Ideational robustness in turbulent times

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Abstract

The concept of robustness has received increasing scholarly attention regarding public policy and governance, where it has enhanced our understanding of how policies and governance are adapted and innovated in response to disruptive events, challenges, and demands associated with heightened societal turbulence. Yet, we know little about the robustness of the ideas undergirding the efforts to foster robust policymaking and public governance. Based on a review of recent strands of governance theory and the ideational turn in public policy research, we define a new ideational robustness concept, which can help us to explain why some governance and policy ideas persist, while others disappear. As the contributions to this special issue demonstrate, studying ideational robustness opens new avenues for reflecting on how the robustness of ideas may affect the robustness of public policy and governance.

Keywords: ideas; robustness; turbulence; policy

Robustness concept has received increasing scholarly attention regarding public policy and governance (Ansell et al., 2023; Capano & Woo, 2018). It highlights the institutional capacity and actual effort of social, political, and administrative actors to flexibly adapt and proactively innovate how we govern society when problems, challenges, and demands change in inconsistent and unpredictable ways and begin to problematize key public functions, goals, and values (Ansell et al., 2021). Despite important advances in our understanding of how public policy and governance may respond robustly to increasing societal turbulence, we know little about the robustness of the policy and governance ideas—defined as a particular set of beliefs held by individuals or adopted by institutions that influence their actions and attitudes (Beland & Cox, 2010)—that give meaning to and guide policymaking, governance strategies, and the use of particular policy tools.

Since the ideational turn of the 1990s, scholarship on policy ideas has highlighted the central importance of ideas for policymaking, both as heuristic shortcuts that help actors make sense of a complex reality and as strategic tools employed by actors when seeking to promote their preferred vision of social reality (Swinkels, 2020). From this perspective, ideational robustness concerns the ability of one or more actors to adapt and innovate ideas in the face of turbulence so that they continue to make sense and remain relevant for public governance and policymaking. To deepen our understanding of how societies are responding effectively and legitimately to unpredictable societal dynamics (and what decision-makers can do to render governance more robust), this special issue theorizes and empirically investigates the forms and determinants of ideational robustness and its role in promoting robust policies and governance.
A rapprochement between recent trends in ideational theory and theories of the robustness of governance and public policy has significant potential benefits, including a firmer grasp on how strategic agency matters for the dynamics producing governance robustness together with a deeper understanding of the ideational resources and strategies helping public governance to adapt and be innovative in turbulent times. Perhaps most notably, it is useful for analyzing the factors that condition change and stability in the ideas that inform, guide, and legitimize public policy and governance. While the early theorizing of ideational change emphasized the rare but fundamental changes in policy and governance paradigms (Carstensen, 2011), more recent research points to the significant (and perhaps much more prevalent) consequences of gradual ideational adjustments aimed at preserving key aspects of an idea through a rearticulation of its granular components (e.g., Cino Pagliarello, 2022; Clift, 2018; Hannah et al., 2022; Jabko, 2019).

As part of the effort to avoid a dichotomous juxtaposition of long-term paradigmatic stability and occasional fundamental change, the ideational robustness concept usefully highlights the ability of ideas to adapt and innovate in ways that help to maintain some key characteristics of a particular policy or way of governing. Ideas owe their malleability to their composite character. Ideas are compounds of meanings and beliefs that are layered on top of each other and constructed through the combination of granular semiotic components. They can be changed either by reshuffling the layered meanings and beliefs or by rearticulating particular meanings and beliefs by recombining their granular components (see Carstensen, 2015).

This introductory article explores what characterizes robust policy and governance ideas and how the robustness of such ideas may affect the robustness of governance and public policies. In so doing, it provides a conceptual framework for the other articles in this special issue. The article is structured as follows. First, we outline how both governance research and the ideational turn in public policy research have struggled to capture the complex relationship between change and stability. Next, we argue that although recent research on robust governance and policymaking represents an important step toward grasping the change–stability interconnectedness, it has failed to consider the robustness of the ideas and broader ideational constructs (e.g., paradigms, frames, programs, and public philosophies) that justify and add meaning to such activities. After having defined the concept of ideational robustness, we consider how it can advance our understanding of why some ideas continue to be used by political and administrative actors even when exposed to disruptive critique or alternative ideas that threaten to outcompete them. We also discuss how variations in ideational robustness affect the robustness of governance and public policies. Part of this discussion specifies how the individual contributions to this special issue apply these insights to concrete analyses. The conclusion summarizes the argument and points to some future research avenues.

Rethinking change and stability in governance and ideational research

Governance research and the study of ideas share a deep interest in understanding the change–stability relationship but have only recently explored their interconnectedness. We will first show how governance research and then ideational research have tended to view change–stability as a dichotomous relationship before casting light on how recent contributions in both strands of research are increasingly interested in how change and stability condition each other.

Change and stability in governance research

Students of politics and governance have long debated the change–stability relationship. In classical political philosophy, the disruption of social and political stability was viewed as an inevitable and repetitive, albeit short-lived, occurrence, eventually giving rise to a new period of relatively stable rule. According to Ansell et al. (2023), Machiavelli and Hobbes perceived history as evolving in a circular movement. In this view, stable regimes predicated on the exercise of hard and soft power would inevitably enter a period of decadence, corruption, and decline that undermined the political order while paving the way for the rise of new forms of relatively stable government. In contrast, Hegel and Marx saw history as a linear trajectory governed by a rational dialectic producing unresolvable contradictions and conflicts that would challenge stable societal structures and forms of government, spurring the turbulent transition of society to a higher state. Despite understanding history differently, these
early political philosophers tended to agree that while stability prevails, it is occasionally interrupted by crisis and turbulence, which eventually foster a new era of stability.

