process in which policies from pre-crisis eras are not so much superceded or replaced as intentionally realigned with the new environmental context. Drawing on the organizational behavior literature, it can be assumed that such policy adaptation is not necessarily always successful in terms of performance (Sarta et al., 2021). Rather, it depends on the nature of existing policy legacies and the extent to which they have been disrupted by the pandemic shock, as well as upon the structural conditions in which the shock occurs and the actual policy capacities of the governments which must deal with them (Wu et al., 2015). Therefore, we should expect to find in some sectors or issue areas a significant effort to adapt policies to the new normal, but where the outputs and the outcomes of these policy adaptation processes cannot be taken for granted. In path dependency terms this refers to path continuity, which, in extremis, can also lead to path disruptions and new policy trajectories but which generally does not. This raises an important question: If adaptation is the process by which policies normally change, does the process work in the same way when adaptation is imposed by a critical external shock? Scholars of crisis management are sceptical about this (as shown by Boin and 't Hart in this thematic issue), and the expectation is that path dependencies play a large role here and matter greatly in affecting how much change occurs and when. However, this too is an empirical question and the critical characteristics of the coronavirus disease pandemic potentially offer huge opportunities for unexpected adaptations to be triggered by policy entrepreneurs (as underlined by Mintrom and True in this thematic issue) and thus for many more significant changes in various other sectors than might be expected in lesser circumstances.

"Acceleration" is the third process that captures another possible direct consequence of a crisis or critical juncture—one which comprises a mechanism through which dynamics and processes that may only have been sketched out or in their infancy in the pre-crisis period are allowed to accelerate and develop more rapidly than might otherwise have been the case thanks to the shock that destabilized the existing policy equilibrium. Hogan, Howlett, and Murphy in this issue, for example, consider coronavirus disease to be such a "path clearing" accelerator in many areas directly impacted by the pandemic, pushing ideas, practices, and dynamics that already existed but were bordered by hegemonic policy paradigms and governance arrangements faster down the road to entrenchment. Acceleration, thus, means that the evolutionary nature of policy dynamics is sped up. Of course, it may also fail to occur or in some cases act as a brake, as occurs when policy change in one area is displaced by the effort put into change in the affected area, actually "reducing" the amount and extent of change occurring in the former.

Normalization, adaptation, and acceleration are not on their own drivers of better policy performance. Rather, they describe "processes" of change and possible long-term reactions to a crisis which involve, in path dependency terms, path continuity, path disruption, and path clearing. Their content in terms of quality of outputs and outcomes and their integration depends on the way policies are addressed, and thus on the characteristics of the design processes and the policy capacities used in implementing them, be they in directly proximate or areas only initially distantly related to an event such as coronavirus disease.

The content of the special issue

At the time of writing, vaccines have arrived and have reduced the lethality of the coronavirus and susceptibility of large parts of the populace to coronavirus disease, reducing although not eliminating the threats posed by the disease over the two-year period from late 2019 to late 2021. But despite this change in the prognosis of the pandemic, a V-shaped recovery to the "old normal" is unlikely.

Responses to coronavirus disease have created a mash-up of new and old normal practices that need to be investigated, disaggregated and understood in the context of the insights of policy theory and practice.

This thematic issue investigates and elaborates on these long-term impacts of coronavirus mitigation and adaptation efforts across a broad range of directly and indirectly impacted policy sectors and subsectors. It features forward-looking analyses of the long-term policy impacts in different countries and sectors associated with the process of normalization, adaptation, and acceleration.

The essays in this collection address these and other questions, both theoretically and empirically.

In Part 1, four essays examine current thinking around policy change, crisis, and disruption and elaborate on the elements and concepts contained in the brief theoretical sketch set out above.

Arjen Boin and Paul 't Hart, after underlining that crises are complex phenomena whose medium- and long-term effects cannot be taken for granted, focus on the role of postcrisis framing as powerful devices to structure those effects. By holding the assumption that meaning-making is a crucial driver of postcrisis processes, they propose three possible paths of framing connecting the pre- and post-COVID ages: the crisis > learning > adaptation script, the crisis > blame > games script, and the crisis > exploitation > reform script. These scripts, they argue, can emerge according to different policy and political characteristics (and among them the relevance of political leaders is underlined).

