Abstract

The health crisis caused by the rapid spread of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronaviru
s-2 (SARS-CoV-2) poses enormous challenges to governments around the globe. Far-reaching mea
sures have to be enacted, and even a slight delay can have fatal negative consequences. The neces
sity for swift and resolute governmental action constitutes a particular predicament for federal dem
ocracies like Germany in which the regular decision-making process requires not only time for para
lementary scrutiny but also the coordination of multiple actors and interests at different levels of go
vernment. In this context, calls for more executive authority are frequent. This study uses daily col
lected panel data from the Mannheim Corona Study to investigate factors that influence responden
ts’ propensity to grant additional discretionary powers to the German federal government on the ex
pense of the parliament and state governments. Based on insights from the crisis management li
terature, we seek to explore the effects of federalized policy responses, trust in government, satis
faction with the government and parliament, and personal threat perceptions on the support for gre
ater decision-making autonomy for the federal executive branch. The results show that, while trust in
government before the pandemic has a minor impact, policy heterogeneity at the state-level and indi
vidual threat perceptions strongly increase the likelihood to support the centralization of the decision-making process.
“Our idea of normality, of public life, social togetherness – all of this is being put to the test as never before.”
– Angela Merkel, German Chancellor, in her TV announcement on March 18, 2020.

1 Introduction

Within only three months after its first occurrence in Wuhan (China) in December 2019, the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 matured into a full-scale global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020b).1 On April 3, the number of officially confirmed COVID-19 cases worldwide surpassed one million while 53,379 reported deaths were attributed to the novel coronavirus. Another month later, these numbers climbed to almost 3.5 million confirmed cases and 243,872 deaths. It only took until the end of September – approximately nine months after the first reported incidence – before one million people died in connection to COVID-19 (Hasell et al., 2020).

As these numbers plainly signify, the global COVID-19 pandemic posed a severe challenge for societies and governments. In the absence of an effective treatment or a vaccination, containing the further spread of the virus seemed to be the only viable option to conquer the health crisis and to protect lives. However, containment policies constitute a delicate dilemma for liberal democracies as they interfere with civic liberties in an unprecedented manner (e.g., Hattke and Martin, 2020). Furthermore, given the pace at which the virus propagated through society, containment measures needed to be implemented immediately since even a slight delay could have fatal negative consequences (e.g., Breznau, 2020). At the same time, the necessity for swift governmental action stood in contrast to the deliberative character of the democratic decision-making process. It also conflicted with the basic principles of federalism that grants discretionary powers to different levels of the government (see also Rosenthal and Kouzmin, 1997). Consequently, Corbett pointedly summarizes that “liberal democracy is, in its very conception, opposed to crisis government” (2009, 20).

In order to enable the government to take prompt and resolute actions in the wake of

the pandemic, calls for an expansion of the federal executive discretion were common (Hattke and Martin, 2020). In fact, the centralization of decision-making powers is a widely reported response to crises in different democratic systems (e.g., Scheuerman, 2012; ’t Hart, Tindall and Brown, 2009; Hermann, 1963). This research also suggests that governments might strategically define and frame an issue as an emergency situation and use crisis rhetoric in an attempt to alter public opinion and to strengthen their position vis-à-vis other democratic institutions (see also Matthews, 2012; ’t Hart and Tindall, 2009; Arato, 2002; Ackerman, 2000).

While democratic governments clearly have incentives to seek more discretionary powers in times of crisis, we know relatively little about the people’s willingness to equip the executive branch of government with additional decision-making authority. Given that citizens’ policy evaluations are partly determined by features of the decision-making process itself (e.g., Juhl and Hilpert, 2021), understanding their preferences for crisis politics is important.

Against this background, the present study investigates the motivations for people to grant special decision-making powers to the federal government in times of crisis. By relying on daily data from a probability-based panel survey in Germany collected between March and July 2020, we measure the public support for expanded decision-making autonomy at the federal level of government over the course of the first epidemic wave. While controlling for several socio-demographic and economic factors as well as sub-national infection rates, we seek to explore the effects of heterogeneity in state-level policy responses, trust in the federal government, satisfaction with the work of the government and the parliament, as well as individual threat perceptions on the demand for enhanced executive power.

