

The Articulate State

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Abstract: *The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of rapid, informed executive decision-making in times of crisis, as well as wide variation in the capacity of states to cope with public health challenges. The crisis has also challenged liberal defenders of limited governments that are often presumed to be inadequately equipped to deal with public emergencies. Protecting public health seems to require a Leviathan state capable of consolidating government power and directing civil society towards shared priorities. Combining Lippmann's account of liberal state capacity and the Ostroms' approach to public administration, we argue, by contrast, that executive government benefit both from constraints and empowered local government. Public health interventions require accurate and trusted public information. This can only be collected and disseminated through independently motivated, autonomous officials. The rapid deployment of state resources requires officials who can act locally with discretion and mutual trust with the population. We thus develop the theoretical value of polycentrism and self-governance beyond their more familiar role of increasing accountability and competition in the provision of local public goods to facilitating effective national policy.*

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The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed some startling differences in the capacity of states to cope with public health emergencies. Some of these differences defy existing measures of state capability, as well as some ideological preconceptions. For example, the Global Health Security Index ranked the United States first and the United Kingdom second in pandemic preparedness in 2019 (Cameron et al., 2019). Yet, while both nations have performed well in vaccine development, they have performed comparatively poorly by high-income country public health standards despite having ample resources and more time to prepare and react than many other developed countries (Bollyky et al., 2022). What is missing in official metrics when it comes to evaluating the effectiveness of policy responses to pandemics?

This puzzle provokes a return to theory so that we can conceptualise what effective states have in these unfolding public health challenges that ineffective states have not. In addition, even someone sympathetic to limited government may well come to conclude that certain kinds of public health challenges can only be met, at least initially, by illiberal methods (Garzarelli et al., 2022; Gelooso et al., 2021). We argue, however, that within liberalism there are resources to aid in analysing and conceptualizing state capacity in a way that can both make sense of recent state performance and help guide how to prepare for the future.

We contribute to addressing this puzzle by tying together some core characteristics of modern statecraft identified by several canonical liberal theorists, and especially Walter Lipmann.

These are 1) prioritising public health, especially during emergencies, 2) collecting systematic public data, and 3) acting within a background of accountability and transparency such that state direction enjoys public trust. Furthermore, we argue that these characteristics are best embodied through the use of polycentric democratic institutions.

In linking these features together, we introduce a new concept: state articulacy. The word ‘articulate’ refers to the ability to speak coherently, in this case a government’s or executive’s

capacity to issue clear guidance that officials and the public recognize as authoritative and well-informed. Moreover, it refers in biology to bodies with jointed segments. This is equivalent to a state with organisationally distinct and independently functional departments with clear divisions of accountability, responsibility, and power. Our theory is that these two characteristics are not merely homonymic. They are connected because it is only by establishing clear, separate spheres of power and accountability that public officials can generate and exchange knowledge and resources with each other. We define state articulacy as the executive's capacity to provide action-guiding statements and coordination that lower officials and the public recognize as authoritative and reliable. While this goes beyond our present remit we also suggest that state articulacy is a component of state legitimacy and social trust.

Our focus on the executive suggests that even illiberal states, with governments not grounded in consent or democratic representation, might aspire to state articulacy. We consider this is a feature not a bug of our approach. We argue that polycentric democratic institutions greatly facilitate state articulacy, but do not wish to presuppose it in our definitions.

However, an executive must rely on summary information about threats to the public and available resources for addressing them. And even in the best of times, it must act without truly knowing its accuracy or the details of how it is collected. In times of crisis, and in the context of so-called 'fast science,' when the nature of the threat is badly understood and the nature of scientific expertise is itself contested, even the possibility of state articulacy is greatly challenged.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we defend the central role of public health for liberal state legitimacy. We do so by way of a stylized re-reading of the liberal tradition. Then we explain the fraught challenge that sovereigns face when trying to achieve a collective

good from a single central position. We introduce our notion of state articulacy as a solution that draws on existing accounts of liberal state capacity and Ostromian understandings of polycentrism, and then contrast this description with the perennial notion of the ‘hollow state’. Then we suggest how our new account of state capability can explain some of the variation between national responses to COVID-19 and link this variation to the qualities of leadership demonstrated in states that have struggled to grapple with the crisis.