Christoph Knill and Yves Steinebach then address directly the differential impact of coronavirus disease on "proximate" and "distant" sectors, looking for commonalities across this dimension. Based on a comprehensive analysis of policy agenda developments in Germany, they find that the pandemic led to profound shifts in political attention across policy areas and demonstrate that these agenda gains and losses per policy area vary by the extent to which the respective areas were relevant to managing the coronavirus disease crisis and its repercussions. Relying on the analysis of four past economic crises in the country, they find that there is limited potential for "catching up dynamics" after the crisis is over. That is, they conclude that policy areas that lost agenda share during crisis are unlikely to make up for these losses by strong attention gains once the crisis is over. As such, they argue that the crisis has had substantial, long-term and so far, neglected effects on policymaking in modern democracies and path disruptions are likely to continue to occur and persist across many key sectors.

John Hogan, Michael Howlett, and Mary Murphy then analyse the relationships between the coronavirus disease crisis and "critical junctures", focussing on the exact nature of the different kinds of policy punctuations which create, further, or alter policy trajectories. They propose a nuanced and detailed conceptualization of such junctures and punctuations by distinguishing five types: path initiation, path reinforcement, critical juncture, path clearing, and path termination. Given this analytical clarification, they hold, like Knill and Steinebach, that coronavirus disease acted in many cases as a path clearing accelerator that helped to entrench or further develop trajectories depending on the nature of the policy activity involved. In their case, however, the authors suggest that the extent of entrenchment of policy legacies was critically important as changes were more likely in new policy areas while older areas remained generally impervious to such change and in some cases even regressed.

Martino Maggetti and Philipp Trein discuss the nature of these path disruptions or accelerations and the impact they have on policy integration, a goal which many governments have striven for over many years in most policy areas. They show that differences in the capacity of governments around the world to deal with the impacts of the coronavirus disease pandemic greatly affected whether or not they were able to integrate and coordinate different policy instruments into coherent pre-, during, or post-response initiatives. Particularly, they find the interplay between health policy and economic policy in many countries to have been articulated between two extreme poles of a continuum: on the one hand, policy designs based on the complementary of pro-public health and pro-economy measures, implying a policy integrated response, and, on the other, designs based on the perception of a necessary trade-off between the two. The authors consider these policy responses to the coronavirus disease crisis as well as their social, economic, and political consequences for the post-COVID state and illustrate them with empirical examples.

In Part 2, a series of detailed essays examine specific major policy areas—healthcare, social welfare, labor market, education, gender, senior care, technology and privacy policy, and fiscal policy—and examine in detail how these sectors have been managed in the pre-COVID era, how and whether they were proximate or distant to the crisis, and how these sectors were disrupted and rebuilt across a variety

of country settings. Specific attention is given to the nature of the redesign that occurred in these sectors over the past 2 years by focussing on questions such as:

1. How is the redesign characterized in terms of policy priorities, policy instruments, and expected outcomes?
2. Does the rebuilt policy represent an adaptive return to the previous situation or is it a novelty resulting from innovation?
3. To what extent does the redesign ensure that it is more robust and adaptive in the face of future shocks and challenges?
4. Are there any specific lessons that can be drawn from these studies of coronavirus disease effects about how such crises influence the redesign, content, and operation of the new policy?

In his chapter, Usman Chohan analyses the impact of coronavirus disease on public finance issues such as national debt and deficit levels, especially (but not exclusively) in developed countries, which have sought to cushion the public health and economic damage of the coronavirus outbreak. He notes a potential turn away from older models of neoliberal austerity and a return to some aspects of Keynesian ideas and policies. The article contextualizes how post-COVID public finance paradigms reflect such a Keynesian tilt, and highlights how different groups of countries are realizing this tilt to different degrees and why.

Azad Singh Bali, Alex He, and M Ramesh in their study focus on the impact of coronavirus disease in the future of health policy in comparative perspective. The paper outlines broad trends and reforms underway prior to the pandemic and highlights likely trajectories in these aspects in the future. The paper argues that while the pandemic has accelerated changes already underway before the crisis, it has made little headway in clearing the path for other or deeper health policy reform due to the entrenched path dependency and structural interests that characterise the sector and impede major reforms.

David Weisstanner reviews the debates in the social policy area, focusing on how proposals for universal basic income (UBI) have emerged as a potential response to employment shocks and explores how public support for UBI in European countries has changed as a result of the pandemic. Using data from the European Social Survey, Weisstanner shows that patterns of UBI support have differed significantly from support for traditional welfare state policies. He argues that lukewarm public support towards UBI explains why few governments have implemented UBI systems, whether before the pandemic or in response to it. At the same time, he notes that debates about UBI are likely to facilitate the introduction of means-tested and time-limited guarantees of basic income which will alter aspects of preexisting debates. These findings suggest that although coronavirus disease has not led to a decisive change in policy trajectories toward unconditional UBI schemes, it has renewed attention to policies guaranteeing a minimum safety net and may well have served as a policy accelerator in this area.