Our analysis shows that especially individual threat perceptions and divergence in containment policies across German states determine the approval of expanded decision-making discretion at the federal level. Whereas trust in government has no discernible effect, the analysis reveals that the satisfaction with the federal government and parliament prior to the onset of the pandemic have the expected consequences for public approval of a centralization. These results suggest that, irrespective of the spatial dispersion of infection rates, citizens prefer coordinated policy responses.
2 Policy Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Germany

According to data provided by the *Our World in Data* project, the first officially confirmed COVID-19 case in Germany was reported on January 28, 2020 (Hasell et al., 2020). However, it took until the end of February before some local hotspots – especially in Bavaria and North Rhine-Westphalia – emerged that spurred the spread of SARS-CoV-2 and challenged local health authorities which struggled to trace back every chain of infection. Despite these developments and the federal government’s recommendation to cancel public events with more than 1,000 attendees, mass events like carnival and also major sports events with thousands of participants and visitors still took place (Hattke and Martin, 2020; Naumann et al., 2020).

In this initial phase of the pandemic in Germany, the federal government followed a containment strategy that predominantly relied on state governments and the local health authorities to identify clusters and suppress the spread of the virus. The federal government was reluctant to impose measures that drastically interfere with civic liberties and the everyday live of millions of people. Yet, due to a lack of common testing and quarantining standards as well as a shortage of staff, this initial decentralized response turned out to be insufficient in order to prevent the virus from spreading (Hattke and Martin, 2020).

Consequently, in mid-March, the number of confirmed cases started to increase exponentially and the German government quickly changed its strategy towards a more centralized and interventionist approach. This new containment strategy primarily relied on issuing stay-at-home orders, closing national borders, shutting down major parts of the economy, closing public institutions (e.g., universities, libraries, etc.) as well as schools and childcare facilities, prohibiting public events, increasing the testing capacity, coordinating a joint procurement program for personal protective equipment, and harmonizing testing and reporting procedures based on guidelines developed by the federal government’s healthy agency (Hattke and Martin, 2020). Despite their exceptional scope, other European countries imposed even stricter policies (e.g., Breznau, 2020; Capano et al., 2020; Schulze, 2020).

Owing to Germany’s federal system that requires the coordination of the federal executive and state-level authorities responsible for healthcare and disaster management, these measures...
were decided by the prime ministers (PM) of the sixteen German states and Chancellor Angela Merkel within the realm of the prime minister conference (Hattke and Martin, 2020; Weible et al., 2020). During the first wave of the pandemic in Germany, the prime minister conference met approximately on a bi-weekly basis and – without a formal mandate – developed into the main body to decide about the adequate policy response to the health crisis. At the same time, Germany’s federal parliament also proved to be able to legislate under these challenging circumstances. The Bundestag not only amended its procedural rules in order to maintain its decision-making ability but also swiftly approved economic relief packages and passed the Federal Infection Protection Act (FIPA; “Gesetz zum Schutz der Bevölkerung bei einer epidemischen Lage von nationaler Tragweite”) which provides a legal basis for expanded executive discretion during a state of emergency (Klafki, 2020; Schulze, 2020).

Overall, the strategy pursued in Germany was very effective as the number of newly confirmed cases decreased quickly towards the end of April. At the same time, the public support for different containment policies started to decrease as well (Naumann et al., 2020). In response to this development and given the heterogeneous infection rates across the German states, an intense debate about when to lift different restrictions emerged and the states reclaimed discretionary power from the federal government (Hattke and Martin, 2020). Moreover, while there was a general agreement among political parties about the implementation of strict measures at the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak in Germany, the containment strategy became an issue of political contestation once the infection rate started to decrease. Especially the liberal democrats (FDP) and the right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) began to oppose containment policies.

3 Federalism, Parliamentary Decision-Making, and Executive Discretion in Times of Crisis

While crises can take various different forms – for example natural disasters, interstate conflicts, terrorist attacks, economic shocks, financial breakdowns, riots, nuclear disasters, or pandemics – they all share three key features: Crises i) pose a severe threat which ii) requires a quick response by decision-makers who iii) have to act under high levels of uncertainty (e.g., Weible
et al., 2020; ’t Hart, Rosenthal and Kouzmin, 1993; Rosenthal, Charles and ’t Hart, 1989). In the face of such an unprecedented, unforeseen, unpredictable, and highly consequential emergency situation, governments need to make numerous far-reaching decisions quickly, yet, they oftentimes lack sufficient information or any legal norm guiding their actions (Capano et al., 2020; ’t Hart, Tindall and Brown, 2009; Scheuerman, 2006).

