

Centralized or Decentralized *Which Governance Systems are Having a “Good” Pandemic?*

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating effects across the world, yet different countries have had varying degrees of success in their attempts to manage it. One of the reasons behind the different outcomes observed so far lies in the strengths and weaknesses of different governance arrangements leveraged to tackle the crisis. In this article we examine what we can learn about the operational capacity of different democracies through their early responses to the crisis. We provide a framework of four positive qualities of multilevel governance that might lead to greater chances of positive practical outcomes and present an illustrative case study of the experiences of Switzerland and the United Kingdom (UK). We conclude with some areas for further research and investigation.

Keywords: coronavirus, covid, decentralization, multilevel governance, pandemic, Switzerland, United Kingdom

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced every government in the world to devise strategies in response to a wide-ranging set of urgent issues. Commentators have already observed how the pandemic is impacting the very foundations of many democracies (Wigura and Kuisz 2020), which suggest that it might be timely to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different governance arrangements leveraged to tackle the crisis. In this article we examine what we can learn about the operational capacity of different democracies through their early responses to the crisis. First, we provide a framework of the positive qualities of multilevel governance, which might lead to greater chances of positive practical outcomes. We then present an illustrative case study of the experiences of Switzerland and the United Kingdom (UK) and conclude with some areas for further research and investigation.



Qualities of Multilevel Governance Arrangements

The field of multilevel governance is extensive, and remains contested, particularly in answering the normative question of ‘what arrangements are best for good governance and effective local democracy’ (Stoker 2006: 503). It is not the purpose of this article to provide an extensive review; however, we identify some degree of consensus over the notion that multilevel governance outcomes can be construed as products of the relative capacities of governance agents, and the nature of their relationships (Homsy et al. 2019; Gash 2016; Stoker 2006). Here we move beyond constitutional features of democratic governments. As colleagues have previously shown, those may not matter much in attempts to avoid severe policy or other disasters (Jennings et al. 2018). Rather we focus on the ways these structures are arranged into working governance systems (Stoker 2006).

Equating good governance arrangements to good COVID-19 response outcomes is not straightforward, nor are we arguing for such a simplistic view. Instead, we highlight how four positive qualities of multilevel governance can contribute, when combined, to give greater chances of positive practical outcomes in times of crisis. Multi-level governance benefits from both centralized and decentralized capacity, mutual learning and integration, and celebrating and exploiting differences. Centralized and decentralized capacities refer to the ability of central government and subnational governance actors (regional and local authorities) to sanction decisions, influence policymaking and undertake its implementation. As Peters and Pierre remind us: “governance is about governing, and governing is predominately about making decisions” (Peters and Pierre 2016:1). Having that decision-making capacity at central and local level are, we propose, the first two qualities of an effective governance system. Mutual learning and integration refer to the ability to identify mutual benefits and leverage the co-production of knowledge among various governance actors at different levels of the system (Homsy et al. 2019). And finally, celebrating difference refers to an acceptance of the need for different approaches to the widely divergent ranges of issues that different localities face in any given situation.

To illustrate our argument, we take the examples of Switzerland and England (and more generally the UK), whose responses to the COVID-19 pandemic highlight advantages and disadvantages within their respective governance systems. We show that despite greater reaction speed in centralized systems, decentralized ones are more effective over time through their ability to be more responsive to local needs. However, decentralization alone does not guarantee greater chances of success. The relationships between the different levels of governance in the system also need to be

constructed in ways that allow mutual learning, integration of perspectives, and honor differences in approaches to different aspects of the crisis.

Case Study

There are clear benefits to having a strong central capacity in terms of the ability to implement rapid, decisive action. In the UK, for example, measures designed to mitigate the spread and impacts of the coronavirus were centrally issued on March 3, 2020 when the government unveiled its plan to tackle the outbreak (UK government 2020). At the time there were 51 cases and no fatalities in the UK (Coronavirus (COVID-19) in the UK 2020). This was then followed two weeks later by a rapid change in tone and course in response to a model by a team at Imperial College London, which predicted high levels of death unless more stringent measures were adopted (Gallagher 2020). However, some have argued that over-centralization has resulted in a greater tendency to make policy mistakes (Dunleavy 1995).

By contrast, it took the Swiss Federal Council until March 13 to declare an “extraordinary situation,” thus reclaiming the ability to adopt stringent measures designed to curb the spread of the virus (Geiser and Allen 2020). By that point, it had 1,176 cases and eight fatalities (COVID-19 Information for Switzerland 2020) and was receiving heavy criticism from the medical community for its lack of coordinated action. While the declaration legitimated the Swiss Federal Council’s ability to lead the response, it had to continue doing so in close collaboration with its 26 cantons, who had until then led their own responses.

The evident tension between speed of reaction and the need to include a broader range of stakeholders in decision-making was counter-balanced by the strength of Switzerland’s decentralized capabilities. Indeed, all three governance levels have mobilized different resources to tackle the outbreak: the federal, cantonal (regional), and communal (equivalent to county or city councils). Each “commune” can issue its own specific guidance in line with federal and cantonal guidelines. Évolène (2020), in Valais, for example, has a dedicated page on its website for local measures in place that go far beyond reposting links to the federal ones. According to the Swiss press, they are at the frontline of the response effort (Pauchard 2020).

