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COVID-19: a dual challenge to European liberal democracy

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces a special issue of *West European Politics* on the COVID-19 crisis. It first sets out the dual challenge to democratic principles and democratic performance that the COVID-19 pandemic has posed to European liberal democracies. Three bodies of scholarship are especially relevant in framing this dual democratic challenge: those that provide accounts of policy, institutional and legitimacy crises; accounts of the governance of emergencies and of emergency politics; and accounts of political turbulence and organisational and policy responses. The articles that comprise the special issue provide comparative empirical insights into first reactions, with a focus on the responses by political decision-makers, European publics and the EU. Assessments of the likely longer-term, potentially transformative effects of COVID-19 on the principles and performance of European liberal democracies will need to draw on both sectoral and systemic perspectives, with a focus on the organisation and operation of public authority and the state.

KEYWORDS COVID-19; liberal democracy; crisis; emergency; turbulence; state

COVID-19, which began to appear on the political agenda of European democracies at the start of 2020, has constituted a singular political challenge. It has involved every level of government, from the local to the global, and all branches of government, including executives, parliaments and courts. It has affected all citizens. It has touched every sphere of life, from the public through to the private. It has extended to virtually every policy domain. Its political effects have been rapid, pervasive and profound.

The COVID-19 crisis has challenged public policy making, with public health policy at the core, but very quickly diffusing through to many other policy domains. It has put to the test the reactive and adaptive capacities of governments, administrations, specialised agencies, legislatures and courts, notably, but not exclusively, administrative and constitutional

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courts. It has provoked swift and sometimes radical power shifts, as executives have dominated and parliaments seemed largely side-lined. It has even struck at the participatory core of democracies, where elections had to be postponed, electoral campaigns forced to be conducted largely online, and where rights to assemble and to protest were severely curtailed, if not temporarily suspended. It has commanded the political and private attention of citizens in a manner unrivalled by any other public issue. Not surprisingly in a European context, there has been a pronounced multi-level dimension to the crisis, evident in both federal and unitary systems; in the relations between the EU and its member states; but also in horizontal relations, as seen, for example, in drastic restrictions on the freedom of movement across the borders of EU member states or accusations of insufficient cross-border 'solidarity'.

COVID-19 has, thus, posed a fundamental challenge to European liberal democracy in two basic respects: it has called into question democratic principles; and it has called into question democratic performance, understood as the ability of liberal democracies to respond appropriately to the crisis.

The German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, repeatedly referred to the COVID-19 crisis as a 'democratic imposition' (*'demokratische Zumutung'*). This 'imposition' has resulted from five developments. First, the 'fight against COVID' has been accompanied by massive restrictions on basic rights and freedoms, such as the right to free movement; freedom of profession, as many were prevented from exercising their professions; or religious freedoms, including the right to worship. These restrictions extended to political rights and freedoms, notably the right to assemble and to demonstrate. In many cases, such drastic limitations were enacted on contested and untested legal bases; were introduced at great speed with minimal, if any, parliamentary involvement; and lasted for many months. To some, the breadth and depth of the restrictions amounted to 'emergency rule'.

Second, throughout Europe, one could observe a rapid concentration of power in the executive (even in systems such as the UK or France, which were already executive-dominated before the pandemic), with a heavy reliance on executive decision taking and recourse to executive policy instruments, such as administrative ordinances. Parliaments, sometimes prevented from meeting physically, were cast in the role of bystanders. The 'crisis hour' of the executive began to extend into weeks and then months.

Third, democratic principles were challenged since democratic politics was subordinated to one overarching aim: 'controlling the virus', which, in the majority of European democracies, appeared to trump and override all other legitimate concerns. The notion of the partial indeterminacy of

democratic politics and of contention amongst different aims and objectives seemed to be suspended as one objective came to dominate all others. Talk of a ‘war’ that had to be waged on COVID-19 justified this prioritisation.

Fourth, the spatiality of democratic European democracies was challenged. Within many states, ‘zones’ were created at local and regional levels that often came with unequal rights and restrictions of citizens of a single body politic. In some cases, the boundaries of these zones prevented both free access and free exit. Some states, such as the United Kingdom, imposed travel bans on their citizens, making it impossible to leave the country, unless stringent conditions were met. Freedom of movement in the EU was curtailed, as many borders were totally or partially closed.

Finally, in some states, there have been massive state interventions into the economy, reshaping established state–economy relations. These interventions took the form of both regulation – for example, the enforced shutdown of large parts of the economy – and state aid, including massive capital injections or even outright nationalisations of companies the survival of which was in danger. In short, long-held principles concerning the role of the democratic state in the economy were reinterpreted or put aside.