It is easy to verify that the global COVID-19 pandemic exhibits all the key characteristics of an emergency situation. First, it is truly global in scope and already caused more than 1.8 million deaths by the end of 2020. Second, the rapid spread of the disease and the absence of a treatment or vaccination require quick actions in order to prevent the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 while, third, solid scientific knowledge about the effectiveness and long-term consequences of several containment measures was rare – particularly at the onset of the pandemic (e.g., Capano et al., 2020). As the German Chancellor Angela Merkel has put it in her TV announcement on March 18: “The situation is serious, and the outcome uncertain.”

In an emergency situation like this, the government is forced to focus on the very core duty of statehood, namely the functioning of society and the protection of lives (’t Hart, Heyse and Boin, 2001, 184). At the same time, the exceptional and unpredictable nature of a crisis oftentimes implies that no precedence or legal norm exist that could provide guidance on the most appropriate policy response (Scheuerman, 2006, 62). Constitutions are written with respect to “normal” times. They might be less applicable in times of crisis (see also Hattke and Martin, 2020; Ackerman, 2004, 2000).²

Despite this lack of clear legal guidance, research has revealed some structural features of political systems that determine the governments’ responses to a crisis. One of the most robust finding is that decision-making tends to become centralized during times of crisis which leads to an increase in executive power (e.g., Hattke and Martin, 2020; Scheuerman, 2012; ’t Hart, Tindall and Brown, 2009; Neal, 2012; ’t Hart, Rosenthal and Kouzmin, 1993; Hermann, 1963). Therefore, in accordance with a well-known German dictum, crises are generally considered to

²Modern constitutions, though, usually feature special provisions for emergency situations that permit the transfer of decision-making authority to allow the executive branch to issue decrees, censor information, or (temporarily) restrict fundamental rights and suspend the usual legal process (Greene, 2011; Ferejohn and Pasquino, 2004; Arato, 2002). Article 15 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), for example, is a derogation clause that grants states emergency powers in times of crisis (e.g., Tierney, 2005). Hence, crisis provisions are well within the institutional realm. However, given the uniqueness and unpredictability of an emergency situation, no legal document can provide clear guidance on the appropriate means used by the government to respond to a specific crisis (Scheuerman, 2006).
be “the hour of the executive” (Scheuerman, 2012, 745). Even in federal democratic systems like the United States and Canada, disaster responses are frequently designed and supervised by the executive branch at the national level.

Increasing executive discretion and centralizing the decision-making process in response to an emergency situation poses a particular challenge for liberal democracies. The necessity for immediate and resolute governmental action conflicts with the time-consuming deliberative character of law-making as well as the oversight responsibilities of legislative assemblies (e.g., White, 2015; Neal, 2012; Corbett, 2009; ’t Hart, Rosenthal and Kouzmin, 1993). However, sidestepping the body of elected representatives – even for a limited period of time – raises important legitimacy concerns. The executive might exploit the additional leeway granted to cope with an acute crisis in an attempt to pursue its own policy agenda without interference and to strengthen its position vis-à-vis other democratic institutions in the decision-making process (Scheuerman, 2012; Ackerman, 2004; Arato, 2002).

Empowering the executive branch at the national level also interferes with a decentralized political system. In fact, federalism plays a decisive role in determining the governments’ disaster responses (e.g., Lester and Krejci, 2007; Conlan, 2006; Waugh and Streib, 2006; Rosenthal and Kouzmin, 1997). On the one hand, decentralized decision-making facilitates the collaboration between local authorities and non-governmental actors at the regional level. It also avoids communication problems which eases the identification and implementation of a sound policy response (Waugh and Streib, 2006). On the other hand, several collective action problems can occur and subnational crisis responses might differ vastly in the absence of a strong superordinate regulatory power (e.g., Hattke and Martin, 2020; Waugh, 2006).

