[Viewpoint Article]

Political and Administrative Decentralization and Responses to COVID-19: Comparison of the U.S. and South Korea

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Introduction

The public health crisis triggered by a novel coronavirus (officially named SARS-CoV-2) created an unprecedented challenge for governments around the globe. Under highly obscure and precarious circumstances, executive authorities (e.g., President, mayors) are expected to take prompt actions in their citizens' best interest. Managing unexpected harmful events is a core function of government, which involves various efforts ranging from evaluating potential risks and negative impacts and mitigating damages and losses that already occurred to providing support for quick recovery (Boin et al., 2010; Petak, 1985). Weick (1988) demonstrates that individual actions involved in sensemaking can cause, prevent, and manage a crisis, arguing that "initial responses do more than set the tone; they determine the trajectory of the crisis." (p. 309). Scholarship on crisis management, decision making, and organizational theories explores why and how government often fails to timely respond to unexpected events. Culprits include lack of protocols and organizational routines, inefficiency and incompetency of leaders, limited resources, and tensions between political leaders and bureaucrats (Boin et al., 2010; Moynihan, 2008; Petak, 1985), as well as their incentives to avoid blame and sensitivity to negative information (Boin et al., 2010; Hood, 2002; Weaver, 1986).

Government response to the COVID-19 pandemic varies significantly across countries with different political and administrative systems. This article demonstrates the variation by focusing on how centralization/decentralization in politics and administration creates conflicts and coordination problems. One of the key points of comparison is the centralized, hierarchical governance system, which may thwart or facilitate a coordinated response. Through comparative case studies from the political-administrative perspective on crisis management (Rosenthal &

Kouzmin, 1997), we claim that political systems and administrative structures shape the degree and scope that different levels of government respond to crises.

While we risk comparing apples and oranges, comparisons between the U.S. and South Korea reveal differences in macro-level structures and associated responses. The two countries found their first confirmed case on the same date but experienced dissimilar trajectories that are unexplained by socioeconomic or geographic differences. As the pandemic rapidly progressed in the U.S., South Korea's strategies to flatten the curve were often referred to as a successful approach that democratic countries could consider (Ahn, 2020; Beaubien, 2020; Kelly, 2020; Kim, B. 2020; Kim, T. H. 2020; Moon, 2020; Walker, 2020, among many). The political-administrative perspective offers important implications for government responses in times of crisis and contributes to long-standing debates about centralization/decentralization in politics and administration.

To Centralize or Not To Centralize

The U.S. form of federalism was a relatively novel governmental design when first created in that it provides for shared sovereignty between national and state governments. While the national government ultimately has supremacy and wields tools such as preemption and resource dependencies to control subnational governments, states enjoy a significant degree of freedom in formulating, adopting, and implementing policy. Although the idea of decentralized government "has broad appeal in the United States," it has been a source of political and administrative conflict as states have resisted attempts by the national government to organize from the top-down (Porter & Olsen, 1976, p. 75). Furthermore, states have relished their roles as laboratories of democracy that have later been adopted by other states and even the national government (e.g., MassHealth as a framework for the Affordable Care Act). Consequently, it

leads to complex intergovernmental interactions, both vertically (i.e., national-state) and horizontally (i.e., state-state), which at times can manifest as a coordinated hierarchical system and at other times be marred by conflict and competition undermining the national interest (Peterson, 1995; Porter & Olsen, 1976; O'Toole & Christensen, 2012).

In contrast, centralized governance with uniformly enforced laws has been an effective development strategy of South Korea, and executive leadership is one of the most salient factors in Korean politics and government. South Korea's developmental centrism and central-local relationship have been rapidly changing during the last three decades (Bae, 2016). Decentralization in itself is an important political agenda as a legitimate effort for efficiency, responsiveness, and democratic accountability; however, at the same time, the country has relied heavily on central bureaucracy within the administratively centralized system. Thus, progress toward decentralized governance has been slow and often thwarted in the new democracy, which is well demonstrated in a series of revisions of the Local Autonomy Act (LAA) and several special or presidential commissions for devolution and decentralization. In essence, subnational governments' power and authority are limited due to overlapping functions and the conditional clause in the LAA that allows the central government to "exercise its own power and control over any function" (Choi et al., 2013, p. 29).