The justification for this ‘democratic imposition’ was, of course, performance. Initially, the emphasis was on the need for speedy and drastic action in the face of an ‘emergency’ to meet the policy challenge. But as the ‘emergency’ appeared to lengthen from weeks to many months, debates began to grow around the question of whether there were aspects of the democratic order that hampered the fight against COVID-19 and, indeed, whether democracies might not be systematically disadvantaged at dealing with a crisis as profound as COVID-19. Comparisons began to be made with countries outside Europe that seemed to fare better in public health outcomes, leading some to suggest a need for ‘more dictatorial’ government (‘Mehr Diktatur wagen’, the provocative title of an article in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Brussig 2021), i.e. to resort to ‘emergency’ measures resemblant to those of non-democratic regimes in relation to the rights of citizens, economic actors and society as a whole. Certainly, the assumption that liberal democracies are inherently better at producing desirable policy outcomes whilst enjoying legitimacy and trust in the eyes of the public was shaken.

Crisis, emergency and turbulence

The dual democratic challenge posed by COVID-19 may be unprecedented in the post-war period in the West in its magnitude and its

quality; but as political scientists have begun to study how European democracies have responded to the challenge, they draw – more or less explicitly – on established analytical perspectives in the study of European politics, government and public policy. They include, in particular, crisis accounts; emergency accounts; and turbulence accounts. These accounts are not rigidly separated, but they direct attention to different empirical manifestations of the COVID-19 challenge and speak to different concerns, focussed on democratic principles and democratic performance, respectively.

Crisis accounts

Crisis accounts come in three main variants, the first two of which link mainly to the ‘performance dimension’ of liberal democracy, whilst the third revolves around the ‘principles’ dimension.

Policy crises

Many policy crisis accounts bring the European Union into focus (for a recent comprehensive overview see Riddervold *et al.* 2021). These accounts seek to identify both causes and patterns of response in Europe’s multilevel system. Given that the most severe of these crises have been ‘transboundary’ in nature, i.e. crises that cross geographical borders and have effects across policy domains, the EU has become increasingly important in crisis handling. The literature looks into how the system performs when hit by a crisis.

After 2008, and prior to COVID-19, the EU experienced two major transboundary crises, throwing the Union into turmoil and putting existing policies and institutions to the test (Laffan 2016). With the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008, the financial and economic crisis came fast to the European continent and in the summer of 2015, the asylum and migration crisis culminated across the boundaries of the European Union (Laffan 2016; Scipioni 2018).

Crisis accounts tend to stress that the EU was not designed for responding to crises at this scale, and thus stepped into an uncharted terrain (Jones *et al.* 2016; Laffan 2016; Lavenex 2018; Scipioni 2018). The EU’s institutional incompleteness is seen as an important conditioning factor for its weak performance in crisis handling. According to Jones *et al.* (2016), the EU’s crisis response is a ‘failing forward’ integration process. With the financial and economic crisis as their example, they present the ‘failing forward’ logic as a cycle unfolding in stages: 1) inter-governmental bargaining and diverging preferences of the member states result in incomplete institutional arrangements; 2) these incomplete

institutions originally adopted contribute to crisis; 3) confronted with severe crisis, member states are forced to get their act together, but can again only agree on lowest common denominator solutions, whilst still forwarding integration. Finally, 4) the cycle repeats itself; failing first, then moving halfway forward. In essence, the half-baked solutions that EU politicians manage to agree on create functional spill-overs and deeper integration, while at the same time sowing the seeds for future failures (Scipioni 2018).

COVID-19 adds to the list of most severe policy crises and has forced the EU to spring into action. Although institutional incompleteness indeed characterised the Union when hit by the crisis, economic and health policy responses as examined in this volume go beyond the lowest common denominator response advanced by the ‘failing forward’ argument (Deruelle and Engeli 2021; Ferrera *et al.* 2021; see also Greer *et al.* 2021; Schmidt 2020). The change engendered by the COVID-19 policy crisis stands out as a differentiated, but deeper, form of integration than the ‘failing forward’ approach would suggest.

Institutional crises

Accounts of institutional crises can be traced back to the late 1970s, with the emergence of the ‘crisis of governability’ discussion (Goetz 2008). Several European democracies underwent reforms to shrink the state, decentralised decision-making authority or delegated it to private institutions. As a result, novel governance arrangements assumed new competences and regulatory functions. The institutional crises back then were confronted with what was widely regarded as a move from government to governance. This shift implied a turn away from government by the hierarchical, coercive state and towards governance through a plurality of decision-centres beyond the state, implying a lack of clear hierarchy and an emphasis on cooperative policy making (Goetz 2008; Papadopoulos 2007).

