ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The political science of Covid-19: An introduction

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Abstract

Political decisions, constellations, and behaviors exert a large influence of the dynamics of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (Sars-CoV-2) pandemic. Politics influences the choice of containment policies and the compliance with these policies—and therefore ultimately the epidemiological situation in each country, state, district, or even neighborhood. This introduction puts the articles collected in this special issue into the broader perspective of the social science literature on Covid-19.

KEYWORDS
Covid-19, politics

Covid-19 has been the toughest stress test for political institutions, public policies, and public administrations in post-war history, in real time. In many countries, political institutions failed; others crumbled but withstood the pressure. Public administrations demonstrated that they lag 30 years behind the technological frontier. Many governments shied away from evidence-based policies and instead preferred to listen to experts they carefully selected.

Sars-CoV-2 provided ample evidence that whether a virus becomes evolutionarily successful does not only depend on the characteristics of the virus, its transmissibility, and lethality, but rather the success of a virus is first and foremost determined by the level of social interactions between potential hosts. A pandemic is a social phenomenon and therefore offers an excellent avenue for research not only by virologists but also by social scientists.

Political scientists became interested in studying the Sars-Cov-2 pandemic because governments have assumed responsibility for organizing humanity's response to the challenges posed by the pandemic. The dynamics of the pandemic have been heavily influenced by containment policies, though these policies have differed substantially across continents, countries, and regions.

In principle, governments can choose between any combination of six containment strategies: two pharmaceutical and four non-pharmaceutical strategies. The two pharmaceutical strategies include the development of Covid-19 medication and the development of Covid-19 vaccines. The four non-pharmaceutical strategies rely on social distancing and surveillance efforts with testing to identify active cases: The first available non-pharmaceutical response and often the first line of defense requires near-perfect isolation of the infected individuals (Hellewell et al. 2020). The second strategy aims at isolating the geographic regions the virus has reached from regions to which the virus has not yet spread (Chinazzi et al. 2020). If neither

of these two strategies proves successful, a more comprehensive and radical approach must be used. The third strategy aims at isolating the people that have a high probability of dying from an infection: In the case of Sars-Cov-2, these are the old and vulnerable (Marais and Sorrell 2020) while at the same time, the virus is allowed to run through the less vulnerable parts of the population until herd immunity is reached (Randolph and Barreiro 2020). The fourth strategy relies on policies that aim at drastically reducing social interactions into what is popularly referred to as a "lockdown" approach (Plümper, Neumayer, and Pfaff 2021). Obviously, these strategies are not mutually exclusive but rather tend to reinforce each other.

The politics of these pharmaceutical and non-pharmaceutical measures offer a fertile ground for research in social science. Whatever strategy governments prefer and implement, the social, economic, psychological, and political costs for the population from non-pharmaceutical interventions are massive—and so are the distributional effects of the pandemic containment policies (Clarke and Whiteley 2020; Plümper and Neumayer 2020; Clemens and Heinemann 2020), and the compensation schemes set up to alleviate the burden of the containment policies for the most affected (Glover et al. 2020; Hur 2020). This special issue brings together social science research on the Sars-CoV-2 pandemic. As Greer et al. have suggested: "[T]here will be no way to understand the different responses to COVID-19 and their effects without understanding policy and politics" (Greer et al. 2020, p. 1413). The articles collected in this volume offer insights into the political causes and consequences of containment policies. All authors build on existing social science approaches to analyze Covid-19. Articles focus on two different but related issues: (i) the influence of containment measures, political institutions, and political attitudes on the dynamics of the pandemic and (ii) the usually unintended consequences of the political response to Covid-19.

As many have suggested, the pandemic operates like a magnifying glass for social and political strengths and, perhaps more so, weaknesses. As the U.K.'s Guardian has put it: The virus "did not remake the global landscape so much as reveal what was already there (…). It amplified it, sometimes distorting it, sometimes illuminating it in alarming detail" (Freedland, 2020). But not all is bad: The pandemic also provided politicians with an opportunity to demonstrate leadership, assume responsibility, and act responsiveness.

