

ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN GOVERNANCE AND
PUBLIC POLICY

Accountability in Crises and Public Trust in Governing Institutions

Lina Svedin



Accountability in Crises and Public Trust in Governing Institutions

This book examines how efforts to exert accountability in crises affect public trust in governing institutions. Using Sweden as the case study, this book provides a framework to analyze accountability in crises and looks at how this affects trust in government.

Crises test the fabric of governing institutions. Threatening core societal values, they force elected officials and public servants to make consequential decisions under pressure and uncertainty. Public trust in governing institutions is intrinsically linked to the ability to hold decision-makers accountable for the crucial decisions they make. The book presents empirical evidence from examination of the general bases for accountability in public administration, and the accountability mechanisms of specific administrative systems, before focusing on longer-term policy changes. The author finds that within the complex web of bureaucratic and political moves democratic processes have been undermined across time contributing to misplaced and declining trust in governing institutions.

Accountability in Crises and Public Trust in Governing Institutions will be of interest to students, scholars, and practitioners of public policy, political leadership, and governance.

Lina Svedin is Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Utah, USA.

Routledge studies in governance and public policy

1 Public Sector Ethics

Finding and implementing values

Edited by Charles Sampford and Noel Preston with Carol-Anne Bois

2 Ethics and Political Practice

Perspectives on legislative ethics

Edited by Noel Preston and Charles Sampford with Carol-Anne Bois

3 Why Does Policy Change?

Lessons from British Transport Policy 1945–99

Jeremy Richardson and Geoffrey Dudley

4 Social Relations and Social Exclusion

Rethinking political economy

Peter Somerville

5 Local Partnerships and Social Exclusion in the European Union

New forms of local social governance?

Edited by Mike Geddes and John Benington

6 Local Governance in England and France

Alistair Cole and Peter John

7 Politicization of the Civil Service in Comparative Perspective

The quest for control

Edited by B. Guy Peters and Jon Pierre

8 Urban Governance and Democracy

Leadership and community involvement

Edited by Michael Haus, Hubert Heinelt and Murray Stewart

9 Legitimacy and Urban Governance

A cross-national comparative study

Edited by Hubert Heinelt, David Sweeting and Panagiotis Getimis

10 The Idea of Public Service

Reflections on the higher civil service in Britain

Barry O'Toole

11 Changing Images of Civil Society

From protest to government

Edited by Bruno Jobert and Beate Kohler-Koch

12 Reasserting the Public in Public Services

New public management reforms

Edited by M. Ramesh, Eduardo Araral and Xun Wu

13 Governing Modern Societies

Towards participatory governance

Hubert Heinelt

14 Understanding the Politics of Pandemic Scares

An introduction to global politosomatics

Mika Aaltola

15 Accountability in Crises and Public Trust in Governing Institutions

Lina Svedin

Accountability in Crises and Public Trust in Governing Institutions

Lina Svedin

First published 2012
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2012 Lina Svedin

The right of Lina Svedin to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Svedin, Lina, 1974–

Accountability in crises and public trust in governing institutions/Lina Svedin.

p. cm. – (Routledge studies in governance and public policy; 15)

1. Emergency management–Decision making. 2. Emergency management–Moral and ethical aspects. 3. Government accountability.

4. Emergency management–Decision making–Case studies. 5.

Emergency management–Moral and ethical aspects–Case studies. 6.

Government accountability–Case studies. I. Title.

HV551.2.S89 2012

363.34–dc23

2011044610

ISBN: 978-0-415-61583-9 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-12014-9 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Wearset Ltd, Boldon, Tyne and Wear

To Hamilton

*Sverige, Sverige älskade vän
En tiger som skäms
Jag vet hur det känns
När allvaret har blivit ett skämt
När tystnaden skräms
Vad är det som hänt*