With respect to the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous recent studies illuminate the effects of a federal structure of government on the policy responses implemented. However, the conclusions drawn with respect to the contribution of federalism to a successful containment strategy are ambiguous (e.g., Capano et al., 2020). In countries like Germany and Canada, the federal structure has proven to be effective in responding to the health crisis, although both countries centralized the decision-making process during the first COVID-19 wave to some extent (e.g., Hattke and Martin, 2020; Migone, 2020; Naumann et al., 2020). In other places, particularly in the United States and Sweden, however, the decentralized approach was found to hinder the
implementation of an effective policy response as it prevented national coordination, produced a patchwork of different measures, and revealed existing ideological and cultural differences (e.g., Deslatte, Hatch and Stokan, 2020; Haffajee and Mello, 2020; Kettl, 2020; Pierre, 2020; Rocco, Béland and Waddan, 2020). Moreover, even states with a centralized health-care system like France\(^3\) were criticized for its crisis management (e.g., Hassenteufel, 2020).

4 Preferences for Expanded Executive Discretion

While, as the previous section shows, research on crisis government and the centralization of decision-making authority in democratic systems is abundant, we currently lack a sophisticated understanding of the circumstances under which citizens prefer to equip the federal government with additional discretion in an emergency situation. However, since features of the decision-making process itself affect the public approval of policies independent of their content, citizens’ views on politics in times of crisis is an important determinant for their support for far-reaching containment measures (Juhl and Hilpert, 2021). Different factors might motivate citizens to prefer a centralized approach and demand more discretionary power for the national government – even at the expense of state governments and the national legislative assembly.

As discussed above, federalism and decentralized decision-making can cause collective action problems which may lead to delayed and inefficient policy responses. When confronted with an emergency situation, the smooth interplay between national and subnational authorities is of crucial importance (Weible et al., 2020). Yet, the complex distribution of decision-making responsibilities in federal systems and varying levels of organizational and resource capacities may render local emergency responses slow and inefficient (Waugh, 2006). Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, federalism seems to impair the formulation and implementation of a resolute policy response in some countries. While the federal government of the United States largely failed to quickly take action in the wake of the pandemic (e.g., Haffajee and Mello, 2020; Kettl, 2020; Rocco, Béland and Waddan, 2020), the Swedish government struggled to coordinate the highly decentralized healthcare system (e.g., Pierre, 2020).\(^4\)

---

\(^3\)As in many other countries, the implementation of an emergency health law in March further expanded the executive’s discretionary power in France (Hassenteufel, 2020, 5)

\(^4\)It is important to stress that these problems are not an inherent feature of federalism per se but depend on the specific institutional design, the actors’ preferences, as well as the policies implemented during a crisis (Rocco, Béland and Waddan, 2020, 472). In fact, federalism has some important advantages (see, for instance,
Differences in state-level responses to the pandemic, therefore, might indicate coordination failure. Moreover, since a concise communication strategy are key components of a successful governmental response to a crisis (e.g., Weible et al., 2020; ’t Hart, Tindall and Brown, 2009), inconsistent and sometimes even conflicting messages send by local officials undermines their credibility and damages the public trust (Christensen and Lægreid, 2020). Consequently, we expect citizens to demand a more centralized crisis response the more state-level policies differ from one another.

**Hypothesis 1:** Policy divergence among the state governments increases the public support for centralized decision-making and expanded discretionary power for the federal government.

Besides this, the public’s attitudes towards democratic institutions are also decisive factors in determining the approval of expanded executive discretion. In particular, trust in government and the evaluation of the performance and functioning of different institutions might be associated with the public’s preferences for centralized decision-making.

Research has convincingly established the nexus between public trust and the implementation of, and compliance with, restrictive containment measures in the context of different pandemics, including Ebola (e.g., Vinck et al., 2019), SARS (e.g., Tang and Wong, 2003), and H1N1 (e.g., Prati, Pietrantoni and Zani, 2011; van der Weerd et al., 2011). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, several recent studies also point towards the importance of trust for the success of containment policies (e.g., Devine et al., 2020; Guglielmi et al., 2020). In line with this research, we expect citizens who exhibit higher levels of trust in the federal government before the outbreak of the pandemic to be more likely to grant executive privileges to the executive branch. This expectation leads to our second hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:** Trust in the federal government prior to the pandemic increases the support for expanding its discretionary authority.

