

RESEARCH

The Attractions and Limitations of Pragmatist Crisis Management: A Discussion in Light of COVID-19 Experiences

Arjen Boin¹ and Martin Lodge²

¹ Leiden University Department of Political Science, NL

² London School of Economics, Department of Government, UK

Corresponding author: Arjen Boin (boin@fsw.leidenuniv.nl)

In a crisis, the temptation for political leaders to ‘go big and do it fast’ can be overwhelming. Societal pressure to act decisively can lead to crisis measures that in hindsight may well be considered overwrought and impulsive. The so-called pragmatist approach to crisis management offers an attractive alternative to the ‘big decision’ approach that was also popular during the COVID-19 crisis. At least in theory, this alternative offers solutions for the often-observed shortcomings of large-scale crisis responses. In this paper, we consider the possibilities and limitations of the Pragmatist approach, using illustrations from the ongoing Covid-19 crisis.

Keywords: crisis management; crisis leadership; uncertainty; Pragmatist approach

Introduction: The lure of big decisions and a possible antidote

The first two decades of the 21st century have offered an array of valuable insights for students of crisis management [1]. This century first presented us with 9/11, Enron and Hurricane Katrina, the tsunami in Japan and the nuclear disaster at Fukushima, moving onwards to the financial crisis, multiple refugee crises and wildfires, all before the current Covid-19 pandemic. These epochal events – and we could list many more – have, in one way or another, tested the crisis management capacities of the nation state.¹

Bureaucracies were designed to deal with routine processes. Situations of crisis defy easy categorization – they combine dynamic and complex processes with a dearth of information – and therefore challenge routine bureaucratic life. To address the management of crises, additional structures and processes have been layered onto ‘normal’ bureaucracies. We have seen the development of professional crisis managers, elaborate organisational structures, and sophisticated crisis information systems. Crisis manuals pervade organisational life, crisis rooms are on permanent standby, and heads of government and ministers are regularly subjected to crisis exercises.

This new reality of ostensibly professionalised and bureaucratized crisis management contrasts with an earlier age where the presence of crisis rooms and their activation might have been viewed as a source of public concern rather than reassurance. It has also given new life to the classic adage that, paraphrasing the words of Murray Edelman [3, p. 47], a government which prides itself on its crisis management skills is likely to discover crises that it can manage.

The considerable attention devoted to preparing for crises has arguably led us astray from a very simple yet critical question: What is good crisis management? In the early years of crisis management research, the answer was typically related to critical decision-making [4]. Good crisis management was a matter of timely and often ‘big’ decisions. It was informed by the notion of strong (or weak) crisis leaders who dared to make critical decisions with little or no information, a ticking clock and in the face of solid opposition.

Here we explore an alternative approach to crisis management, one informed by pragmatist principles [5, 6]. It embodies the ambition to improve political decision-making in the face of deep uncertainty. It does not propagate big ‘do-or-die’ decisions, but instead prescribes a rather cautious approach of incremental steps that trigger instant feedback on the effect of the decisions taken. This approach arguably helps policy-makers to avoid some of the key problems widely identified in the crisis management literature (such as late detection or leadership paralysis). But while we think this approach works in theory, the question is if it works in practice. More specifically, we ask what lessons can be drawn for this approach in the context of the Covid-19 crisis?

¹ These events may differ in terms of duration, scope and consequences, but all these events share the unifying properties of dire threat, a sense of urgency, and deep uncertainty – thus bringing them together under the moniker of crisis [2].

In seeking to answer this question, we begin by discussing the key pre-requisites for a pragmatist approach. We subsequently explore whether and how the pragmatist approach to crisis management played out in the light of the first (March–June 2020) and second (November–March 2021) waves of the Covid-19 crisis. We do not aspire to offer a systematic comparison of different national approaches [7], but rather to use available information to prod and explore the usefulness of a pragmatist crisis approach.

We argue that the Covid-19 crisis exposed the demanding pre-requisites for a pragmatically informed approach towards crisis management. But the global crisis also points to ways forward. In the conclusion, we suggest several ways in which a pragmatist approach can contribute to more effective and legitimate crisis responses.

