

Beyond the brink: diagnosing tipping points in public administration – an integrated framework of systemic entrapment, organizational inertia and cognitive capture

International
Journal of
Organization
Theory &
Behavior

Received 1 October 2025

Revised 21 April 2026

4 June 2026

Accepted 5 June 2026

Konstantinos Grigoriadis

*Department of Computer Science and Biomedical Informatics,
University of Thessaly, Lamia, Greece, and*

Alexandra Ermeidou

*Department of Management, Economics and Social Sciences,
University of West Attica, Athens, Greece*

Abstract

Purpose – This article aims to bridge a critical gap in the public administration literature, where the concept of the tipping point has been examined through fragmented and isolated lenses. It seeks to synthesize disparate approaches (system dynamics, governance and conceptual framing) into a holistic, multi-level diagnostic model to provide a more comprehensive understanding of abrupt and non-linear changes in public policy.

Design/methodology/approach – The study employs a narrative literature review, organized through thematic analysis, to synthesize existing research on tipping points in public administration. This approach allows for the interpretation and integration of findings across diverse research streams to develop a new, unified theoretical framework.

Findings – The analysis confirms that the path to a tipping point is a multi-level process resulting from the interaction of three distinct but interconnected levels: “systemic entrapment” (macro-level structural pressures), “organizational inertia” (meso-level institutional lock-ins) and “cognitive capture” (micro-level dominant narratives). This interplay explains the mechanisms of systemic resistance to change that precede abrupt shifts.

Originality/value – The primary contribution is the development of the “integrated tipping point governance framework”. This new diagnostic tool offers a deeper, endogenous explanation for institutional failure and inertia, complementing descriptive theories such as punctuated equilibrium theory and providing the necessary diagnostic foundation for applying normative models such as adaptive governance. It provides a valuable conceptual tool for academics and practitioners to analyze and manage abrupt changes in public policy.

Keywords Tipping points, Public administration, Adaptive governance, Organizational inertia, Institutional change, Complexity theory

Paper type Literature review

1. Introduction: towards an integrated theory of tipping points in public administration

The concept of the tipping point, although established in public discourse primarily through climate science, has a rich and older history in the social sciences. The term was initially coined in the 1950s to describe abrupt demographic shifts in urban neighborhoods (McKenzie, 2025), capturing the moment when a gradual process suddenly turns into a rapid and often irreversible change. At its core, the concept describes the non-linear dynamics of complex systems, where the accumulation of pressures can lead to a sudden regime shift once a critical threshold is crossed (Duit, 2016; Pollitt, 2015). This idea of abrupt, disproportionate and sometimes catastrophic change stands in fundamental contrast to the traditional linear and incremental

© Konstantinos Grigoriadis and Alexandra Ermeidou. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licences/by/4.0/>



International Journal of Organization
Theory & Behavior
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 1532-4273
p-ISSN: 1093-4537
DOI 10.1108/IJOTB-09-2025-0286

approaches that often characterize the design and implementation of public policy (Drollette, 2025; Perrin, 2015).

The growing recognition that socioeconomic, political and ecological systems are subject to such abrupt changes makes understanding tipping points an urgent necessity for modern public administration. It is called upon to manage crises ranging from climate change (Stavi, 2023) and ecosystem collapse (Folke *et al.*, 2011) to public health reforms (Thygesen *et al.*, 2021), urban planning (Card *et al.*, 2008) and organizational changes (Henderson, 2010; Molines *et al.*, 2022).

Despite its breadth, the academic literature examining tipping points within public administration remains deeply fragmented. Existing studies tend to approach the phenomenon through specialized and often isolated conceptual lenses, creating a piecemeal understanding. A significant portion of the research focuses on *system dynamics and thresholds*, analyzing the non-linear changes and the catalysts that trigger them, often drawing inspiration from the natural sciences (Armstrong McKay, 2024; Galaz *et al.*, 2011). A second, distinct research stream centers on *governance and administrative agency*, examining how institutional capacity (Chou, 2021; Duit, 2016), proactive policies (Clark *et al.*, 2023; Tàbara *et al.*, 2024), or, conversely, systemic failures and administrative pathologies (Jones, 2016; Stoker, 2019) contribute to approaching or avoiding a tipping point. A third approach treats tipping points as a tool for *conceptual framing and strategic action*, analyzing how the concept is used as a political and rhetorical tool to mobilize action (van der Hel *et al.*, 2018; Caso, 2021) or how individual and collective thresholds for taking initiative are shaped (Hinchliffe and Campbell, 2016; O'Brien, 2020).

Despite the value of each approach, the lack of synthesis among these three dimensions constitutes a critical research gap. The literature fails to offer an integrated framework that connects the objective mechanisms of system dynamics with the subjective processes of administrative management and strategic framing. This fragmentation limits theoretical understanding and undermines the concept's practical utility as a diagnostic and strategic tool for policymakers, who receive disjointed advice that ignores the critical interactions between different levels of the problem.

This study seeks to fill this gap by developing a unified theoretical framework that synthesizes the different dimensions of tipping points in public administration. Through a narrative literature review, organized using thematic analysis, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1. How are the different dimensions of tipping points (system dynamics, governance, conceptual framing) represented and interconnected in the public administration literature?
- RQ2. What are the underlying mechanisms that link systemic pressures, institutional pathologies and strategic actions in the process of approaching a tipping point?
- RQ3. How can these different dimensions be integrated into a coherent theoretical framework to improve the diagnosis and management of tipping points in public administration?

The innovation of this article lies in its novel synthesis of the three fragmented research streams into a single, multi-level and dynamic model. Its contribution is twofold. On a theoretical level, it offers a deeper and more holistic understanding of the phenomenon by highlighting the critical interdependencies that the existing literature overlooks. On a practical level, the proposed framework aims to be a powerful diagnostic tool for public officials and policymakers. Instead of examining systemic pressures, administrative shortcomings, or political rhetoric in isolation, they will be able to diagnose precisely how these dimensions interact to create the conditions for an impending crisis or for a transformative opportunity. In this way, the article not only contributes to academic knowledge but also provides a concrete conceptual tool for building more proactive, adaptive and resilient governance in a world increasingly defined by abrupt and non-linear changes.

2. Theoretical framework: synthesizing dynamics, governance and action

The conceptual journey of the term “tipping point” is in itself indicative of its flexibility and interpretive power. With its roots in 1950s sociology describing the dynamics of racial segregation (McKenzie, 2025), the concept was popularized by the work of Malcolm Gladwell, who framed it as a theory of “social epidemics”, where ideas and behaviors can spread rapidly once a critical mass is reached (Schmidt and Olson, 2008). Today, its most robust theoretical foundation is found in complexity theory and the study of resilient social-ecological systems (Folke *et al.*, 2011; Duit, 2016). In this context, a tipping point is defined as the critical threshold beyond which a system undergoes an abrupt, non-linear and often difficult-to-reverse change in its state or structure (Armstrong McKay, 2024). This shift is not the result of a single major disturbance but often the culmination of slow, cumulative pressures (slow variables) that gradually erode the system’s resilience, making it vulnerable to a catalyst or a focal event that triggers the change (Wood, 2006; Nohrstedt, 2022). This theoretical approach is fundamental as it shifts the analysis from searching for simple linear causes to understanding the underlying systemic dynamics that shape vulnerability and adaptability.

2.1 The three interconnected dimensions of tipping points

The analysis of the literature reveals that understanding a tipping point in public administration requires the synthesis of three distinct yet interdependent dimensions. The first is *system dynamics*, which concerns the objective, often quantifiable pressures exerted on a social, economic, or ecological system (Ge *et al.*, 2016). These pressures can be endogenous, such as the gradual deterioration of public infrastructure (Livingstone, 2018), or exogenous, such as the impacts of climate change (Stavi, 2023). The second dimension is *governance and administrative agency*, which acts as the intermediate mechanism that filters, amplifies, or dampens systemic pressures. Institutional capacity, resilience and proactive policy design can increase the system’s absorptive capacity and push the tipping point further away (Szabó *et al.*, 2023a; Malekpour *et al.*, 2020). Conversely, systemic failures, administrative pathologies and institutional fragmentation act as vulnerability multipliers, lowering the threshold required for destabilization (Folke *et al.*, 2011; Börzel and Risse, 2018). For example, a lack of coordination between different government agencies can turn a manageable environmental pressure into an uncontrolled crisis (Galaz *et al.*, 2011).

