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A Book Review of Governing the Pandemic: The Politics of Navigating a Mega-Crisis by Arjen Boin, Allan McConnell & Paul 't Hart

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A public administration scholar is hard pressed to find a reputable journal in 2021 that does not have a special issue dedicated to COVID-19 research. Given that the pandemic's tentacles reached every part of society, it comes as no surprise that we see the first wave of books in 2021 on how governments responded in the first few months of the pandemic, paced by Boin, McConnell and Hart's *Governing the Pandemic: The Politics of Navigating a Mega-Crisis*. In this six-chapter publication, we are provided with an extended overview "from the balcony" of the challenges that all governments must address during an ongoing cataclysmic event as the one our world has faced the past two years (p. v).

In the preface and chapter one, the authors emphasize that the content is centered on outlaying the crisis studies tools to gain a better understanding of the dynamics that led to the first year of the pandemic responses and how governments navigated their way through the highs and lows of the everchanging pandemic. Case studies or dazzling statistics are not deployed but rather a look at international government responses and public reaction to actions (or non-actions) taken by the organizations that represent them. In case we needed a reminder, the first stanza reminds us of the human element associated with the pandemic, with municipal and national leaders transforming into insomniacs to medical professionals dealing with the trauma

associated with seeing patients after patient lose their battles to a seemingly indefatigable enemy. The authors provide a perspective on COVID-19's place in history when compared to other global health scares. Its emergence as triple crisis: Creeping (Boin et al. 2020), transboundary (Boin & Rhinard, 2008) and solidarity is what makes the pandemic unique compared to its counterparts in recent decades.

The authors proceed to give us a general response timeline breaking down warning signals of the pandemic and periods between first known infections and first measurements within different European countries. One of the early lessons reported by authors is that politicians must strike a balance between acting too early and acting too late. What is not emphasized enough however is that this surfaces a common issue in many public administration settings not just pandemics or other unforeseen events such as cataclysmic weather disasters or terrorist attacks (though New York City Mayor Giuliani's rise to fame after 9/11 despite a polarizing mayorship up to that point is mentioned later in chapter three). Read any world leader memoir and you will find chapters dedicated to overcoming unanticipated crises that demand immediate attention with a litany of political, economic and social factors to consider. In academic literature, Stivers (2018) details the work of other scholars on the issue with responsiveness in public administration. As a result, much of this content does not stand as revelatory on its own.

As the authors move forward, they assert that to take charge of a pandemic, collective behavior must also be controlled as well. Based on COVID-19 research, they find leaders had to walk the line of public, economic and social considerations (Dostal, 2020; Polischuk & Fay, 2020; Rauhaus et al., 2020). Within chapter three similar literature is used to outline choices about governance control, how regime type influences first responses and the capacity that

governments have to govern in an effective manner combined with the social legitimacy available to do so. The authors explain that those in charge of the crisis were tasked with creating acceptable responses and their philosophical perspectives came into play. Their application of phrases such as "Kantian" and "utilitarian" introduce another useful way that public officials view pandemic response instead of just a traditional political lens, which is often what the public sees in media coverage. Although a pragmatic approach is generally supported in moments of crisis management, the authors point out that was not the case as politicized adaptation activities occurred (p. 57), which serves as one explanation among others are offered as to why several countries undermined their own credibility with their constituency. Communication becomes a central theme in chapter four as Boin, McConnell and Hart remind us that while governments were the primary source of information early, this over time as more information was linked, and other opinions were formed. In order to be effective, leaders needed to win "framing contests" (Boin et al., 2009). We are reminded in chapter four that words do matter and the ability create narratives is key in keeping support, especially in terms of creating meaning. The authors provide a roadmap to tackling such a daunting task, which helps to provide definitions to those that lack a familiarity with literature. A missed opportunity however comes to light with an absence of marketing, branding or social marketing of policy literature. Given the content is discussed so heavily in Western European literature (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2018; Eshuis & Klijn, 2012; Eshuis, et al., 2021; Karens, et al., 2016; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009) more of the content could have been brought to the forefront.

In the penultimate chapter five there is an acknowledgment that even once the pandemic is declared to be over, the discussion about COVID-19 will be in full swing. Analysis on accountability and culpability will be conducted and inevitably the public will demand shoulders

to place failed policies upon. The authors make sure to note that in the inquiries that follow, we can continue to learn about how to address the next possible event more effectively (Stark, 2018, 2019), no matter how politicized they will inevitably become. They also outline what we can expect the reports to say and how governments might respond and the barriers that exist to learning from crises. In the concluding chapter, we are served with "five essential pathways for institutional learning" for governments to become more resilient during the next mega-crisis event that will inevitably come the world's way (p. 108). These are broad in application and serve well as framing elements. Yet, what they outline is subjective and similar to what governments and citizens are experiencing today: It is impossible to determine effectiveness until an extensive period of time has passed due to the subjectivity of the elements suggested by Boin and his team combined with the unpredictability associated with human behavior.

When looking at this publication from Boin, McConnell and Hart from "a balcony perspective" while the reader may not request an encore, there is a lot to like about the publication. Where the authors excel is in providing an easy-to-read "in-the-moment" primer of how COVID-19 is addressed within a global context from a crisis management perspective with literature from across the globe. An individual does not need a degree in public health or public management to understand what the authors outline, and the work should be commended for that. This book serves as a wonderful foundational piece for an elective course on COVID-19 response in a health administration department or as a text within an emergency management given the crisis management focus. As Boin and his counterparts acknowledge, pandemic-related fallout will be examined for years to come; however, that point does not make this content any less important. There is value in having resources to refer to as COVID-19 plays out on the world stage and this book serves a needed purpose in this regard.

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