Given its lengthy intellectual background, it is hardly surprising that this understanding of change and stability remains in place in modern social science. One notable example is found in the work of Easton (1965). His theory of the political system treats the disruption of governance processes as exceptional rather than commonplace and focuses on the efforts to restore the systemic equilibrium that has been disturbed by the failure to receive relevant inputs from the environment or to translate these inputs into effective governance outputs. This understanding remains vibrant, as witnessed by recent strands of resilience theory emphasizing the need for system maintenance in the face of perturbations and thus aiming for a prompt and effective return to the status quo ante, when the system is disturbed. Here, a socio-political system is said to be resilient if it is capable of bouncing back and restoring its original equilibrium upon exposure to shock (Shaw et al., 2012).

Similar tendencies are found in historical institutionalist theory. Historical institutionalism shows how entrenched, self-reinforcing policy paths tend to become stable and capable of resisting change even as environmental conditions continue to evolve and new and more efficient paths become available (Mahoney, 2000; Pierson, 2000). At historical breaking points, however, strong external pressures may lead to the collapse of an institutionalized policy path (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; True et al., 2019), which creates a window of opportunity for policy change (Kingdon, 1984 [2011]) resulting in the creation of a new stable path. Later, some historical institutionalists sought to endogenize explanations of change by pointing to the significant, gradual change resulting from interpretive battles over the meaning of institutions (Streeck & Thelen, 2005). However, this argument introduced a new social learning perspective that is opposed to the rational choice argument supporting the classical arguments about path-dependency and path-shaping, thus resulting in a bifurcation of the analysis of changing policy paths seen either as gradual or revolutionary.

Normative or sociological institutionalism claims that governance institutions adapt to their environment through learning that transforms the logic of appropriate action, which scripts the actions of situated actors. At the same time, the external environment is seen to be adapting to changing governance institutions (March & Olsen, 1995). However, governance institutions do not change fast enough to ensure the efficiency of history, and they tend to ignore key changes in their environments, which gives rise to a creeping institutional obsolescence that will ultimately generate radical transformations in the face of major performance crises (March & Olsen, 1989; Munck Af Rosenschöld et al., 2014; Rosenbaum, 2022).

Opposing the idea that governance reform is driven by environmental change, constructivist institutionalism (Bevir & Rhodes, 2007) assumes that any stable pattern of rule will have failings that come into conflict with people’s existing beliefs, which raises a series of dilemmas. Because people confront these failings against the background of diverse traditions, political contests will emerge over how to interpret the failings and what should be done about them. In most cases, these contests will trigger the reform of the existing pattern of rule. The governance reform is likely to generate new failings, dilemmas, and contests, thereby establishing a cyclical pattern whereby relative stable governance is interrupted by contestation and reform internal to governance institutions. Because some stable rules persist during most contests and most contests occur within established governance practices, stability and change are closely related and part of ever-changing patterns of rule. While the latter argument brings us closer to an understanding of the dialectics of stability and change, it ultimately sides with the general trend in governance theory to “associate stability with the absence of change, while change is seen as a disruption of stability” (Ansell et al., 2023). While this is a perfectly intuitive view, it prevents us from understanding how change may contribute to stability and how stability may condition change.

**Change and stability in research on policy ideas**

In much the same way as governance theory, the research following in the wake of the ideational turn in policy theory struggled analytically to capture the stability–change interdependence. The motivation to turn to ideas in new institutionalist scholarship stemmed from the inability of extant structuralist theories—whether of a rational or sociological bent—to account for change and to view agency as a key driver of transformation processes (Schmidt, 2008). In response, work emerging from the ideational turn identified new ideas as a key driver in processes of change.
In his seminal article on the role of policy paradigms, Hall (1993), for example, applied Kuhn’s ([1962] 2012) famous notion of paradigms to explain how the declining explanatory power of one policy paradigm undermined its authority, ultimately leading to its demise and replacement by a new policy paradigm. In this view, similar to scientific paradigms, a policy paradigm can be threatened by the accumulation of anomalies; that is, developments that are not fully comprehensible and explicable within the premises of the policy paradigm. Confronted with a growing number of anomalies, ad hoc attempts are generally made to stretch the terms of the paradigm to account for the challenges. This gradually undermines the intellectual coherence and relevance of the paradigm, which will eventually collapse and be replaced by a new paradigm with greater problem-solving capacity. The basic structure of this argument is re-found in the Actor Coalition Framework, which also relies on a punctuated equilibrium model and tends to view learning as intra-paradigmatic, as it primarily takes place within coalitions with shared fundamental core beliefs (Jenkins-Smith et al., 2018).

Paradoxically, first-generation ideational scholarship ended up structuralist in their understanding of how ideas impacted actors (Schmidt, 2011). Simply put, outside periods of change, ideas were conceptualized as stable, homogenous, and defined by a core, making it difficult to see how agents could ever think outside ideas and change them; yet again, the impetus for change was external to the explanatory model (Carstensen, 2011). Scholars seeking to endogenize change processes by allowing greater interpretive room for agents provided a less structuralist perspective on ideational change. Instead of conceiving of ideas as stable and homogenous, scholars started thinking of ideas as polysemic (Béland & Cox, 2016), ambiguous (Cino Pagliarello, 2022), malleable (Carstensen & Matthijs, 2018), in need of being worked out in practice (Jabko, 2019), and demanding continuous support from powerful coalitions (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016).

In sum, leading scholars associated with the ideational turn seem to mirror the arguments of leading governance researchers when it comes to theorizing the change–stability relationship. Change is seen as a more or less momentary disruption of stable governance and governance ideas, but frequently also as the ground-clearing condition for the emergence of a new stability. In other words, change and stability are each other’s negation and do not produce or necessitate one another. Following recent interventions in both traditions, we want to argue that change and stability are two sides of the same coin: “Inevitably they accompany each other, interact with each other, tug at each other, shape each other” (Rosenau, 2018, p. 9).