CONTAINMENT POLICIES, POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS, AND ATTITUDES AND THE DYNAMICS OF THE PANDEMIC

Few countries were prepared for a pandemic (Bouckaert et al. 2020; Capano 2020) that was expected to come with certainty (Contini et al. 2020; Fan, Jamison, and Summers 2018). Therefore, since the early onset, decision making in the pandemic has relied on the reported data on cases and deaths (Karlinsky, and Kobak 2021, Vandoros 2020). However, as Castle, Doornik, and Hendry (2021) note, numbers have been subject to substantial revisions and occasional errors. For these reasons, governments increasingly relied on forecasts and modes to better project scenarios considering the volatility and uncertainty of current trends that continue to vary widely across regions and countries. However, early on, it became clear that the highly volatile long-term forecasts' accuracy of Covid-19 cases and deaths were less reliable than their forecast intervals suggested. Castle et al. emphasize an alternative approach. They show that the usefulness of forecasts can be enhanced when care is taken to handle non-stationarity and that inferences and comparisons should be limited to forecasts based on week-ahead methods. Furthermore, based on analyses of data from six Latin American countries, they show that these week-ahead methods become more reliable during periods when case numbers are declining, and similarly forecasting errs more often during ramping up periods, or those in which data are subject to significant revision.

Notwithstanding the insights from these types of statistical models, most governments had to improvise and return to containment policies that had, to no avail, been developed to contain the plague: lockdowns and quarantines of the infected, people with whom they had been in contact, and travelers returning from high incidence areas. As social scientists have repeatedly demonstrated, the timing of a response and the choice of a combination of containment measures does not only depend on the epidemiological situation and dynamics but also political institutions (Plümper, Neumayer, and Pfaff 2021; Toshkov, Carroll, and Yesilkagit 2021), partisan preferences at least in the United States (Adolph et al. 2020; Pickup, Stecula, and

Van Der Linden 2020), the characteristics of political leaders, and on political trust and political culture (Adolph et al. 2021; Jennings et al. 2021).

The pandemic quickly revealed a large set of country-specific problems: The health system of many countries was underequipped, understaffed, and underfinanced, political decision making proved to be slow and inefficient, or, in countries with emergency legislation, fast, arbitrary, and volatile. In Germany, one of the world's technologically most advanced countries, information on new infections was transferred via fax machines to the Robert Koch Institute. Schools painfully demonstrated their inability and, occasionally, their unwillingness to organize remote lessons via the internet (Barberia et al. 2020). In some countries, the health system collapsed or was at the brink of collapse. Yet some politicians denied the severity of the virus, the pandemic, or even the existence of the virus.

It is perhaps fair to say that most governments have responded initially with little knowledge of the nature of the virus but with the best intentions. Under the impression of powerful footage from Northern Italy, most European governments implemented more or less stringent lockdown policies—Sweden, Norway, and Iceland being the exceptions (Plümper and Neumayer 2020a). The standard response combined social distancing, shop, bar, and school closures. Curfews and the closure of firms producing non-essential goods and services were rare but nevertheless occurred. Taken together, these policies triggered a cycle of high and rising infection and mortality rates, followed by stringent containment policies, which reduced the pandemic dynamics; in turn, governments reduced the stringency of measures, and the next cycle started.

Just looking at Europe, Sweden was perhaps the most important, and certainly the most widely observed and discussed, exception. The Swedish government refused to implement a strict lockdown during the first wave of the pandemic and kept shops, bars, and restaurants open (Hensvik and Skans 2020). Sweden was not alone with this strategy, but it became the role model. Other countries, including Norway and Iceland, avoided lockdown by implementing early and comprehensive travel restrictions.

From a global perspective, the choice of containment strategies showed more variation across countries (An and Tang 2020). Apparently, stringent and strict travel restrictions work reasonably well for island countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and Taiwan. Testing with tracing apps and strictly enforced quarantine policies helped South Korea, China, and Singapore to keep the pandemic largely under control. However, in the United States, the pandemic and containment policies deepened the country's pre-existing polarization. States governed by the Democrats implemented relatively stringent containment, while states governed by the Republicans relied on laxer containment policies.