The third and often neglected dimension is *conceptual framing and strategic action*. A tipping point is not just an objective event; it is also a socially constructed phenomenon whose meaning and urgency are defined through public and political discourse (Horton, 2015). The ability of politicians, scientists, or social movements to frame a problem in terms of an “impending tipping point” can serve as a powerful rhetorical and political tool for mobilizing public opinion and pressuring for change (van der Hel *et al.*, 2018; Russill, 2008). This framing directly influences the individual and group thresholds for action, determining the moment when inertia is overcome and citizens or organizations decide to act (O’Brien, 2020; Hinchliffe and Campbell, 2016). Consequently, approaching a tipping point depends not only on the objective state of the system but also on the subjective perception and interpretation of that state by the actors involved.

The preliminary conceptual model proposed here, as illustrated in Figure 1, illustrates the dynamic and cyclical relationship between these three dimensions. Systemic pressures (e.g. rising unemployment) do not automatically lead to a crisis, as their impact is mediated by the governance structure. A resilient administration can absorb them, while a pathological one can amplify them. Simultaneously, public perception, shaped by the conceptual framework, puts pressure on the administration to act, influencing its institutional behavior. The administration’s action (or inaction), in turn, has a feedback effect on the initial systemic pressures, either mitigating or exacerbating them, thus completing a feedback loop. The theoretical contribution of this model lies in its transcendence of linear and isolated approaches. Instead of examining each dimension separately, the framework highlights the co-

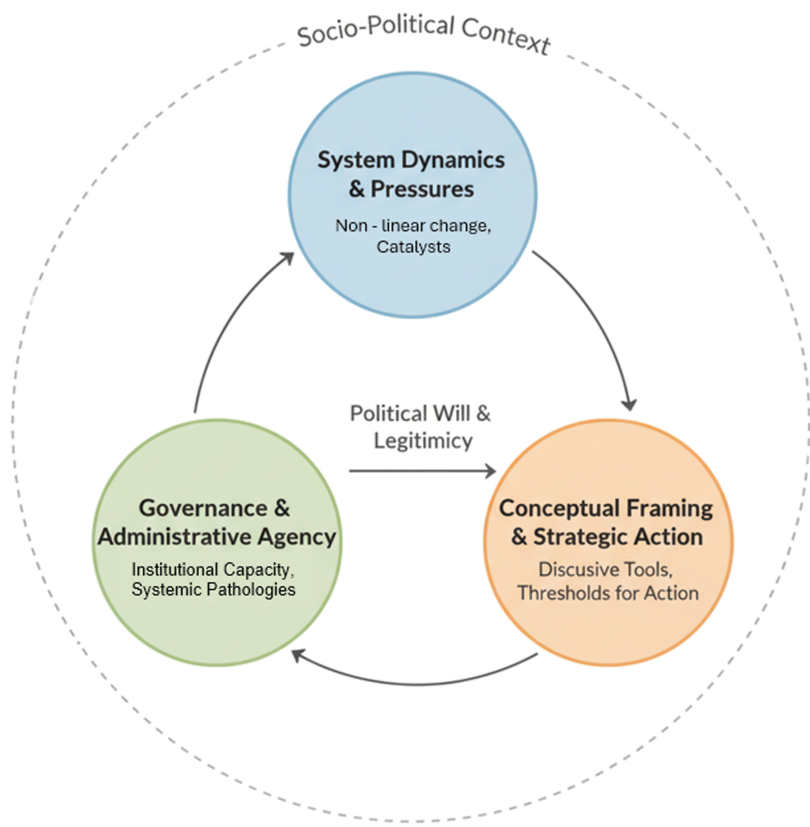


Figure 1. A preliminary conceptual model of tipping point dynamics in public administration

evolution of systemic conditions, institutional structures and social perceptions. This holistic approach is crucial as it suggests that interventions to avoid negative tipping points (or trigger positive ones) must be equally multi-layered, simultaneously targeting the reduction of systemic pressures, the enhancement of institutional capacity and the shaping of a supportive public discourse. To empirically explore and further develop this conceptual framework, a systematic analysis of existing knowledge is required, which is described in the following section.

3. Methodology

This study adopts an interpretive narrative review approach, guided by a systematic search protocol and organized using thematic analysis to identify, synthesize and interpret the central patterns and trends in the literature on tipping points in public administration. Consistent with established interpretive methodologies in public administration, the aim was not a quantitative meta-analysis but rather a narrative synthesis that focuses on conceptual development. This approach was chosen because the primary goal was to move beyond a simple aggregation of studies to develop a new, integrated conceptual framework by interpreting and connecting findings across diverse research streams. It must be acknowledged that the search strategy prioritized explicit use of the term “tipping point”, which introduces a potential terminological and exclusion bias, as literature discussing abrupt change through terms like “policy drift” or

“crisis management” without explicitly using tipping-point terminology may have been omitted. However, this focus was necessary to isolate how the specific theoretical construct of the tipping point is currently utilized and conceptualized within the field.

3.1 Search and selection of literature

The literature search was conducted in the electronic databases Google Scholar, Scopus, Semantic Scholar and Web of Science, covering literature up to March 2025. The initial set of 387 records was narrowed down through specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria comprised: (1) peer-reviewed publications in academic journals; (2) articles that explicitly addressed the concept of “tipping points” in the context of public administration or public policy; and (3) the use of related terms such as “thresholds” or “abrupt shifts”. After a preliminary screening of titles and abstracts, 112 articles were selected for in-depth reading and coding. Representative examples of the search queries used include:

“tipping point” AND (“public administration” OR “governance” OR “public policy”)

(“threshold” OR “abrupt change” OR “regime shift”) AND (“policy implementation” OR “bureaucracy” OR “public sector”)

TITLE-ABS-KEY((“tipping point” OR “critical transition”) AND (“governance” OR “state capacity”))

3.2 Data extraction and thematic analysis

The thematic analysis process was conducted by two researchers and carried out in three stages.

First, a coding framework was jointly developed and agreed upon. At this initial stage, descriptive themes were defined to capture prominent patterns in the literature. Subsequently, each researcher independently read and coded the entire set of 112 articles. The first researcher produced 560 coded notes and the second produced 516, creating a combined dataset of 1,076 notes. Each note included the full bibliographic reference, a reference number and the assigned descriptive code. Regular review meetings were held to discuss discrepancies and refine the codebook, ensuring consistency.

Second, during the final stage of analysis, the descriptive themes were inductively synthesized into broader analytical themes through an iterative interpretive process, which provided a higher level of interpretation and conceptual organization. Specifically, descriptive categories related to structural variables were grouped under system dynamics, while categories dealing with institutional responses and human perception were abstracted into governance and framing dimensions, respectively. This transparent consolidation process allowed for the transition from individual records to a coherent narrative synthesis, enabling the development of an interpretive framework that answers the study’s central research questions.

3.3 Reliability check

To assess the inter-rater reliability of the coding process, a binary matrix was created in Microsoft Excel and imported into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to calculate agreement statistics. The analysis confirmed a high degree of consistency and reliability in the coding procedure. The Cohen’s kappa values ranged from 0.731 to 0.980, indicating “substantial” to “almost perfect” agreement across all descriptive themes. These results were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), and the observed agreement percentages were consistently high, ranging from 86.6% to 99.1%. A detailed presentation of the reliability statistics for all seven descriptive themes, including confidence intervals and chi-square test results, is provided as [supplementary material online](#) via Figshare (10.6084/m9.figshare.32649321).

The process of search and selection of Literature is detailed in the research flow diagram (Figure 2).

The thematic analysis, which links the descriptive to the analytical themes and provides indicative bibliographic references, is presented in the following Table 1.

4. Results: the dimensions of tipping points in public administration

The thematic analysis of the literature reveals a multi-level and dynamic landscape surrounding the concept of tipping points in public administration. The findings are organized around the three analytical themes (system dynamics, governance and administrative agency, conceptual framing and strategic action) and the seven descriptive themes that compose them, highlighting the central ideas, convergences and tensions that run through the academic research.