Kent 2002

Contents

<i>List of figures and tables</i>	x
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiv
1 Introduction	1
2 Accountability mechanisms in Swedish governance	17
3 A comparative outlook on accountability mechanisms and the exertion of accountability in crises	36
4 Swedish crises 1931–2005	61
5 Mapping three historical developments: crises, accountability, and trust	85
6 Actors in accountability processes: who is held accountable by whom, and how?	95
7 Formal and informal accountability processes	114
8 Public trust in governing institutions	147
9 Crises, accountability, and trust in governing institutions: conclusions	166
<i>Notes</i>	176
<i>Bibliography</i>	194
<i>Index</i>	206

Figures and tables

Figures

2.1	A schematic view of the accountability framework	19
2.2	Nordquist's model of where issues tend to end up, in formal courts or with adjudicating government agencies	32
5.1	Swedish crises 1986–2005 and key decision-making institutions	86
5.2	Public confidence in governing institutions 1986–2007	88
5.3	Crises and public confidence in crisis managing institutions 1986–2007	90
8.1	Crises, accountability processes, and public confidence in the government	150
8.2	Crises, accountability processes, and public confidence in the police	155
8.3	Crises, accountability processes, and public confidence in the armed forces	158
8.4	Crises, accountability processes, and public confidence in agencies	160
9.1	The status of accountability exertion in Sweden across time	169

Tables

2.1	Structures and agents as accountability mechanisms regarding elected officials' actions in Swedish crises	34
2.2	Structures and agents as accountability mechanisms regarding public servants' actions in Swedish crises	35

Preface

In some ways it may seem ironic that I, a Swede by origin and culture, would be looking at accountability and Swedish crisis management at a time when the country I live and work in, the United States, is involved in two wars and has witnessed crises that make most modern day Swedish crises and crisis management seem pale by comparison. However, I believe as James March put it, that organizations can only really learn from people who do not adapt to the code. My hope is that by offering an outsider's view, politically and organizationally, on how accountability is exerted in Swedish politics and administration, this book will contribute to better crisis management and, ultimately, to a reversal of the trend of decreasing trust in Swedish governing institutions.

As a social scientist I believe strength lies in asking the right questions. And by that I mean good questions that matter. Bill Moyers expressed this well, "... my folks and I try and figure out the difference between the important ... and the immediate. Because the immediate is not always the most important" (Stewart 2011). As a political scientist, I believe that it is our job to ask the hard questions about how to govern. Furthermore, as a crisis management expert through research and practice, I am increasingly aware of the importance of ethics in crisis management.

One of the hardest questions any elected official faces today is how to *legitimately* govern on behalf of the people at times when many structural features and incentives undermine that legitimacy. Plummeting voter turnout, decreasing public support of and participation in political parties, and a decreasing interest and attention paid by citizens to the more mundane issues of politics make it hard for politicians to stay connected to what citizens really think on many issues and to feel that their job is really to represent the people and not their own, perhaps better informed, points of view. Increased emphasis on individualized elections, the twenty-four hour news cycle, the unrelenting attention of the media hungry to expose a minister's every personal and professional misstep, make it hard for elected officials to not focus on what is right in front of them, what is happening right now (regardless of whether or not that situation is important or equally important to other things in a larger time perspective), and to not first and foremost try to protect themselves.

The increased interdependence of issues and the political and administrative bodies set to manage these issue, on behalf of the people, may also spur politicians

and administrators to feel like their real impact and power is being seriously curtailed, leaving them to follow along (to take a reactive stance) and do the best they can (satisficing, Simon 1947: 38–41) in situations that seem largely out of their control. However, the reality is that the impact of any situation and decision is first and foremost local. People who experience the exercise of power, who evaluate and judge the way politicians and administrators govern, do not live and experience this at an EU level, or even at a national level. Their experience is inherently personal and local, and the practical adaptation or resignation to the limits of power that national level decision-makers experience may not seem that understandable to them. Hence a perceptual gap is created between national politicians and civil servants perception of their role and reality, and the experience and perceptions that citizens have of their governing institutions.

No time tests the perceptions of legitimate governance and the values of democracy like crises (crises put the fabric of democracy and public institutions to the test, Beckman 2004; Olsson 2005).