Balancing power between national and subnational governments (i.e., regional, local) as well as within government (i.e., the executive branch) is a key dimension of designing both political and administrative institutions (Porter & Olsen, 1976; Morozov, 2016). Proponents of centralizing power at the national level argue that it supports administrative efficiency through coordination, targeted resource allocations, and national standards for public services (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001; Peterson, 1995). From an administrative perspective, centralizing power

reduces inefficiencies and transaction costs resulting from bargaining, negotiating, and competition, in addition to uncertainties and risks that go along with pluralistic decision-making (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001; Wood & Bohte, 2004). On the other hand, centralized governments may undermine democratic values, such as representation and equity, in as far as they are less sensitive to local concerns and may allow benefits of policy choices to be concentrated in geographic areas with powerful political networks. Empowering subnational governments allows them to better support communities by developing expertise and capacity specific to local areas (Krueger & Bernick, 2010; Reed, 2014).

Conversely, decentralized governments allowing for local self-governance provide opportunities for policy decisions to be made as close as possible to the people whom they are affecting, which is particularly important in nations that are both geographically and socially diverse (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001). From an administrative perspective, this supports adaptation, innovation, and flexibility as bureaucrats are not forced to maneuver one-size-fits-all solutions into unique local parameters. But, this also could lead to a patchwork of policies buttressed by fragmented regulatory regimes and create institutional barriers to administratively efficient solutions and collective actions (Cox & Ostertag, 2017; Wilson et al., 2020; Carter & May, 2020). The political dimension exacerbates this disjointed nature as national and subnational leaders find benefit in claiming credit for popular programs, ridding themselves of unpopular programs and using policy experiments as a weapon in ideological or partisan battles (Goelzhauser & Rose, 2017; Volden, 2005). Thus, decentralizing power may ultimately lead to inequitable distributions of costs and benefits, less resilient systems that are more vulnerable to stress and conflict as governmental units compete over resources and power (Meier & O'Toole, 2010).

America's Response to the Pandemic

The first case of COVID-19 in the U.S. was confirmed on January 21 in Washington state. Over the ensuing weeks, the outbreak grew exponentially and spread geographically, and by March 15, cases were confirmed in all 50 states (Taylor, 2020). The U.S. federal government has been widely criticized for its slow response and President Donald Trump's downplaying the potential threat and repeatedly claiming that "we have it totally under control" (Leonhardt, 2020). At the same time, state and local officials, as well as public health experts, advocated for more aggressive federal efforts, including ramped-up testing protocols and social distancing measures. State governors were quicker than the White House to both sound the alarm and use administrative powers to prepare for crisis management. For instance, Washington's Governor, Jay Inslee, declared a state of emergency on February 29, and 32 other governors followed suit by March 13, when President Trump declared a national emergency. Notably, there was a partisan gap in early gubernatorial responses, with Democrats declaring both emergencies and stay-at-home orders three to four days earlier on average, compared to their Republican counterparts (Fowler et al., 2020).

Despite the political dimensions in early subnational responses, governors from both parties called for the federal government to play a stronger role in coordinating efforts across states; for example, in securing COVID-19 tests and essential medical equipment (e.g., personal protective equipment (PPE), ventilators). Subnational leaders have seen their national profiles rise as a result of crisis leadership and criticisms of the federal response. Many of these criticisms focus on the bidding war with states fighting the federal government for access. New York's Governor, Andrew Cuomo, likened it to "being on eBay with 50 other states, bidding on a ventilator… And then [Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)] gets involved and

FEMA starts bidding. And now FEMA is bidding on top of the 50… The federal government, FEMA, should have been the purchasing agent: buy everything and then allocate by need to the states" (Smith, 2020). In response to these criticisms, Trump remarked that "The Federal government is not supposed to be out there buying vast amounts of items and then shipping. You know, we're not a shipping clerk" (Forgery, 2020).