New perceptions of change and stability in governance and ideational research

New research on robust policy and governance (Ansell et al., 2023) aims to reconceptualize the stability–change relation by showing how change enables stability and, reciprocally, stability enables change. The argument is based on the assertion that we live in turbulent times of poly-crisis (Morin, 1999) and unpredictable dynamics (Ansell & Trondal, 2018) that render classical risk management strategies obsolete, such as forecasting, insurance, and contingency planning (Ansell et al., 2021; Capano & Woo, 2018). Robust governance aims to flexibly adapt and proactively innovate the modus operandi of public policy, regulation, and service to uphold core public functions, goals, and values. This effort is supported by institutions, platforms, and arenas that can scaffold and guide attempts at generating the adaptations and innovations needed to respond effectively and legitimately to turbulent events (change requires stability) (Ansell et al., 2023). Hybrid forms of unicentric bureaucracy, competitive quasi-markets, and pluricentric networks may provide a supportive infrastructure for developing and deploying robustness strategies aimed at aligning short- and long-term goal attainment (strategic agility) and combining the exploration of new options with the exploitation of well-known solutions (ambidexterity) (Carstensen et al., 2023).

Unlike its conceptual cousin, “resilience,” which aims to adapt in order to bounce back and restore the status quo ante, the robustness strategy aims to adapt and innovate in order to “bounce forward” by using the window of opportunity provided by turbulence to find new and better ways of promoting basic public functions, goals, and values. Robust governance is driven by the ambition to build back better, but it does not embrace the idea of limitless organizational agility that is willing to change everything in the pursuit of potential gains. Change is motivated by an interest in maintaining some basic functionality. Hence, robust governance is an instance of “dynamic conservatism” that changes certain things to be able to continue to do something perceived as important and valuable (Ansell et al., 2015).
The emerging research on robust governance has not yet given the ideational aspect much consideration. This is a pity, since public governance cannot be reduced to goal formulation, strategic calculations, regulatory technologies, and/or service delivery. Often, such efforts are in important ways guided and supported by an array of ideas that must be adapted and innovated to facilitate robust governance responses to heightened turbulence. Ideas, for example, play a key role in unifying a coalition of actors around a particular governance strategy, provide the intellectual scaffolding for effective learning, and in many instances guide concrete governance procedures, regulatory interventions, and service provision.

It is important to note in this context that despite their compound and composite character, not all ideas are equally malleable; much depends on their degree of specification and institutionalization. Some ideas are so detailed and engrained in everyday rules, norms, and practices that they mainly allow for incremental change. The bureaucratic idea about the necessity of rule compliance offers a case in point. Others, such as magic concepts (i.e., competitive service contracting) and fluffy meta-narratives and storylines (i.e., activation of unemployed enhances their employability), are so vague, general, and multifaceted that there is more scope for radical reformulation (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011). Regardless of this difference, all ideas tend to change marginally when used by actors aiming to secure their relevance in a changing environment. This is true even for political ideologies and governance paradigms (Carstensen & Matthijs, 2018, p. 447).

The parallel tendency in recent research on policy and governance ideas to perceive stability and change as mutually conditioning factors rather than dichotomous poles signifies the potential of developing a concept of ideational robustness. Such a concept may serve as a backdrop for analyses of how policy and governance ideas change to remain stable and what remains stable to support and promote change, thereby advancing our understanding of why some ideas remain in use while others do not.

Conceptualizing ideational robustness

We define ideational robustness as when ideas are adapted and innovated in ways that advance their ability to remain relevant despite encountering turbulence. Importantly, we do not consider just any form of change in response to turbulence as an expression of robustness; it is only when the adaptation or innovation of ideas supports their ability to remain relevant and influential that we talk of ideational robustness. Ideational robustness refers to the gradual or radical processes of rearticulating existing ideas to defend or advance their position as a point of reference in communication. Non-robust ideas will therefore disappear from the conversation if those employing them are prone to dogmatically resist rearticulation. Consequently, they are in danger of being replaced by new ideas that are more easily applicable to the interpretation of emerging demands and events, as seen most dramatically in a policy paradigm shift (Hall, 1993). When ideas are successfully adapted in response to turbulence, they enable learning, coordination between actors who might otherwise struggle to form a coalition (Culpepper, 2008), and legitimization of the emerging governance arrangement (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2018). Moreover, we are not thinking of robustness as an innate quality of certain ideas and institutions. As the scholarship on policy ideas establishes soundly (Kamkhaji & Radaelli, 2022) and in agreement with the literature on robustness (Ansell et al., 2023), the capacity to promote robustness hinges on the work done by actors, whether as idea brokers within a coalition of actors or as actors deploying particular ideas in their everyday work.

The robustness of policy and governance ideas refers to when, in the wake of turbulence, they are adapted to secure their relevance as a means to propose policy solutions to emerging problems, mobilize a coalition supporting this solution, and secure the necessary public support. In answering the question of what adapting and innovating policy and governance ideas entails, we may usefully distinguish between different levels of ideas. First, in the foreground of political debate, we find policy ideas that encompass the specific policies or “policy solutions” pushed by policymakers (Béland & Cox, 2010), when they are not floating around in the policy primeval soup waiting to be picked up when the time is ripe (Kingdon, 1984 [2011]). An example of this could be a policy idea about the usefulness of introducing reading tests in elementary school.