Closely related to the concept of trust in the government is citizens’ satisfaction with the performance of the incumbent government and parliamentary parties prior to the pandemic (Lester and Krejci, 2007) and other federal systems, like Germany (Naumann et al., 2020), managed to respond to the onset of the health crisis comparatively well.
Due to the enormous uncertainties associated with the global health crisis, citizens wish to place the crisis management in the most capable hands. Consequently, citizens who are more satisfied with the performance of the incumbent government are expected to be more likely to prefer expanded executive powers as compared to citizens who are dissatisfied with the federal government. Similarly, a high satisfaction with the work of parliament should result in a reluctance to empower the executive branch at the expense of the elected legislative assembly. Following this line of reasoning, our next hypotheses are:

**Hypothesis 3a**: Satisfaction with the work of the federal government increases the support for more centralized decision-making at the national level.

**Hypothesis 3b**: Satisfaction with the work of parliament decreases the support for more executive discretion.

Finally, since crises and emergency situations frequently generate collective stress (Rosenthal, Charles and ’t Hart, 1989), the psychological consequences of the ongoing health crisis and the policy measures imposed can affect the citizen’s preferences for a centralization of the decision-making process as well. Not only does the disease cause specific psychological reactions. The strict and unprecedented policies imposed in response to the pandemic and the associated economic downturn similarly shape the citizen’s perceptions and their well-being (e.g., Guglielmi et al., 2020; Naumann et al., 2020).

In general, individuals perceive the threat posed by the SARS-CoV-2 virus differently. Citizens who perceive the virus as less threatening should be less inclined to approve strict measures that interfere with their everyday life and harm the economic prospect. They also should be more reluctant to grant the federal government additional discretionary authority at the expense of state executives and the parliament. In contrast, individuals who feel threatened by the virus are expected to demand far-reaching containment policies and a swift and resolute government response. However, the necessity for coordination and collaboration in a decentralized system might slow down the decision-making process. Consequently, we expect citizens who feel threatened by the virus to prefer a centralization of the decision-making process.

**Hypothesis 4**: Higher levels of perceived threat increase the demand for centralized decision-making and expanded executive discretion.
Taken together, we expect several factors to affect the citizens’ preferences for a unilateral and centralized decision-making in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the following, we examine the relative contribution of policy heterogeneity at the state level, trust in government, satisfaction with the federal government as well as with the work of the parliament, and individual threat perceptions on the support for expanded executive privileges.

5 Data and Methods

We test the hypotheses derived above using individual-level public opinion panel data during the 2020 spring wave of the Corona pandemic in Germany (20th March 2020 through 10th July 2020). The data were collected by the Mannheim Corona Study (MCS) which is a special series of surveys conducted by the German Internet Panel (GIP). The GIP is an online panel survey with a probability-based offline recruitment procedure, covering the German population aged 16 to 75 (Blom, Gathmann and Krieger, 2015). The MCS study uses a daily rotating panel design. In particular, the GIP sample was randomly divided into eight groups of equal size, seven of which were invited to participate for sixteen consecutive weeks.\(^5\) While several items were included in every week of the survey, others changed weekly. Each group of respondents was invited on the same day every week and were asked to participate within two days. Overall, the MCS data include 54,696 responses from 4,387 respondents and about 92% of the respondents participated at least twice (Blom et al., 2020). Further, the MCS not only covers several of the items required to test our hypotheses. It can also be augmented with additional GIP data that was collected prior to the onset of the pandemic.

Our dependent variable, citizens’ preferences for centralization and expanded executive discretion, was measured using the following MCS survey item that was asked in all sixteen MCS weeks: “How much do you agree to the following statement? To curtail the Corona pandemic’s negative consequences for society, the federal government should pass far-reaching measures even without consent by federal parliament or the states.”\(^6\) Respondents use a 7-point scale ranging from 0 (fully opposed) to 6 (fully supportive) to express their opinion. A ‘don’t know’ category was provided as well.

\(^5\)The eighth group was not invited to participate in the MCS.

\(^6\)In the original German item, the federal government, parliament, and states are referred to by their German names, i.e., Bundesregierung, Bundestag, and Bundesländer
To test Hypothesis 1, we require data on the daily policy divergence between the sixteen German states. To this end, we utilize data provided by Steinmetz, Batzdorfer and Bosnjak (2020) that lists which of 14 different containment measures – e.g., school closures, stay-at-home-orders, or recommendations to wear masks – were in place at each day in each state. Effectively, the different measurements are indicator variables, and we compute the simple matching coefficient (SMC) for each state with every other state on every day to learn about the policy heterogeneity between states. This procedure results in a set of 240 SMCs per day, each representing the comparison between state \( i \) and some other state \( j \) with \( i \neq j \) on day \( t \). We then compute the mean of all 240 matching coefficients to measure the average variability in the states’ policy responses on day \( t \).