The liberal state and public health

Following canonical readings of Hobbes (1651), contemporary political thought usually departs from the presumption that the traditional function of the state is to prevent violent conflict over interests, resources and morality. The state secures people’s safety from the threats of others by establishing and defending borders against foreign powers and policing the domestic population. On this account, the biggest threats to safety arise from rivalries within society. Often represented as a prisoners’ dilemma, social interaction absent a state is intrinsically competitive and can only be ameliorated through the coercion of a third party. As left and right-wing critics of liberalism note, this points towards a relatively thin theory of the public good.

The newly found salience of infectious disease has provoked a review of this starting point and highlighted that public safety can require extraordinary collective action not to defend against deliberate harm but against the unintentional consequences of social interaction.² Rarely noted before the pandemic, the famous frontispiece of Hobbes’ *Leviathan* shows not just a sovereign whose physical body is constituted by the people but also an attractive city

² Our approach here could be extended to concerns about externalities more generally and especially those focused on emerging environmental crises.

with broad avenues, empty of everyone except figures that on inspection are dressed as traditional plague doctors (Botting, 2021; Falk, 2011). *Leviathan*, on this re-reading, visually presents an outbreak of infectious disease as a paradigmatic instance of necessary state action. Unlike prisoners' dilemmas where the conflict is over a rival good, such as a subtractable resource, infectious diseases present something more like a stag hunt where effective coordination is to the benefit of both parties but where the cooperation of the other parties nevertheless must be assured. When it comes to initiating coordinated action, the key barriers for the state are knowing what the right course of action is, through understanding the nature of an emerging threat, and issuing guidance that actors in civil society can not only follow but can also be confident that others will follow. The response relies relatively less on the threat of coercion, and more on mutual trust and information since effective coordination is more directly to everyone's benefit.

Since pandemics were regular and devastating occurrences in early modern Europe, it is no surprise that liberal thinkers reflected on them. In his *History of England*, Hume describes frequent pandemics with urban mortality rates of 20% (Hume, 1754-1762, H 16.2 & 64.27). And he notes instances of social distancing at public rallies as early as the sixteenth century (Hume, 1754-1762, H34.18).

Here we quote a passage from the *History* about the rebuilding of London after the Great Fire (1666) which had an important side effect on public health:

The fire of London, though at that time a great calamity, has proved in the issue beneficial both to the city and the kingdom. The city was rebuilt in a very little time; and care was taken to make the streets wider and more regular than before. A discretionary power was assumed by the king to regulate the distribution of the buildings, and to forbid the use of lath and timber, the materials, of which the houses

were formerly composed. The necessity was so urgent, and the occasion so extraordinary, that no exceptions were taken at an exercise of authority, which otherwise might have been deemed illegal. Had the king been enabled to carry his power still farther, and made the houses be rebuilt with perfect regularity, and entirely upon one plan; he had much contributed to the convenience, as well as embellishment of the city. Great advantages, however, have resulted from the alterations; though not carried to the full length. London became much more healthy after the fire. The plague, which used to break out with great fury twice or thrice every century, and indeed was always lurking in some corner or other of the city, has scarcely ever appeared since that calamity (Hume, 1757, H65.43).

Rather than criticizing the illiberal (and illegal) nature of Charles II's actions, Hume praises his effective means of coordinating the rebuilding response to the Great Fire.³ This is because the King's directives were taken to be authoritative because they were clearly and coherently addressing a major public calamity.

We mention King Charles' actions as an instance of illiberal state articulacy recognized by a liberal thinker to illustrate the concept and to show that within liberalism – Hume is one of the most able defenders of the utility of markets and of limited government – such positive public health outcomes are highly valued. We argue, however, that in general kings and dictators are not required to produce such outcomes and that they often are incapable of producing them. And that the liberal tradition points the way toward an alternative.

Although theoretical emphasis on public health as a central government competence waned in the second half of the 20th century, perhaps because of fewer direct experiences of fatal infectious diseases, historically it is central to liberal thought (Koyama, 2021). For example,

³ This is, in fact, compatible with Hume's account of how leaders can act legitimately during exceptional circumstances (Schliesser, 2018).