The ‘crisis of governability’ is also very prominent in EU-related literature. This literature emphasises the institutional consequences of policy crises. The question here becomes which institutions gain or lose functions and power when a crisis hits the EU. The literature does not necessarily agree. New intergovernmentalism points to the European Council as making the ‘big’ crisis decisions, seconded by *de novo* bodies such as the European Central Bank and EU agencies to execute the decisions taken (Bickerton *et al.* 2015; Csehi and Puetter 2021; Fabbrini and Puetter 2016). According to the new intergovernmentalist account, this happens at the expense of the traditional supranational institutions such as the European Commission, although, as Smeets and Zaun (2021)

suggest dynamics have differed markedly between the Eurozone and the asylum crises.

Other scholars disagree and instead point to the changing role of the European executive. Even in crisis, the Commission remains an engine of integration. It may be 'boxed in and constrained' (Becker *et al.* 2016) but it is still at the centre when transboundary crisis actions have to be coordinated. Instead of losing power, Commission power has changed. The crisis has been a catalyst for a more pronounced move towards both policy management and presidentialization in the Commission (Bauer and Becker 2014; Becker *et al.* 2016). As a result of crisis, power has been centralised in the Commission, which has had its management duties expanded and its capacity to take strategic action enhanced (Bauer and Becker 2014). Deruelle and Engeli (2021) contribute new findings to this ongoing debate. Examining the long-term process of gradual institutionalisation of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control – ECDC, they find that the ECDC has been empowered as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. However, this has not happened at the expense of the Commission. Rather the two institutions ally when interacting with the member state representatives in the Council (Deruelle and Engeli 2021).

Apart from affecting the power balance between EU institutions, research points to a shift of competences upwards from the national to the EU level as an institutional consequence of crisis. The 'joint-decision trap' (Scharpf 1988) is often used to characterise the EU's inability to take decisions and this trap should paralyse the system when confronted with a crisis. However, Falkner (2016) finds that external shocks or crises may work the other way around and instead propel the EU out of its normal joint-decision trap. As a consequence of the financial and economic crisis, the EU gained competences at the expense of the national level. Instead of being disempowered, the European Commission has had its supervisory and enforcement powers significantly strengthened in the aftermath of the crisis. Comparing several crises, Falkner also finds that such power shifts are not an automatic result, but depend on the combination of extreme time pressures and high functional pressures. The financial and economic crisis implied extreme pressures. The asylum and migration crisis, on the other hand, did not force EU politicians to act to the same extent. There was no pressing deadline and only a smaller number of member states bore the costs of non-action. Stalemate could thus continue (Falkner 2016).

Legitimacy crises

Crisis accounts finally inform us about the manifold legitimacy implications of crisis. Legitimacy crises come in many guises. A crisis may affect

trust in office holders; governing authorities; and, ultimately, the ideational foundations on which democracy rests. Legitimacy accounts, thus, raise concerns in relation to the societal foundations of democracy, i.e. the ‘principles’ dimension of crisis handling and the power shifts involved.

When a crisis hits, the question of responsibility will arise: who is responsible for addressing it, making sense of it and for coordinating responses to it (Boin 2009; Boin *et al.* 2014)? When a crisis leads to institutional transformation, with power shifts, fragmentation or concentration, accountability questions arise. Managing a crisis relates to, and brings into question, all of the dimensions of Boven’s (2007) definition of accountability: ‘Accountability is a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgement, and the actor may face consequences’ (p. 450).

In the midst of a crisis, responsibility for actions taken becomes blurred. It becomes unclear who has the obligation to explain and justify which actions. In addition, the forum’s ability to hold actors accountable declines significantly, at least during the height of a crisis. Normal democratic principles and accountability relations are likely to be put on hold.

At the same time, a crisis can be a strong legitimising force in its own right for power shifts and major institutional changes. Policies, interventions and new institutional competences that were previously considered out of bounds become possible. Crises are ‘open moments’ that impact both on the rulers and the ruled, where new or different policies are called for and adopted – but under extreme time and functional pressures (Falkner 2016; Laffan 2016). Decisions taken during such ‘open moments’ may go well beyond the standard operating procedure of democracy and thus legitimacy crises are likely to arise as soon as time and functional pressures ease. In relation to the COVID-19 crisis, the crisis’ fast-burning initial phase may set standard norms and procedures of democracy aside, but decisions taken in that phase are likely to be evaluated by constituencies in ‘the subsequent slow-burning phase of legitimizing normalization or delegitimation’ (Schmidt 2021: 1).