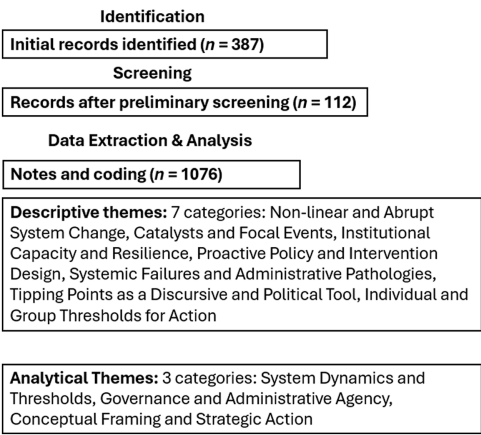


Figure 2. Flow chart of the literature search and the coding reliability process

Table 1. Thematic analysis linking descriptive themes to analytical themes

Analytical theme	Descriptive theme	References
A1: System dynamics and thresholds	D1: Non-linear and abrupt system change	Ahmed <i>et al.</i> (2018), Analoui and Fitzsimons (2009), etc.
A1: System dynamics and thresholds	D2: Catalysts and focal events	Caso (2021), Choi and Ko (2025), Delaney (2015), Duggan and Bush (2014), etc.
A2: Governance and administrative agency	D3: Institutional capacity and resilience	Ahmed <i>et al.</i> (2018), etc.
A2: Governance and administrative agency	D4: Proactive policy and intervention design	Clark <i>et al.</i> (2023), Fairbridge (2006), Gobble (2020), etc.
A2: Governance and administrative agency	D5: Systemic failures and administrative pathologies	Analoui and Fitzsimons (2009), Börzel and Risse (2018), etc.
A3: Conceptual Framing and Strategic Action	D6: Tipping points as a discursive and political tool	Armstrong McKay (2024), Bellamy (2023), Caso (2021), etc.
A3: Conceptual Framing and Strategic Action	D7: Individual and group thresholds for action	Clark <i>et al.</i> (2023), Doabler <i>et al.</i> (2021), etc.

4.1 System dynamics and thresholds: the nature of abrupt change

A fundamental finding that permeates the entire body of literature is the recognition of change as an inherently non-linear and abrupt process. The traditional view of gradual and predictable evolution is strongly challenged, with researchers emphasizing that social, political and ecological systems are characterized by long periods of apparent stability that can be interrupted by sudden, disproportionate and often irreversible changes (Drollette, 2025; Pollitt, 2015; Duit, 2016). This dynamic, often described using concepts from complexity theory such as “bifurcations” and the “butterfly effect” (Matei and Antonie, 2015), underscores the sensitivity of systems to initial conditions and the probability that small, cumulative pressures can trigger regime shifts once a critical threshold is crossed (Ge *et al.*, 2016; Vormedal, 2012). The reality of abrupt changes, such as the collapse of ecosystems or rapid social transformations, poses a fundamental challenge to administrative frameworks designed to manage linear processes (Folke *et al.*, 2011; Kröger, 2023). The inability to predict the precise timing and intensity of these changes creates conditions of deep uncertainty, often paralyzing decision-making (Drollette, 2025).

The transition from stability to abrupt change is often accelerated by the presence of *catalysts and focal events*. While slow, underlying variables (e.g. the gradual increase in temperature) erode a system’s resilience, a specific, visible event often acts as the trigger that sparks the shift (Wood, 2006; Mukherji, 2013). These events can be large-scale crises, such as economic collapses (Jones, 2016) or extreme weather events (Wang and Downey, 2024), that disrupt equilibrium and create “windows of opportunity” for radical change (Nohrstedt, 2022). However, they can also be more symbolic, such as a tragedy (Shultz *et al.*, 2013) or the departure of a key individual (Ruijter *et al.*, 2023), which gain disproportionate significance as they visualize a larger, latent problem (Vries, 2013). The importance of an event lies not in its objective scale but in its ability to focus collective attention, change the dominant narrative and mobilize political action (Stafford *et al.*, 2010; Choi and Ko, 2025).

4.2 Governance and Administrative Agency: the role of institutions

A system’s ability to withstand pressure depends critically on its institutional capacity and resilience. The literature is nearly unanimous that strong and adaptive institutions act as a crucial buffer against abrupt changes (Börzel and Risse, 2018; Duit, 2016). State capacity, defined as the sum of a state’s resources, is the primary determinant of its resilience (Szabó *et al.*, 2023a, b). In this context, *adaptive governance*, characterized by flexibility, learning and multi-level collaboration, emerges as an essential model for managing uncertainty (O’Riordan and Lenton, 2013; Ge *et al.*, 2016). However, the creation of such structures is hampered by the inherent difficulty of designing for long-term, uncertain risks (O’Riordan, 2013).

Beyond simple reaction, the literature underscores the importance of proactive policy design and intervention. Public administration can act as a catalyst by triggering self-reinforcing feedbacks that accelerate desired transitions, such as in the adoption of clean technologies (Nijse *et al.*, 2025; Sperling, 2018), inducing “positive” or “virtuous” tipping points (McKenzie, 2025; O’Riordan, 2010; Tàbara, 2023). This requires targeted interventions at sensitive intervention points, often through “carrot and stick” policies (Nijse *et al.*, 2025) and the development of “adaptive pathways” (Malekpour *et al.*, 2020; Ramm *et al.*, 2018).

Conversely, the literature is rich with examples where *systemic failures and administrative pathologies* accelerate the path toward a negative tipping point. Institutional inertia, fragmentation and a lack of coordination prevent a coherent response to emerging threats (Folke *et al.*, 2011; Galaz *et al.*, 2011). Phenomena such as “lock-in” to outdated technologies due to sunk costs and powerful vested interests (Kröger, 2023; O’Riordan and Lenton, 2013) or institutional myopia (Spratt, 2025) create a situation where administrations are often trapped on paths that inevitably lead to crisis. The failure of public administration to act decisively can itself become a “critical forcing” that actively pushes systems toward irreversible changes (Drollette, 2025; Walker, 2021).

4.3 Conceptual Framing and Strategic Action: the construction of meaning

The analysis reveals that the concept of a tipping point functions extensively as a powerful rhetorical and political tool. The framing of an issue as an impending tipping point is a strategic act aimed at creating a sense of urgency and legitimizing drastic policy interventions (van der Hel *et al.*, 2018; Horton, 2015; Russill, 2008). As a “productive metaphor” and a “boundary object”, the concept facilitates communication between different fields (van der Hel *et al.*, 2018). However, this very flexibility makes it an object of contention, as the sense of alarm can create a contested dialog environment (van der Hel *et al.*, 2018; Bellamy, 2023). The use of the term often transfers responsibility to impersonal “forces”, obscuring the specific administrative and political decisions that created the conditions for the crisis (Koponen, 1966; Russill, 2024).

Finally, the approach to a tipping point depends directly on the *individual and group thresholds for action*. The decision to act is not an automatic response to objective conditions but the result of a complex psychological and social process (O’Brien, 2020). At the individual level, public officials are influenced by factors such as personal perception and experience (Hinchliffe and Campbell, 2016). At the collective level, mobilization depends on the ability of “messengers” to persuade, the “stickiness” of the idea and the power of the frame (Schmidt and Olson, 2008; Jackson, 2007). The psychological asymmetry, where people perceive decline more rapidly than improvement, makes building trust for long-term reforms an exceptionally difficult administrative challenge (O’Brien, 2020).

Overall, these findings outline a phenomenon that is simultaneously systemic, institutional and socially constructed. Objective pressures are filtered through administrative structures and interpreted through cultural lenses, creating a complex web of interactions. The challenge that emerges is the need to synthesize these fragmented pieces into a coherent and dynamic framework that can explain these interactions.