Second, similarly placed in the foreground of policy debates are frames, which Campbell (1998, p. 385) defines as “[i]deas as symbols and concepts that help policy makers to legitimize policy solutions to the public.” One can, for example, frame the introduction of reading tests as a way to build a
world-leading elementary school system or as a tool that may help readers identify and support particularly challenged students, depending on what will make the policy most appealing to other actors. On that background, programs reflect the underlying assumptions orienting policies and providing problem definitions that set the scope for possible policy solutions. In education policy, this could be a policy program based on social pedagogical principles promoting education via play and social interaction (Jensen, 2011, p. 150), which—at least in abstract terms—would be fundamentally different from a policy program based on an understanding of education policy as a tool for promoting economic growth (Cino Pagliarello, 2022). Finally, at the most general level and similarly placed in the background, we find public philosophies, which are “worldviews or Weltanschauung that undergird the policies and programs with organizing ideas, values, and principles of knowledge and society” (Schmidt, 2008, p. 306). These will typically be so fundamental that they cut across policy areas, as in the case of understanding individuals as democratic citizens, which will fundamentally inform the policy goals of an education policy program as well as social policy or labor market policy.

This conceptualization gives rise to the possibility of change occurring at different degrees and tempi (Béland, 2019; Schmidt, 2016). We would expect to see policy ideas change rather often in response to new information or shifting circumstances. Similarly, actors are likely to apply shifting frames to promote their policy programs (Campbell, 2004). More rarely, we will witness change in underlying policy programs and paradigms, as they are stabilized by the broad societal coalitions that brought them to prominence (Carstensen & Röper, 2022). Carstensen and Matthijs (2018) suggest that paradigms may change incrementally, albeit significantly, as actors pragmatically and creatively bring new ideational elements to prominence through processes of bricolage without disbanding the whole paradigm. Public philosophies gain their power not only from their taken-for-granted status but also from being used actively in public debate. Although fundamental change does not happen over short periods of time, gradual change in public philosophies may occur through such debates, as actors strategically fuse existing ideational elements in new and unexpected ways (Boswell & Hampshire, 2017; Carstensen & Hansen, 2019). Key for understanding the capacity of actors to adapt ideas in new and unexpected ways is to appreciate the relational structure of policy ideas. Where earlier approaches (most notably Hall, 1993 and (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith 1993) conceptualized ideas as defined by a core that is more or less unproblematically translated into meaning in concrete situations, more recent approaches have proposed a more pragmatic approach to how actors work with institutions (Berk & Galvan, 2009; Emmenegger, 2021) and ideas (Carstensen, 2011; Jabko, 2019) that emphasize the composite, malleable, and dynamic nature of meaning structures.

Ideational robustness is a product of an ongoing, messy effort among the involved actors to align the multifaceted ideational basis for identifying and solving societal problems, forming a supportive coalition, and building public legitimacy around adapted interpretations of an idea. This involves extensive learning and coordination that can assume at least two forms: the adaption and innovation of policy ideas in ways needed to support the realization or maintenance of overall policy goals as defined by a policy program; or a redefinition of the goals, programs, and paradigms that define a policy. As noted by Howlett and Ramesh (2023), static robustness is when policy changes are limited to policy implementation mechanisms or a shift in the design promoting a policy as the main goals and aims of a policy are retained. Dynamic robustness concerns “not only changes in aspects of policies related to the micro-calibrations and meso-level tools and objectives means to achieve goals and objectives, but also to the nature of the goals pursued and instruments and logic behind them” (Howlett & Ramesh, 2023, pp. 26–28; see also Jen, 2005, p. 113). This line of thinking suggests that the adaptation and innovation of ideas support and qualify each other; when efforts to adapt and innovate ideas are coordinated, they will tend to enhance ideational robustness.

Based on these reflections on the application of a concept of ideational robustness in policy and governance studies, one might envisage at least three principal mechanisms through which ideational robustness in governance and policymaking appears. First, it may appear as a rebalancing of the relative weight of the different components of an idea giving greater prominence to some elements at the expense of others. This was seen in the “varieties of neoliberalism” promoted by various British prime ministers since Thatcher, where interpretations of the role of the state shifted within what remained a neoliberal paradigm (Carstensen & Matthijs, 2018). Second, new elements that were previously unrelated to the idea may be added, perhaps to strengthen the legitimacy of a particular idea by appropriating critical discourses. This was a key development in the reform of financial regulation in
the wake of the financial crisis of 2007, where ideas concerning the importance of systemic dynamics were added to a market-friendly policy paradigm that previously had focused merely on the stability of individual financial institutions (Baker, 2013). Finally, key components of an idea may be rearticulated either by changing their meaning slightly by adding further nuance or by extending and broadening the understanding of key terms to foster multivocality (Padgett & Ansell, 1993). Consider the “Europe of Knowledge” idea in European education policy: As demonstrated by Cino Pagliarello (2022), it was possible for the European Commission to gain support for the idea from Member States, not because they shared identical policy priorities on education, but because the idea was sufficiently flexible to answer contending interpretations, notably about the relative importance of economic growth and social cohesion. Common for all three mechanisms is not only that they potentially produce very significant change in meaning structures but also that they do so in ways that maintain the robustness of such structures when confronted with turbulence.

**How can policy and governance research benefit from ideational robustness?**

The robust governance concept points to the ability of those who govern to respond to unforeseen disruptive demands and events in a manner that allows them to continue to govern effectively and legitimately (Ansell et al., 2023). The ideational robustness concept is helpful for understanding how actors flexibly and creatively employ ideas in their efforts to explain, justify, and add meaning to disruptive demands and events. Governance robustness thus hinges on the robustness of the ideas that are applied when practices change. In the following, we wish to highlight three key areas in which ideational robustness can inform policy and governance research and provide important advice to policymakers. These areas relate to policy learning and coordination in a politico-administrative environment, mobilization of policy coalitions, and securing legitimacy among affected citizens and public employees around governance responses. In each case, ideational research illuminates the challenges related to realizing robust governance as well as possible paths forward in dealing with these challenges.

