

Research suggests the strength of democracy in times of crisis

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Democracy is often messy, filled with competing voices, political arguments and bureaucratic redundancies. But when it comes to immediate disaster response, it's a clear winner over autocratic systems.

The coronavirus pandemic proved to be a real-time experiment for political scientists such as Binghamton University Professor Olga Shvetsova. As the pandemic unfolded in the summer of 2020, Shvetsova and her COVID-19 Policy Response Lab compiled a massive [database](#) comparing pandemic-related governmental policies in 75 countries on both the national and subnational levels.

The database inspired multiple articles, including one Shvetsova had published in a medical journal, and a forthcoming book, tentatively titled "Government Response and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Between a Rock and a Hard Place." On March 7, Shvetsova discussed her findings with the campus community as she gave the 2022 Harpur Dean's Distinguished Lecture.

"Despite the challenges of the last few years, she has used the crisis as an opportunity to bring together a team of students and collaborators to ask some important questions about how governmental policy emerges in times of crisis," Harpur College Dean Celia Klin said during her introduction.

Before the advent of vaccines and treatment protocols, the only way communities could fight the coronavirus was through non-medical interventions such as closures, mask mandates and social distancing, Shvetsova explained. Public health policy played a crucial role in establishing these measures—although not seamlessly.

"We tend to think that governments know what needs to be done, and that for everything that needs to be done, there is somebody in government who is responsible for doing it," she said. "This is very optimistic."

Shvetsova's team began collecting data in March 2020, with the help of volunteers from around the world. They studied national policies, as well

as those made on the subnational level such as by states and provinces, to create a protective public policy index that was frequently updated during the course of the pandemic.

The research found that democracies with self-governing states or provinces—federations, to use political science terminology—offered more layers of protection to individual citizens than those with unitary governments. This goes against the assumption early in the pandemic that autocracies would mount a more robust response to the crisis.

You can think of it in terms of a decision tree; a signal either reaches—or fails to reach—the decision-making authority, which then mounts a response. Unitary democracies tend to field more signals than autocracies, although they still go to a single authority.

Federations, on the other hand, have both multiple signals and multiple decision-making authorities. They're more likely to pick up signals of a crisis and respond, whether at the national, state or municipal levels—something that residents of New York state saw firsthand during the COVID crisis. Even if one of the decision-making bodies doesn't respond to a signal, the other layers may.

Redundancy, as seen in federations with their multiple levels of government, is actually a plus when it comes to crisis response, Shvetsova's research found.

Conflicting forces

When it comes to enacting public health mandates, democratic governments find themselves subject to contradictory forces.

"Politicians generally don't like to inflict pain on the public that voted for them. The word 'mandate' doesn't bode well in this country, and the

world outside this country is not that much different," Shvestsova said. "On the other hand, they also do not want to see a healthcare calamity."

As a result, political actors want protective policies, but they would prefer that someone else put them into place, she said. Power-sharing among different branches of government and among different political parties therefore enabled more effective policymaking in terms of public health. The more political parties there were in a legislative body, the more likely that body was to adopt more stringent pandemic-related policies.

Exactly who makes those decisions and how they are made are in constant flux, however.

"The allocation of responsibilities in government is akin to a living, breathing process. It undergoes regular adjustments," Shvetsova said.

Those adjustments could be seen in elections, which then influenced the enactment of pandemic-related policies. Lawsuits over enacted policies, seen in some parts of the United States, are another.

On the national level, the healthcare systems that were in place prior to the pandemic didn't have an impact on governmental strategy, whether they were single-payer, private insurance or entirely out-of-pocket. However, the constitutional assignment of responsibility for public health did matter, Shvetsova said.

"Politics mattered more than prior health policies," she said.

Overall, response to a crisis appears to be swifter in decentralized democracies, and shared accountability makes it easier for governments to enact necessary policies.

"How well we design our government is going to determine how well we survive a crisis," she said.

More information: Database comparing pandemic-related governmental policies in 75 countries on both the national and subnational levels: [www.openicpsr.org/openicpsr/pr ...
3401/version/V3/view](http://www.openicpsr.org/openicpsr/pr...3401/version/V3/view)

Provided by Binghamton University

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