The gap in perceptions between those who work in government and those who experiences government's power reach is one of the reasons why it is important to have well-functioning public accountability mechanisms. With well-working active accountability mechanisms it is possible to bridge this gap and have citizens start to feel that even though they are in many instances removed from the process and the everyday dealings of politics, there is a system in place that looks out for their best interest and holds those vested with power responsible for their use of that power, their actions and decisions that affect so many people. With well-functioning accountability mechanisms there can be a sense that *the system works*. That democracy, as we have come to cherish it, works despite its many limitations and imperfect conditions for legitimate governance.

There is a qualitative difference between doing the wrong thing for the right reasons and doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. From an ethical point of view I think we are more apt to forgive someone in power for doing the wrong thing for the right reasons than we are to forgive them for doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. The first instance seems to indicate a lack of tools, analytical ability, or failure to grasp an overwhelming picture of ambiguous and uncertain information. The importance lies in basing your decisions on the right values, prioritizing the values that people think are legitimate to prioritize in that situation regardless of how poorly you then performed the acts of advancing those values. The second instance suggest, by contrast, an understanding of the situation, the values involved, and the tools that may promote those values, but a discrepancy in the legitimacy perceived in terms of the values someone of power chooses to prioritize. The first instance can be written off as a mistake and may be remedied by implementing better tools and clarifying procedures or mandates. The latter, however, suggests a larger systemic problem where there is a discrepancy between the exercise of government and the people's wish, alternatively a corruption of those that make decisions in terms of on whose behalf they make those decisions, i.e., the difference between being self-serving and serving the people.

I believe this book asks the right questions; challenging and important questions about governments' management of crises, about accountability, and about the public's trust in our fundamental governing institutions. Is it a perfect book? Far from it. But I believe that the topic is important enough to publish, even if it could take someone a lifetime to research it and do it justice. Not least if one is to accurately portray how those that lived through each of the crises experienced in the situation. I have relied primarily on secondary sources in order to cover crises from the greater part of the twentieth century. As a case researcher my desire to delve deeper and deeper into each case and each aspect of accountability within each case has at times been overwhelming. I have pursued a fair amount of primary source research on several cases, primarily those that I deemed pertinent that have not been well documented and analyzed by crisis researchers yet. Most of these cases fall on the very early or very recent ends of the historical spectrum covered in the book. On countless occasions I have had to remind myself of the purpose of this study; to map out trends and changes over time, rather than to accurately describe the very details of each case. I have thus had to lay some material to the side in my "next project" pile. As is so often the case, parsimony (for the sake of comparison) competes in this book with the value (and desire) of providing a rich contextual account. I hope that you will enjoy the rough, but fascinating, picture it presents.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my mentors and heroes, who showed me the ropes of this profession and who believed in me when I did not.

A special, blessed, thank you goes out to my always brilliant research assistants Hillary Galvin and Nicholas Swisher. I would also like to thank the MPA program and its directors past and present, Rick Green and Chris Simon, for their ongoing support and encouragement, the Department of Political Science for research funding, and the College of Social and Behavioral Science at the University of Utah for facilitating junior faculty research.

Thanks also to CRISMART and its stellar researchers and staff for very generously sharing their research findings, their case studies and their insights on crisis management in the Swedish system. I would also like to thank CRISMART and the Swedish National Defence College for providing me with a research base of operations while doing a lot of the information gathering for, and outlining of, this book in 2008.

I would also like to thank the great number of scholars who, through the excellent service of Svensk Nationell Datatjänst, have provided this book with invaluable public opinion data. Special thanks goes to Michelle Coldrey at Svensk Nationell Datatjänst for working so diligently to track down researchers, gain approvals, and make the transfer of data possible.

Finally, I would also express my profound gratitude to Daniel Patterson for his copy-editing brilliance and his unwavering support.

And thanks to the administrative insiders, the men and women who work hard under often extraordinary circumstances and well outside of the limelight of public support and recognition [*in i tapeten!*] to make sure our safety, our society, and our way of life remains sound and open to as much discussion as possible.