Walter Lippmann considers a commitment to public health, and especially the treatment and prevention of infectious diseases, central to modern statecraft (De Waal, 2020; cf. Cutler et al., 2006). As Adam Smith (1981 V.i) noted, to “prevent” the “spread” of a most loathsome “disease” deserves the “most serious attention of government.” Quoting Smith in *The Good Society* (1938), the book that laid the foundation for the revival of liberalism after World War II, Lippmann argued, contrary to Herbert Spencer’s doctrine of *laissez faire*, that public health is “both a relief and a remedy.” Lippmann thought it not just a moral duty, but also politically expedient (Schliesser, 2019). Nor did he think of it as an expenditure that must come at the expense of the economy, for a healthier populace also means a more productive economy.⁴ So, the state must build up expertise and capacity in public health to protect life and promote economic flourishing; it cannot wholly outsource this obligation to private actors or institutions.

But, given that any program for public health must rely on the work of experts often in only partially overlapping disciplines, this reinforces the significance of the question we started with: how do we cultivate a society in which appropriate kinds of authority—including that of public health officials—win widespread trust?

The executive’s paradox of power

Although Hobbes diagnosed the problem of mis-coordination effectively, his prescription was ultimately flawed despite the occasional successes of the sort that Hume praises in Charles II. To coordinate effective action to protect the public, an executive must elicit information from her subordinates, decide on a course of action and ensure her will is carried out through commands and direction of resources. A common intuition is that this is best

⁴ We should acknowledge at the outset that, although Lippmann was a critic of racial eugenics, his emphasis on public health occasionally aligned with support for a ‘soft’ eugenics that frequently appears in the thought of liberals who departed from *laissez-faire* in the first half of the 20th century (Cowen, 2018)

achieved, indeed perhaps only possible at all, if all relevant institutional power is held in the same position with a unitary will behind it. This is why we quote Hume on Charles II. As Tullock (1965) observes, the citizens' eye view of a government bureaucracy is that of a pyramid with all power and responsibility ultimately residing at the top.

However, even a very effective ruler cannot be fully informed about every detail of her realm nor can she personally ensure all elements of her will are carried out. The idealised role of an organisational pyramid is to delegate these tasks in such a way that the right information, at an appropriate level of granularity, reaches the right rung of the ladder. The sovereign herself only has the cognitive capacity to handle a few specific items of information. She then must state a broad policy that will have to be implemented through commands to subordinates at various levels.

Although this idealised view is not held by contemporary scholars of government bureaucracy, it has often been a point of departure for theorists. Indeed, it remains a central conceit of welfare economics (Adler, 2021; Buchanan, 1959). For example, it was how Woodrow Wilson conceived government and this informed his attempts to develop a centralised federal bureaucracy in the United States (Ostrom, 2008; Wilson, 1908). In the United Kingdom, it is reflected in the increasingly deprecated norms of cabinet collective responsibility for official government policy and individual ministerial responsibility for actions taken within each department (Flinders, 2000; Palmer, 1995). Despite it being implausible that an individual Minister or Secretary of State could really be personally responsible for all key decisions in a government department or policy area, the fiction is retained to create democratic rituals of accountability in parliamentary democracies. Something similar can be said in terms of congressional oversight (McCubbins and Schwartz, 1984). When evaluating the strength of leadership, commentators often focus on how much

power a premier appears to have to enforce their will on an organisation and the lack of opposing voices. A powerful opposition is presumed to be a sign of weakness in a leadership.

The paradox we point to is that the very lack of institutional restraints or autonomous actors to check leadership can reduce the effective power of a sovereign to implement policy. A curious finding in development economics is that absolute states where the sovereign has no constraints are also comparatively weak states (Johnson and Koyama, 2017; Ma and Rubin, 2019). These are states without capacity to collect resources or provide public goods. For example, authoritarian states struggle far more to collect taxes than liberal states. This is not simply because the sovereign must exercise greater coercion for the sake of survival when her rule is in doubt. Even when no serious rivals exist, an absolute state struggles to generate the productive capacities of the society being ruled. Correlatively, capable modern states have emerged in parallel with the growth of civil society, private commerce, administrative capacity and the rule of law (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2019; North, 1990; North et al., 2009).

