Turbulent Societies

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SUMMARY

In the immediate aftermath of a crisis, authorities mobilize to mount a response. Units, personnel and equipment are deployed to provide immediate relief to affected communities. Often it takes some time before a crisis response system becomes fully operational. In the meantime, societal actors mobilize as well. Citizens mobilize to help themselves and their families. NGOs mobilize to provide assistance. And in some cases other societal actors, such as community groups, churches and businesses also mobilize to provide support. However, not all societal actors that mobilize are cooperative. Some actors, such as protest and advocacy groups, sense an opportunity for political change and mobilize to allocate blame and to advance their interests.

The mobilization of both cooperative and contrarian societal actors provides authorities with vexing and intractable challenges under otherwise already complicated, stressful, and chaotic conditions. From past research, we know that the mobilization of societal actors can have both positive and negative consequences for crisis response processes, but we have limited knowledge about the types of strategies that authorities can enact towards societal actors. In this dissertation, I therefore asked the following research questions: which strategies can public authorities enact towards the mobilization of societal actors during crises that promote crisis response capacity and crisis response legitimacy? And: what are the consequences when authorities fail to enact an appropriate strategy?

I have answered the research questions via two case studies: the Dutch response to the EU refugee crisis, and the Dutch response to the Groningen earthquakes. In both cases, I have interviewed respondents in and outside of government, ranging from policy makers to citizen volunteers. In each of the cases, authorities were responsive toward different types of societal mobilization but appeared to find limited guidance in either past experience or existing policies. Similarly, not all Dutch authorities enacted the same types of responses. Nevertheless, my research results illustrate that when confronted by cooperative or contrarian societal mobilization, authorities can enact multiple types of strategies that either promote or maintain response capacity and response legitimacy.

Specifically, I have identified four ideal-typical categories of strategies that promote response capacity and response legitimacy: adaptive, channeling, conservative and reformist strategies.

Adaptive strategies are a type of functional strategy that can be enacted towards cooperative societal mobilization. Adaptive strategies are flexible strategies for engaging with societal actors based on the different tensions and dilemmas that might be encountered during a response process. Adaptive strategies can also be focused on

adapting internal structures and arrangements and standard operating procedures and work practices to accommodate societal mobilization. My multiple case study of the Dutch response to the refugee crisis showed that adaptive governance responses to tensions and dilemmas produce virtuous response cycles, improving both response capacity and response legitimacy.

Channeling strategies are type of functional strategy that can be enacted towards contrarian societal mobilization. Contrarian societal mobilization can threaten significant disruptions of ongoing crisis response processes. Functional responsiveness toward contrarian societal mobilization involves finding a way to channel the needs, wishes, and claims of societal actors who are in principle opposed to authorities' interests and ideas, and to do so in such a manner that their opposition does not threaten the response capacity and legitimacy of ongoing crisis response processes. Channeling strategies have two components. First, channeling strategies can be focused on anticipating different types of contrarian societal mobilization and identifying means of channeling (or cordoning off) societal mobilization that is unwanted. And second, channeling strategies can also be focused on sending contrarian societal actors away from disaster sites.

Conservative strategies are type of political strategy that can be enacted towards cooperative societal mobilization. Crises can serve as a reminder that existing policies and institutions may need to be updated as environments change. Conservative strategies are aimed at identifying incremental political changes rather than widespread political and policy reforms, and are focused on engaging with societal actors that have similar interests to authorities. Cooperative societal actors who mobilize in response to a crisis can help identify potential issues and provide new policy solutions and viewpoints. Authorities who employ conservative strategies may listen to these societal actors and choose to evaluate and improve upon existing policies and policy venues, leaving the extant status quo and balance of power intact.

Reformist strategies are a type of political strategy that can be enacted towards contrarian societal mobilization. When contrarian societal actors mobilize against existing institutions, policies, and arrangements, the risks for authorities are altogether more severe. Reformist strategies focus on the large-scale adaptation – or even reform – of a policy sector in the face of adversity: for example, the redesign of policies, policy venues, or modes of decision-making, such as when more participatory arrangements are introduced to ensure that different voices are heard in decision-making processes. The goal of reformist strategies is to restore response legitimacy and capacity after it has been severely challenged by an unfolding crisis or contrarian societal mobilization.

When authorities do not enact appropriate strategies, or are not responsive, response processes can be severely disrupted. My research on the Dutch response to the

refugee crisis illustrates how authorities' lack of responsiveness, or their inappropriate responsiveness, toward societal mobilization can lead to vicious response cycles that significantly hinder their management of a crisis. These vicious response cycles can lead to distrust, blame games and a lack of communication. When authorities are not sufficiently responsive toward contrarian societal actors and a crisis serves as a trigger event for political societal mobilization, outright opposition to authorities' interests can emerge. My research on the Groningen earthquakes presents a case in point.

In sum, my research results illustrate that when confronted by cooperative or contrarian societal mobilization, authorities can enact adaptive, channeling, conservative, and reformist strategies that either promote or maintain response capacity and response legitimacy. When authorities fail to enact appropriate strategies, they are at risk of disruption of ongoing response processes or outright opposition from societal actors. As a result, there is a continued need for public responsiveness towards societal mobilization in times of crisis.