A pragmatist approach towards crisis management

Crises require decision-making under conditions of uncertainty: decisions aimed at taking away causes, the dampening or de-escalation of unfolding crises, or the limiting of consequences. Making decisions in these circumstances – without the desired or required information available – is extremely challenging for decision-makers. As political leaders (and policymakers even more so) loathe uncertainty, there is much emphasis on collecting as much information as possible and relying on ‘evidence-based’ approaches set out in crisis plans to draw sound inferences.

But in crisis situations, verified information is simply not available (crisis is, after all, defined in terms of uncertainty). The quest for certainty, to borrow from John Dewey [8], is bound to fail. To make things worse, decision-makers cannot simply wait for further information or ‘sit it out’. There is no time to consult with all parties involved in order to learn more. Decision-makers quickly discover, to their dismay, that the available crisis manuals – if they can find any – are of limited use and possibly counter-productive. They are operating in the dark.

Crisis decision-making is then quickly reduced to informed guesswork. Policymakers have to make immediate decisions without so much as an indication as to the effectiveness and potential side-effects of their decisions.² The only thing they know for certain is that they will face the inevitable post-crisis ‘inquiry’ that in all likelihood will zero in on their liability and how blame should be distributed [10]. The danger of crisis paralysis is real.

While not speaking directly to the world of crisis management or to the crisis phenomenon itself, the pragmatist tradition in American philosophy offers intriguing suggestions as to how to deal with a world filled with urgent threats and deep uncertainty [6].³ A pragmatist approach to crisis management places a premium on discovery through action. Uncertainty is not considered a paralysing constraint, but rather a normal feature of the challenge at hand. To discover what the best course of action is, policymakers formulate an initial hypothesis, a rough idea about the causal relation between crisis measure and effect. Immediate and successive feedback is central; by acting and reacting, decision-makers learn and adjust. It is therefore best that policymakers take small steps that allow for immediate feedback. The pragmatist approach is reflected in the classic idea of incrementalism [11], which is rarely associated with crisis management (small incremental steps appear an anathema when the situation seems to demand dramatic decisions).

It is crisis management through gradual steps, backed by an immediate and iterative feedback process, which helps decision-makers to quickly and effectively adjust their policy interventions to a dynamic situation. It invites ‘experimentation’ in that different interventions are explored in different areas, so as to enable better understanding as to how different interventions may perform. Uncertainty is tamed through continuous engagement with the environment. This crisis management approach centres around learning, which is ‘experiential’ rather than based on deductive reasoning [12]. It is a process of constant evaluation.

Addressing common crisis management challenges

The pragmatist approach appears well suited, at least in theory, to a situation that is characterised by deep uncertainty and an absence of evidence-based strategies. The question is whether a pragmatist approach to crisis management offers remedies to the often-diagnosed problems that plague governments dealing with crises. Let us briefly consider some of these common problems – and how a pragmatist approach might seek to mitigate them.

Crises are associated with extreme forms of leadership. We already discussed the possibility of paralysis. But there is also an opposing concern that politicians view crises as an ‘unmissable’ opportunity to display their ‘strong leadership’ qualities. The seductive appeal of a big and daring decision – announced in dramatic terms, emphasizing the dire need for a radical choice – may be hard to resist. Exceptional circumstances can quickly give rise to a request for, or the granting of, extraordinary executive powers. The political instinct to enhance one’s political profile to appear as a ‘strong leader’ is arguably fed by societal clamouring for decisive action.⁴ The problem with such posturing, however, is that it makes U-turns politically highly problematic, as such a change of heart would open politicians up to ridicule and claims of being ‘inconsistent’, or flat-out wrong.

Pragmatists propose a radically different approach that does not feel radical. It highlights the benefits of incremental decision-making, which provides constant opportunities for adjustment. Such opportunities make dramatic policy U-turns both unlikely and unnecessary, while, paradoxically, creating fertile ground for actually performing a U-turn

² We use terms decision-maker and policy-maker interchangeably.

³ The most prominent early American pragmatists include William James, Charles Peirce, Oliver Wendell Holmes and John Dewey. See Menand for an engaging history [9].