**Lesson #1: The role of ideas in policy learning**

Designing institutions and policies for robustness means establishing systems capable of maintaining the same performance in the face of internal/external perturbation unknown when the system was invented (Howlett et al., 2018). This is largely a matter of keeping the system updated to address new turbulent developments before or as they unfold, which requires robust political institutions, information systems, and policy networks that provide feedback on problem definitions, policy tools, and goal attainment (Sørensen & Ansell, 2023, p. 76). This is based on significant learning capacity (Capano & Toth, 2023) within systems that facilitate safe environments for experimentation and taking risks (Sørensen & Torfing, 2023), and it maintains a diversity of forms of knowledge and perspectives (Capano & Woo, 2018).

A key insight of ideational research is that no learning is as rational or open as one might wish. Hall (1993, pp. 278–279) brings out this point forcefully, suggesting that we should think of policy learning—understood as “a deliberate attempt to adjust the goals or techniques of policy in response to past experience and new information”—to take place within the context of a policy paradigm; that is, “a framework of ideas and standards that specifies […] the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing.” The policy paradigm is stable over time. One might see change in policy instruments and their settings, which Hall (1993) calls second- and first-order change, but a significant institutional shift will only take place through a replacement of the policy paradigm: a third-order change. From this perspective, policy learning is never neutral. Even in cases where a policy paradigm has not emerged, learning always takes place through the lenses of specific ideas about how the policy area operates. Even if one relaxes the assumption of incommensurability—that is, that policy actors can only judge the truth of a knowledge claim from within a policy paradigm, thus allowing actors the ability to think outside the confines of a paradigm (Carstensen, 2011)—strong political grounds remain to doubt the capacity of the policy actor to assess the explanatory capacity of different sets of ideas indiscriminately, openly, and rationally.

This presents us with an important political problem for how to enable learning to promote robust institutions; namely, how to think openly from the starting point of our existing ideas. Consider the Capano and Toth (2023, p. 98) argument that policies “can be made robust against crises by activating...
a certain number of unplanned behaviors while having the systematic capacity to immediate draw lessons from these behaviors and diffuse them.” From the perspective of ideational research, existing ideas and institutions will always heavily mediate this kind of learning exercise, which adds to the risk of not detecting developments or potentialities not already recognized by such ideas. Indeed, if one employs alternative ideas to conduct such probing and comes up with the result that crisis is more than likely to happen, how will one judge this relative to much more sanguine claims made on the basis of rival ideas?

One answer could be that decision-makers should establish systems able to work with different (and sometimes rival) sets of interpretations that help them to avoid myopic groupthink, thereby stimulating ideational robustness (Carstensen et al., 2023). For example, some scholars argue that hybridity—the combination of different organizing principles—increases the structural flexibility that allows public organizations to respond robustly to turbulence (Trondal et al., 2021). However, this is a challenge for both functional and political reasons. On a functional level, coherent sets of ideas and methods make for much more efficient learning, coordination, and decision-making. Kuhn ([1962] 2012) recognized this already in his analysis of scientific paradigms, noting that not having to discuss fundamental ontological issues, researchers can instead focus on increasingly esoteric questions, which serves to deepen and extend the explanatory power of the paradigm. Similarly, if decision-makers (or the experts guiding them) are unable to agree on basic understandings of the dynamics driving a policy area, it becomes difficult to make decisions and to develop regulations to a sufficiently advanced level.

Take, for example, the widespread use of models in policymaking. Understood as a conceptual transmission device between abstract policymaking paradigms and concrete political programs, models provide “simplified representations of complex economic processes, which specify causes and quantify effects, by highlighting the impact of certain variables while downplaying the importance of others” (Heimberger et al., 2020, p. 340). In this capacity, models are arguably a quintessentially efficient policy tool in that they offer concrete methods for identifying the “optimal” policy decision. Importantly, however, efficiency does not necessarily translate into effectiveness. For one, models tend to bias the diagnosis of problems and solutions (Fuglsang, 2023). This does not sit well with the effort to handle turbulent problems often requiring the activation of different kinds of thinking and an openness to alternative problem definitions. Indeed, MacKenzie (2008) shows how models can have performative effects that ultimately become crisis-inducing in their own right.

One way to address this openness–efficiency dilemma is to build a standing group of experts from different disciplines (or researchers from different schools within a discipline) and tasking them to provide alternative interpretations to decision-makers; either on a running basis or when especially problematic situations arise. This would maintain the efficiency of having a policy paradigm in place in everyday policymaking while upholding interpretive openness within the organization. Think of this as a form of ideational redundancy. Abandoning optimization and the acceptance of redundancy is a key argument in the robustness literature (Ansell et al., 2021; Capano & Woo, 2018; Howlett et al., 2018), because it gives decision-makers room to direct resources in new directions when crisis hits. Here, we may think of the institutionalized availability of alternative interpretive frameworks, data, and methods as a form of organizational redundancy that will enable the organization to improvise forcefully in a future crisis.

This alone, however, is unlikely to suffice. Making the joining together of different forms of knowledge or disciplinary views matter in actual policymaking requires not only that the knowledge is made available, but also that such demiurgical work is thoroughly institutionalized. This is key for countering the politics of policy ideas. Studies of policymaking models—understood as “simplified representations of complex economic processes, which specify causes and quantify effects, by highlighting the impact of certain variables while downplaying the importance of others” (Heimberger et al., 2020, p. 338)—clarify how specific political and economic interests are connected to their continued use and dominance in policymaking. This explains why their supporters would want to resist their replacement or combination with alternative interpretive approaches, whether in periods of crisis or relative calm. In the words of Heimberger et al. (2020, p. 338), models are “potential carriers for certain political convictions and, hence, allow actors drawing on such models to exert power in political decision-making under certain conditions.” Moreover, models may be particularly important in bolstering the authority of certain professions and disciplines. Fuglsang (2023) thus argues that in economic policymaking, models serve to
institutionalize certain forms of economic thinking in a manner that empowers the economists subscribing to such theories. In the vocabulary of Carstensen and Schmidt (2016), models give certain actors “power over ideas” at the expense of alternative voices, and they may over time become so firmly ingrained in policymaking that neither proponents nor critics even recognize it.