Testing Hypothesis 2 requires information on respondents’ trust in the federal government prior to the pandemic. The GIP asked a corresponding survey item in January 2020. Since the first German COVID-19 case was reported at the end of January when most respondents had already completed the survey, this survey item is a valid measure of the pre-pandemic trust in the federal government. The item follows a standard format and asks respondents to rate their trust in the federal government on a 7-point scale (0 no trust at all, 6 high trust).

We obtain information on respondents’ satisfaction with both the federal government and the parliament from the November 2019 GIP wave. Respondents were asked to rate the work of the federal government as well as each of the six party factions in the Bundestag on an 11-point scale (0 not satisfied at all, 10 very satisfied). In order to obtain a single measure for satisfaction with the work of parliament, we define a respondent’s satisfaction with parliament by the maximum rating of any party faction reported by the respondent. These two measures allow us to evaluate Hypothesis 3a and 3b.

Finally, we assess the empirical support for Hypothesis 4 by measuring respondents’ threat perceptions with respect to COVID-19 using an MCS survey item. Respondents rate their perceived threat on a 11-point scale (0 no threat to me at all, 10 extreme threat to me). This item was asked throughout the entire field period of the MCS.

In addition to these key variables, we control for several factors that may affect respondents’ opinion about the centralization of decision-making authority. First, we include the respondents’ self-placements on a political left-right scale and its squared term which was collected.

---

7The party factions are CDU/CSU, SPD, AfD, Greens, Left, and FDP.
in the GIP wave of September 2019. These variables enable us to detect whether left-leaning, right-leaning, or extreme self-placements are associated with preferences in favor of centralizing decision-making power. We further include the confirmed number of COVID-19 infections in the past seven days per 100,000 inhabitants in the state a respondent lives. Finally, we add demographic and socio-economic information like gender, education level, households income in the previous month, and age to the model specification.

Given the panel structure, we estimate linear regression models with random effects for respondents and employ a specific weighting scheme (see Blom et al., 2020) to improve the sample’s representativeness.

6 Results

Table 1 summarizes the results of our empirical analysis. Model 1 only includes the variables of interest while Model 2 adds a number of controls. To support the expectation that policy heterogeneity between states increases public support for centralized decision-making (Hypothesis 1), the coefficient on the Policy Heterogeneity variable should be positive and statistically significant. In fact, the analyses support this expectation. This result suggests that citizens favor a nation-wide containment strategy, and that they are willing to centralize decision-making power in order to obtain a common national crisis response. Figure 1 facilitates the interpretation of the corresponding substantive effect. It demonstrates that at high levels of policy divergence among German states the random effects model predicts respondents to approve the centralization of decision-making authority by more than one unit more on a seven-point scale (the 95% confidence interval covers [1.0, 1.2]).

As outlined above, Hypothesis 2 states that citizens whose trust in the federal government was high prior to the pandemic should be more likely to approve the centralization of decision-making authority. Accordingly, this hypothesis implies that the estimated coefficient associated with the Trust in Government variable should be positive and statistically significant. Yet, Table 1 indicates that it fails to reach conventional levels of statistical significance in both model specifications. Instead, these results suggest that trust in the federal government does not affect the support for expanded decision-making authority for the federal executive branch.

In addition, we test the expectation that satisfaction with both the federal government
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Determinants</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy Heterogeneity</td>
<td>3.160***</td>
<td>4.670***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.143)</td>
<td>(0.241)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in Government (Pre-Pandemic)</td>
<td>−0.005</td>
<td>0.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.027)</td>
<td>(0.031)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with Federal Government</td>
<td>0.052***</td>
<td>0.050**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.020)</td>
<td>(0.022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with Parliament</td>
<td>−0.054***</td>
<td>−0.043**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.017)</td>
<td>(0.020)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COVID-19 Threat</td>
<td>0.091***</td>
<td>0.078***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.003)</td>
<td>(0.004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COVID-19 Incidence</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.009)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>−0.011***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.178**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.073)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education: Medium</td>
<td>−0.338***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.115)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education: High</td>
<td>−0.852***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.112)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HH Income Previous Month: Medium</td>
<td>0.073*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.040)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HH Income Previous Month: High</td>
<td>0.063</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.058)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LR-Placement</td>
<td>0.041</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.069)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LR-Placement^2</td>
<td>−0.0002</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.008)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.228***</td>
<td>2.839***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.109)</td>
<td>(0.257)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Random Effects (Standard Deviations)**

| Respondents                          | 1.729    | 1.699    |

| Observations                         | 41,191   | 28,745   |
| Log Likelihood                       | −72,847.150 | −51,307.520 |