1 Introduction

Crises test the very fabric of our governing institutions. They threaten core societal values and require decision-makers to take action under conditions of great uncertainty and intense time pressure. While the public generally accepts that decision-making in crises often is centralized and information is confined to a key few, public trust in government is intrinsically linked to the ability to hold decision-makers accountable for the crucial decisions they make in crises. For reasons of expediency and effectiveness, the mechanisms set in place for exerting accountability under *normal* administrative conditions are often suspended in crises. But what happens in the aftermath of the crisis? Who is held responsible and by whom? How is this accomplished? The ability to hold top-level decision-makers and public servants responsible for their actions, or lack of action, in situations that matter most is a crucial part of the ongoing relationship of trust between governing institutions and those governed.

This relationship is affected, in part, by the public's perception of decision-makers' reasonable risk taking, competent analysis, and timely action. If the public cannot make judgments about these things in relation to a crisis, its confidence in those decision-makers is often cast in shadows of mistrust. A lack of accountability makes crises linger in both public and political discourse and can create larger credibility crises that jeopardize political parties and leaders. This book provides a framework for thinking about critical links in the accountability process and for mapping out strategies for strengthening trust in government through crisis accountability processes.

In many ways, Sweden is a shining example of good governance and a refined administrative state; small but smart. Sweden measures up as one of the least corrupt countries in the world, with a strong sense of egalitarianism, and often at the forefront of gender equality. The country has a tradition of consensus building, political compromise, and collective nation building. The Swedish political and administrative state is well established, stable, and grants public access to information in a way that would make many civil liberties unions green with envy. The number of accountability mechanisms and venues for recourse available in the administrative system is impressive. Based on these cultural and administrative features Sweden has the potential to serve as a best case example of accountability in crises.

2 Introduction

At the same time, Sweden, like many Western states, has witnessed a growing divide between politicians and the citizens they represent. There has been a decline in political party memberships, decreased public participation in most traditional political activities, and politicians now rank as one of the groups of professionals that the public has the least confidence in. Sweden, along with other Western democracies, has also seen a gradual, but persistent, decline in the overall trust that the public places in governing institutions. The growing apathy and disconnect between the governing and the governed has caused worry that democracy, as we know it, is becoming undermined but without any consensus on what caused it or what might fix it. Accountability mechanisms are an important part of the explanation and the solution to this puzzle.

Accountability and societal values

In an effort to address the issues surrounding accountability in crises, this book investigates a number of key societal values:

Crisis management and trust in government

The primary value underlining this study is the importance of accounting for public performance in situations when performance matters the most, i.e., in crises. Following from this is the democratic insight into the management of crises by top-level government officials, be they professional administrators or elected officials. The ability to hold decision-makers accountable for their critical decisions, actions, or inactions made during high-stake administrative situations is critical to the sustaining of public trust in governing institutions.¹

Trust can be defined as “a psychological state comprising of the intention to accept vulnerability based upon the behavior of positive expectations of the intentions of or behavior of another” (Rousseau *et al.* 1998: 395). In the context of risks and crises, public institutions have been charged with the responsibility to keep their citizens safe, a charge that has its roots in the basic social contract between government and governed. Simply put, the people vest the government with a certain amount of taxes and power (including a monopoly on violence) in exchange for protection and order. The public thus expects, having met its part of the contract, that the government will keep it protected (from all sorts of things) under orderly conditions.

Linking the accountability mechanisms – *actors* seeking to exert accountability through *structures* in a domestic and international *environment* (see [Chapter 2](#) for a more detailed account) – to trust in government is a considerable challenge.² However, attempts to empirically link accountability to trust in government have been made in the area of trust and risk regulation. Several studies have “examined what kind of evaluative judgments contribute to the creation or destruction of trust in risk regulation and other institutions” (Poortinga and Pidgeon 2003: 962). Scholars have identified different dimensions of trust, i.e., what it is that makes us trust someone else, be they individual decision-makers,

