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# Editorial: The political economy of federalism and multilevel politics in turbulent times

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federalism, decentralization, political economy, crisis, accountability, polarization, inequality

## Editorial on the Research Topic

### The political economy of federalism and multilevel politics in turbulent times

Three events have shaken governance in advanced democracies in the twenty-first century: the 2008 financial crisis, subsequently leading to the so-called “Great Recession” in a majority of European countries; the increase in political polarization due to the breakthrough or growth of radical parties across Western democracies; and the COVID-19 pandemic. These events have had a particular impact on the operation of federal and decentralized systems. The economic crisis enhanced the tensions between the redistributive role of the central government and the political autonomy of sub-central units. The strengthening of populist parties in some sub-state units has changed regional party systems as well as federal electoral dynamics. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented a daunting challenge for intergovernmental coordination.

Federalism and decentralization have often been advocated around the world on the promise of better governance, economic efficiency and the appeasement of ethnic conflict. Yet, evidence regarding the performance of these regimes is increasingly mixed; in fact, in some cases, federal arrangements have resulted in, for instance, poor fiscal management, the reinforcement of centrifugal forces or decreased accountability. Our original Research Topic aimed to explore federalism and multilevel politics in light of the crises noted above. Do institutional conditions moderate political actors’ territorial demands in the event of a negative shock? Have federal countries managed the COVID-19 crisis better than unitary ones? Has polarization moderated accountability processes during the pandemic? What accounts for the disproportionate effect of the pandemic among low-income classes? In responding to these questions, the resulting Research Topic provides new insights into key political challenges that many democratic states face today such as the operation of accountability; the expansion of inequality; the relationship between territorial structures and government effectiveness; or the emergence of centrifugal territorial demands. The Research Topic brings together five

excellent and timely contributions: four of them present original research, whilst a fifth is a book review in a case study of interest.

The first paper, by [Shvetsova et al.](#), examines the relationship between the stringency of the public health measures taken as a response to the COVID-19 crisis and the territorial structure in 73 countries. The question here is whether federations under-perform compared to unitary countries given the potential space for the existence of co-ordination problems between the multiple levels of government in the former. This is a particularly relevant question since, as the same authors had previously argued ([Shvetsova et al., 2020](#)), the multiplication of decision-making nodes in federations could make these regimes overall more responsive to the onset of a new threat. [Shvetsova et al.](#)'s findings seem to confirm their previous intuition: they do not find significant performance differences between federations and non-federations, and they show how several context-induced political characteristics (type of government system, timing of an election, degree of parliamentary fragmentation, etc.) might be behind the unequal involvement of central and sub-central governments across federations.

The following two contributions examine two different angles of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for multilevel governments: inequality and polarization. On the former, the paper by [Rogers et al.](#) is concerned with the geographic heterogeneity of the coronavirus and its generalized disproportionate effect among low-income classes. By focusing on the Mexican federation and using highly sophisticated individual-level movement data collected from personal electronic devices in five cities, the paper investigates whether the pandemic has changed individual risk behavior. Their results suggest that it is in high-income and high-education neighborhoods where individuals' behavior changed more after the imposed federal lockdown, reducing relatively more individual exposure to risk. However, the existing inter-territorial variation in behavior and outcomes suggests states' policy autonomy had an impact in the management of the crisis.

The paper by [Beramendi and Rodden](#) focuses on the relationship between accountability and polarization in the context of the coronavirus in federal democracies. Motivated by the paradoxical electoral resilience of those incumbents in localities that were hit particularly hard by the pandemic, the authors build a theoretical framework explaining the role of pre-existing polarization on competence-based retrospective voting to empirically explore its effects on the adoption of mitigation policies—proxied through mortality rates. The preliminary evidence from a cross-county analysis in the United States shows that the lowest death rates were found in politically competitive suburban areas. The study suggests that in polarized societies the incentives to perform diligently decline because the electoral costs of co-operation are higher. All of these

results add nuance to the varying effect of polarization in multilevel democracies.

[Amat and Rodon](#)'s contribution looks at a previous crisis, namely the Great Recession, to understand the institutional roots of political actors' territorial demands. The authors argue that parties will have incentives to adopt more extreme territorial positions when the constitutional rigidity of a country is low. Under these circumstances, in the event of a negative shock, minority groups will not have an institutional guarantee that the majority group will not use its status to challenge or overturn the territorial agreement, which will in turn lead the former to develop more centrifugal political positions. The study confirms these expectations using a dataset covering around 500 political parties' position in 28 European countries between 1999 and 2019, that is, pre- and post-crisis. The article also lays the groundwork for future work to examine the political role of territorial institutions in the event of a crisis.

The last of the contributions in this e-Book is a review by [Anwen Elias](#) of *Caroline Gray's Territorial Politics and the Party System in Spain: Continuity and Change since the Financial Crisis* published in 2020 by Routledge London. According to [Elias](#), the Caroline Gray's provides an in-depth study of how the "territorial dimension of competition has become a distinctive feature of how the impact of the financial crisis played out." In doing so, it successfully provides important new insights into the intersection between economic, political and territorial dynamics in the aftermath of the Great Recession in Spain.

## Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

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