⁴ Indeed, some political leaders use these circumstances to enhance their own particular political agendas.

without suffering political embarrassment should it prove necessary. In a pragmatist approach, U-turns are both a given and unproblematic.

Second, there is the concern that crisis management activities are informed by one dominant viewpoint. It can be problematic when decision-makers are devoted to a particular policy, principle, or ideology and therefore hesitate to act outside their personal policy paradigm. The financial crisis provided several examples of such 'principled thinking.' Think of the hesitation among policymakers to offer massive stimulation packages, arguing that it would run up the debt [13], or think of the devotion to the idea of 'moral hazard' during the banking crises. Here, policymakers became preoccupied with the potential consequences of different pathways of action, like the fear that 'bailing out' banks would encourage inappropriate risk-taking, while also requiring massive state intervention in the private sector.

During the Covid-19 crisis, too, some perspectives were informed by an over-attachment towards certain policy assumptions. It has been suggested, for instance, that initial pandemic planning in many countries, such as the UK, was based on an influenza-type virus, thereby delaying action in terms of suppressing the Coronavirus, and leading to policymakers looking towards solutions like 'herd immunity.'⁵ There was also a widespread (Western) consensus that lockdown measures such as those imposed on Wuhan would not be accepted in Western liberal democracies.

This is not to say that a pragmatist approach is necessarily free of 'behavioural biases' or influences from ideology. But a pragmatist perspective encourages the consideration of alternative perspectives. It is paradigmatically agnostic, adopting what works and rejecting what doesn't. Relying on feedback processes to adjust for detected weaknesses, a pragmatist approach will produce an accumulation of measures that may even lead to what previously might have been thought of as 'unthinkable' kinds of interventions.

Third, crisis research has often noted the prevalence of 'blind spots' or biases in organizational sense-making, which prevent organisations from identifying and correctly interpreting the information about threats emanating from their environment [14]. The 9/11 Commission, for instance, described different 'failures of imagination,' which were also on display in the lead-up and early phase of Hurricane Katrina [15]. Such organisational blind spots unwittingly enable the incubation of crises by missing and thus tolerating deviations from supposedly safe practices, or otherwise neglecting to detect emerging risks [16].

Pragmatists argue that organisations should not try to simplify messy environments brimming with uncertainty by designing crude indicators of known threats. They advocate a 'culture of inquiry' as a more effective (yet surely less efficient) strategy. Empirical evidence for the effectiveness of this strategy is found in so-called High Reliability Organizations (HROs), which are built around the idea of open and challenging feedback processes (founding HRO researchers Todd LaPorte, Paul Schulman and Karl Weick would qualify as Pragmatists).

Can it work? Pre-requisites for a pragmatic approach

Having briefly noted the potential benefits of a pragmatist approach to crisis management, we now turn to a far trickier issue: what are the pre-requisites for such a pragmatist approach? Let us briefly discuss two important conditions for a pragmatist approach to crisis management.

First, there are the demanding *political pre-requisites*. The pragmatic approach might be particularly hard to 'sell' during the earliest stages of a crisis, when citizens, politicians, and the media shift their gaze towards the administrative centre in expectation of grand pronouncements and seemingly decisive policy interventions (the normal reflex during a crisis). It is asking a lot from political decision-makers to refrain from making grand statements about big decisions, expecting them to 'embrace uncertainty' and to illustrate their own insecurity by communicating a need for constant re-evaluation of their crisis management decisions.

The crisis management literature is not particularly optimistic that these prerequisites can be easily circumvented or ignored. The political dynamics prompted by a crisis can escalate quickly and become an overbearing influence on the decision-making process. In a pandemic world of exponential infection growth patterns, any delay will be framed in terms of costly consequences for human life. When the media, and, increasingly, social media, frame a crisis, they tend to do so in absolute, dualistic terms: now or never, health or economy, do or die.

Within such a pressurised environment, a pragmatist approach can be seen as a sign of weakness. The longer the crisis lasts, the less attractive the pragmatic approach is likely to become as people tire of politicians tweaking crisis policies and back-tracking on earlier promises. Few leaders live under the conception that a perception of weakness somehow translates into effective crisis management (most are likely to expect a perception of strength to automatically translate into effective crisis management). In short, it will take political courage to go down the pragmatist route.