From a broader perspective, this indicates that not only policy ideas but also ideas about governance are crucial in policymaking. As argued by Mandelkern and Oren (2023, p. 79), such ideas “have a twofold influence on the policymaking process since they affect not only what political actors believe, but also the institutional structure and norms of the policymaking process part in the policymaking process.” This also matters in times of crisis, because the dominance of ideas about how to govern may limit the applicability of alternative policy ideas, undergirding the stability of existing ideas while potentially further undermining policy and governance robustness.

Lesson #2: The role of ideas in coalition building

The first lesson indicates the challenge as well as importance of aligning different forms of knowledge and power in policymaking (Howlett et al., 2018), which requires appreciation of how policy and governance learning are usually carried out within coalitions of actors who are motivated by both policy and power. Such a notion is further developed by Trein and Vagionaki (2022, p. 911), who define policy-oriented learning as attempts at updating beliefs “in order to achieve programmatic success of policies regarding a successful implementation, achievement of outcomes, and efficient use of resources.” This is the form of learning generally recognized in the policy literatures on robustness. Power-oriented learning, on the other hand, is treated as a residual—or not recognized at all. According to Trein and Vagionaki (2022, p. 911), it “refers to the update of beliefs with the aim of increasing political influence rather than of improving policies with the intention of solving a problem.”

Trein and Vagionaki (2022) theorize the circumstances under which we can expect to see each of these forms, arguing that policy learning is only likely in a context characterized by high issue salience (like in an acute crisis or other forms of disruptive turbulence) and limited polarization between actors. Here, the risk is less that power dominates policy and more that the information and knowledge base for decision-making is too thin. According to Trein and Vagionaki (2022, p. 907), in a polarized, high-issue-salience context, decision-makers are likely to insist on their positions even if doing so means that policy solutions address a policy problem in a bargaining mode (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2018) rather than in a pragmatic problem-solving and collaborative sense (Ansell, 2011). This aligns with general insight from the policy learning literature about how higher salience makes it much less likely that decision-makers use evidence in an “unpolitical” way (Bundl & Trein, 2022). Thus, turbulent contexts do not generally lend themselves to deep policy learning; rather, they will be prone to the symbolic and legitimizing use of knowledge that enhances the credibility of agencies or policy positions instead of improving the quality of the organization output (Boswell, 2009, pp. 7–8).

From the perspective of ideational research, balancing policy and power is key for successful learning. This becomes particularly evident in the context of coalition building. As already noted, a key dimension of the robustness of ideas is their capacity to maintain coordination between the groups comprising a political coalition. From the perspective of the decision-maker, a key challenge then becomes bringing actors together who do not necessarily agree or share similar interests around a common interpretation. That is, while the decision-maker sees an interest in forging a coalition among a diversity of actors, these actors might not share the same policy ambitions and/or prefer the dominance of other goals in the coalition that are more aligned with their own interests. For example, different professional groups provide different perspectives and forms of knowledge, but the groups struggle to get their perspective represented—and others under-represented—by using their professional authority, institutional position, and the dominance of their ideas in the cognitive infrastructure (Helgadóttir & Ban, 2021; Hirschman & Berman, 2014). This is clearly a major challenge for maintaining the robustness of institutions in the face of turbulence.

Robustness often hinges on the capacity of ideas to maintain an interpretative openness that enables a sufficiently large group of actors to align around them. This, again, is not a rational process of arguing and persuading others using sound arguments, but rather a hard-nosed negotiation process. The main objective is to sustain different interpretations among various audiences with different evaluative criteria, promoting coordination without requiring explicit consensus (Ferraro et al., 2015). This relates to the notion of “multivocality” originally developed by Padgett and Ansell (1993). They perceive robust
action as a particular way of exercising control through the formation of a plurality of alliances with mutually disconnected groups of actors established and maintained through ambiguous messages and multi-vocal communication (Ansell et al., 2023). However, the negotiations sometimes also result in the adaption and transformation of a given policy idea.

The negotiation of ideas and the coalitions they engender are an important and strategic resource for robust agency. A key argument in ideational research is that crises, turbulence, and periods of significant structural societal transformation make ideas all the more important when building new coalitions (Blyth, 2002; Campbell, 2004; Seidl, 2022) and/or in providing renewed firepower to maintain existing coalitions (Carstensen & Röper, 2022). In line with the argument about the multivocality used in robustness scholarship, ideational scholarship suggests that the forging of sufficiently broad coalitions requires not only a specific form of robust action but also certain kinds of ideas. Highly ambiguous and polysemic ideas that mean different things to different people will likely have a broader appeal for coalition builders than better-defined, narrower ideas (Jenson, 2010). This relates notably to the capacity of certain ideas to speak to multiple interests and remain open in their potential meaning (Jabko, 2006).

This is what Béland and Cox (2016, p. 429) understand as ideas working as a “coalition magnet,” which they define as the “capacity of an idea to appeal to a diversity of individuals and groups, and to be used strategically by policy entrepreneurs (i.e., individual or collective actors who promote certain policy solutions) to frame interests, mobilize supporters and build coalitions.” For ideas to gain such an impact, policy entrepreneurs must be able to manipulate the ideas in a way that key actors in the policy process legitimate them by embracing or promoting them, and they must bring together actors whose perceived interests or policy preferences had previously placed them at odds with one another. Importantly, polysemic ideas have the potential to create social consensus rather than just a minimum—and typically shaky—winning coalition (Béland & Cox, 2016, p. 432). By pointing to the strength of keeping coalitional ideas sufficiently underspecified and pragmatically malleable, we see another reason why, under turbulent circumstances, it is challenging to maintain high-quality policymaking based on specialized knowledge.