Emergency accounts

Accounts that place the notion of ‘emergency’ at the heart of their analyses come in two versions. One, from a public policy perspective, focuses on ‘governing emergencies’ and related phenomena such as catastrophes, disasters or policy shocks. It is mainly concerned with explaining how governments respond in the face of sudden major public policy emergencies. The other, centred on ‘emergency politics’, highlights the political

consequences of attempts at dealing with policy emergencies. The first perspective is oriented towards ‘performance’, the second towards ‘principles’.

Over the past two decades, there has been a steadily growing interest across different sub-disciplines of political science into the question of how political systems respond to sudden major shocks, be they natural catastrophes, policy disasters or disruptive events, such as major terrorist attacks. One important strand of literature in this vein examines public reactions to such emergencies (which are also explored in several contributions to the present collection) and how the reactions of political decision-makers both shape, and are shaped by, public reactions.

In the context of the present discussion, three themes from this literature deserve highlighting. First, studies on the governance of emergencies stress the complex interaction of factors that shape responses. For example, in an early attempt at explaining variation in state COVID-19 responses, Maor and Howlett (2020) set out a combination of psychological, institutional and strategic factors. Similarly, Capano *et al.* (2020) point to the combination of ‘opportunity and capacity’, including ‘the opportunity and capacity each government had to learn from previous pandemics and their capacity to operationalise and build political support for the standard portfolio of policy measures deployed to deal with the crisis’ (Capano *et al.* 2020: 381).

A second major theme relates to the nature of the responses. Here, Maor’s (2020, 2021) work on disproportionate policy reactions – including, in particular, deliberate underreactions and overreactions – is especially instructive. Maor (2020) argues that psychological, institutional and strategic factors interact in leading governments to deliberately overinvest or underinvest in policy instruments. Thus, policy overinvestment ‘occurs when government invests in a single policy instrument beyond its instrumental value in achieving a policy goal’ (p. 93), while underinvestment occurs when governments invest below an instrument’s value. With specific reference to COVID-19, he and his co-authors suggest that decisions on the instruments chosen to fight the pandemic can only be properly understood if one takes account of the possibility of deliberately disproportionate policy responses (Maor *et al.* 2020).

Third, although suddenness, urgency and immediacy are central defining characteristics of emergency, the related scholarship is sensitive to the need to combine short-term with medium- and long-term perspectives. Thus, work on ‘catastrophic politics’ (Atkeson and Maestas 2012) has shown how ‘extraordinary’ events may reshape public opinion and attitudes in the longer term. This is partly because ‘disasters draw scrutiny from a wide range of citizens, not just those normally interested in news and politics (...) As a result, catastrophes create opportunities for citizens

from every segment of society to observe and evaluate government in action' (Atkeson and Maestas 2012: 2–3); and partly, because, as a result, they have the potential to redraw established political boundaries. This opens the possibility not just of seismic shifts in public political orientations, but also of fundamental 'recalibrations' in dealing with policy risks and regulation (Balleisen *et al.* 2017).

Studies of '*emergency politics*' are centrally concerned with the question of how the attempt to deal with 'emergencies' shapes and reshapes political systems; as such they speak directly to the 'principles' part of the dual democratic challenge. Jonathan White's work on 'emergency Europe' (White 2015) and 'governing by emergencies in the European Union' (White 2020) provides a prime example. White explicitly challenges crisis accounts: 'Crisis is approached as a moment in which the limits of a system are exposed, generating functional pressures for adaptation and innovation (...). Such accounts resemble those of public authorities themselves, who use them to rationalise their actions' (White 2020: 3). However, '[a]ctions always exceed mere functional adaptation (...). One needs to recognise not just the intuitive point that crises can be instrumentalized to serve political ends, but that the very handling of situations as exceptional ones demanding actions of last resort is consequential in itself. By speaking of emergency politics, one brings these governing rationalities to the fore, and treats them as a self-standing phenomenon to investigate rather than the dependent effect of functional demands' (White 2020: 4).