Second, there are demanding *administrative pre-requisites*. The pragmatist approach builds on a very technocratic view of the world: it is a world in which administrative and political fine-tuning is feasible, even under conditions of deep uncertainty. This critical reliance on immediate feedback processes requires not just reliable data-flows, but also processing (analytical) capacity, and almost immediate adjustments in terms of policy interventions. In other words, this is not a world where time-lags, classification effects, or 'multi-organisational sub-optimisation' feature widely [17].

The literature is perhaps even less sanguine when it comes to the capacity to collect, analyze, interpret and share with relevant actors the information that is needed for effective feedback. Sense-making – the interpretation of (emerging) data patterns – is consistently identified as a key weakness in the crisis management toolkit, with most states

⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-britain-path-speci-idUSKBN21P1VF>.

ill-equipped to collect and assess this data. As both the collection and analysis of data will pertain to different problems playing out in different policy domains, sense-making capacity must be interdisciplinary and flexible, reacting to the shifts in shape that crises undergo. In other words, a pragmatist approach requires administrative capacities of different kinds: analytical (to make sense of the data), coordinative (to join up different agencies), delivery (to respond in near-real time ways) and advisory (to offer political decision-makers informed views about policy adjustments).

In the remainder of this paper, we will see how these pre-requisites manifested themselves during the Covid-19 crisis. We limit ourselves to the West European context. We will take into account both the immediate, or, 'first wave,' responses (spring/summer 2020) and the 'second wave' responses (winter 2020/1). The first wave provides insights for one particular area of concern in crisis management: the problem of discovering and declaring a crisis and choosing policy interventions that, as yet, have a limited evidence-base or grounding in crisis manuals. The focus on the 'second wave' delivers first insights into how policymakers can learn from the ongoing crisis when emerging knowledge and experience are being outpaced by changing conditions.

The 'first wave': The pragmatist approach quickly runs out of road

When China locked down, Western countries reassured their publics that all the systems were in place to contain, if not stop, the virus through appropriate (and focused) actions [18]. But before March 2020 was halfway through, most European countries were taking restrictive measures. Options that prior to Covid-19 had been seen as far-fetched (restrictions on mobility) or only justifiable in local 'hotspots' (school closures), were widely imposed.

From a pragmatist crisis management perspective, the immediate escalation of measures seems exaggerated and possibly misplaced. The pragmatic approach would not deny the necessity of complete lockdowns but would simply consider such heavy-handed measures as ultimate resorts to be arrived at through a (possibly) rapid succession of incremental steps. It would call for a differentiated and localised approach so as to avoid over-inclusive or socially 'unacceptable' measures. One might argue that existing WHO guidance as to how to handle pandemics reflected such an approach, suggesting different tiers of measures. So far for the theory.⁶

A handful of countries adopted what looks like a pragmatist approach. To begin with, they did not impose an immediate and complete lockdown in those crisis-drenched days of early March 2020 (e.g., Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands).⁷ These countries began with a more cautious approach that built on WHO guidelines (avoid personal contact, emphasize personal hygiene, cancel mass events and maintain distance). When these measures were shown to be insufficient, the crisis regime was ramped up to include the closures of schools and restaurants. An assortment of further 'tightenings' of the regimes followed, but the escalation of measures never added up to the complete lockdowns that other countries adopted straight away, regionally or nationally (such as extreme restrictions on movement outside one's accommodation).

The initial responses to Covid-19 offer considerable insight into the challenges for a pragmatist-informed approach toward crisis management. Once Covid-19 cases emerged in various hotspots across Europe, administrative systems soon became overwhelmed. For one, information about local conditions and policy effects was hard to come by due to the limitations of test capacity and track-and-trace practices. Different recording practices also made comparison of fatality numbers problematic. Even the precise number of available hospital beds was not always known during the initial phase of the crisis. The continuing uncertainty about the effectiveness of interventions and the spread of Covid-19 placed considerable pressure on a system that relied on ongoing data analysis and responsiveness. It made an effective pragmatic approach all but impossible.