5. Discussion: a unified framework for diagnosing tipping points

The analysis of the results confirms the initial observation that the academic discussion on tipping points in public administration remains significantly fragmented. The findings answer the first research question (RQ1) by revealing three distinct, though often disconnected, axes of analysis: the dynamics of objective systemic pressures, the mediating function of governance and the constructive role of the conceptual framework. The international literature rarely synthesizes these dimensions into a comprehensive interpretive scheme. Studies focusing on the mechanisms of abrupt change (e.g. Armstrong McKay, 2024; Gaspar *et al.*, 2016) often treat administration as an external variable or a “black box”. Research analyzing institutional pathologies (e.g. Folke *et al.*, 2011; Livingstone, 2018) does not always delve into the underlying systemic stressors. Similarly, research on the rhetorical use of tipping points (e.g. van der Hel *et al.*, 2018) tends to focus on discourse while overlooking material conditions. This conceptual fragmentation constitutes the central gap that the present study seeks to bridge by moving forward to synthesize a new, integrated theoretical framework.

5.1 The integrated tipping point governance framework

Answering the second and third research questions (RQ2, RQ3), we propose a new, multi-level framework that does not treat the three dimensions as separate but as deeply interconnected and embedded within one another. This model, which we call the *integrated tipping point governance framework (ITG Framework)*, analyzes the dynamics leading to a crisis (or an opportunity) through three mutually reinforcing levels: *systemic entrapment*, *organizational inertia and cognitive capture*. Rather than being strictly sequential, the causal architecture of these levels is recursive and co-constitutive. For example, while systemic entrapment often generates pressures that test organizational inertia, cognitive capture can actually precede and actively generate organizational inertia by preemptively dismissing emerging structural

threats. The framework identifies the boundary condition for a tipping point as the moment when the absorptive capacity of organizational inertia is completely exhausted by systemic entrapment and the legitimizing narratives of cognitive capture collapse, abruptly converting latent stress into punctuated change. To clarify this mechanism, the transformation of accumulated pressures into a tipping point follows an explicit process pathway. First, systemic entrapment drives the steady accumulation of latent pressures. As these pressures escalate, they inevitably lead to organizational overload, overwhelming existing administrative coping mechanisms. This objective systemic failure subsequently forces the sudden collapse of cognitive legitimacy, as the dominant narratives can no longer justify or mask the unfolding reality. Ultimately, it is this collapse of the sense-making framework that unlocks the institutional rigidity, acting as the definitive catalyst for abrupt, punctuated change.

5.1.1 Level 1: systemic entrapment (macro-level). At the base of the framework lies *systemic entrapment*, which corresponds to the dimension of system dynamics. This level describes the slow, cumulative and often invisible macro pressures that erode the resilience of a socio-ecological system. Systemic entrapment is analytically distinct from mere cumulative structural stress; while structural stress refers to temporary burdens that systems can ultimately absorb or bounce back from, Entrapment represents a fundamental, irreversible depletion of system carrying capacity where traditional return-to-normal mechanisms fail. These are not isolated events but deep, structural trends that create a “trap”, making the system increasingly vulnerable to abrupt changes (Folke *et al.*, 2011). Examples include the gradual degradation of natural capital, the widening of economic inequalities or the accumulation of public debt (O’Riordan and Lenton, 2013; Jones, 2016). These processes often go unnoticed by traditional monitoring methods designed to detect immediate crises (Grewatsch *et al.*, 2023). Entrapment is the objective material condition that determines “how close” a system is to a tipping point.

5.1.2 Level 2: organizational inertia (meso-level). The existence of a systemic trap does not automatically lead to action. The system’s response is mediated by the second level, *organizational inertia*, which corresponds to the dimension of governance. This level describes the institutional, political and administrative structures that hinder adaptation and reinforce adherence to the status quo. Organizational inertia is analytically distinct from simple institutional lock-in; while institutional lock-in refers primarily to the structural inability to change due to sunk costs and rules, organizational inertia encompasses the active, ongoing administrative practices and behavioral routines that actively defend the status quo against emerging systemic evidence. This inertia is fueled by powerful “lock-in” mechanisms, such as massive investments in existing infrastructure, the influence of strong vested interests, or entrenched bureaucratic routines (Kröger, 2023; O’Riordan and Lenton, 2013; Galaz *et al.*, 2011). Organizational inertia acts as an institutional “risk amplifier”: instead of mitigating pressures, it allows them to accumulate unchecked, while simultaneously preventing the implementation of proactive policies. It is the pathology of governance that renders public administration unable to “see” or “act” upon an impending crisis.

5.1.3 Level 3: cognitive capture (micro-level). Organizational inertia, in turn, is legitimized and reproduced by the third level, *cognitive capture*, which corresponds to the dimension of conceptual framing. This level concerns the dominant ideas, narratives, values and mental models that justify inertia and render alternatives “unthinkable” (Spratt, 2025). Conceptually, cognitive capture differentiates itself from mere groupthink or short-termism; while groupthink is a localized failure of team decision-making and short-termism is a temporal bias, cognitive capture is a systemic, structural colonization of the administrative imagination where specific narratives completely enclose policy possibilities. Cognitive capture manifests as “executive myopia”, where leaders focus on short-term goals, as “groupthink” which discourages dissent and as a rhetorical framing of warnings as exaggerated (Bellamy, 2023; Spratt, 2025). Political and administrative actors use uncertainty as an excuse to postpone action while promoting narratives that downplay the severity of the systemic entrapment (Horton, 2015). Furthermore, this capture is not solely used for inaction; political leaders may strategically use rhetoric to artificially manufacture a sense of crisis, actively pushing a system

toward a forced tipping point that aligns with their ideological preferences. This cognitive condition creates a vicious cycle: the inability to imagine a different reality reinforces organizational inertia, which in turn allows the systemic trap to deepen, ultimately making the crisis inevitable. The relationship between these three levels is illustrated in Figure 3. Furthermore, to ensure transparency and explicitly demonstrate the theoretical contribution of the proposed framework, Table 3 contrasts the three ITG constructs with adjacent concepts found in the literature, clarifying their conceptual distinctiveness.

To ensure theoretical precision, the scope conditions and boundary limits of the ITG framework must be explicitly defined. First, regarding its context of application, the framework is intended primarily for public administration and governance systems, although it explicitly conceptualizes these institutions as embedded within broader socio-ecological and socio-technical settings. Second, ITG is strictly a theory of non-linear tipping dynamics; it is not intended to explain successful gradual adaptation, routine policy implementation, or daily administrative resilience. Instead, it specifically diagnoses the failure of these gradual adaptive processes and the subsequent trajectory toward abrupt shifts. Finally, the framework has clear boundary limits regarding where it does not apply. It is not applicable to stable policy environments characterized by the absence of accumulating systemic pressures. Furthermore, it does not explain purely exogenous, instantaneous crises, such as a sudden, unpredictable

The Integrated Tipping Point Governance Framework

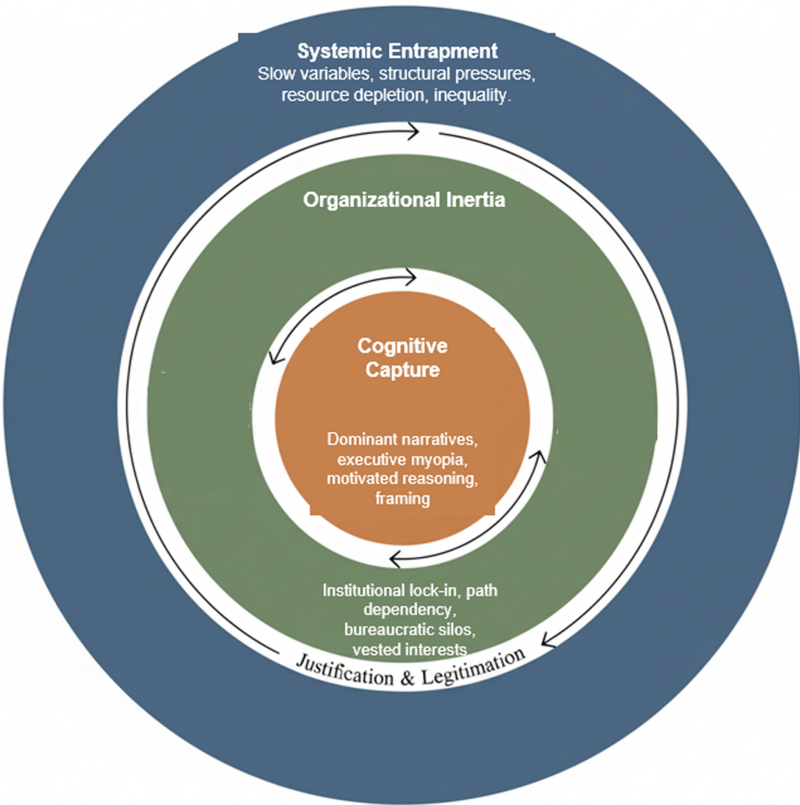


Figure 3. The ITG Framework, illustrating the nested relationship between systemic entrapment, organizational inertia and cognitive capture

natural disaster, where organizational inertia and cognitive capture did not play a preceding role in building the system's underlying vulnerability.