Amongst the chief features of emergency politics highlighted by White is the emphasis on 'technocracy', 'efficient knowledge-based rule' (White 2020: 107) based on specific expertise. Appeals to expertise – notably of virologists, epidemiologists and other scientists – have, of course, been absolutely central to the formulation of policy responses to COVID-19, with seemingly overwhelming attention given to their expertise (see also Heinzl and Liese 2021). White's account of such technocratic expertise, which preceded COVID-19, clearly resonates with developments since the beginning of 2020: 'the ends of decision-making are largely assumed. As a form of instrumental rationality, technocracy is the art of delivering rather than reflecting and choosing (...) it makes no appeal to ongoing political process to identify the goals worth pursuing, and attaches no particular value to public deliberation and opinion-formation as the measure of what should be done. Technocracy presents itself as about the efficient solution to recognised problems on which there is little reasonable disagreement' (White 2020: 108).

Accounts of emergency politics, with their emphasis on the partial suspension of 'normal' democratic politics and the predominance of 'expertise', have already begun to influence the academic study of

COVID-19 politics. In relation to Germany, e.g., Wolfgang Merkel (2020) explicitly engages with accounts of ‘exceptional’ politics when he highlights the critical role of science in early responses to COVID-19, with scientists, especially virologists and epidemiologists, emerging as ‘fourth order sovereigns’ (next to the people, parliament and the executive as first, second and third order sovereigns, respectively). With parliament dis-empowering itself during the first months of the COVID-19 crisis, Merkel argues, the country was ‘governed in an emergency mode by the third- and fourth-order sovereigns’ (Merkel 2020: 5). Equally, however, there were accusations that not enough attention had been paid to experts and that policy-makers ignored evidence (Cairney 2021). With specific reference to the EU and COVID-19, Kreuder-Sonnen and White (2021) contrast emergency politics to crisis management and consider its implications for the EU’s ‘normative and sociological legitimacy’.

Turbulence accounts

In recent years, but predating the pandemic, the notion of ‘turbulence’ and associated concepts, such as ‘turbulence governance’, have become influential in studies that seek to understand contemporary policy making. According to Ansell *et al.* (2017), ‘[t]urbulence governance (...) requires organisations to face governance challenges of *certain* kinds – situations where *events, demands, and support interact and change in highly variable, inconsistent, unexpected or unpredictable ways*’. Central to ‘turbulence’ are variability, i.e. the propensity for swift and major changes; irregularity, which implies that formal and informal rules or norms or patterns that are typically expected to guide behaviour do not appear to apply; and, as a consequence, the appearance of unpredictability and uncertainty.

Turbulence scholarship is principally interested in the performance of public institutions as they confront turbulence. One strand of literature emphasises organisational-institutional responses, highlighting for example, the choices to be made between stability versus adaptation; anticipation versus resilience; and organisational coupling versus decoupling (Ansell and Trondal 2018); practices of ‘dynamic conservatism’ (Ansell *et al.* 2015); and, with specific reference to the pandemic, the nature of ‘robust governance responses’ (Ansell *et al.* 2020).

Another strand can help to analyse public policy responses. Of particular interest here the concept of ‘protean power’ introduced by Katzenstein and Seybert (2018) (see also Katzenstein 2020), associated with improvisation and innovation in the face of uncertainty. They contrast such ‘protean power’ with ‘control power’ associated with governing calculable risks: ‘control power operates in ‘normal’ situations, where calculable probabilities of outcomes make it, at least in principle,

measurable and deployable. Protean power, by contrast, emerges typically in situations of uncertainty. This form of power thrives on actors' agility. They can be innovative in reinterpreting the meaning of rules, and they can play without rules, relying on identity and other mechanisms for managing uncertainty' (Seybert and Katzenstein 2018: 25).

The appropriate balance between 'control power' and power based on creativity, experimentation and innovation has evidently been widely debated in the European pandemic context. At issue has not just been how much 'control power', based on state coercion, is compatible with democratic principles; but, equally, whether less coercive control might lead to better policy outcomes. In this debate, the Swedish approach, with its emphasis on voluntary compliance (Kuhlmann *et al.* 2021) appeared to deviate from what soon emerged as the norm in much of Europe: in Sweden, 'government and agencies preferred to issue recommendations and advice on the appropriate social behaviour instead of coercive regulation' (Pierre 2020: 480). This less coercive approach seemed to reflect cross-national 'variation in the perception of government and its role as a regulator. Thus, while changing social behaviour in some countries requires coercive enforcement measures and regulations in other countries changing population behaviours can be accomplished with much more subtle signalling from the government' (Pierre 2020: 479). As several contributions to the present collection underline (see below), trust of the people in government played a critical role in shaping the public's early responses to the pandemic; what has attracted less comment is how much trust governments placed in their people.