However, to satiate the demands for more federal involvement, FEMA set up a supply chain task force on March 30; and on April 2, President Trump invoked the Defense Production Act for the first time to compel 3M Company to produce ventilators (Sherman, 2020; Watney & Stapp, 2020). Under the Defense Production Act, the White House has the authority to require manufacturers to produce or to sell supplies directly to the federal government, which then determines how to distribute them to states. Trump invoked it to spur COVID-19 test manufacturing (Watney & Stapp, 2020), along with budget cuts to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

However, the underlying problem of obtaining much-needed medical supplies and equipment remained, exacerbating political conflict. Some states were also willing to undertake subterfuge when outbidding others failed. On April 30, Maryland's Larry Hogan, who negotiated a deal with South Korea to obtain COVID-19 tests, announced that he was deploying the National Guard to protect the tests, stored in an undisclosed location, from being seized by the federal government (Parker, 2020). Adding further to the chaos was the patchwork of policies that emerged from the spate of stay-at-home orders and economic reopening plans. Additionally, some states effectively closed their borders to residents of neighboring states with high infection rates, such as New York (Mervosh et al., 2020).

A key challenge here is political competition between national and state governments over authority. For instance, in a now-famous line, Trump exclaimed, "When somebody's the president of the United States, the authority is total" (Gittleson & Phelps, 2020); this quickly met condemnation from governors (Wilson, 2020). While Trump's view of expansive presidential power pre-dates the COVID-19 pandemic, he had reversed course within 48 hours, stating "the governors are responsible…[and] have to take charge" (Gittleson & Phelps, 2020). Governors sent mixed messages as well by calling for more federal action and warned of federal overreach at the same time. In recent years, national-state conflicts have taken on a distinctly partisan character, with governors and other state policy actors most likely to challenge the federal government when controlled by the opposition party. For instance, since 2016, Republican governors have been reluctant to challenge President Trump on the federal government's role in immigration, healthcare, and environmental policy, even though they had previously done so in response to similar efforts by President Obama and are traditionally the party of "states' rights" (Kettl, 2020b). Thus, the federal-state partnership is complicated by the political competition between the President and governors, passing the buck as they attempt to claim credit and shift blame (Hood 2002; Volden, 2005; Weaver 1986).

Governors became weary of this battle as the pandemic wore on, and it appeared at least some were looking for administrative solutions that were not marred by national-subnational political conflict. For instance, three groups of 16 states in the Northeast, Midwest, and West formed regional alliances to coordinate economic reopenings. While these agreements were non-binding, they did rely on joint decision-making bodies including representatives of all states involved (Huq, 2020). In their public statements, governors of member states struck similar tones concerning the need for regional coordination in the absence of politics. In a joint statement by

Inslee, California's Gavin Newsom[1], and Oregon's Kate Brown, the Western governors said: "Health outcomes and science – not politics – will guide these decisions" (Chappell, 2020). Taken together, this would largely indicate that governors were feeling the toll that politics were taking on developing administratively efficient and effective solutions to COVID-19, and were looking to remove political conflict with the White House from the equation.

South Korea's Response to the Pandemic

The first confirmed case in South Korea was announced on January 21, the same date the first case was confirmed in the U.S. Until mid-February, the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) had been managing the situation with real-time tracing and alerts to the people. During the first several weeks, the Korean government was criticized for not banning travel from China and being overly optimistic until the super spreader event changed the situation on February 18. On February 20, President Moon declared Daegu as a special disaster area and promised to support it in every way. Over two months, March and April, zero new cases were reported for several consecutive days, during a period that included the national election on April 17 and relaxed social distancing since April 20. The country's initial success in flattening the curve without stringent measures such as lockdown, travel bans, or local blockade has been explained in several ways, including tech-based tracking systems, massive testing capacity, transparent information sharing, effective leadership, competent deputies, citizens' voluntary cooperation, and learning from past epidemics (Ahn, 2020; Beaubien, 2020; Kelly, 2020; Kim, B. 2020; Kim, T. H. 2020; Moon, 2020; Walker, 2020).

[1] It is worth noting that a recall petition in California began in summer 2020, largely fueled by resentment over Newsom's public health orders. The recall election is scheduled for November 2021. Polling as of March 2021 suggests Newsom is favored to remain in office (Kreutz & Martichoux, 2021).