groups, or institutions.³ While these core components of what makes us trust others are interesting, it is also true, as Earle and Cvetkovich assert, that “most people will not have the resources or interest to make a detailed assessment of whether or not it is worthwhile to trust a particular institution” (Earle and Cvetkovich cited in Poortinga and Pidgeon 2003: 963) and that “it is more likely that under complex circumstances trust is based on agreement and sympathy rather than on carefully reasoned arguments or direct knowledge” (Poortinga and Pidgeon 2003: 963). In these situations, Poortinga and Pidgeon state, people “base their trust judgments on whether they feel that the other person or organization shares the same values, i.e., is seen as having the same understanding of a specific situation” (Poortinga and Pidgeon 2003: 963). Based on their quantitative empirical research, Poortinga and Pidgeon have come up with four types of public trust and distrust in government risk regulation: *acceptance (trust)*, *critical trust*, *distrust*, and *rejection (cynicism)* (Poortinga and Pidgeon 2003: 971).

If we look at the dimensions of trust creation, its maintenance, and its destruction, the mechanisms of accountability relate to trust in a number of ways. The environment shapes a culture of trust or distrust of government and public institutions in general. This is important because being trusting or skeptical predisposes people to judge positive information as truthful if they are trusting and to primarily believe negative information if they are skeptical. Emotionally based mental associations, or affective heuristics, related to specific issues or risks have been shown to guide how acceptable people find risks as well as the level of trust they hold in regulating institutions. Consequently, the feelings that people have about issues and the institutions that govern them affect their evaluation and judgment of the performance of decision-makers and institutions with regard to the management of specific issues, such as materialized risks and the more complex nature of crisis situations.

Structures and agents are equally important because they embody the attributes that public trust is based on. Institutions and individual decision-makers are evaluated and judged as being either competent, objective, fair, consistent, and having good intentions (faith), or not. Speaking as individuals, elected officials are often the governmental decision-makers who either communicate competence, fairness, commitment, caring, and good intentions, or the opposite. Public servants, through their interaction with individual citizens or communicating as the face of institutions, are the ones demonstrating objectivity, consistency, and predictability, or who project the worst characteristics of bureaucracy. Structures and agents also embody the potential for sanctioning of public judgments, of righting perceived wrongs that could challenge the public's trust in its governing institutions.

Accounting for public performance

Scholars have shown how accountability and transparency can play a key role in avoiding economic and financial crises by promoting market stability, and enabling inflation targeting (Stasavage 2003; Walsh 2003). Historically, accountability and

4 Introduction

transparency have been key features of institutions designed to stabilize volatility in international financial markets and avoid collapses of the entire international financial system (Helleiner 1994).

As trust and confidence play significant roles in successful crisis management, Ludvig Beckman (2004) rightly states that governments and agencies across the world are working on improving what is often termed society's crisis management ability. The core task that decision-makers are taking on in this work, is seemingly the public's *confidence* in society's ability to manage crises.

If government actions in crises are successful, society is perceived as "robust" and trust in government is strengthened. If the actions fail – if the wrong decisions are made, organization is poor and resources insufficient – the authorities appear ineffective, and trust diminishes.

(Beckman 2004: 15)

In line with this mode of thinking, the Swedish government stated in the early 2000s that "it is crucial for the public to have confidence in the democratic system's ability to manage situations that arise" (Beckman 2004: 15).

Even though fostering public confidence in governing institutions is critical, for a state governed by law to function well, citizens need effective methods for pressuring their governing institutions and public servants to operate in a way that is just and ethical. The evaluation of crisis management should therefore be based, not only on an *effectiveness* criteria but also on a *legitimacy* criteria (Beckman 2004: 16). In accordance with Beckman's assertions, I argue that good or successful crisis management needs to be both *effective* and *legitimate* in its analysis, actions, and decisions. In situations characterized by great uncertainty and urgency, effective, just, and ethical analysis and action may be particularly challenging and we need, to some extent, to keep this in mind when evaluating public performance. However, because of the critical nature of decisions in crises, it is imperative that these decisions are accounted for. Spin can make any actions seem to stem from good leadership, but only critical review can tell us whether or not government actions are reasonable and just. Without well-functioning accountability mechanisms and the active pursuit of accountability in crises, the public is unable to make this kind of critical judgment, and will be unable to exert the kind of pressure that promotes effective and ethical behavior in crises.