5.2 Comparative assessment and contribution of the framework

The contribution of the Integrated Framework becomes clearer when compared with two of the most established models for change in public administration: the *punctuated equilibrium theory (PET)* and the *adaptive governance framework*.

PET describes the pattern of change with great accuracy: long periods of stasis are abruptly interrupted by short periods of radical change (Wood, 2006; Chou, 2021). PET explains that these “punctuations” occur when external shocks or a change in the “policy image” move an issue onto the broader political agenda (Nohrstedt and Hansén, 2010). While PET is powerful in describing what happens, it is less analytical about why the system remains inert for so long and traditional ideational institutionalism often neglects the material macro pressures beneath institutional norms. The ITG framework offers explanatory leverage beyond PET and ideational institutionalism by solving specific theoretical puzzles, such as why policy images sometimes fail to shift even when overwhelming external shocks occur. ITG explains this by demonstrating how cognitive capture actively weaponizes systemic uncertainty to artificially extend the equilibrium phase. Our model offers a deeper, endogenous explanation for the period of “equilibrium”, analyzing it not as passive stasis but as an active process maintained by the interplay of systemic entrapment, organizational inertia and cognitive capture. Our framework, therefore, complements PET by providing the underlying mechanisms that explain the long period of inertia before the “burst”. To further clarify its distinct predictive value, ITG generates unique empirical expectations not found in PET. For instance, an empirical observation supporting ITG, but not PET, would be a scenario where a massive external shock occurs, yet policy punctuation fails to materialize because administrative elites successfully use cognitive capture to reframe the crisis, thereby artificially sustaining organizational inertia. Conversely, the ITG framework would be falsified if abrupt, endogenous institutional collapse occurs randomly or purely due to exogenous forces without any prior accumulation of latent systemic pressures or organizational and cognitive resistance. Finally, ITG predicts distinct trajectories of tipping dynamics depending on the configuration of its levels. A system with high systemic entrapment but low cognitive capture will experience an early, manageable transition, whereas a system where all three levels are deeply entrenched will follow a trajectory of delayed collapse, resulting in a significantly more destructive and chaotic tipping point.

The adaptive governance framework, on the other hand, has a strongly normative character. It proposes how governance should be structured: flexible, multi-level and promoting learning and collaboration (Folke *et al.*, 2011; O’Riordan and Lenton, 2013; Ge *et al.*, 2016). It provides an ideal type but is less powerful in explaining why existing administrations systematically fail to adopt these practices. The integrated framework functions here as a *diagnostic* tool. Before we can apply the “therapy” of adaptive governance, we must diagnose the “illness”. Our model allows us to pinpoint the specific entrapments, inertias and cognitive captures that prevent adaptation. It functions, therefore, as the necessary diagnostic preamble to the normative prescription of adaptive governance. A summary of this comparative analysis is provided in Table 2.

In summary, the proposed framework answers the initial research gap by synthesizing the fragmented findings of the literature into a coherent, multi-level and dynamic model. Its contribution lies not in the discovery of radically new elements but in the original organization and theorization of the relationships between already recognized, but isolated, concepts. By providing a deeper explanation for the mechanisms of institutional failure and inertia, the framework aims to offer greater diagnostic accuracy than existing models and to lay the groundwork for a more targeted application of proactive and adaptive governance strategies, a hypothesis that requires further empirical validation.

Table 2. Comparative analysis of the proposed ITG Framework against Punctuated Equilibrium Theory and the Adaptive Governance Framework

Dimension/ Characteristic	ITG framework (proposed)	Punctuated equilibrium theory (PET)	Adaptive governance framework
Main focus	Diagnostic: Explains why systems enter a state of inertia and become vulnerable	Descriptive: Describes the pattern of change (stasis and abrupt shifts)	Normative: Prescribes how governance should operate to be resilient
Focus of change	Endogenous: Interaction between systemic, institutional and cognitive levels	Primarily Exogenous: External shocks and changes in the “policy image.”	Dynamic: Continuous learning, adaptation and reorganization in response to changes
Role of administration	Often pathological, trapped in inertia and cognitive capture	Primarily reactive, maintains equilibrium until pressured by external forces	Proactive and adaptive, actively manages resilience
Primary strength	High diagnostic power, explains the mechanisms of adaptive failure	Strong descriptive power for the macro-historical dynamics of policy change	Provides a clear, practical guide for improving governance
Limitation	Less normative, does not offer immediate “solutions.”	Less explanatory regarding the mechanisms that maintain stasis	Less diagnostic regarding the reasons hindering its practical adoption

Table 3. Conceptual distinctiveness of the ITG framework constructs

ITG construct	Adjacent concepts	Distinctive characteristics
Systemic entrapment	Structural stress, environmental shocks (Resilience literature)	While structural stress refers to temporary or absorbable burdens that a system can bounce back from, Entrapment represents a fundamental, irreversible depletion of the system’s carrying capacity where traditional return-to-normal mechanisms completely fail
Organizational inertia	Institutional lock-in, path dependency (Institutional theory)	While institutional lock-in primarily describes a structural inability to change due to sunk costs and rigid rules, organizational inertia encompasses the active, ongoing administrative practices and behavioral routines that purposely defend the status quo against emerging systemic evidence
Cognitive capture	Groupthink, policy image, framing and ideational lock-in	While groupthink is a localized failure of team decision-making and policy image refers to general public perception, cognitive capture constitutes a systemic, structural colonization of the administrative imagination, where specific narratives completely enclose policy possibilities and render alternatives unthinkable

6. Illustrative application: diagnosing the failure of public procurement reform

To demonstrate the practical utility of the Integrated Framework as a diagnostic tool, we now apply it to a stylized, hypothetical scenario that illustrates a persistent problem in public administration: the failure to reform public procurement systems. While this scenario is hypothetical, it is inspired by the chronic challenges observed in many public sectors, including those in several European public administrations, where, despite repeated

modernization efforts, procurement often remains a slow, bureaucratic and innovation-averse process. We will first outline how this problem would be diagnosed from a conventional, fragmented perspective and then apply our multi-level framework to offer a deeper and more coherent analysis.

6.1 *The conventional diagnosis: a fragmented approach*

A conventional analysis would approach the problem by focusing on the individual, visible symptoms. It would fragment the problem into a series of distinct technical and procedural weaknesses, proposing a targeted technocratic solution for each. For example, the problem of time delays would be attributed to overly complex procedures, and simplification would be proposed. The problem of high costs would be interpreted as insufficient competition, and the solution would be the imposition of stricter rules. The lack of transparency would be addressed by introducing e-procurement platforms (Analoui and Fitzsimons, 2009). Finally, the inability to adopt innovation would be attributed to a lack of appropriate tools.

Although each of these solutions seems logical, the conventional approach suffers from a fundamental problem: it treats the system like a machine with faulty parts. It ignores the deeper, underlying dynamics that make the system resistant to change. This approach answers “what” is wrong but rarely delves into “why” the system persists in operating this way. The result is a vicious cycle of piecemeal reforms that address symptoms while leaving the “illness” untouched, ultimately leading to frustration and the cynical acceptance that “nothing can change”.

6.2 *Applying the integrated framework: a multi-level diagnosis*

The Integrated Framework offers a radically different diagnostic perspective. Instead of focusing on symptoms, it seeks the underlying mechanisms that produce them, analyzing the problem across the three interconnected levels.

6.2.1 *Identifying systemic entrapment (macro-level).* The framework begins its analysis with the external macro-structural pressures that “trap” the procurement system in a dysfunctional pattern. One such pressure is chronic fiscal austerity. In an environment of continuous cuts, public organizations are forced to focus almost exclusively on achieving the lowest possible price, displacing criteria such as quality or innovation (Livingstone, 2018). A second pressure is accelerating technological change. The long cycles of tenders make the technology obsolete by the time it is delivered. A third pressure is market concentration, where a few large suppliers dominate, limiting competition. These systemic pressures create a “trap” from which the system can hardly escape through internal changes alone.