Lesson #3: The role of ideas in securing the legitimacy of policy adaptations and innovations

Robustness involves changing the content and form of policy and governance in ways that allow a coalition of actors to uphold basic functions, purposes, and values in a society facing heightened turbulence, but also doing so is not only a challenge in terms of maintaining efficiency but securing legitimacy. Following Schmidt (2013), we may usefully distinguish between different forms of legitimacy that policy and governance robustness depend on; namely, input, output, and throughput legitimacy. Coupling this conceptualization in the context of policy and governance robustness, Sørensen and Ansell (2023, p. 78) argue that input legitimacy involves the capacity of institutions “to use emerging political agendas, lines of division and forms of political agency as a resource in innovating themselves in ways that strengthen their ability to enhance input legitimacy.” Effective policymaking must also produce output legitimacy by reducing the risk “of political resistance and an empowerment and mobilization of the political agency of downstream actors to implement the policy in an adaptive way that resonates with local political sentiments and conditions” (Sørensen & Ansell, 2023, p. 82). Finally, yet importantly, robustness depends on the throughput legitimacy of political processes, particularly a belief in their fairness and transparency.

The concept of ideational robustness sheds light on how discourse, ideas, and power are integral to the production of all three forms of legitimacy. Along these lines, Carstensen and Schmidt (2018) argue that the processes through which legitimacy is established and defended are critically connected to the exercise of ideational power in struggles between contending views of the world. They start with the insight that although power must be legitimate to remain stable and effective, it is ultimately the perception of legitimacy and the actions that indicate the support of subordinates that make a political system stable and efficient.

Struggles over policy and governance ideas play out in the context of the three different forms of legitimacy already discussed. In the case of input legitimacy, actors exert ideational power when seeking to persuade or impose on other actors regarding the political responsiveness of the system to citizen needs and demands. In turn, discursive contests about output legitimacy are related to efforts to persuade or impose on other actors the superiority of certain policies and their beneficial outcomes for the people. Finally, using discourses and ideas, actors may seek to persuade other actors to believe
that procedural rules of accountability, transparency, inclusiveness, and openness have been followed with efficacy (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2018). Here, actors may seek to use dominant governance ideas to lend support to the maintenance of prevailing decision-making structures or seek to change these same structures by pushing for alternative interpretations of what constitutes the most legitimate decision-making structure (Mandelkern & Oren, 2023).

For policymakers to maintain robust institutions, it is thus necessary to attend actively and strategically to building input, output, and throughput legitimacy. This points to another dimension of multivocality; namely, that to govern effectively in turbulent times, decision-makers must secure legitimacy by employing solutions that speak in different ways to many different audiences and constituencies (Padgett & Ansell, 1993). This requires balancing between backstage negotiations with political, economic, and civic leaders and bonding strategically with political competitors (Ansell et al., 2023). Such efforts importantly must speak to the values that structure the system as well as the more specific organizations involved in legitimacy contests. Ideational research indicates that such ideas may vary considerably between countries (Dobbin, 1994; Vail, 2020) and that a key political task is to use such nuances strategically in establishing and defending policies (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016).

The importance of appreciating national and local specificity in ideas also speaks to the risk of conservative bias in the efforts to legitimize changes in policy and governance. Pragmatically reusing ideational and institutional elements for new purposes—that which Carstensen et al. (2023) refer to as “bricolage”—is necessary in many cases to respond robustly to turbulence, but also runs the risk of structuring thinking according to pre-existing ideas. This is because in the case of bricolage, innovation originates in novel combinations that generate new, emerging functionalities—rather than being a result of proactive attempts to combine divergent and convergent thought. Moreover, and importantly, the risk of conservative bias does not even go away in times of crisis, where one could imagine a greater readiness to try out radically new ideas. As summarized by Hannah et al. (2022, p. 10) in their exposition of the literature on crisis management, scholars paint a complicated picture of crisis-induced learning in which crisis management is often a process of political survival, thus providing a context in which leaders might be incentivized to avoid acknowledging failure or downplaying the need for reform.

This indicates a key challenge to robust policy and governance action: how to make the changes needed to respond effectively to disruptive demands and events without losing the level of support from the population or other societal elites needed to continue to gain authorization to be in charge of governance and policymaking. The ideational robustness concept suggests that the ability to secure legitimacy hinges on the strategic endeavors of those who govern to stimulate the continuous adaptation and innovation of the ideational foundation of public policy and governance.

The contributions to this special issue

The contributions to this special issue on ideational robustness fall into three groups, each focusing on one of the mechanisms of ideational robustness theorized earlier. The first set of papers theorize and empirically investigate how ideational robustness may emerge from the rebalancing of the relative weight of the different components of an idea giving greater prominence to some elements at the expense of others. Andersen and Larsen thus demonstrate how the continued viability of activation policies do not depend on strong evidence of policy effectiveness, but instead on the successful rebalancing of ideational elements surrounding the core idea that benefit recipients will cease to be passive if benefits are made conditional on their participation in certain activities. In fact, as they show, when confronted with scathing critique about the limited effects of activation, and a weakening of support for the notion that activation enabled benefit recipients to return to the labor market, activation policies proved robust through the rebalancing of both the central means and aims of activation toward a more demanding approach focused on increasing the labor supply.