Analytical perspectives and democratic concerns

The above brief review of analytical perspectives that are likely to influence how political science frames chief research questions related to COVID-19 does not, of course, claim to be exhaustive; nor do the summary labels of 'democratic principles' and 'democratic performance' exhaust the core concerns. But taken together they provide a first orientation through the maze of questions and debates to which the pandemic has given rise. In particular, they draw attention to the multi-level and transboundary nature of pandemic politics; to the intricate interplay of politics, polity and policy variables in shaping responses; to the importance of public opinion and public trust in shaping compliance with government measures; and to the role of time in defining the public policy challenge (with an emphasis on suddenness, speed and urgency), in the formulation and implementation of responses, and in the study of sequences of events, decisions and reactions as the pandemic unfolded.

'First drafts of history': initial responses of governments, publics and the EU

The 15 articles assembled in the present collection offer comparative observations relating to the manner in which national decision-makers, including parliamentarians, have responded to the pandemic; the implications of these measures for democratic principles; citizens' attitudes, opinions, evaluations and trust; and EU responses.

Louwerse *et al.* (2021) compare how parliamentary opposition parties in four countries responded to the pandemic during the first half of 2020. Their analysis engages with the 'rallying effect' that has also featured prominently in studies of early public reactions (Kritzinger *et al.* 2021). They note that whilst opposition sentiment was largely supportive of governments during the onset of the pandemic, the mood turned more critical as time went on. One potentially critical variable in shaping government responses highlighted early on has been the territorial organisation of the state. As Hegele and Schnabel (2021) show in their comparative analysis of the Austrian, German and Swiss federations, variation in federal arrangements has mattered in explaining both degrees of centralisation *vs.* decentralisation and unilateral *vs.* coordinated decision making.

Turning from the question of how democratic processes affect COVID-19 politics, the following two contributions present comparative evidence that speaks to the reverse question, i.e. how COVID-19 politics affect democracy. Engler *et al.* (2021) draw on data covering 34 European democracies and note large cross-country variation in the extent to which governments were willing and able to constrain individual liberties and concentrate power in the executive. The latter observation is reinforced by Bolleyer and Salát (2021) in their six-country comparative analysis of restrictions placed on parliamentary policy making under the influence of the pandemic. They highlight that 'unified executives' with single party governments were more prone to executive aggrandisement than coalition governments.

A number of contributions explore attitudinal and behavioural public reactions to the pandemic and its handling by governments. Jørgensen *et al.* (2021), in their eight-country comparison of pandemic-specific and broader political attitudes in 2020, record medium to high levels of support for government responses and note that high levels of interpersonal trust and self-assessed knowledge were critical in driving support. Political trust and partisanship as explanatory variables that affect public evaluations of government measures are explored by Altiparmakis *et al.* (2021). They present comparative panel survey data from 11 countries and show that trust in national leaders was decisive in shaping public responses.

Hassing Nielsen and Lindvall (2021) demonstrate that even countries that can be said to share many features may differ significantly in levels of trust. Their comparative analysis of Denmark and Sweden between March and late June 2020 reveals that Danes had consistently higher levels of trust in their public authorities than Swedes. Differences between another pair of countries – Austria and France – were even starker, as borne out by the multi-wave panel surveys analysed by Kritzinger *et al.* (2021). Whilst they find a strong initial ‘rally round the flag’ effect in Austria, with trust closely tied to perceived health risks, such an effect was noticeably absent in France.

Of course, as the aforementioned studies make clear, trust in government is only part of a broader set of individual-level variables that have shaped public responses. Amongst these variables, the perception and evaluation of experts and expertise mattered critically, as Oana *et al.* (2021) show. Based on vignette experiments in mid-2020 in seven European countries, they find strong support for restrictive lockdown measures, with trust in experts having a notable effect. Heinzel and Liese (2021) provide further evidence of the link between the public perception of expertise and public support for COVID-19 measures. Using data generated from a survey experiment conducted in Germany and the UK, they find that ‘there is an observable polarisation effect where citizens who ascribe much expertise to public institutions support COVID-19 measures more than the control group (...) those who ascribe little expertise support them less than the control group’.

The link between public attitudes to actual public behaviour is explored by Ansell *et al.* (2021). Their analysis links mobility surveys to political, economic and demographic factors. They find clear effects of social security on levels of compliance with social distancing measures, but also a strong correlation with populist attitudes. Thus, populism matters not just for the perception of government measures, but for the willingness to adhere to these measures.