6.2.2 *Analyzing organizational inertia (meso-level).* Next, the framework examines how internal institutional structures not only fail to address the systemic trap but reinforce it. The diagnosis here would identify “lock-in” mechanisms. A primary mechanism is the overly rigid legal framework. Designed to prevent corruption, it creates a strong path dependency, where compliance with procedure becomes an end in itself (O’Riordan and Lenton, 2013). A second mechanism is intense administrative fragmentation. Departments operate in isolation (a classic “silo” effect), leading to inefficiency (Galaz et al., 2011). Third, the actions of powerful vested interests, both internal (bureaucrats) and external (large suppliers), create a strong web of resistance. Organizational inertia is the reason the system cannot adapt.

6.2.3 *Uncovering cognitive capture (micro-level).* Finally, the framework uncovers the dominant narratives that legitimize organizational inertia, focusing on the culture of risk aversion. The dominant narrative is that the primary goal is not achieving the best value but avoiding scandal. This mindset leads to a “cognitive capture” where public officials are “imprisoned” in a logic: choosing the cheapest and safest supplier is always the right choice. Any attempt at innovation is framed as “risky”, while adherence to inefficient methods is presented as “prudent” (Spratt, 2025). This cognitive capture is a collective, deeply rooted belief that justifies organizational inertia, rendering any reform effort doomed from the outset.

In this scenario, the actual tipping point is reached when the accumulated systemic pressures, such as total technological obsolescence of government hardware, cause a catastrophic operational failure where core public services can no longer be delivered. Once this threshold is crossed, the cognitive capture collapses and the system is forced into an abrupt, chaotic emergency procurement phase, entirely bypassing standard bureaucratic processes and resulting in massive financial costs and loss of public trust.

In conclusion, the difference between the two diagnoses is fundamental. The conventional approach would suggest a “faster car” (e.g. an e-procurement platform). The integrated framework reveals that the problem is not the car but the fact that it is stuck in a traffic jam (systemic entrapment), the roads are poorly designed (organizational inertia) and the drivers have learned that the only safe way to drive is at 20 kilometers per hour (cognitive capture). The value of the framework lies in its precise and multi-level diagnosis. It makes it clear that a viable solution requires a holistic intervention that simultaneously addresses institutional lock-ins and the dominant culture, creating the conditions for the system’s release.

6.3 Secondary illustration: an empirical vignette of the Flint water crisis

To move beyond hypothetical scenarios and further demonstrate the framework’s empirical diagnostic value, the ITG model can be briefly applied to a well-documented public administration failure: the Flint water crisis in the United States. In this case, systemic entrapment was evident in the city’s severe, decades-long economic decline and extreme fiscal distress, which decimated the municipal revenue base. This structural trap activated organizational inertia through the imposition of state-appointed emergency managers. These managers operated under rigid, cost-cutting institutional mandates that prioritized immediate financial savings over long-term infrastructure viability, effectively bypassing standard democratic feedback mechanisms. Crucially, this inertia was sustained by cognitive capture, where public officials and environmental regulators became imprisoned in a technocratic, austerity-driven narrative. They systematically dismissed citizens’ early complaints about water quality as uninformed or anecdotal, framing their own disastrous cost-saving decisions as objectively prudent. The actual tipping point occurred when the accumulated latent pressures, specifically corroding pipes and lead leaching, caused an unavoidable public health emergency. The cognitive capture collapsed abruptly under the weight of undeniable medical evidence, leading to a punctuated, catastrophic crisis of institutional trust. This brief empirical vignette illustrates how the interplay of the three ITG levels does not merely delay adaptation but actively manufactures a catastrophic tipping point.

7. Conclusions: from diagnosis to adaptive governance

This study began by recognizing a fundamental gap in the public administration literature: the fragmented understanding of tipping points. Through a systematic thematic analysis, the article synthesized three distinct research streams into a new, integrated theoretical framework. The central contribution of the study is the development of the *ITG Framework*, which explains the path to crisis (or opportunity) through the interplay of three levels: *systemic entrapment*, *organizational inertia* and *cognitive capture*. Theoretically, this framework advances academic knowledge by providing a deeper diagnostic and explanatory model for the mechanisms of institutional failure. Practically, it offers policymakers a tool to move beyond superficial reforms, enabling them to identify the root causes of inertia and design more holistic and strategic interventions.

7.1 Limitations and directions for future research

It must be clearly acknowledged that the proposed framework is, at this stage, conceptual and requires rigorous empirical validation. Its value lies in its ability to generate distinct predictions and explicit, testable propositions to guide future empirical work. For example,

Proposition one: Systems exhibiting high cognitive capture will experience delayed but significantly more destructive tipping points compared to systems with high organizational inertia but low cognitive capture. Proposition two: cognitive capture can act recursively to strengthen organizational inertia even in the absence of new systemic entrapment pressures. Furthermore, formalizing the causal pathway to crisis yields Proposition three: the probability of an abrupt punctuated change is maximized when the steady accumulation of latent pressures creates an unmanageable organizational overload that directly triggers the sudden collapse of cognitive legitimacy. A fruitful direction would be the operationalization of the framework's levels. For instance, future research could construct a "systemic entrapment index" by combining macro-level indicators such as the public debt to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) ratio, the Gini coefficient for inequality and key environmental degradation metrics. Similarly, an "organizational inertia index" could be developed using proxies like the average duration of legislative processes, the number of veto players in a policy domain, or data from the World Bank Governance Indicators on regulatory quality. These indices could then be used. Another approach would be a comparative case study, examining how different national cultures influence the cognitive capture of public officials. Such research would be crucial in transforming the conceptual model into a tested and sound theory of administrative change. Furthermore, qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviews with senior public officials and policymakers, could provide rich data for exploring the mechanisms of cognitive capture in specific organizational contexts. Finally, the development of agent-based models would allow for the dynamic exploration of the interactions between the three levels under different conditions.

In a world characterized by increasing complexity and frequent abrupt changes, the ability of governance systems to adapt is no longer a luxury but a condition for survival. Understanding the deeper mechanisms that lock our institutions into inertia while systemic pressures accumulate is not merely an academic exercise. It is a critical step toward establishing a more far-sighted, resilient and ultimately more effective public administration, capable of navigating safely through the turbulent seas of the 21st century.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

References

- Ahmed, F., Khan, M.S.A., Warner, J., Moors, E. and Terwisscha Van Scheltinga, C. (2018), "Integrated adaptation tipping points (IATPs) for urban flood resilience", *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 30 No. 2, pp. 575-596, doi: [10.1177/0956247818776510](https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247818776510).
- Analoui, F. and Fitzsimons, V.G. (2009), "A troubled relationship: corruption and reform of the public sector in development", *The Journal of Management Development*, Vol. 28 No. 6, pp. 513-521, doi: [10.1108/02621710910959675](https://doi.org/10.1108/02621710910959675).
- Armstrong McKay, D.I. (2024), "Two decades of climate tipping points research: progress and outlook", *Dialogues on Climate Change*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 30-38, doi: [10.1177/29768659241293272](https://doi.org/10.1177/29768659241293272).
- Bellamy, R. (2023), "Public perceptions of climate tipping points", *Public Understanding of Science*, Vol. 32 No. 8, pp. 1033-1047, doi: [10.1177/09636625231177820](https://doi.org/10.1177/09636625231177820).
- Börzel, T.A. and Risse, T. (2018), "Fostering resilience in areas of limited statehood and contested orders".
- Card, D., Mas, A. and Rothstein, J. (2008), "Tipping and the dynamics of segregation", *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 123 No. 1, pp. 177-218, doi: [10.1162/qjec.2008.123.1.177](https://doi.org/10.1162/qjec.2008.123.1.177).
- Caso, F. (2021), "Tipping point: kay S. Lawrence's exhibition on climate emergency", *Globalizations*, Vol. 18 No. 6, pp. 1053-1057, doi: [10.1080/14747731.2021.1917869](https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2021.1917869).