Politically, too, an approach that may have sought to consider local conditions was soon becoming unfeasible. In view of growing societal concern (as evidenced in parents withdrawing children from schools, or shortages of toilet paper in supermarkets) as well as other jurisdictions' policy responses, politicians came under pressure to 'race to the top' when it came to restrictive policy measures, such as in terms of school closures, restrictions on the economy, and on national as well as international travel.

A paradox then emerged. Pragmatist approaches led to a Goldilocks moment ('just right'): the accumulation of measures resulted in a crisis regime that appeared effective and was considered legitimate.⁸ Those very qualities made it then politically very hard to stray from the set of imposed measures. Further tweaking increasingly became viewed as unnecessary and risky. The crisis regime rapidly hardened, making a pragmatist approach look less appetizing.

This precautionary shift informed the initial easing of lockdown measures, which was very careful, as a rise in cases was feared. The easing appeared, at first sight, to be informed by some degree of pragmatist crisis management principles: a roadmap with clear steps and clear thresholds was accompanied by regimes supposedly sensitive to local conditions. Careful fine-tuning never had a chance, however. Decision-makers lacked the data to inform a calibrated 'easing' regime. Political pressures soon forced a 'race' towards 'opening the economy.' Political leaders – many soaring in the polls with warming temperatures and declining patient numbers – could not resist the pressures to speed up the easing

⁶ The day might eventually come when epidemiologists will show which policy regime was the best for the particular circumstances at hand.

⁷ For a case study of the Netherlands [19]. On Denmark [20], and on Germany [21].

⁸ For the uninitiated: Goldilocks stars in Susanna Davidson (2012). *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (Usborne Publishing).

of restrictions, instead relying on societal and organisational caution and self-regulation to maintain the downward trajectory of Covid-19 infections.

The second wave: Pragmatist approach succumbs to wear and tear

If the first wave offered particularly challenging conditions for a pragmatist approach towards crisis management, then an ongoing or 'creeping' crisis should, in principle, offer somewhat more benevolent conditions for the operation of such an incremental approach.⁹ After all, while uncertainty over mutations and societal behaviour, as well as over the wider social and economic consequences of certain interventions, might still run high, one might reasonably expect certainty with regard to modes of transmission, treatment and overall risk profiles to gradually increase. Administrative capacities, whether in terms of 'track and trace' or testing capacity, are also likely to have increased – or at least one would hope so. In short, a combination of time and enhanced capacity would seem to establish the conditions in which a pragmatist approach should flourish.

One dominant idea about the control of Covid-19, drawing on wider studies of pandemics, appeared nicely in line with a pragmatist-type approach. The so-called 'hammer and dance' approach, popularised by Tomas Pueyo,¹⁰ suggests that once governments have regained some control, a policy of targeted and localised adjustments in view of outbreaks should suffice to allow for a return to some form of 'non-lockdown' life. Subsequent 'No Covid' proposals similarly proposed that carefully controlled and targeted interventions, based on immediate feedback, would offer a perspective to manage the pandemic and gain public acceptance.¹¹ Administrative capacity indicators (the German 50 infections per 100,000 inhabitants), or tier systems (such as in England) sought to indicate the feasibility of a differentiated and targeted approach.

This 'whack-a-mole' strategy (as termed by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson)¹² would require carefully calibrated drawing of boundaries, tight control of population movements (or highly compliant societies), all based on immediate detection strategies that would also be linked to immediate and highly effective interventions. Technologies such as apps, as well as enhanced 'track and trace' systems were thought to enable such a differentiated approach. In late summer and early fall, most European countries employed a rather cautious approach that could be described – with a little bit of imagination perhaps – in such pragmatist terms.

But politically such an approach soon proved very problematic. The gradual approach prescribed by pragmatist principles did not align well with the growing (albeit still limited) societal indifference towards new freedom-limiting measures. The imposition of 'light lockdown' measures (in autumn 2020) was widely criticized as heavy handed, fueling this or that lingering crisis that had resulted from first-wave measures, such as loneliness or economic hardship. But to others – the Zero-Covid alliance comes to mind – a pragmatist approach looked perilously similar to a wait-and-see, hope-for-the-best approach. They judged the measured approach as proof of denial and incompetence on the part of crisis management authorities.