Complicating the public management of crises and the evaluation of public performance is the fact that national crises and disasters often present unique circumstances under which normal administrative rules are neither adequate nor appropriate (see for instance Wells *et al.* 2000). Many would argue that in foreign policy crises, politics stay at the water's edge suppressing public disagreement over policy (Gowa 1998; Baker and Oneal 2001). Furthermore, decision-makers engaged in international negotiations often need a certain amount of secrecy and discretion to be able to effectively play the two-level game and find the compromises that can solve crises (Evans *et al.* 1993).

In disasters that have a physical dimension, decision-makers often find themselves victims of the disaster while simultaneously being charged with managing it (Svedin 1998b; Newlove *et al.* 2003). This may have a number of effects on the possibility and reasonableness of applying normal administrative procedures, both during and after the crisis. During the crisis, decision-makers may not have access to key information and data they would normally have to base their analysis and decisions on because, for example, their offices are under water or out of power. Likewise, key decision-makers may be forced to limit their presence for important decisions in order to evacuate their own families, informing the media or finding alternative work locations. In some crises, marked by excessive urgency, “normal” decision-making procedures may be judged as too slow and cumbersome to be effective, or may be found to be an unforeseen impediment to saving lives and limiting severe damage.

In some crises, society’s democratic institutions, procedures, and leaders are the very values under attack or at stake in the crisis. The assassination of national leaders arguably puts an administrative system’s ability to operate *normally* to its hardest test. Unfortunately, examples of this type of crisis are abundant: the murder of Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme (Hansén 2003) and Foreign Minister Anna Lindh (Wockelberg 2004) to name only two. In these situations, when governing institutions are put to the test in terms of their ability to function well and perform responsibly (Kettl 2007) issues of accountability are both the most important and the most vulnerable. In at least two instances, Swedish public servants have overstepped their authority and the boundaries of constitutionality in an attempt to manage crises that challenged democratic institutions and procedures.

The type of responsibility frame news media place on crises is key in shaping public perceptions of decision-makers’ actions in crises:

The media convict the organization of high moral crimes and misdemeanors. While the legal system presumes one is innocent until proven guilty, the media reverse the procedure. The burden is on the organizations to prove their innocence. . . . The organizations are much more easily and quickly convicted in the “court of public opinion” than they are in formal courts. Furthermore, the threshold for conviction is much lower in the court of public opinion than it is in the formal legal system. Once a person or an organization is perceived as a “villain,” it is extremely difficult to shed that label.

(Mitroff 2004: 26)

Exploring where responsibility finally lands in the aftermath of crises, Wockelberg (2005b, 2009a) looks at elected officials’ and top-level administrators’ involvement in crisis accountability processes. She notes that:

Swedish civil servants are living the sheltered but over time increasingly demanding lives of their Norwegian colleagues. . . . Swedish MPs present the

6 Introduction

accountability doctrine in complaints on ministers and the government made to the Committee on the Constitution which is the formal instrument for scrutiny of governmental activities.

(Wockelberg 2009a: 10)

Wockelberg has also examined the exceedingly few cases where ministers have actually been fired or reassigned duties in the government following a major crisis perceived by the public as having been handled poorly (Wockelberg 2005b). The study describes a multitude of nested games that prime ministers play to keep the prerogative to hire and fire ministers away from external opponents and internal party challengers. Crises may, however, also present prime ministers with a welcome opportunity to reshuffle Cabinet for reasons other than actual poor performance or negligence in a crisis. Such reasons may be disagreements on policy, personality clashes, or a chance to gain popularity for the prime minister or the government as a whole (Wockelberg 2009b).

Abuses of power within the government and among public servants that attract a lot of public attention can create credibility crises in and of themselves. Public sector scandals can have a very damaging effect on the public's trust in governing institutions (Johansson 2004) and spur cynicism about politics and public performance. Ethics remains a rather murky and subjective area of politics, however, something which sometimes spills over and leaves the ethics of public administration unclear (Wockelberg 2005a).

