Effective and Legitimate Crisis Governance in Multilevel Systems

Dimiter Toshkov, Lars Brummel, Brendan Carroll, Ingmar Jansen, Kutsal Yesilkagit
(Institute of Public Administration, Leiden University)

Research agenda: How does the organization of the state influence the effectiveness and legitimacy of (pandemic) crisis governance? What is the role of decentralization and federalism? Which structures promote fast and effective policy responses that enjoy the support of the citizens and have high levels of compliance?

Study 1: Correlates of the speed of the initial policy responses to COVID-19

Design: Survival analysis of the timing of adoption of restrictive policy measures in 30 European countries during the first COVID-19 wave in 2020.

Main results: Countries with less administrative & healthcare capacity, with separate ministries of health, and with ministers of health who had medical background reacted faster and more decisively with closing down schools and imposing lockdowns.

Study 2: Multilevel governance (federalism) and COVID-19 policy responses

Design: Comparative qualitative process-tracing case studies of COVID-19 management (2020-2022) in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and France.

Main results: In federal states, regional governments play a larger role in pandemic crisis management compared to unitary states. Federations have different decision-making arrangements, focusing more on coordination than centralization, but the quality and content of their pandemic policies does *not* substantially differ from unitary regimes.

Study 3: Public acceptance of restrictive policy measures during pandemics

Design: Survey experiment conducted on nationally-representative samples in the Netherlands (N=1150) and Germany (N=1167).

Main results: The public is more willing to comply with restrictive measures and more reluctant to protest them in the Netherlands than in Germany. In the Netherlands, restrictions decided by the national government are more accepted than those decided regionally but there is no such difference in Germany.

Conclusions and policy implications

1. Relatively high administrative and healthcare capacity, as well as high pandemic preparedness can have paradoxical effects, slowing down the initial response to a crisis.
2. Organizational factors, such as having a representative of the medical profession at the meetings of the cabinet, can have a big impact, speeding up policy responses.
3. Multilevel governance (federal or decentalized) structures shape the nature of the policies, but are not associated with the speed or quality of the policy responses to pandemics as such.
4. Which level of government takes the decisions addressing a pandemic (e.g. lockdowns) matters very little for the public acceptance of the measures.

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