- Choi, S. and Ko, Y. (2025), "Does she belong here? Women in leadership positions and organizational performance in gendered institutions", *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 85 No. 1, pp. 238-251, doi: [10.1111/puar.13806](https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13806).
- Chou, M. (2021), "Australian local governments and climate emergency declarations: reviewing local government practice", *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 80 No. 4, pp. 613-623, doi: [10.1111/1467-8500.12451](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12451).
- Clark, C.J., Jashinsky, K., Renz, E., Bergenfeld, I., Durr, R.L., Cheong, Y.F., Kalra, S., Laterra, A. and Yount, K.M. (2023), "Qualitative endline results of the tipping point project to prevent child, early and forced marriage in Nepal", *Global Public Health*, Vol. 18 No. 1, 2287606, doi: [10.1080/17441692.2023.2287606](https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2023.2287606).
- Delaney, K.R. (2015), "Psychiatric mental health leadership at the tipping point", *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, Vol. 36 No. 5, pp. 320-325, doi: [10.3109/01612840.2014.994688](https://doi.org/10.3109/01612840.2014.994688).
- Doabler, C.T., Clarke, B., Kosty, D., Maddox, S.A., Smolkowski, K., Fien, H., Baker, S.K. and Kimmel, G.L. (2021), "Kindergarteners at risk for severe mathematics difficulties: investigating tipping points of core mathematics instruction", *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, Vol. 54 No. 2, pp. 97-110, doi: [10.1177/0022219420972185](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022219420972185).
- Drollette, D. Jr (2025), "Carlos Nobre on tipping points in the Amazon rainforest", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 81 No. 2, pp. 97-100, doi: [10.1080/00963402.2025.2464432](https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2025.2464432).
- Duggan, C. and Bush, K. (2014), "The ethical tipping points of evaluators in conflict zones", *American Journal of Evaluation*, Vol. 35 No. 4, pp. 485-506, doi: [10.1177/1098214014535658](https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214014535658).
- Duit, A. (2016), "Resilience thinking: lessons for public administration", *Public Administration*, Vol. 94 No. 2, pp. 364-380, doi: [10.1111/padm.12182](https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12182).
- Fairbridge, R.W. (2006), "Global warming and the tipping point", *International Journal of Environmental Studies*, Vol. 63 No. 4, pp. 361-371, doi: [10.1080/00207230600899250](https://doi.org/10.1080/00207230600899250).
- Folke, C., Jansson, Å., Rockström, J., Olsson, P., Carpenter, S.R., Chapin, F.S., Crépín, A.-S., Daily, G., Danell, K., Ebbesson, J., Elmqvist, T., Galaz, V., Moberg, F., Nilsson, M., Österblom, H., Ostrom, E., Persson, Å., Peterson, G., Polasky, S., Steffen, W., Walker, B. and Westley, F. (2011), "Reconnecting to the biosphere", *Ambio*, Vol. 40 No. 7, pp. 719-738, doi: [10.1007/s13280-011-0184-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-011-0184-y).
- Galaz, V., Moberg, F., Olsson, E.-K., Paglia, E. and Parker, C. (2011), "Institutional and political leadership dimensions of cascading ecological crises", *Public Administration*, Vol. 89 No. 2, pp. 361-380, doi: [10.1111/j.1467-9299.2010.01883.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.2010.01883.x).
- Gaspar, V., Jaramillo, L. and Wengender, P. (2016), "Tax capacity and growth: is there a tipping point?", working paper No. 16/234, IMF, Washington, DC, available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2902728>.
- Ge, L., Anten, N.P.R., van Dixhoorn, I.D., Feindt, P.H., Kramer, K., Leemans, R., Meuwissen, M.P.M., Spoolder, H. and Sukkel, W. (2016), "Why we need resilience thinking to meet societal challenges in bio-based production systems", *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, Vol. 23, pp. 17-27, doi: [10.1016/j.cosust.2016.11.009](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2016.11.009).
- Gobble, M.M. (2020), "Identifying the tipping point", *Research-Technology Management*, Vol. 63 No. 1, pp. 62-67, doi: [10.1080/08956308.2020.1686276](https://doi.org/10.1080/08956308.2020.1686276).
- Grewatsch, S., Kennedy, S. and Bansal, P. (2023), "Tackling wicked problems in strategic management with systems thinking", *Strategic Organization*, Vol. 21 No. 3, pp. 721-732, doi: [10.1177/14761270211038635](https://doi.org/10.1177/14761270211038635).
- Henderson, S. (2010), "Football broadcasting: tipping point or bleeding edge?", *Soccer and Society*, Vol. 11 No. 5, pp. 614-626, doi: [10.1080/14660970.2010.497361](https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2010.497361).
- Hinchliffe, K.J. and Campbell, M.A. (2016), "Tipping points: teachers' reported reasons for referring primary school children for excessive anxiety", *Journal of Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools*, Vol. 26 No. 1, pp. 84-99, doi: [10.1017/jgc.2015.24](https://doi.org/10.1017/jgc.2015.24).
- Horton, J.B. (2015), "The emergency framing of solar geoengineering: time for a different approach", *The Anthropocene Review*, Vol. 2 No. 2, pp. 147-151, doi: [10.1177/2053019615579922](https://doi.org/10.1177/2053019615579922).

-
- Jackson, R.S. (2007), "The tipping point: how little things make a big difference", *Multicultural Perspectives*, Vol. 9 No. 2, pp. 54-55, doi: [10.1080/15210960701386491](https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960701386491).
- Jones, C. (2016), "The credit crunch: short-term UK housing market correction or long-term tipping point?", *International Journal of Housing Policy*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 70-90, doi: [10.1080/14616718.2015.1067971](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616718.2015.1067971).
- Koponen, N.E. (1966), "The myth of a 'tipping point.'", *Equity and Excellence in Education*, Vol. 4 No. 4, pp. 10-14, doi: [10.1080/0020486660040402](https://doi.org/10.1080/0020486660040402).
- Kröger, M. (2023), "Socio-ecological crises and global climate tipping points as difficulties for expanding extractivisms: prognoses on the Arctic", *Globalizations*, Vol. 20 No. 3, pp. 465-481, doi: [10.1080/14747731.2022.2117500](https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2022.2117500).
- Livingstone, D.W. (2018), "Tipping point for teachers? Changing working conditions and continuing learning in a knowledge economy", *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, Vol. 37 No. 3, pp. 359-371, doi: [10.1080/02601370.2018.1483439](https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2018.1483439).
- Malekpour, S., Walker, W.E., de Haan, F.J., Frantzeskaki, N. and Marchau, V.A.W.J. (2020), "Bridging decision making under deep uncertainty (DMDU) and transition management (TM) to improve strategic planning for sustainable development", *Environmental Science and Policy*, Vol. 107, pp. 158-167, doi: [10.1016/j.envsci.2020.03.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2020.03.002).
- Matei, A. and Antonie, C. (2015), "The need for positive change: adapting management in public administration", *Procedia Economics and Finance*, Vol. 26, pp. 345-350, doi: [10.1016/S2212-5671\(15\)00863-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2212-5671(15)00863-1).
- McKenzie, J. (2025), "Introduction: (Almost) everything you wanted to know about tipping points, but were too afraid to ask", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 81 No. 2, pp. 81-82, doi: [10.1080/00963402.2025.2465146](https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2025.2465146).
- Molines, M., Akremi, A.E., Storme, M. and Celik, P. (2022), "Beyond the tipping point: the curvilinear relationships of transformational leadership, leader-member exchange, and emotional exhaustion in the French police", *Public Management Review*, Vol. 24 No. 1, pp. 80-105, doi: [10.1080/14719037.2020.1795231](https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2020.1795231).
- Mukherji, R. (2013), "Ideas, interests, and the tipping point: economic change in India", *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol. 20 No. 2, pp. 363-389, doi: [10.1080/09692290.2012.716371](https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2012.716371).
- Nijssse, F.J.M.M., Lenton, T.M. and Smith, S.R. (2025), "How to leverage positive tipping points for climate action", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 81 No. 2, pp. 101-106, doi: [10.1080/00963402.2025.2464437](https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2025.2464437).
- Nohrstedt, D. (2022), "When do disasters spark transformative policy change and why?", *Policy and Politics*, Vol. 50 No. 3, pp. 425-441, doi: [10.1332/030557321X16508834302815](https://doi.org/10.1332/030557321X16508834302815).
- Nohrstedt, D. and Hansén, D. (2010), "Converging under pressure? Counterterrorism policy developments in the European Union member states", *Public Administration*, Vol. 88 No. 1, pp. 190-210, doi: [10.1111/j.1467-9299.2009.01795.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.2009.01795.x).
- O'Brien, E. (2020), "When small signs of change add up: the psychology of tipping points", *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 29 No. 1, pp. 55-62, doi: [10.1177/0963721419884313](https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721419884313).
- O'Riordan, T. (2010), "Tipping points: malign and benign?", *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, Vol. 52 No. 1, p. 2, doi: [10.1080/00139151003636037](https://doi.org/10.1080/00139151003636037).
- O'Riordan, T. (2013), "Future earth and tipping points", *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, Vol. 55 No. 5, pp. 31-40, doi: [10.1080/00139157.2013.824340](https://doi.org/10.1080/00139157.2013.824340).
- O'Riordan, T. and Lenton, T. (Eds) (2013), *Addressing Tipping Points for a Precarious Future*, British Academy, doi: [10.5871/bacad/9780197265536.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.5871/bacad/9780197265536.001.0001).
- Perrin, B. (2015), "Bringing accountability up to date with the realities of public sector management in the 21st century", *Canadian Public Administration*, Vol. 58 No. 2, pp. 183-203, doi: [10.1111/capa.12107](https://doi.org/10.1111/capa.12107).
- Pollitt, C. (2015), "Wickedness will not wait: climate change and public management research", *Public Money and Management*, Vol. 35 No. 3, pp. 181-186, doi: [10.1080/09540962.2015.1027490](https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2015.1027490).