Accountability in crises is important not only for its symbolic effects on the possibility of crisis termination and a return to *normalcy* ('t Hart 1993), but also for its long-lasting effects on public trust in governing institutions. Abuse of power and poor judgment in situations when the public perceives itself as most vulnerable and in need of leadership have stronger effects on people's trust in the system than abuse of power under normal administrative circumstances. The ability to hold decision-makers responsible for abuse of power and poor performance is critical to restoring and maintaining trust in governing institutions and in the soundness of the relationship between the government and those governed.

Exerting accountability: the balancing of competing logics

Crises present a unique set of competing political and managerial logics for elected officials and professional administrators: the logic of avoiding responsibility (for that which is perceived as having gone badly) and assuming responsibility (for all that is perceived as successful in the management of a crisis).⁴

It is clear that every crisis is unique in its specific details and crises therefore require a flexible adaptation of established routines and existing resources. No preconceived manual can surpass creative thinking and decision-making that solves immediate problems through improvisation. It is, however, equally apparent that such ad hoc solutions can be more or less appropriate.

In some cases new problems are created this way, which in turn require improvising. ... A crisis decision-maker faces a difficult balancing act of quickly solving pressing problems and strictly following established rules and processes even in these acute situations where they seem a poor fit.

(Sundelius *et al.* 1997: 200–201, my translation)

To skillfully navigate the mandates of formal rules and apply these in a way that best suits the crisis can be seen as an essential leadership skill. To assume and avoid responsibility in crises is an inherent part of the political game of gaining favor and avoiding losing power. But what about public servants? Do they engage in the kind of strategic assumption and avoidance of responsibility in crises that elected officials have been known to do? Do elected officials blame the bureaucracy, or even specific civil servants for decisions, actions, and inaction in crises? To what extent can public servants defer to elected officials as those “steering” the bureaucracy and, as such, those who are ultimately responsible?

There are a number of relations between elected officials and the cadre of public servants that make up a state bureaucracy that regulates responsibility between these two types of top-level decision-makers in crises.

Politics and administration are formally and organizationally separated [in Sweden] and the over-stepping of these boundaries comes with the risk of criticism. We must note that state agencies are not only protected against control by individual ministers, there are also limitations put on the range of issues the government as a collective is allowed to control or even try to influence. Given these limitations of governmental and ministerial power we would perhaps expect corresponding limitations to be put on governmental and – even more so – on individual ministerial responsibility. In other words we would expect responsibility to be symmetrically allocated. The politics-bureaucracy relationship is however less clear cut in reality and formal and practical obstacles to political control/bureaucratic independence is repeatedly debated, often when the Committee on the Constitution conducts its scrutiny of the [Swedish] government.

(Wockelberg 2009a: 6)

Political and administrative leaders may use their organizations as tools for strategic assumption of responsibility by centralizing control or for strategic avoidance of responsibility by decentralizing or diffusing decision-making power (‘t Hart *et al.* 1993). Elected officials and top-level administrators use the selective politicization of incidents to direct blame or assume responsibility where they think they might gain from the attention (Brändstrom and Kuipers 2003). They may also selectively securitize whole issue areas in an effort to centralize decision-making, move decision-making authority into an organization they control, or out of a sphere of influence they do not control (Buzan *et al.* 1998; Bynander 2003). In fact, the act of labeling an administrative situation a crisis is

8 Introduction

a powerful, albeit precarious, strategy that decision-makers use to help them assume or avoid responsibility. Labeling a situation a crisis is an intrinsic part of focusing attention,⁵ raising the stakes of public performance, and changing the rules of the game that apply during normal administrative conditions.

Administrators are the often forgotten or invisible decision-makers (Wockelberg 2006), the grey mice running along the walls of the halls of power. These potentially powerful actors can slip through the mechanisms of public accountability or turn out to be unsung heroes in crises. Particularly in the context of the European Union, the growing power and reach of top-level administrators is an expanding field of research. As policy issues become increasingly complex and requiring substantial expert knowledge to formulate and implement policy, the role of administrators is strengthened vis-à-vis elected politicians. As politicians are forced to increasingly rely on the expertise of professional administrators, top-level administrators also take a more active role in informing and shaping decisions. Yet this can also place them in the precarious position of becoming scapegoats of a government in trouble or needing to resign in the wake of a poorly managed crisis. The lines of accountability that establish a relationship between the government and top-level administrators have not necessarily shifted to reflect the growing importance of these parties in the formulation of policy and policy decision-making. While professional administrators are occasionally sacrificed on the altar of public accountability, more often than not they get neither the credit nor the burden of responsibility that their influence actually warrants.