A key difference with the first wave was the dualistic climate that emerged after the summer, where the Zero-Covid alliance battled with proponents of a 'we must learn to live with the virus' approach. This increasingly polarized climate paralyzed politicians. More generally, a differentiated strategy also proved problematic in terms of 'political narrative' as politicians sought to appeal to solidarity and social compliance while opening a limited range social and economic activities, leaving some parts of the population, both in terms of geography and in terms of economic sector, feeling as though they were unfairly treated by being subjected to harsher regulations, so inhibiting this very sense of solidarity.

In the end, the pragmatist approach failed to motivate great majorities to adjust their behaviour, eventually forcing politicians to adopt a sudden and rigorous lockdown regime. By late 2020, virtually all European countries had returned to different degrees of 'lockdown' with considerable restrictions imposed on economic and social life that were likely to last well into second quarter of 2021 (awaiting the roll-out of vaccinations). In the real world of pandemic management, the pragmatic approach did not stand a chance, even without taking transmission-enhancing Covid-19 mutations into account.

Indeed, as the pandemic progressed, the administrative limitations of a differentiated approach were exposed. The growing differentiation and flexibilisation of measures meant that both populations and state organisations faced complex and seemingly inconsistent interventions: it is hard to explain why hairdressers and nail salons are allowed to open, but outdoor restaurant seating remains an anathema.

Consequently, imposing simple and consistent jurisdiction-wide regimes proved administratively and politically far less resource-intensive. A 'decentralised' strategy – a key part of any experimental approach – proved problematic as sub-national authorities across Europe frequently clashed with central government over consistency of actions, the extent of measures taken, and financial compensation packages. Examples here included the ongoing disputes between regional and central government in Spain, the conflict between the mayor for Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, and

⁹ On the concept of creeping crisis [22].

¹⁰ <https://tomaspueyo.medium.com/coronavirus-the-hammer-and-the-dance-be9337092b56>.

¹¹ https://www.zeit.de/wissen/gesundheit/2021-01/no-covid-strategie-coronavirus-initiative-lockdown?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com.

¹² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-53220901>.

the UK central government over the kind of (financial compensation) measures to be taken in view of local infection rates, or the concerns in France over whether to adopt local lockdowns.¹³

In short, the pre-requisites for a 'hammer and dance' approach proved too challenging in both political and administrative terms. The necessary institutions and processes were not in place, and populations were generally unwilling to accept such a nuanced approach. Although by the time of the second wave, it may have been reasonable to assume that processes would have been put in place for a pragmatist crisis management system, such systems were quickly found wanting once again. Jurisdictional boundaries did not fit variations in infection rates; indicators required interpretation, 'surprises' (such as mutations) kept happening and publics quickly grew tired of the 'hold on one more time' rhetoric from weary-looking politicians. Covid-19 suggests that, political and administrative systems as well as wider society are not well-equipped, at least at the current time, to organise and sustain over a long period of time a differentiated approach that allows for errors and adjustment.

Conclusion: Back to the drawing board?

Our starting point was the simple yet powerful idea that the application of pragmatist principles towards crisis management might help address a key impediment to effective crisis management: uncertainty. It appears advantageous to gradually learn from engaging with the environment rather than rely on deductive reasoning of 'what should work' given assumptions about actors' capacities and motivations.

A pragmatist form of crisis management relies on highly demanding administrative and political conditions or pre-requisites. Covid-19 cruelly exposed these vulnerabilities. We noted that the first wave was characterised by a rather rapid move towards 'going hard' type approaches; political dynamics and administrative limitations made it hard for politicians to stick with a pragmatist approach. The second wave highlighted, again, how limited administrative capacities and political dynamics quickly undermined attempts at managing crises in ways that would be recognised as 'pragmatist.' In short, Covid-19 suggests that the application of pragmatist principles is even more demanding than we thought.