- Ramm, T.D., Watson, C.S. and White, C.J. (2018), "Describing adaptation tipping points in coastal flood risk management", *Computers, Environment and Urban Systems*, Vol. 69, pp. 74-86, doi: [10.1016/j.compenvurbsys.2018.01.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compenvurbsys.2018.01.002).
- Ruijter, E., Dingelstad, J. and Meijer, A. (2023), "Studying complex systems through design interventions: probing open government data ecosystems in The Netherlands", *Public Management Review*, Vol. 25 No. 1, pp. 129-149, doi: [10.1080/14719037.2021.1942533](https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2021.1942533).
- Russill, C. (2008), "Tipping point forewarnings in climate change communication: some implications of an emerging trend", *Environmental Communication*, Vol. 2 No. 2, pp. 133-153, doi: [10.1080/17524030802141711](https://doi.org/10.1080/17524030802141711).
- Russill, C. (2024), "Displacements of care in climate crisis: the case of tipping points", *Environmental Communication*, Vol. 18 Nos 1-2, pp. 94-101, doi: [10.1080/17524032.2023.2301000](https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2023.2301000).
- Schmidt, S. and Olson, R. (2008), "A review of the tipping point by Malcolm Gladwell", *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management*, Vol. 28 No. 3, pp. 198-206, doi: [10.1080/01608060802251098](https://doi.org/10.1080/01608060802251098).
- Shultz, J.M., Muschert, G.W., Dingwall, A. and Cohen, A.M. (2013), "The Sandy Hook elementary school shooting as tipping point", *Disaster Health*, Vol. 1 No. 2, pp. 65-73, doi: [10.4161/dish.27113](https://doi.org/10.4161/dish.27113).
- Sperling, D. (2018), "Electric vehicles: approaching the tipping point", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 74 No. 1, pp. 11-18, doi: [10.1080/00963402.2017.1413055](https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2017.1413055).
- Spratt, D. (2025), "Is scientific reticence hindering climate understanding?", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 81 No. 2, pp. 107-113, doi: [10.1080/00963402.2025.2464442](https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2025.2464442).
- Stafford, S.G., Bartels, D.M., Begay-Campbell, S., Bubier, J.L., Crittenden, J.C., Cutter, S.L., Delaney, J.R., Jordan, T.E., Kay, A.C., Libecap, G.D., Moore, J.C., Rabalais, N.N., Rejeski, D., Sala, O.E., Shepherd, J.M. and Travis, J. (2010), "Now is the time for action: transitions and tipping points in complex environmental systems", *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, Vol. 52 No. 1, pp. 38-45, doi: [10.1080/00139150903481882](https://doi.org/10.1080/00139150903481882).
- Stavi, I. (2023), "Urgent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions is needed to avoid irreversible tipping points: time is running out", *All Earth*, Vol. 35 No. 1, pp. 38-45, doi: [10.1080/27669645.2023.2178127](https://doi.org/10.1080/27669645.2023.2178127).
- Stoker, G. (2019), "Embracing complexity: a framework for exploring governance resources", *Journal of Chinese Governance*, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 91-107, doi: [10.1080/23812346.2019.1587859](https://doi.org/10.1080/23812346.2019.1587859).
- Szabó, J., Puškárová, P. and Černota, M. (2023a), "Governance of social tipping points and resilience: a stakeholder agency perspective", in *Governance of Social Tipping Points*, Springer, Cham, pp. 25-42, doi: [10.1007/978-3-031-47413-2_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-47413-2_3).
- Szabó, J., Puškárová, P. and Černota, M. (2023b), "Resilience of the EU's periphery vis-à-vis social tipping points: policy recommendations", in *Governance of Social Tipping Points*, Springer, Cham, pp. 111-133, doi: [10.1007/978-3-031-47413-2_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-47413-2_7).
- Tàbara, J.D. (2023), "Regenerative sustainability. A relational model of possibilities for the emergence of positive tipping points", *Environmental Sociology*, Vol. 9 No. 4, pp. 366-385, doi: [10.1080/23251042.2023.2239538](https://doi.org/10.1080/23251042.2023.2239538).
- Tàbara, J.D., Flamos, A., Mangalagiu, D. and Michas, S. (Eds) (2024), *Positive Tipping Points towards Sustainability: Understanding the Conditions and Strategies for Fast Decarbonization in Regions*, Springer International Publishing, doi: [10.1007/978-3-031-50762-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-50762-5).
- Thygesen, L.C., Christensen, K., Rørth, M., Sørensen, H.T., Vandenbroucke, J.P. and Westendorp, R.G.J. (2021), "Tipping points – do the prognostic values of multimorbidity and functional status vary with age?", *Clinical Epidemiology*, Vol. 13, pp. 853-857, doi: [10.2147/CLEP.S325348](https://doi.org/10.2147/CLEP.S325348).
- van der Hel, S., Hellsten, I. and Steen, G. (2018), "Tipping points and climate change: metaphor between science and the media", *Environmental Communication*, Vol. 12 No. 5, pp. 605-620, doi: [10.1080/17524032.2017.1410198](https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2017.1410198).
- Vormedal, I. (2012), "States and markets in global environmental governance: the role of tipping points in international regime formation", *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 18 No. 2, pp. 251-275, doi: [10.1177/1354066110380962](https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066110380962).

-
- Vries, M.F.R.K. (2013), "Coaching's 'good hour': creating tipping points", *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, Vol. 6 No. 2, pp. 152-175, doi: [10.1080/17521882.2013.806944](https://doi.org/10.1080/17521882.2013.806944).
- Walker, R.T. (2021), "Collision course: development pushes Amazonia toward its tipping point", *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, Vol. 63 No. 1, pp. 15-25, doi: [10.1080/00139157.2021.1842711](https://doi.org/10.1080/00139157.2021.1842711).
- Wang, W. and Downey, J. (2024), "Have we reached a 'tipping point' in climate change reporting? How mainstream newspapers cover heatwaves", *Journalism Practice*, Vol. 20 No. 4, pp. 1-26, doi: [10.1080/17512786.2024.2409840](https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2024.2409840).
- Wood, R.S. (2006), "Tobacco's tipping point: the master settlement agreement as a focusing event", *Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 34 No. 3, pp. 419-436, doi: [10.1111/j.1541-0072.2006.00180.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-0072.2006.00180.x).
-

Corresponding author

Konstantinos Grigoriadis can be contacted at: kongrigor80@gmail.com