In the first article of this collection, Barberia et al. (2021) stress the heterogeneity in containment policies in another large federal state: Brazil. The country is an excellent case for studying an uncoordinated and often confused response to Covid-19. Like Lukashenko in Belarus, Putin in Russia, and Trump in the United States, the Bolsonaro government downplayed the severity of the pandemic, took an explicit "do nothing" stance on containment policies and even tried to prohibit local and regional governments from implementing more stringent containment policies (Barberia and Gomez, 2020). In the end, Brazilian "state governments took a lead role in implementing social distancing policies to prevent the spread of Covid-19 within their territories, and these subnational governments have been consistently recognized as dominant in cases where more lax federal legislation introduced by President Jair Bolsonaro has attempted to circumvent the containment strategies." Barberia et al. (2021) show that the pandemic's dynamics (Castro et al. 2021) and the causal mechanism that shapes the dynamic have been heterogeneous across Brazilian states.

These results cannot be generalized to other federal states (Buthe et al. 2020). Germany implemented containment policies that did not vary much between high incidence states in the South and West and low incidence states in the North and East. This strict policy was partly relaxed during the second wave when Germany introduced a decentralized element to containment policies and eventually linked containment policies to the incidence rate in districts. However, the central government dominated public debates and policy making alike throughout the pandemic.

Ratto et al. (2021) expand the perspective to 15 Latin American countries (excluding Brazil from the sample) and analyze the pandemic dynamics during the first wave of the pandemic. They distinguish between three phases: During the first phase, most Latin American governments implemented stringent

containment measures. During the second phase, these containment policies were slowly phased out. During the third phase, governments removed most containment policies. Ratto et al. provide evidence that the pandemic situation follows the stringency of containment policies from the second phase on. As the pandemic evolves, the correlation between the stringency of containment policies and the number of daily new infections increasingly became negative. These results ought to be expected: Non-pharmaceutical interventions only reduce incidence rates if a sufficiently large part of the population changes its behavior.

The question of the extent to which citizens accept social distancing norms motivates the article of Stegmuller et al. 2021. They study the prevalence of non-compliance with public health guidelines through the lens of a survey experiment in nine countries. The sample varies with respect to incidence and mortality rates and, more importantly, governments' choices of containment policies. Their sample includes Sweden, the role model for liberal containment policies, New Zealand, the role model for ultra-strict travel restrictions, and Italy, a country overwhelmed by the first wave that relied on rigid lockdown policies. Their list experiment suggests that more participants report to have not adhered to containment policies than we would find based on traditional surveys—a result that often occurs and is usually explained by the existence of social desirability bias in classical surveys. Their experiment also reveals a large variation in the degree of non-compliance across countries—a variation that correlates with the stringency of lockdown-style policies: "On average, countries with strict policy measures, such as France or Italy, show lower levels of ignorance of health guidelines, compared to countries with more lenient measures, such as Australia, the United States, or Sweden." At the individual level, the authors are mainly interested in the determinants of non-compliance.

Who ignores social distancing rules? The authors find a significant correlation between ideology and non-compliance in some but not in all countries. In the United States, a country with a highly politicized and polarized response to Covid-19 (Kubinec et al. 2020; Stecula and Pickup 2021), individuals that place themselves on the extreme right of the political spectrum are less likely to practice social distancing. But in the analyzed country sample, the United States is an outlier (Pickup, Stecula, and van der Linden 2021). In European countries, no ideological difference in adherence to social distancing norms can be observed.

Lewis and Duch (2021) also conduct a survey experiment to explore the existence of a gender gap in risk perception in the United States. The study provides evidence that risk perception and behavior are associated—a result that is well-established in the psychological and economic literature. Galasso et al. (2020) find similar gender differences in compliance with social distancing norms. More importantly, Lewis and Duch demonstrate that men and women estimate their individual risk of becoming infected with Sars-CoV-2 to be lower than the population average, and they show that the gender gap in risk perception widens in an experimentally framed high-risk setting.