However, South Korea also experienced partisan conflicts, intergovernmental tensions, and administrative confusion comparable to that in the U.S. Decision-makers have been harshly criticized for behaving in an overtly political manner. In particular, political conflicts and competition among and within political parties have been intensified during election campaigns; partisan and intergovernmental conflicts boiled over between the Blue House and Mayor of Daegu, within Daegu City Council, and between Governor of Kyounggi Province and Mayor of Bucheon City, and the like. For instance, the governing party denounced the mayor of Daegu (Kwon, Young-Jin) and the governor of Kyoungbuk Province, both affiliated with the majority-opposition party, for not taking coercive steps in response to the Shincheonji Church outbreak and for being more engaged with politics and pork-seeking.

Mayor Kwon was also accused of focusing on pending businesses rather than pandemic response, such as relocation of Daegu's new airport and selection of the new government complex site, an allegation that he refutes, calling it a "bad politics virus." This conflict was further highlighted when Mayor Kwon stormed out of a Daegu City Council meeting after Council members challenged the timing and payment method of stimulus funds, which he was blamed for withholding in order to influence the general election. At the same time, tensions were revealed within the ruling party with regard to the eligibility for stimulus funds: the governor of Kyounggi Province argued for distributing basic income to all residents regardless of the income levels, while the mayor of Bucheon City favored supporting small business owners instead of all residents. As the governor threatened to exclude Bucheon City from the payment, the mayor acquiesced to the plan for universal support.

Despite the intense political conflict and intergovernmental tensions, South Korea's pandemic response worked well administratively. Since the "control tower" debate during and

after the sinking of MV Sewol in 2014 and the MERS outbreak in 2015, there has been an ongoing deliberation about streamlining reporting and response systems and finding a balance between public and private interest (transparency vs. privacy). After suffering from MERS, for instance, the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MOHW) was given extensive authority to collect data tracking patients' movements, visiting places, and transportations, and required disclosing the information to the public with no delay (Kim, T. H., 2020; Moon, 2020). Furthermore, the MOHW and local government authorities could shut down any location, such as stores, businesses, and churches, if they posed threats to public health. The enhanced surveillance amid outbreaks and the public's right to be informed received public support, which may be rooted in the Confucian culture and lessons learned from previous failures in dealing with overwhelming public safety threats and social chaos.

However, measures for administrative coordination and centralized authority diverted the role of the KCDC and undermined the professionalism of the agency affiliated with the MOHW. The authority structure made it harder for the agency to "control" the situation. For example, as the COVID-19 pandemic continued to develop, new emergency headquarters were created under the Minister of the MOHW. Within the centralized system at the national level, the KCDC has limited authority, resources, and autonomy, which led the agency to be scapegoated as things were winding to a close (Lee 2020). In fact, several senior officials, including the then-Director of the KCDC, were dismissed for their roles in the poor response to the MERS outbreak (Lee 2020). Consequently, public employees working at the KCDC tended to have low motivation and high turnover; bureaucratic expertise and institutional memory regarding disease outbreaks have not been sufficiently preserved within the agency. Furthermore, the role of the agency has been limited to epidemiological investigation rather than taking preventive measures against

epidemics and securing the supply of medical equipment. At the same time, legislative oversight and external control mechanisms are weak and costly, which again results in centralized administration.

Nevertheless, career bureaucrats, rather than politicians and elected officials, have emerged as leaders, unlike in the U.S. The KCDC Director Jung Eun-kyeong, praised as a "corona hero," received international attention for her clear messages with refined expression and accurate information in the daily briefings (Walker, 2020). As of September 12, 2020, the KCDC was promoted to a more independent, higher-level organization renamed as the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCPA) under an inaugural Director, Dr. Jung. The new agency has broad executive authority over infectious disease control and vaccine distribution with considerably increased organizational resources. In addition, the role of local authorities has become more prominent, with governors and mayors introducing creative measures and laws that allow them to implement tailored response strategies for their citizens, all of which involve major changes in the centralized governance at the national level.

Discussion and Conclusions

There is certainly no one best way or one-size-fits-all solution to responding to or mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic in countries under different circumstances. This article demonstrates that one of the essential determining factors in national responses to the pandemic is how the political and administrative dimensions of centralization/decentralization are balanced against each other. We focus on the conflicts-coordination problem of the government as an aggregated organizational actor and among leaders as individual agents. The stress of responding to COVID-19 puts these dynamics on full display in countries around the world as national and

subnational leaders attempt to balance policy choices grounded in public health expertise and administrative efficiency with political expediency.