Does this imply that pragmatist crisis management is just 'too hard' for the real world? One might argue that a global pandemic, going through multiple waves and months, is simply 'too hard' for *any* approach towards crisis management (even if the experience of some countries, think of Australia and New Zealand, appears to contradict that notion). However, when focusing on the pre-conditions and vulnerabilities of a pragmatist approach towards crisis management, we can draw some modifying conclusions.

First, a pragmatist approach to crisis management might benefit from a paradoxical condition: it may be necessary to embrace a cautionary attitude to enable experiential learning through feedback processes. During crises, feedback processes cannot be relied upon or will be too costly. Amid conditions of high uncertainty and demands for action, it may therefore help to create conditions for detecting and processing information [23, 24]. This might be done by imposing a more daring (rather than cautious) starting point that does *not* rely on careful calibration or differentiation. A more stringent set of immediate measures could create the conditions for establishing capacities that enable experiential learning (and a subsequent easing of initial and universal) lockdown conditions.

Second, we can conclude that time is not necessarily a friend of the pragmatist approach. A long-lasting, semi-permanent state of crisis reinforces the political and administrative limitations of this approach. For one, administrative systems are ill-suited to operate in highly differentiated and flexible ways at times of a pandemic, given the mobility of people across jurisdictional boundaries, the inevitably incomplete monitoring of the disease, and growing societal reluctance or overall lack of patience. Politicians, then, become increasingly challenged in their capacity to argue a case for 'more or less' social and economic restrictions, especially as political rivals and powerful interests begin to mobilise around competing policy frames.

All this does certainly not warrant a return to the 'great leader taking big decisions' type of crisis management. Nor does it prompt a call for re-arranging the deck-chairs of organisational crisis management systems. In our view, the focus should be more on the embrace of tools to pro-actively establish the conditions for learning about existing uncertainties (rather than discounting such measures as 'knee jerks'). It is about challenging the dominance of certain perspectives, and it is about stressing the importance of the limits of administration. It is about humility rather than confidence. And it is also about the limits of political grandstanding.

We conclude with a few pointers towards a pragmatist crisis management approach:

- The need to understand administrative and political capacity limitations: probing into capacities and 'what can go wrong' would enable political (and administrative) systems to think more carefully about the administrative feasibility of different crisis plans. It is in the area of administrative feasibility where the limits of advocacy for targeted approaches (e.g., targeting particular at-risk groups) will become apparent.

¹³ <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-andy-burnham-is-the-king-of-the-north-a-crown-the-pm-believed-hed-won-12109752>; <https://www.economist.com/international/2020/10/12/across-the-world-central-governments-face-local-covid-19-revolts>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/20/lockdown-conflict-between-regional-and-national-authorities-in-spain>; <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-riviera-weekend-lockdown-coronavirus-infections/>.

- The need to understand the implications of different crisis management approaches and the development of indicators to understand their potential impacts on different public health, education systems, and the wider society and economy.
- The need to communicate ranges of uncertainty: In a crisis, everyone wants to be reassured through the communication of seemingly uncontroversial indicators. Instead, a pragmatist approach towards crisis communication would emphasise the importance of contextual trajectories, combined with an emphasis on associated uncertainty.
- The need to create an infrastructure for policy experimentation. Organizing and interpreting feedback on an experiment requires certain skills that policymakers may not possess. An interdisciplinary collaboration would be recommendable, to prevent policymakers from drawing incorrect or counter-productive inferences from incoming data.

The Covid-19 narrative continues to be written as we type. Future crises will provide further and alternative challenges to theoretical approaches towards crisis management. We cannot wait for all that to play out before deliberating about contemporary crisis management approaches. The Covid-19 experience both prompts a conversation and enhances its scope about how to manage crises responsibly under conditions of deep and often maddening uncertainty.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Publisher's Note

This paper underwent peer review using the Cross-Publisher COVID-19 Rapid Review Initiative.