Adrián Zancajo, Antoni Verger, and Pedro Bolea focus on education, which is one of the policy sectors hardest hit by the pandemic. They show how various international organizations and policy entrepreneurs have used the pandemic as an opportunity to promote their policy priorities in international and national agendas for education from preschool and K-12 to postsecondary and beyond. However, they find governments' responses to the crisis in this sector have varied substantially and are contingent on the institutional characteristics of national educational systems They argue that previous levels of digitalization of the system and the level of social inequalities in education have shaped governments' policy responses. The teaching profession's autonomy and the culture of social dialogue between educational authorities and teachers' unions have also been important mediating factors, especially around decisions on school reopening. These characteristics make the education system especially impervious to change and has limited the impact of the pandemic in this important social institution and area of activity of the post-COVID state.

Li, Ma, and Wu then address one of the potentially most overt continuing impacts of the pandemic on all of our lives, the use of contact tracing technologies and the implications for data privacy and data governance. In the absence of therapeutics and with continuing uneven rates of vaccination, nearly all governments initiated various means to logistically track and trace the movement of individuals in order to facilitate the isolation and quarantining of those exposed to the coronavirus

disease virus. Governments, most often in conjunction with private service providers, developed mobile applications or drew on mobility data from private companies (i.e., Apple, Google, etc.) to trace personal mobility. While many such technologies were disappointing or encountered unexpected roll-out difficulties, however, the efforts to do so revealed and reinforced tensions between the information needs of public health agencies and governments and issues of privacy and data protection for individuals. Li, Ma, and Wu's paper explores the extent to which coronavirus disease and digital contact tracing has led to changes in data governance, if at all, and what the implications of these changes might be in the post-COVID world. Focusing on the cases of China, Hong Kong, and Singapore, their findings suggest that the future balancing of government needs against personal data privacy will depend on co-production of the regulatory tools necessary to oversee such technologies, greater data literacy among individuals, and greater transparency in terms of the protocols for data management by government. However, they see little evidence yet that such new approaches are emerging.

Mike Mintrom and Jacqui True analyze the United Nations' strategy and efforts to eliminate violence against women, which it calls a "shadow pandemic." The paper shows how an advocacy strategy pursued by the United Nations over the course of the pandemic has driven policy changes at the local and national levels that are intended to have long-term impacts on reducing violence. The case study identifies coronavirus disease as a policy window that has facilitated a significant reframing of the global agenda on violence against women.

In her chapter, Lina Vyas focusses on one of the deepest impacts of coronavirus disease—the huge workplace experiment by which the world has been forced to rethink how it should work and engage in employment activities. Despite the nascent and uneven return of domestic and international travel, recurrent COVID hotspots, including possible intermittent travel restrictions and work from home requirements, have continued to curtail the geographic mobility of the workforce, ensconcing virtual meeting and remote working arrangements which look set to continue into the post-COVID era. Indeed, Vyas speculates that flexible scheduling and work practices, coupled with the desire to balance work–life commitments will likely drive worker demands for continued flexibility and force employers to move to more flexible working arrangements as standard, with consequent impact on the nature of work and work–life balance, and the demand for office space.

Finally, the article by Gietel-Basten, Matus, and Mori explores the impact of COVID as a potential trigger for policy innovation in elder policy, including health policy and inter-sectoral issues associated with elder well-being, carer, and home support services. Focusing on policy approaches in Asia in three core areas (income protection, health, and social welfare), their findings reveal highly uneven specific support for older persons across the region, with non-state actors (NGOs) typically providing essential services to the elderly in the absence of sufficiently targeted policies by government. Further, their findings also reveal poor levels of inter-agency and intergovernment coordination, with policy approaches often designed as single-actor models, limiting their potential impact and highlighting the need for better inter-sectoral integration of elder policy. Importantly, too, despite the disproportionate impact of COVID on the elderly and expectations that this might trigger fundamental shifts in policy approaches, especially efforts to enhance inter-government/inter-agency coordination, Gietel-Basten, Matus, and Mori find little evidence to support this. Rather, they conclude, while several innovations can be observed in terms of how specific stakeholders responded to the pandemic, the broader policy frameworks and approaches to the elderly in Asia remain largely similar to those existing previous to the pandemic.

Together, these essays, and the thematic issue as a whole, begin the process of developing the theoretical and conceptual analyses and empirical insights needed to aid our understanding of the post-COVID state and its emerging policy norms and impacts across a wide spectrum of cases and countries. Thanks to these contributions, it is clear that the post-COVID age will be a challenging one, not only for people, organizations and states dealing with the impact of the pandemic on their own lives and activities, but also for policy scholars, their theoretical frameworks and their empirical research.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

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