Travel restrictions run counter to the DNA of European integration and have been one of the least used policies that governments had at their disposal—at least in Europe. At the very early stage of the pandemic, when the international spread of the virus could have slowed down and perhaps even stopped, many governments were reluctant to implement travel restrictions. When governments implemented travel restrictions, the virus had already been brought to most countries by international travelers. E.U. members were unprepared at the early stages of the pandemic and had no plan in place that allowed the temporary suspension of European law in emergency situations. For the second wave of the pandemic, Neumayer, Plümper, and Shaikh (2021) provide evidence that travel restrictions—mostly test and quarantine requirements—have been implemented by countries with relatively low incidence rates on travelers from countries with higher incidence rates, and governments had to use relatively stringent containment measures. In other words, travel restrictions are an essential part of the anti-corona policy arsenal over which governments command, and for some countries, the most important instrument. From the perspective of models of opportunistic government (Downs 1957), it is undoubtedly most interesting that countries depending on income from international tourism have tried to keep borders open until the tourist season was over—and then had to use a rather stringent policy mix to again bring down the high incidences that result from relatively unconstrained travel.

Kubinec, Lee, and Tomashevskiy (2021) also refer to an opportunistic logic of government to explain why countries that suffer from political and administrative corruption often had high incidence rates. In

a sample of three corrupt countries, Kubinec explain why some companies could keep their business running, while others had to close during a lockdown. What drives these differences? While an epidemiological explanation would stress the intensity of social interactions in each sector and firm, Kubinec et al. highlight the "ties" between companies and government, their political connectedness (Fisman 2001). They demonstrate that governments have utilized an arbitrary distinction between system-relevant sectors and industries that are claimed to be non-essential—arbitrary as long as we ignore the linkages between the companies that kept businesses open and the government also showed that the definition of "essential" varied from country to country. Analyzing Egypt, Venezuela, and Ukraine, they show that "politically connected firms are significantly less likely to comply with Covid-19 shutdown restrictions." Of course, this study leaves open whether governments are unwilling or administrations unable (or both) to enforce restrictions for well-connected firms. However, Kubinec et al.'s result highlights the relevance of corruption and cronyism for the effectiveness of containment policies. While much recent research has shown that corruption is associated with a less stringent policy response, Kubinec et al.'s result is consistent even with a comparatively stringent policy response by corrupt governments: The more stringent the containment policies, the larger the competitive advantages for firms that do not have to comply with measures because they are "connected' with their government and public administrations.

Social science research on the stringency of containment policies leaves no doubt that the effectiveness of non-pharmaceutical health policies is not fully explained by the pandemic situation. Political incentive structures also influence the political response—often in ways that political scientists have analyzed for decades. If anything, the pandemic has revealed that old theories of political decision making work reasonably well to explain response patterns of the public and governments during the pandemic. In other words: Microfoundations typically used in social science theories have weathered the pandemic stress test fairly well.

However, political and social scientists should keep potential caveats in mind: First, the influence of partisan preferences measured on a traditional left–right scale, formal political institutions such as electoral systems, political decentralization, veto-players have, outside countries that already had polarized partisan conflicts before the pandemic (Kubinec et al. 2020), been less influential than "weak" factors, most notably trust in government and public administration. Political trust influences compliance, thus indirectly the political costs of containment policies for incumbents and opposition parties that support containment policies. Apparently, containment policies work best when a vast population share voluntarily follows the rules and regulations. If governments have to enforce containment policies, the higher the political costs of these measures.

Second, the pandemic, while operating like a magnifying glass that revealed the weaknesses of each country, each political system, each public administration, and perhaps even each politician in great detail, has had less political consequences than political scientists arguably would have expected before the virus hit the world. Many governments repeatedly implemented harsh lockdowns over an extended period, and, yes, that triggered protests but few riots. It gave rise to the emergence of new and often dubious political groups but did not lead to a substantive strengthening of populist parties.