The last four articles assembled here address the multi-level nature of the democratic challenge. Data from a four-wave panel survey in The Netherlands conducted by Goldberg *et al.* (2021) provides evidence for differentiated support for European solidarity: ‘We found a higher degree of solidarity when it comes to medical assistance compared to fiscal or border support. Support for medical solidarity drops over time, fiscal solidarity remains stable, and border solidarity increases’. The concern with cross-national solidarity is also at the core of the analysis of political communication by national political leaders undertaken by Ferrera *et al.* (2021). Their study shows that shifting elite discourses moving from antagonism to stressing solidarity were critical in establishing the foundations for the establishment of the Next Generation Europe package.

They single out the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, who, they suggest, engaged in a ‘deliberate endeavour of ‘polity maintenance’ – i.e. keeping the EU polity together, regardless of deep interest-based divisions’.

Truchlewski *et al.* (2021) undertake a detailed examination of how the Next Generation Europe and other measures emerged in a process involving both EU institutions, notably the Commission and member states. They engage explicitly and critically with ‘emergency politics’ accounts as discussed above and suggest that ‘there was no uniformly relentless process of EU institutions urging member states to act (...) Normative priorities were indeed discussed at the level of national representatives, framed in terms of a stark contrast between solidarity among interdependent members and responsibility that comes with sovereignty (...) the Commission engaged in orchestrating a rapid response while member-states were ostentatiously forward-looking’.

The final contribution by Deruelle and Engeli (2021) also considers the temporality of pandemic reactions, including questions of speed and of time horizons, by examining the institutionalisation of European public health policy, with a focus on the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control – ECDC. The pandemic placed this agency in the limelight. It had seen its mandates increase over the years; but whether the sudden attention will ultimately trigger a longer-lasting expansion of the EU’s involvement in public health policies remains to be seen.

Principles and performance: the state redefined?

The contributions to the present collection are testament to the remarkable speed with which many political scientists have reoriented their empirical research agendas in the face of COVID-19. Major comparative data collection efforts on policy responses and public responses were launched almost immediately. Key institutions and organisations critical to supporting and fostering COVID-19 related work, such as academic associations, journals, and funding agencies, have been very quick at recognising the need to encourage research on COVID-19 as a multi-dimensional and multi-level political phenomenon. Inevitably at such an early stage, much of this recent and ongoing work draws on the established ‘division of labour’ amongst major sub-disciplines of political science and takes its inspiration, and often also key concepts and theories, from established analytical perspectives, including, but by no means limited to, the crisis, emergency and turbulence accounts sketched out above.

As the potential longer-term implications of the ‘fight against the virus’ for both democratic principles and the performance of liberal democracies start to become apparent, we can expect to witness the emergence of a

growing body of scholarship focussed on broader systemic effects. Early examples of such work include the articles by Bolleyer and Salát (2021) on executive aggrandisement and by Engler *et al.* (2021) on how democratic traditions affect pandemic policy responses. Put differently, scholarship is likely to turn increasingly to the longer term systemic consequences of the reactions triggered by crisis, emergency and turbulence. Inevitably, a concern with systemic effects and longer-term repercussions will pivot on a potentially far-reaching and lasting redefinition of public authority and ‘the state’ in the wake of COVID-19. At stake are, *inter alia*, the organisation of public authority, notably multi-level relations; political economy, i.e. state-economy relations; and the relations between state and society and the principles governing their interaction.

Shifts in multi-level systems: already within the first few weeks after the pandemic started to unfold, the question of whether multi-level politics fostered or hindered effective policy responses came to the fore. Coordination problems across levels of government and administration in federal, decentralised and unitary systems swiftly became a major focus of both political debate and academic comment (Hegele and Schnabel 2021). They appeared to heighten pre-existing tensions in countries with secessionist movements, notably the UK and Spain. Within the European Union, both supporters and critics emphasised the significance of the Next Generation Europe fund, as a path-breaking decision that marked a decisive step towards a ‘fiscal union’ (Ferrera *et al.* 2021). As was to be expected, the European Commission lost no time in advancing the objective of creating a ‘European health union’, centred, in the first instance, on vaccine purchase, a vaccination strategy, the launch of vaccine passports, efforts to promote joint vaccine production and the control of vaccine exports.

Truchlewski *et al.* (2021) argue that deliberation of power-shifts can occur in the midst of crises, but to varying degrees. The EU economic recovery plan caused ‘lengthy, often public-facing deliberations over a very contentious issue’ (Truchlewski *et al.* 2021). At the same time, the role of the ECDC changed from coordination to more management-oriented tasks (Deruelle and Engeli 2021). Yet, EU measures taken in the field of health remained largely uncontroversial and without much public debate (Truchlewski *et al.* 2021), with the important exception of vaccine purchases. Goldberg *et al.* (2021) point out that support for enhanced multi-level solidarity – and thus power shifts – may change over time. Both within the EU and in national multi-level systems the initial focus on how multi-level systems have shaped responses is likely to give way to studies on how multi-level systems are being reshaped under the influence of COVID-19 measures.