*Note:*  
*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
and the parliament should affect to what extent citizens demand the expansion of the federal government’s discretionary power (Hypotheses 3a and 3b). To support the expectation that satisfaction with the work of the federal government increases the respondents’ support for the centralization of decision-making power, the coefficient on the Satisfaction with Federal Government variable should positive and statistically significant. Similarly, we expect the opposite effect for satisfaction with the work of parliament. Table 1 shows that both of these expectations receive empirical support. Furthermore, by visualizing the marginal effects, Figure 2 shows that increasing satisfaction with the government or parliament respectively has, on average, effects of up to half a unit on the seven-point scale of approval of centralizing decision-making power.

Finally, Hypothesis 4 expects that citizens who feel threatened by the virus demand a more centrally administered policy response to the pandemic. Accordingly, we expect the coefficients associated with the COVID-19 Threat variable to be positive and statistically significant. In fact, the random effects models lend empirical support for the hypothesized effect. As Figure 3 illustrates, citizens who feel strongly threatened by the pandemic are predicted to support the centralization of decision-making authority at the national level by 0.8 [0.7, 0.9] units more than citizens who do not feel threatened at all. We conclude from these results that the notion of threat and the stress it causes are strongly associated with the preferences citizens have regarding the political decision-making procedure. Threat is a powerful predictor for the desire to equip the executive branch with far-reaching discretionary privileges at the expense of the
parliament and state-level authorities.

Turning to the control variables, the analysis identifies several other predictors affecting individual preferences for a centralized crisis response. The results suggest that age is negatively related to preferences for centralization. Furthermore, while women tend to favor the concentration of discretionary authority at the federal level somewhat more than men, education is negatively related to the support for centralization. Although the positive effect of a respondent’s household income in the previous month is only statistically significant at an \( \alpha \)-level of 0.1, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases among 100,000 inhabitants in seven days in the state a respondent lives, and her political self-placement do not have statistically
significant effects on her approval of centralized decision-making.

Overall, the results demonstrate that citizens’ approval of expanded executive authority at the federal level is associated with psychological and political factors. With respect to psychological aspects, we find that citizens who feel threatened by COVID-19 are more likely to expand the federal government’s competencies and approve the centralized development of a policy response than citizens who do not feel threatened. The political factors we identify as relevant predictors are the heterogeneity in policy responses at the state level, satisfaction with the federal government, and satisfaction with parliament.

7 Federalism and Aggregate Support for Centralization

To further explore the importance of heterogeneous policy responses at the state level for citizens’ support for a centralization of decision-making authority, we utilize simulation techniques and calculate counterfactual scenarios. These analyses provide insights into the substantive impact of the implementation of more (or less) coherent containment measures across the German states on public opinion at the aggregate level. The analyzed scenarios cover the empirically observed range of policy differences reported in Steinmetz, Batzdorfer and Bosnjak (2020) and illustrated by Figure 4. As this figure shows, the policy heterogeneity across the German states varies over the course of the MCS (indicated by the gray shaded area). Accordingly, the simulated scenarios range from a fully identical set of state-level policies (Policy Heterogeneity = 0) to the most diverging policy response which was recorded only a few days before the MCS was fielded, and before Angela Merkel and the PMs met for the first time in an attempt to develop a coordinated containment strategy across states (Policy Heterogeneity = 0.26).

In our simulations, we first use the regression coefficients derived by Model 2 in Table 1 to predict each respondent’s support for decision-making centralization across the different levels of Policy Heterogeneity. All other variables are kept at their observed values, including the respondent-specific intercept. Hence, we obtain for each simulated value of Policy Heterogeneity 28,745 predictions of the level of support for decision-making centralization. To ease the interpretation, we distinguish between respondents who are predicted to favor centralization (i.e., whose predicted response is higher than 3 on a 0-6 scale) and those respondents who do not. In particular, the quantity of interest here is the (weighted) share of respondents who
support expanded executive privileges at the federal level. Figure 5 graphically illustrates these aggregate results.