By contrast it is not clear what role or agency local councils or other bodies have in the UK’s response to the crisis on the ground. Local authorities in England have through the austerity measures of the last decade lost a great deal of capacity. NHS bodies seemed tied up by a complex system that seems to discourage initiative in favor of regulation and performance measurement. The country’s lack of decentralized capabilities at the local

levels also led to confusion in how to implement central government's orders in various sectors. For example, for a time NHS 111 – the UK's national telephone line providing frontline medical advice, through which all COVID-19-related queries and medical cases from the public were routed – contradicted information provided by ministers (Mason, Quinn, and Walker 2020); more recently, concerning the construction sector, the government published guidelines to close sites where the 2 meter distancing rule could not be followed but withdrew them hours later following protests that the rules could not be implemented (Plimmer and Pickard 2020). This example highlights the lack of mutual learning and integration in the British system. One way this is mitigated is through consultation. The withdrawal of the construction guidelines highlights the lack of consultation with the broader construction sector in the formulation of the guidelines.

By contrast, in Switzerland, mutual learning is institutionalized in the consultation processes at the cantonal and communal levels, which informs and is integrated into central decision-making. During the crisis, these consultation mechanisms took place weekly and have continuously fed into central decision-making. Perhaps cultural differences account for the discrepancy in capacity for mutual learning among different governance levels and centers. Swiss historian and political commentator Claude Longchamp (2020) notes the long-standing tradition of consensus building in Swiss political life, whereas Lowndes (1999) identifies that relationships between local and central government departments and agencies in England have notoriously been characterized by a lack of trust, conflict and competition. The asymmetrical devolution which has seen powers taken by Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland also suffers from a lack of engagement and the tendency for Whitehall and Westminster to act without consultation. The result is increasingly diverse approaches to COVID-19 in the different regions, especially in moving out of lockdown in different parts of the UK.

It is the institutionalization of processes of mutual learning, which occur on an ad hoc basis in the UK, that has been leveraged successfully in the Swiss case to ensure locally relevant and appropriate responses are not only welcome, but able to influence the general course of the country's strategy. In this way, decentralized capacity alone is not sufficient to generate a response like that seen in Switzerland, but it benefits from the relationships among the different levels of governance being constructed in a manner conducive to mutual learning and integration.

This feature is combined finally in the case of Switzerland with a commitment to celebrating differences by providing local governance centers with the freedom and resources to undertake what they feel is needed for their communities. The commune of Bovernier, for instance, a small village with 900 inhabitants in the canton of Valais, decided to call each of

Table 5-1: Comparing Qualities of Governance System in the United Kingdom and Switzerland Leveraged in their Pandemic Responses

Quality	UK	UK impact	Switzerland	Swiss Impact
<i>Central Capacity</i>	Strong	Rapid response	Strong	Coordinated response
<i>Decentralized Capacity</i>	Weak	Implementation problems	Strong	Effective implementation
<i>Mutual Learning</i>	Weak	Lack of policy coherence	Strong	Coherent policies
<i>Celebrating Difference</i>	Weak	Lack of local relevance	Strong	Relevant, innovative responses

the 110 households with a resident over the age of 65 to arrange food and medicine deliveries (Pauchard 2020). In Geneva, the immediate focus was on job security and support for commercial organizations (ORCA 2020). In this way, different approaches are celebrated for their localized capacity to innovate rapid, relevant responses, in contrast to centralized edicts such as the construction site closure example discussed earlier, which struggled to be implemented effectively as the realization emerged among various stakeholders that “one-size might not fit all.” The UK experience has seen little attempt at allowing local capacity and resources to energize and innovate in responding to the pandemic. Local authorities and the primary healthcare teams based around general practice surgeries were overlooked despite their local knowledge and contacts, as a one size fits all regime based on centralized regulation dominated decision-making.

On balance, then, as outlined in Table 1, Switzerland and the UK have been able to leverage different qualities of their governance arrangements with varying degrees of success. The UK put all its governance eggs in the basket of control and coordination from Westminster and Whitehall. However, even the strength of a rapid response thereby provided has deteriorated to become more a sense of a constant changing of minds and flawed initiatives, driven more by the news cycle than any idea of strategy. The Swiss response, in contrast, drew its governance response from a wider canvass of resources, leaning on both central and local capacity and drawing on mutual learning and local initiative.

Further Research

Our argument is not the often-heard claim for more decentralization of power in governance systems or a hymn of praise for collaborative

governance. It is that those systems that appear to be emerging best from the tragedy of the coronavirus pandemic have delivered across multiple qualities necessary for effective governance. Decentralized capacity is important and illustrated in other examples, such as Germany's demonstrated success in case testing capabilities, which relies on a network of 400 public health offices capable of testing three times as many patients per head of population than the UK (Oltermann 2020). However decentralized capacity alone does not seem sufficient. In the United States for example, the *Washington Post's* long exposé on the "denial and dysfunction" that characterized the American response to the pandemic emphasizes how power struggles and missteps by the president and mistrust between the various federal department and agencies responsible for dealing with such an outbreak led to delays and failures that are central to the dire impact of the pandemic in that the country (Abutaleb et al. 2020). The way the relationship between different centers of power is constructed seems equally as important to the effectiveness of a response.

Operational capacity or functionality is different to constitutional arrangements and different again to standard lists of the requirements for good governance. This pandemic has shone a bright light on systems that in ordinary times can stumble on or muddle through and as such is a great opportunity to learn. But there is much more to know. What are the other determinants in positive outcomes – resources, governing traditions, or policy styles? And what affects the abilities of different systems to demonstrate some of these positive qualities – cultures, media environments, or even trust? And beyond this opportunity to learn, is it realistic to imagine that systems can learn and change? We are at early stages in the process and lack enough evidence to be able make clear, let alone definitive, judgements. But it does seem worth asking whether we can start a process of learning from an event causing immense human suffering to help us understand what key areas of reform of governance systems, supporting human welfare, can be identified for the future.

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