The kernel of the problem is time-inconsistency. Subjects of a regime can only invest and produce socially valuable resources that can be widely exchanged or shared if they can be confident that they will not be expropriated. Otherwise, out of self-preservation, they must focus on producing for their own private necessities and hiding any surplus from the jealous sovereign. They remain safe by remaining poor. An arbitrary ruler has limited credibility to promise not to expropriate. Hobbes' expectation was that arbitrary government would be at least as good as any other government because a sovereign's interests are sufficiently aligned with the majority. This was, in fact, also Hume's (1739, T3.2.7.1, SBN 534) assumption. The problem is the personal interest of a ruler can frequently diverge from that of individuals in civil society. The same powers used to enforce social order can easily be implemented to single out individuals or groups for arbitrary penalty. The occasional emergence of protective

states historically happens when they are subject to competition for governance provision (Piano and Salter, 2020).

This is a challenge that crops up repeatedly in any social relationship where one actor functions as a dictator. The benefits of being a dictator are undermined by the lack of scope for long-term cooperation. How does it relate specifically to bureaucracies tasked with providing public goods such as public health? When taking instructions from a powerful executive, the equivalent of expropriation is loss of employment or reduced prospects of promotion. Officials who have an unclear set of competencies and responsibilities will not take initiative lest they act beyond their powers or get involved in a failed policy for which they might later be blamed. They will wait for explicit instructions from higher up the chain of command so that failure is shared. Critically, officials will avoid conveying accurate information that is unlikely to be well-received by the executive. The paradox is that executive at the top of the bureaucracy may well want intelligent, self-directed subordinates. They may also want to be challenged and to be informed of bad news so they can act to defend the public interest. The problem is they cannot credibly promise not to ‘shoot the messenger’ *ex post*.

State articulacy

How can a state overcome the paradox of power to achieve collectively beneficial ends? Development economists have argued for the centrality of private property, voluntary exchange and enforcement of contracts within a framework of the rule of law for sustained growth and prosperity. The Ostroms developed, in parallel, an institutional analysis of public administration to argue for the usefulness of polycentricism (Ostrom, 2010; Ostrom and Ostrom, 2014). They argue regimes constituted by organisations with overlapping jurisdictions and functions, but distinct sources of authority and mechanisms of accountability are more likely to produce the knowledge and incentives necessary for the

effective provision of local public goods (Aligica and Tarko, 2012, 2013; Sørensen and Ansell, 2021).

We argue that as well as local and common goods, in some circumstances, polycentrism is critical to improving the capacity for centralised governments to respond to national crises. The simplest contribution is reducing pressure on national government to solve problems that can be dealt with locally. Accountable local government under fiscal federalism produces both the capacity and incentive to resolve problems. This reduces pressure on national leadership to intervene while also creating a local elite constituency that is keen to keep national politics at arms-length from various issues. This means that agendas for political action can be split according to local, regional and national saliency. This also means that national governments can be relatively confident that most significant administrative activity can take place without their oversight because there are built-in incentives for local officials to continue carrying out their work. Government administration can carry on automatically without constant intervention from the centre.

A second contribution is the production, aggregation and dissemination of granular, up-to-date information. This has proved to be a critical contribution to dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, both for national governments getting early-warnings of infections within communities and for being able to track individual cases as well as formulating collective responses. For Lippmann (1922), a core function of the state is as a machinery of record, a collector and disseminator of accurate public data. A lot of our social practices, inside and outside the market, presuppose a social infrastructure in which the machinery of record is reliable, allowing public authorities and private actors to plan their activities. For that to happen, the public must be well-informed, and the only way citizens can possibly be well-

informed on complex matters of policy is for state experts to organize and process information.⁵

The germ of Lippmann's idea is expressed in John Stuart Mill's (1869, Ch. 5) claim that "the greatest dissemination of power consistent with efficiency" should be allied with "the greatest possible centralisation of information, and diffusion of it from the centre." To be a machinery of record requires state expert bureaucracies that operate by clear and impartial rules.

Statistical offices that collect data, and public record keeping that is reliable and accessible to all at minimal cost. This immense and nearly invisible machinery makes possible both political contestation and a great deal of individual and collective decision making. Lippmann calls attention, in particular, to the state's role in recording births, marriage, death, deeds of ownership, and licensing. We are, of course, not the first to note the importance of record keeping to modern statecraft. In recent decades this insight has been taken up by Foucault (2008) and Scott (1998).