References

1. **Boin A, 't Hart P, Stern E, Sundelius B.** The Politics of Crisis Management. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2016. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316339756>
2. **Rosenthal U, Charles MT, 't Hart P.** Coping with Crises: The Management of Disasters, Riots and Terrorism. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas; 1989.
3. **Edelman M.** Political Language: Words that Succeed and Policies That Fail. New York: Academic Press; 1977.
4. **Hermann C.** Some consequences of crisis which limit the viability of organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly.* 1963; 8(1): 61–82. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2390887>
5. **Ansell C, Bartenberger M.** Pragmatism and Political Crisis Management: Principle and Practical Rationality during the Financial Crisis. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar; 2019. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781788978569>
6. **Ansell C, Boin A.** Taming deep uncertainty: The potential of pragmatist principles for understanding and improving strategic crisis management. *Administration & Society.* 2019; 51(7): 1079–1112. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095399717747655>
7. **Capano G, Howlett M, Jarvis DSL, Ramesh M, Goyal N.** Mobilizing policy (in)capacity to fight COVID-19: Understanding variations in state responses. *Policy and Society.* 2020; 39(3): 285–308. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14494035.2020.1787628>
8. **Dewey J.** The quest for certainty. New York: Minton, Balch and Co; 1929.
9. **Menand L.** The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 2002.
10. **Hood C.** The Blame Game. Princeton: Princeton University Press; 2011.
11. **Lindblom C.** 'The science of "muddling through".' *Public Administration Review.* 1959; 19(2): 79–88. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/973677>
12. **Das J, Khanm AQ, Khwaja AI, Malkani A.** Preparing for crises: Lessons from COVID-19. Forthcoming.
13. **Krugman P.** Why economics failed. *New York Times.* 2014 May 2.
14. **Turner BA.** Man-made disasters. London: Wykeham; 1978. See also Lodge M. 'Accounting for Blind Spots.' In: T. Bach T, Wegrich K (eds.), *The Blind Spots of Public Bureaucracy and the Politics of Non-Coordination.* London, Palgrave; 2019. p. 29–48; Lodge M, Wegrich K. 'Introduction: Governance Innovations, Administrative Capacities, and Policy Instruments.' In: Lodge M, Wegrich K, editors. *The Problem-Solving Capacity of the Modern State.* Oxford, Oxford University Press; 2014. p. 1–22.
15. **Boin A, Brown C, Richardson J.** Managing Hurricane Katrina: Lessons from a Megacrisis. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press; 2019.
16. **Vaughan D.** The Challenger Launch Decision. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; 1996. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226346960.001.0001>
17. **Hood C.** The Limits of Administration. London: John Wiley; 1976.
18. **Wright L.** The plague year. *New Yorker.* 2021.
19. **Boin A, Overdijk W, Van der Ham C, Hendriks J, Sloof D.** COVID-19: Een Analyse van de Nationale Crisisrespons. Leiden: The Crisis University Press; 2020.

20. **Rubin O, De Vries D.** Diverging sense-making frames during the initial phases of the COVID-19 outbreak in Denmark. *Policy Design and Practice*. 2020; 3(3): 277–296. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25741292.2020.1809809>
21. **Dostal JM.** Governing under pressure: German policy making during the Coronavirus crisis. *The Political Quarterly*. 2020; 91(3): 542–552. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12865>
22. **Boin A, Ekengren M, Rhinard M.** Hiding in plain sight: Conceptualizing the creeping crisis. *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy*. 2020; 11(2): 116–138. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/rhc3.12193>
23. **Boin A, Lodge M.** Making sense of an existential crisis: The ultimate leadership challenge (LSE blog); 2020.
24. **Hood C, Lodge M.** Pavlovian innovation, pet solutions and economizing on rationality? In: Black J, Lodge M, Thatcher M (eds.), *Regulatory Innovation*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar; 2005.

How to cite this article: Boin A, Lodge M. The Attractions and Limitations of Pragmatist Crisis Management: A Discussion in Light of COVID-19 Experiences. *LSE Public Policy Review*. 2021; 1(4): 9, pp.1–8. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.22>

Submitted: 26 January 2021

Accepted: 11 March 2021

Published: 03 May 2021

Copyright: © 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



LSE Public Policy Review is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by LSE Press.

OPEN ACCESS The Open Access icon, which is a stylized 'O' with a circular arrow inside, indicating that the content is freely available.