Shifts in state–economy relations: the ‘political economy of COVID-19’ refers to a second empirical site where major power shifts are likely. Early government responses included for example, more or less open nationalisations; massive capital injections and emergency loans; hugely expansive ‘furlough schemes’ aimed at avoiding mass unemployment; or measures to cover at least part of the losses of revenue suffered by businesses most directly affected by COVID-19 policies. Across Europe, public shares of GDP shot up in a space of only a few months and public indebtedness increased at a dizzying pace in some countries, such as the UK. At the same time, regulatory measures not only directed production and consumption in a manner previously unknown outside wartime, but also affected international trade, notably through restrictions on the export of goods thought vital for public health. Again, the initial focus on how different political economy traditions in Europe have shaped responses is likely to give way to studies on how political economy traditions are being reshaped under the influence of COVID-19 measures.

Shifts in state–society relations: a major theme in the present collection of articles is how publics across Europe responded to the profound transformation that their lives underwent. How did they evaluate the measures taken by governments (Altıparmak *et al.* 2021; Jørgensen *et al.* 2021)? In whom did they place their trust (Kritzinger *et al.* 2021; Heinzl and Liese 2021; see also Schraff 2020; Esaiasson *et al.* 2020; Baekgaard *et al.* 2020)? What were their attitudinal responses (Hassing Nielsen and Lindvall 2021; Oana *et al.* 2021)? Were they willing to comply (Ansell *et al.* 2021)? And how did they judge their government’s performance (Bol *et al.* 2021)?

There is, however, more to state–society relations than whether the attitudes, expectations, trust or satisfaction of citizens *vis-à-vis* public authorities will show enduring shifts engendered by the omnipresence of public authority in the fight against COVID-19. During the pandemic, both in relation to economic actors, but perhaps even more so in their interaction with citizens, public authorities have taken recourse to an extraordinary range of coercive measures that have gone to the very core of civil liberties. Many of these measures were unknown in European liberal democracies outside wartime. At the same time, taken for granted rights as entitlements, perhaps most notably access to primary and secondary education, were severely curtailed or temporarily suspended, challenging established notions of mandatory public service provision. Both, coercion and temporary unilateral state withdrawal, are sharp reminders of the hierarchical state, of authoritative government rather than negotiated governance (Goetz 2008). Again, the initial focus on how different state–society traditions in Europe have shaped public responses is likely to give way to studies on how state–society relations are being reshaped under the influence of COVID-19 measures.

As attention will gradually shift from studies that seek to describe and explain political, institutional and policy responses to COVID-19 to studies that explore their longer-term implications, the question of whether COVID-19 marks a ‘watershed’, a ‘transformative’ or even an ‘epochal’ set of events will assume growing prominence. As suggested here, this discussion will revolve around both the normative principles of liberal democracy and, more specifically, the liberal democratic state, including its organisation, instrumentation and constitutive relationships; and its performance, most notably as concerns its capacity to handle multi-dimensional crises and emergencies. Some of this work, notably from a policy perspective, is likely to be of the ‘lessons learned’ variety, i.e. seek to assess how states can improve their capacity to deal with crises (Boin *et al.* 2020) or enhance their ‘political robustness’ (Sørensen and Ansell 2021). Others will direct attention to whether central tenets of ‘emergency politics’, such as technocratic rule, and of crisis management, such as executive aggrandisement (Bolleyer and Salát 2021) are likely to shape post-pandemic politics. Still others will want to know whether the pandemic marks a watershed in how citizens view and trust their political systems, their states and the European Union.

To be able to engage adequately with these questions requires analytical frameworks capable of grasping comprehensive, multi-faceted systemic change. An excellent starting point for such an endeavour is transformation research (for a recent comprehensive overview see Merkel *et al.* 2019). It is centrally concerned with interdependencies of political, societal, economic and legal developments and of domestic and international settings; combines institutional-organisational with actor-centred perspectives; and draws on a rich repertoire of theoretical traditions and methods. Importantly, transformation research places an emphasis on processes rather than outcomes. As such, it does not assume that multi-faceted processes of change necessarily lead to fundamental, transformative or epochal shifts in political power. But it provides the analytical tools for political scientists to be open to such an eventuality and to be able to detect, describe and explain the, potentially, transformative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on European liberal democracies.

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