While all states collect information, the distinctly liberal state does so in a rule-following fashion and respecting certain limitations. These include the possibility of publicly reconstructing and auditing the construction and sharing of data and so making it contestable. The problem is that building up accurate data collection is challenging without pre-existing capacity and, critically, broad trust in the process. In practice, collection processes that are known to be reliable through use are much more likely to be trusted and trustworthy, and so also have more compliant data sharing. It is, however, impossible to know from theory or formal specification that a data collection process works as it should. Moreover, there is a political economy to data collection when the results determine how resources will be

⁵ In the age of cheap computer power and powerful data collection, private institutions and individuals are capable of organizing and disseminating complex and large amounts of data. But in general they are not capable of coordinating public policy authoritatively.

allocated. By contrast, data regularly and consistently gathered by governing units at a smaller scale, and practically used to achieve a variety of local public good needs is likely also to be useful during a national crisis. This can only be relied upon if the system of data collection is subject to feedback as to the success and failure of local interventions.

The current most impressive example of such data collection is the Danish Civil Registration System founded in the 1960s (Pedersen, 2011)). This is an administrative register that keeps track of many key details of individuals including those pertinent to uses in public health (Erlangsen and Fedyszyn, 2015) and in epidemiology (Schmidt et al., 2014). Because Denmark's government has a high degree of transparency and accountability and so authority and trust, this administrative register functions smoothly without much social contestation. And while we recognize that such a registry has roots in Denmark's culture of communitarian-organic social democracy with a tendencies toward eugenics (Lucassen, 2010), Denmark's present public culture and institutions are a check on illiberal uses of such a registry.

A third contribution is the capacity of governments to draw on resources in civil society and the private sector. As Hayek (1945) observes, it is impossible for one actor to know all the available resources, scarcities and needs across a whole society. This is what explains the critical role of decentralised markets with competitive pricing for the coordination of the production of private goods, and the importance of entrepreneurship for generating and dynamically improving public knowledge of available resources and how they can be effectively used. Public officials can never be placed in precisely the same position as entrepreneurs in private markets, where there is a tight link between satisfying ultimate consumer needs and the realisation of profit and loss (Pennington, 2003). Nevertheless, the provision of public goods can be made more effective by bringing accountable decision-making to a more local level. Officials in such a position are more likely to be aware of the

immediate needs of their community and the peculiar local resources that might be commissioned. Here, Lippmann (1922) saw value in the circulation of experts between different levels of government, research and even business. For him, a ‘revolving door’ between government and civil society was a strength of a liberal regime rather than merely an avenue for special interests to infiltrate the state. Critically, so long as those responsible for spending public money are locally accountable and transparent, and there is at least the possibility of competition and comparison between providers, then the resources can be effectively deployed whether publicly owned or commissioned or contracted for from the private sector.⁶

Taken as a whole, state articulacy is an institutional structure that helps meet the fraught challenges a sovereign faces when attempting to manage cooperation. In essence, it splits the stylized administrative pyramid that Tullock identifies with bureaucracy into independent units with limited responsibilities. This reduces the need for surveillance and the loss of information that happens as it travels up through fewer layers before it is used (Ostrom and Whitaker, 1973). Nevertheless, these units can exchange information and combine resources with one another. Because the information is already tested locally, it can be trusted by national governments as generally credible and treated as a plausible official record. In turn, this means that policy decisions taken and announced to the public that are justified by official statistics are more likely to be treated as based on credible information. This can increase personal adherence to governments directives that cannot feasibly be enforced through sanctions.

⁶ On the significance of post facto accountability in liberal views of states of emergency see Lazar (2009).

Hollowing out as the converse of articulacy

Although our notion of state articulacy is novel, what might be considered its opposite has been subject to significant discussion.⁷ It is the notion of the hollow state. The ‘hollowing out of the state’ is the process of a government retreating from directly providing traditional public services and the replacement of dedicated agencies with less hierarchical networks of providers (Rhodes, 1994). Hollowing out has proved controversial to define and evaluate. As a result, there is debate over whether and where it is even happening (Skelcher, 2000). Part of the problem has been figuring out what relationship hollowing out has with state centralisation. If a state undergoes a centralising reform, does it become less hollow, or more (Taylor, 2000)?