Sørensen and Torfing also show the political efficacy of a strategy based on rebalancing existing policy ideas. Analyzing the robustness of bureaucracy as an idea, they point out how the response to criticism of the limited efficiency of bureaucratic organization is to apply a divide-and-conquer strategy aiming to create zones of validity for different governance paradigms to carve out a niche for a particular approach to governance while recognizing the value of competing approaches. Similarly, supporters of ideas about the continued relevance of bureaucracy have sought to “repackage” the ideas, such as by downplaying means–end rationality as a core component of bureaucracy in favor of a description of how the administration works closer to more critical governance paradigms.
Another set of papers explores the second mechanism of ideational robustness, namely, the addition of new ideational elements previously unrelated to the idea in question. Analyzing ideational robustness from this angle, Clift’s paper reveals how, in response to a flurry of crises (the financial crisis, Eurozone crisis, and the pandemic), new ideas about fiscal space came together with the pre-existing understanding of debt sustainability in the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Reflecting economic thinking about growing your way out of debt, ideas about fiscal space were sought to be balanced with considerations of fiscal discipline. Although “fiscal space” was employed in IMF discourses, however, the idea struggled to seep into policy frameworks at the operational level, casting doubt on its long-term durability. This points to the important institutional conditions for bolstering ideational robustness.

Comparing the management of the Eurozone crisis and the economic crisis following the COVID-19 pandemic, Carstensen and Schmidt also point to the importance of institutions for long-term robustness. Their paper argues, first, that an important source of robustness in crisis management is the reinterpretation of existing ideas and institutions; that is, robust responses may arise through the creative work done by actors as they practice institutional rules in everyday policymaking, leading to significant policy change outside institutional reform. Moreover, in situations where actors find it impossible to agree and act on a common vision of a new institutional structure, the potential of exerting different kinds of power—coercive, institutional, and ideational—keeps one actor from dominating crisis management and opens up for changing interpretations and thus actions. This strategy is not viable in the long run, however, as a continued stream of brinkmanship will undermine the legitimacy of crisis management. To capture this variability in robustness, Carstensen and Schmidt propose a more granular conceptualization of robustness as a matter of degree, where—depending on how long term and broadly supported a policy is—they may be minimally, modestly, or maximally robust.

In a study of changes in Canadian and Australian defence policy from the Cold War to the post-Cold War period, Andrea Migone, Michael Howlett, and Alex Howlet show how change and stability are intertwined. A learning-based introduction of new policy components supports the retention of core cognitive and normative policy ideas. Through thorough case studies of the development of the policy doctrines in the two countries, the authors document how Australia managed to retain the main features of their defense doctrine through flexible policy and successful procurement responses to new challenges, whereas Canada suffered with policy shambles informed by ideational instability and conflict, alternating swings of alignment and misalignment of defense policy ideas and military doctrines with partisan government priorities.

Finally, ideational robustness may also emerge as key components of an idea are rearticulated either by slightly changing their meaning through the addition of further nuance or by extending and broadening the understanding of key terms to foster multivocality. Examples of this are found in the Béland and Cox research note. Assuming a long-term perspective, they theorize how the valence and polysemy of policy ideas can make a policy idea robust over time. Using the two broad normative policy ideas of solidarity and sustainability, they show how ideas can work to build coalitions among competing policy interests over a large-scale policy problem. Denis, Foucault, Larouche, Régis, Cohen, and Girard analyze the ability of the World Health Organization (WHO) to adapt its health credo to changing contexts and circumstances to promote the legitimacy of an international health order as an example of ideational robustness. Specifically, their analysis shows how, over time, the WHO has connected their discourse on health with different dimensions—from international public health to international health solidarity to global health—in such a way as to maintain its relevance and legitimacy in the face of changing contexts. Åsa Knaggård and Peter Triantafilou investigate the ideational robustness of liberal democracy with a specific focus on the degree of rearticulation of three core ideas—constitutionality, parliamentarism, and public responsiveness—in their efforts to legitimize their interventions. Showing how Sweden was more inclined to adapt the meaning of these democratic ideas than Denmark, the authors conclude that the difference in ideational robustness in their responses to COVID-19 may relate to prior adaptations of democratic ideas in the two countries.

Conclusion

This introduction to the special issue on ideational robustness has argued that the new research on robust governance will benefit from a closer study of what we refer to as ideational robustness. Ideas play a key role in public policy and governance, and we must better understand why some ideas have more staying power than others. In turbulent times where hegemonic ideas are dislocated by new and
often unpredictable events, developments, and demands, deeper analysis is required of how social and political actors attempt to flexibly adapt and proactively innovate such ideas to ensure their continued relevance. The ideational robustness concept will help scholars in the fields of public policy and governance to appreciate the interlinkage between ideational change and stability by drawing attention to how ideas are changed while maintaining some core characteristics, and the factors then facilitate attempts to rebalance, adapt, or rearticulate those policy and governance ideas.

As shown earlier, the study of ideational robustness allows us to draw three lessons. First, and most fundamentally, ideas are an important source of policy and governance robustness. As the contributions to this special issue demonstrate, ideational robustness plays an important role in learning how to adapt and innovate forms of policy and governance content, as well as in building the coalitions necessary to stabilize institutions and policy in turbulent times. Highlighting the ideational basis of such processes provides an important piece to understanding how and under what circumstances actors can stabilize institutions when faced with multiple, intersecting crises. Second, drawing on ideational scholarship brings useful emphasis on power and politics in the study of robustness. Much of the progress made in the study of policy and governance robustness has been made by outlining the circumstances most conducive to building robust institutions. However, more work is still required to understand how robust outcomes may be achieved under circumstances less prone to institution-building. Assuming that power and politics is an ever-present part of decision-making in modern democracies also points to the need to develop theoretical frameworks outlining when different forms of power help to build or risk undermining robust decision-making.

Third, and following from this, the contributions to this special issue indicate how, despite the political and administrative efficacy of attempts to adapt and innovate ideas and discourses to stabilize institutions in the context of turbulence, long-term robustness requires changes to existing institutional setups that foster coordination, inclusion, and learning. Much can be gained by working actively and strategically with the ideas that underpin robust institutions, but the high demands on modern governance systems require more systematically structured decision-making to achieve long-term robustness. In the future, outlining the sufficient and necessary conditions for ideas to produce robust institutional outcomes should therefore be high on the agenda of scholarship on policy and governance robustness.

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