On the one hand, compared to the horizontal division of responsibilities in American federalism, the central-local relationship of South Korea is closer to the vertical functional division within a hierarchical governance system. While South Korea faced many of the same challenges as the U.S., political and partisan conflicts in South Korea have not thwarted administrative efforts to the same extent. The Moon administration advocates for responses that speak to localities' need and urgency while holding administrative controls that limit discretionary or uncoordinated actions from subnational governments. Sharing the experience of epidemics, South Koreans in general concur with the idea of prompt, aggressive actions from the government, although not without a political divide. As argued by Rhodes (1999), the central-local relationship depends on a specific type of policy area as well as resource distribution among localities. Regulatory policies such as COVID-related measures may be more compatible with hierarchical governance rather than network governance. Mobilizing, distributing, and redistributing resources, such as providing subsidies, distributing PPEs, and reimbursing medical expenses to low-income families and medical staff, could be better implemented with centralized administration systems, especially when localities have limited capacities and are loaded with politics.

However, proactive strategies to fight the pandemic have raised concerns about privacy. The coordinated efforts with the public and private sectors allowed the government to timely address the needs, such as developing contact tracing apps. However, the use of extensive surveillance with advanced technology poses the danger of Big Brother (Kavanagh, 2020; Reed, 2020). The concerns are valid even with broad public support and consensus among citizens in

exceptional circumstances. A prominent historian, Yuval Harari, shows concerns that new surveillance tools may bring us totalitarian surveillance regimes (Harari, 2020). In contrast, the other side argues that digital monitoring needs to be embraced as Big Mother with careful use of any technology (Reed, 2020). The tradeoff between efficiency in pandemic control for public interest and the potential danger of infringing privacy will continue to be debated while no clear-cut answers exist. The lack of fiscal capacity of subnational government created a negative feedback loop, which made it more difficult for the central government to delegate and distribute authority with local politicians being obsessed with pork-seeking.

On the other hand, U.S. federalism has its strength for organizing a diverse polity, which is a key reason it has endured for two centuries. However, prompt decisions required in crisis situations are often in conflict with democratic decision-making based on consensus and deliberation (Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997). Decentralization and polarization in the U.S. have allowed political conflicts to undermine administrative coordination, as observed in blame-shifting between federal agencies and between national and subnational elected officials (Shear et al., 2020; Carter & May, 2020). This was likely exacerbated by divergent perceptions of U.S. citizens as to the seriousness of the pandemic and the necessity of the response as well as strategies for flattening the curve. The Trump administration's attempt to utilize centralized management tools had complicated matters while exploiting the decentralized political system to avoid blame. As shown in the PPE case, however, U.S. states were asking for more centralized coordination from the federal government, at least during the initial stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the potentials for poly-centric processes in long-term crisis management (Rosenthal & Kouzman, 1997), a decentralized system had added uncertainty and confusion void of effective crisis leadership in the U.S. After all, "there's no substitute for federal leadership"

when it comes to emergency (Emanuel, 2020). Director Currie at the Government Accountability Office said, “Coordination just at the federal level is extremely difficult.” (Kettl 2020a). While there are inherent pros and cons to decentralization, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the institutional limitations in American federalism and the advantages that centralized administrative coordination creates in times of crisis.

However, this article does not fully account for individual leadership as an independent factor that interacts with existing political/administrative institutions and thereby may incur fair criticism (Van Wart, 2003). It may depend more on the role of individual leaders to balance the centripetal and centrifugal forces by maintaining governing authorities and allocating administrative power to the subnational government and civil society under democratic conditions, contingent on the situation that requires either centralized or decentralized responses. As Fukuyama (2020) argues, “What matters in the end is not regime type, but whether citizens trust their leaders, and whether those leaders preside over a competent and effective state.” In essence, the distribution of political, administrative, and fiscal power across the different levels of government is endogenously determined in the society, and the distinction between centralization and decentralization is often not clear. Underlying these dynamics is government capacity to separate the politics from the administration in organizing actors, including subnational governments, around a national goal (Kettl, 2020b). Governments capable of mitigating this complication are more likely to find efficient and effective solutions that balance the competing demands of democratic governance. In contrast, governments that fail to do so will likely spend more time determining who is to blame for failure than seeking solutions.

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