A way out of this confusion is to look through the lens of liberal political economy. The notion of a unitary state with a single will emanating from the centre, that operates in the background of much theory of public administration, is misconceived (Ostrom, 2008; Pourvand, 2021). Since that is a weak paradigm, it has so far been unclear what exactly is being ‘hollowed out’. Often the hollowing out claim is conflated with criticisms of neoliberalism and privatization of state monopolies into private monopolies. We think it is more useful to recognize that liberal democratic politics is always constituted by exchange between independent actors with multiple, but overlapping, interests and values. The relatively capable state is strong precisely because of its limited purpose, cooperative interdependency with other actors in civil society, and functional separation of powers and responsibilities.

On our account, hollowing out occurs when the internal divisions within the state are consolidated such that the competencies of various agencies are blurred and subject to

⁷ Strictly speaking the opposite of state articulacy is a state that fails at being a machinery of record. But many state capacities presuppose the kind of data that go into state articulacy.

discretionary change. This could happen alongside a more general retreat from state competences but often does not. For example, the British state is highly centralised and has recently been subject to waves of austerity, but it has seldom reduced the scope at least of its formal powers or objectives (Marinetto, 2003; Ward and Ward, 2021). Even when engaged in privatisation of public services, British governments establish regulatory agencies and often remain the primary or even sole buyer of key services (Thatcher, 1998). In general, the contemporary British state arguably has agencies with overlapping roles and functions, but accountability and ultimate control of public resources has been increasingly centralised (Thomas, 2021).

State Articulatory and Pandemic Responses

Can this theoretical notion of state articulatory help explain the differential responses of states to COVID-19? The unfolding pandemic reveals a stark pattern of states with initially bad and even disastrous policy responses (China, the United States, the United Kingdom and Italy) and those with rather successful initial responses such as South Korea, Japan, Germany, Taiwan and Czechia (Pancevski and Hinshaw, 2020). The explanation for these outcomes cuts across familiar ideological debates about the role of markets and governments. The United States, for example, is the only developed nation without a universal health care system. And so it is understandable that critics argue that “rapaciously profit-driven health care system and an austerity-ravaged state will make this virus harder to manage” (Kapczynski and Gonsalves, 2020). True the US effort suffered from under-investment in public health and that the relationship between public and private actors in the United States is toxic for health care (Táiwò, 2020).

Yet, universal health care alone is insufficient. The United Kingdom has had the National Health Service (NHS) since 1948. Whereas most developed states use a combination of

public support, private insurance and co-payments to provide universal healthcare, the NHS is a single-payer system that is free at the point of use (apart from some low flat fees for items like prescriptions). Yet the UK has not performed well against the pandemic either. Just like the United States, the UK was slow to roll out testing and could not get contact tracing off the ground (Barker et al., 2020). The NHS sent countless carers to treat COVID-19 patients without adequate PPE equipment, and its staff were told to keep quiet about it (Campbell, 2020). This constitutes many of the same failings of the United States, but playing out within what appears to be a diametrically different health care system.

Why the similar experience? On our account, despite the US and UK having different health care systems, the public health elements both rely on centralized, highly consequential, yet low-capacity, agencies: the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the United States, and what was called Public Health England (PHE) in the UK, an agency that was subsequently disbanded on arbitrary grounds. In the UK, there were local officials with expertise in contact tracing that were not deployed (Shabi, 2020). These central institutions lack the resources and coordination to predict and respond nimbly to pandemics. Yet they maintain the regulatory clout to prevent other actors from stepping into the breach. They initially struggled to collect and publicise credible data. The CDC, in response to political pressure, conflated viral and antibody tests (Madrigal and Meyer, 2020). The resulting public record was so opaque that even well-informed experts did not know how to correct for them. This is an example of the consequences of a relatively hollow rather than articulate state struggling to produce appropriate records and withstand political interference.

This arrangement contrasts with the success of more decentralized yet better coordinated public health regimes elsewhere. Recognizing the threat of COVID-19 early, South Korea's regulatory agency fast-tracked approvals for privately developed tests (Terhune et al., 2020). They also used smartphone technology to track the infected (Kim, 2020). The South Korean government was thus able to utilize private sector capacity and infrastructure for the public good. South Korea's response could be attributed to its preparedness in response to the previous SARS outbreak. But Germany, which did not experience a severe infectious respiratory disease outbreak before, also built up testing capacity early in the pandemic. This is partly due to its decentralised testing regime that allowed the local state governments to utilize competitively priced private laboratories and experiment with local standards (Loh and Kresge, 2020). This could relate to the observation that within neoliberalism, the German so-called Ordoliberal (Ordos) variant has not shared in the mistrust of state capacity characteristic of U.S. conservatism (Foucault, 2008).