THE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF CONTAINMENT POLICIES

The pandemic, the containment policies, and the compensation schemes set up to moderate the containment policies had vast economic consequences and distributive effects. By the end of 2021, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has predicted that global Gross Domestic Production (GDP) will still fall short of pre-pandemic levels by approximately $3000 billion. This resembles roughly the annual GDP of countries like the United Kingdom, India, or France. The economic footprint the pandemic left on countries is huge, but so is the variation of this economic malaise across countries: China returned to pre-pandemic income levels already during the second quarter of 2020. At the other end of the distribution, Argentina is predicted to return to pre-pandemic income levels, not before

the second quarter of 2026. The crisis lasted two quarters in China but is expected to linger for 25 quarters in Argentina.

Economic redistribution within each country also was substantial. Covid-19 is more likely to harm the old and vulnerable. While reducing the risk for the old and the sick, containment policies mount costs on parents with young children, the working population, and especially those in exposed and essential sectors. At the same time, compensation schemes have raised public debts and currently cause a return of inflation as a global problem, thus redistributing wealth from creditors to debtors and from future tax-payers to current tax-payers.

Containment policies (or their absence) have economic, social, and psychological consequences that cannot remain without political consequences. In principle, one could expect that the incumbents and other parties supporting containment policies would gain political support from groups profiting from containment policies and lose political support from groups that have to pay the bill. However, this is not what happens. During the first wave, most incumbent parties gained political support—a phenomenon described as "rally around the flag" by political scientists. (Bol et al. 2021; Schraff 2020). In addition, Esaiasson et al. (2021) find an increase in support for democratic institutions. Hence, the majority of studies of incumbency effects during the pandemic are in line with research that suggests that crises and disasters instigate increased support for the governing party (Bechtel and Hainmueller 2011). However, in countries with polarized politics, political leaders do not necessarily profit. Clarke, Stewart, and Ho (2021) and Gomez and Barberia (2020) discuss why Trump in the United States and Bolsonaro in Brazil failed to profit from the rally around the flag effect.

While most published studies have relied on traditional survey designs, Freden et al. 2021 utilize what they call a question-based computer language assessment. Rather than letting survey participants assess the incumbent's performance and ask what party they would vote for if there were elections, Freden et al. asks participants to describe the current Prime Minister in two keywords. The distribution of keywords is used to evaluate whether the support for the incumbent is rising or falling. Using this technique, they find that west European citizens became more positive about the incumbent during lockdowns. The authors also show that leader evaluations are contingent on the partisan preferences of the voter. Apparently, supports for incumbents increase during the pandemic, but more so with voters who probably would vote for the incumbent party anyways. Thus, it remains to be seen whether the pandemic, in the long run, stabilizes political competition or leads to the further polarization of political competition along partisan lines.

Pickup, Stecula, and van der Linden (2021) provide further evidence that the pandemic potentially increases political polarization and may lead to the emergence of antagonistic political camps. Their study uses the distinction between Leavers and Remainers in the post-Brexit United Kingdom. It shows that Leavers have become more antagonistic against immigrants during the pandemic, while the Remainers have not significantly changed their political attitudes toward immigrants. Of course, it may be too early to tell whether the camps of Remainers and Leavers are sufficiently stable to create a divide. Pickup et al. at least suggest that the Brexit position, while initially a function of "pre-existing attitudes, values, and sociodemographic characteristics," increasingly becomes a "Brexit identity." If that is true, then political scientists should be increasingly able to demonstrate that every policy preference of the voters is correlated with the voters' Brexit identity—and that also holds for the attitude toward immigration during the pandemic as Pickup et al. demonstrate.

Political polarization and Covid-19 are an unhealthy combination in more than one respect. While the pandemic had little influence on electoral outcomes (yet) in most countries, the potentially most important exception was, argue, the United States. Admittedly, we cannot know the counterfactual. Would Trump have won the election if the pandemic had not happened? Would Trump still reside in the White House if he had not downplayed the severity of the virus and if his government had, with the majority of U.S. state governments, implemented a more coherent and more stringent containment policy? Clarke et al. argue that, indeed, Covid-19 and the lackluster response to the pandemic contributed largely and perhaps decisively to the electoral defeat.