Assuming responsibility or avoiding responsibility

Ultimately, well-functioning accountability mechanisms should provide information to the public that makes it possible to appropriately locate responsibility and evaluate the degree to which the person vested with this responsibility has filled this charge. As previously mentioned, exerting accountability in crises involves a balancing of the two competing logics. For decision-makers it means taking responsibility for those things that would appropriately fall within the area of responsibility of that office, but also avoiding taking responsibility for things that do not appropriately fall within that person's responsibility. While this may seem a straightforward proposition, the imperatives of crises push decision-makers to assume responsibility for things and in situations where they have no authority, could not reasonably have foreseen the consequences of a decision or action taken, or where another actor actually bears the primary responsibility. Likewise, it is tempting to assume responsibility for actions and decisions made that were the consequence of luck or fortuitous circumstance, thus avoiding identifying real holes in the management response and in planning on the part of the involved institutions. Claiming responsibility for outcomes in crises that actually turned out the opposite of or contrary to the measures put in place to manage the crisis can similarly present a false understanding of cause and effect, and hinder learning in the aftermath of crises.

Accountability as a receipt of good and bad performance in crises

Few would argue that the role of leadership is not critical in mitigating crises. Specifically, Boin *et al.* (2005) outline the importance and function of sense-making and meaning-making by leaders in crises. Furthermore, the importance of leadership in the symbolic aspects of crises and crisis management has long been recognized as a key function of crisis leadership and a vital part of crisis termination ('t Hart 1993). The skillful art of successful crisis leadership often comes down to communication ('t Hart 1993; Brändstrom and Kuipers 2003; Boin *et al.* 2005). The powerful symbolic potential of crises lends itself to the rhetoric and strategic crisis communication (Millar and Heath 2004) surrounding decision-makers' role in the crisis as well as a framing of the crisis in a way that fits the political purposes (many times organizational survival) of key decision-makers.

Mitroff (2004: 5) describes the fundamental functions of crisis leadership as: 1) performing a crisis audit of the strengths and vulnerabilities of the organization before a crisis materializes, and to develop skills and capabilities that can be used to manage a crisis; 2) putting the identified pre-crisis capabilities and skills to work during a crisis; 3) reassessing the leaders' and the organization's performance in the aftermath of the crisis; and 4) implementing needed changes to make a more effective response possible in the future. One of Mitroff's key points is that crisis leadership should be anticipatory and preventative rather than reactive.⁶ Good crisis leadership implies actual crisis management ability, rather than merely the management of the *perceptions* of that ability. The kind of assessment of public performance we want to be able to pursue in crisis accountability processes is an assessment of the extent to which public servants and elected officials have fulfilled these four functions.⁷

Leaders also need to be able to take a "big-picture" approach to crises, assessing how discrete events and vulnerabilities may interact and thereby create major crises (Mitroff 2004: 11–14). Triggering events in crises are often easier to identify than the full picture of the underlying reasons and factors that produced the conditions for a crisis to come together. Crisis leaders taking a big-picture approach are also trying to discern what kind of subsequent crises might follow if current circumstances are not handled well. Mitroff (2004) argues that the type of critical thinking leaders need to do to successfully engage in crisis management in a highly integrated and massively complex world is:

the ability to be aware of, to examine, and to challenge one's fundamental assumptions of the world; the ability to "connect the dots", i.e., to see the "big picture"; and the ability to think "way outside the box" of conventional thinking.

(Mitroff 2004: 11)

In many crises

it is not known how other critical factors, such as all of the stakeholders or key players, will "rise to the surface" in response to how the initial crisis is