Inarticulate states and incoherent leaders

The other element of state articulacy is the capacity of its leading representatives to provide clear guidance and to be believed that what they say is accurate and worth following. Public health interventions chiefly require not coercion but coordination on personal conduct to reduce the spread of infections. When it comes to addressing public bads, the results of personal decisions are not in immediate evidence. The costs of activity that risk spreading disease are dispersed and temporally distant. This is why scientific models and systematic observation are needed even to detect a problem before it becomes a crisis. Nevertheless, appropriate, peer-observable, changes in behaviour to prevent infection can become self-enforcing norms. To become common norms, most people must internalise the conduct and believe it to be genuinely useful. Otherwise, they will weakly adhere to new rules and ignore

them whenever they can do so without censure. In a free society, these norms must ultimately be accepted through persuasion and debate. To be persuasive, leaders must be able to harness legitimate knowledge and expertise.

In both the US and Britain, political leaders have fuelled mistrust of expertise (Browning, 2019) and shown a lack of interest in, if not outright hostility toward, maintaining the state's role as a machinery of record. Both the Trump administration in the United States and some Conservatives in the United Kingdom have pursued a strategy of lowering trust in public institutions and spreading doubt about the reliability of expertise and official data collection (Dyck, 2010; Funk et al., 2019; Trantidis and Cowen, 2020). They, thereby, undermine the scope for responsible state action in emergencies. In the COVID-19 pandemic, this translated into comparatively weak adherence to social distancing guidelines (Weinberg, 2020).

On our account it is not just leaders that influence institutional capacity but also institutional capacity that influences the choice of leaders. A leader is not rendered responsible and prudent primarily through personal characteristics but rather the institutional situation in which they are placed. A lack of information, or unstructured information, and too much responsibility concentrated in one place renders even the most diligent leader dumb. But when accurate information from an articulate state is absent, politicians that are more familiar and comfortable with the glare of the camera and genre of the tweet possess a competitive advantage over their opponents.

Limitations

As is often the case for developing theories based on novel experiences with limited data, there is a risk of developing a theory that overfits observations. While both the United Kingdom and the United States had peculiarly poor initial responses to COVID-19, that may have been a misfortune. For example, it could be that both states suffered from

uncharacteristically poor leadership during the crisis resulting from a series of unpredictable electoral upsets from 2016. Moreover, when we look back on the crisis in retrospect, it is possible that initial successes within the borders of a nation-state will turn out to determine little of the overall impact on a country's population. It could be that the global nature of the pandemic means that even relatively articulate nation states are unable to contain infection over the long run.

A potential weakness in terms of empirical tractability is that while we can imagine an index for features of state articulacy, there is an irreducibly subjective element to state articulacy because it is rooted in local public political cultures and perceptions. It requires members of the public to understand official statements with clarity. It also requires officials to trust each other that they are performing their relevant tasks professionally. This is partly a reflection that institutions, no matter how durable, are ultimately constituted in the shared understandings and predictive behaviors of those participating in them (Boettke et al., 2016; Grube and Storr, 2015).

Conclusion

Liberal political economy identifies regime features like localism, the separation of powers, federalism and polycentricity as generally beneficial for the efficient provision of public goods as well as offering opportunities for individuals to engage in collective self-governance. However, this scholarship has not so far identified the benefits of the separation of governmental powers into autonomous units for those exercising executive power. Indeed, it is possible to imagine that limits and divisions within government must come at a wary executive's expense. The best that has been said for political leaders so far is that liberal democracy reduces the costs of losing power, a benefit for a political elite but not to their capabilities in their official role (Weingast, 1997). By contrast, there has been relatively little discussion of how the division of power might augment the positive powers of an executive.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a stern reminder of the strict limits of what people working from a single central position can achieve when dealing with a national public emergency. To successfully respond to a rapidly spreading infectious disease, many policies must be implemented spontaneously without central direction, a lesson that is being implemented in parts of Italy that were particularly heavily hit by the pandemic (Martuscelli, 2021). We have emphasized that effective national policy relies on the aggregation of accurate information from local areas. To be considered trustworthy, guidance from leadership must be based on data and evidence that is intelligible and interrogable. Such information can only be produced through cooperation among equals, and not the commands of a centralised hierarchy.

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