Clearly, the aggregate support for decision-making centralization quickly increases as the states’ policy responses diverge. Figure 5 suggests that, by increasing the heterogeneity in COVID-19 policies across the German states, a majority of citizens supports the centralization of the decision-making process at the expense of state-level executives and the parliament. Based on sixteen weeks of MCS data, we find that the majority favors expanded executive privileges if our measure of policy differences exceeds 0.085 units.

Together, these results suggest that Germans citizens take notice of how German federalism responds to the pandemic, and that its performance shapes public opinion about an adequate crisis response.

8 Conclusion

Why do individuals living in federal democracies prefer the centralization of decision-making capacity and the empowerment of the federal government in times of crisis? While the crisis management literature provides robust empirical evidence for the tendency to centralize the decision-making process and empower the federal government in an emergency situation, the circumstances under which citizens prefer to grant the executive branch additional discretionary authority remain opaque.
The present study attempts to fill this gap by investigating individual preferences for centralized decision-making over the course of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany. Based on individual-level panel data, the analysis demonstrates that especially heterogeneity in the states’ policy responses as well as individual threat perceptions increase the support for centralization. The evidence further suggest that satisfaction with the federal government and the parliament prior to the onset of the pandemic also have the expected effects on the approval of expanded discretionary privileges for the federal executive branch. Whereas satisfaction with the government increases the support for granting expanded discretionary power, individuals who are satisfied with the work of the parliament prefer the inclusion of the legislative branch during policy-making. Therefore, the findings support the notion that citizens dislike diverging crisis responses across states and that feelings of threat increase the demand for centralized decision-making.

These results have a number of important implications for crisis management and democratic decision-making more generally. Although research has shown that federalism alone does not determine the effectiveness of COVID-19 containment strategies (e.g., Capano et al., 2020; Haffajee and Mello, 2020; Hassenteufel, 2020; Naumann et al., 2020), this study shows that heterogeneous policy responses trigger public skepticism. Independent of the dispersion of actual infection rates across states, citizens prefer coordination and a homogeneous containment strategy. Moreover, the evidence suggests that individuals who feel threatened are more likely to sacrifice the parliamentary control of governmental policies for the sake of a quick and resolute
crisis response by the executive branch.

While this study provides important insights into the citizens’ assessment of adequate crisis responses in democracies, further research can build upon these findings in several ways. In particular, future research may disentangle individuals’ preferences for centralized decision-making and the empowerment of the executive vis-à-vis the legislative branch of government. Moreover, the generalizability of these results to other (emergency) situations merit further examination. Finally, exploring the dynamics of the individual-level preferences for centralization over the entire course of the pandemic merits scholarly attention as well. Given the current situation one year after the first COVID-19 incidences were reported in Germany, the investigation of changes in preferences and its determinants is not only of scientific value. It also provides policy-makers important insights that may help them designing an adequate crisis response that is in line with the preferences of the citizens.
References


URL: https://ojs.ub.uni-konstanz.de/srm/article/view/7735


URL: https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X15574494


URL: https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12401


URL: https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2020.1793215


Christensen, Tom and Per Lægreid. 2020. “Balancing Governance Capacity and Legitimacy:


URL: https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929920948684


URL: https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-07-2020-0342


Hasell, Joe, Edouard Mathieu, Diana Beltekian, Bobbie Macdonald, Charlie Giattino, Esteban


URL: [https://doi.org/10.1002/epa2.1104](https://doi.org/10.1002/epa2.1104)


URL: [https://doi.org/10.17176/20200325-123240-0](https://doi.org/10.17176/20200325-123240-0)


Naumann, Elias, Katja Möhring, Maximiliane Reifenscheid, Alexander Wenz, Tobias Rettig, Roni Lehrer, Ulrich Krieger, Sebastian Juhl, Sabine Friedel, Marina Fikel, Carina Cornesse

**URL:** [https://doi.org/10.1002/epa2.1091](https://doi.org/10.1002/epa2.1091)


**URL:** [https://www.juwiss.de/39-2020/](https://www.juwiss.de/39-2020/)