Clarke, Stewart, and Ho (2021) interpret containment policies as an excellent example of what political scientists call "valence issues." In principle, valence issues are politically uncontroversial because the

majority of the electorate agrees at least on the political aims. Confronted with an emergent valence issue such as Covid-19, an issue that is perhaps not well understood, the dominant strategy for all incumbents should have been to stress the importance of the issue, suggest a reasonable set of policies, and be open to public and political debates about these policies. This strategy has fueled the "rally around the flag" in most democracies. Clarke et al. offer ample evidence that, unlike most other incumbents, the Trump administration could not profit from the pandemic (Clarke et al. 2021; Clarke, Stewart, and Whiteley 2020). Survey research suggests that voters did not agree with the "do nothing and blame the Chinese's strategy" and judged Trump's anti-Covid credentials very low. Clarke et al. admit that an earlier breakthrough with vaccines could have increased political support for Trump, but either the vaccine came too late or the election too early. From a valence issue perspective, it could well be that any other political response to Covid-19 other than denial of the problem would have increased the electoral chances of the Trump government.

2021.'s article study the effects of Covid-19 on voting from a related but different angle, arguing that the pandemic increases the perceived risk of voting and thus the cost of voting. As a consequence, turnout should decline. In fact, it should decline most in societal groups that profit the least from their electoral choice. However, at the same time and to the extent partisan differences on the optimal containment policy exist, voting may also increase the perceived utility from voting. When policies are more likely to matter, and when parties disagree more fundamentally on optimal policies, the incentives to vote increase. Which effect dominates during the Covid-19 pandemic? Cooperman et al. argue that the pandemic reduces turnout in the Brazilian municipal elections in November 2020 in districts that have high incidence rates, that had high incidence rates at earlier stages of the pandemic, and that are neighboring districts with high incidence rates. They find support for their expectations: Voter turnout is lowest where the incidence and mortality rates are relatively high. This also holds if only nearby districts have high incidence and mortality rates.

Finally, Plümper, Neumayer, and Pfaff (2021) analyze the emergence of protest against containment policies in Germany. According to their analyses, protest organizers terminate and locate protest events at least partly strategically. Protest events take more frequently place when containment policies are stringent, where mortality rates are relatively low, and where mainstream parties have been relatively week in the last election.

CONCLUSION

Epidemiological dynamics, political institutions, containment policies, and the public response influence each other, condition each other, and reinforce or weaken each other. The articles in this special issue study a small selection of mechanisms that reveal the influence of politics on containment policies, and the influence of containment policies on political attitudes, behaviors, and decisions. Like most published research on Covid-19, the contributions here describe the force of the pandemic as a stress test for political systems, institutions, decision-making processes, and public policies. Apparently, in many countries, the pandemic demonstrated that not all is well and that holds first and foremost for the political response to Covid-19.

Unlike any previous pandemic or epidemic, Covid-19 is, and needs to be analyzed and understood, a political phenomenon. Researchers of natural disasters (Bakkensen et al. 2017; Plümper, Flores, and Neumayer 2017) have developed the concept of resilience to describe whether natural hazards become disasters for the affected population (World Bank 2010). When resilience is high, even large hazards remain manageable for the society and the government, and the number of fatalities stays low. Sars-CoV-2 is a natural hazard that became a disaster for most countries, mainly because preparedness was low. But resilience is more than preparedness. Resilience is a concept that describes how well an entity, say a country, copes with the unexpected. It is possible that governments and citizens alike are unprepared but resilient. It may also be that governments and citizens are prepared but not resilient. One can clearly expect a pandemic, as we should have, and still not cope well.

These articles clearly lay bare the "endogenous" nature of a pandemic. However, while social scientists have learned to interpret endogeneity as a nuisance and work their way around it, the pandemic and the containment policies do so obviously influence each other, and no comprehensive understanding of pandemic politics is possible if we isolate the effect of containment policies on the pandemic from the effect of the pandemic on containment policies. Containment policies are not only implemented to reduce the incidence and mortality rates, they are also implemented to increase the probability that governments do not have to use them in the future. Apparently, this strategy has not always been successful.

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