Variations in Government Responsiveness: Policy Innovation and Diffusion during the COVID-19 Crisis

Yuehong Tai[*]   Jielu Yao[†]   Elise Pizzi[‡]

Abstract

Crises illuminate variations in government policy innovation, responsiveness, and capacity. In the face of a public health crisis, subnational governments are particularly important because they have more access to information about local conditions and constraints than the central government. Provincial governments in China vary widely in their choices of policy, communication strategy, and ability to respond. What explains the variation in policy responses? We explore variation in provincial government responsiveness to the COVID-19 crisis in terms of policy content and timing. We collected data on the adoption of twenty-five policies used to contain COVID-19 in all 30 provinces in China from December 30th, 2019 to March 18th, 2020. We use multilevel pooled event history analysis to understand factors that impact the probability of adopting each policy. Moreover, this model allows us to compare multiple policies for more precise theoretical analysis of heterogeneity across policies. Our results demonstrate that outbreak severity does not matter for policy diffusion. Instead, variation in policy adoption results from both local politics and top-down intervention. More specifically, we find that the characteristics of provincial leaders, in particular their tenure in the province, are the most reliable predictors of policy adoption. The central government also plays a significant role in policy adoption. However, we observed the heterogeneous effect of central intervention. The policies related to information disclosure and control such as requiring the public to use color-based health QR code and the provincial governments to disclose the number of confirmed cases are most susceptible to central intervention. The findings help explain variation in government responsiveness to health crises and highlight the critical role of local politics in crisis response, even in a largely top-down system.

KEYWORDS: government responsiveness; policy adoption; de-centralization; COVID-19; event history analysis

[*]Department of Political Science, University of Iowa, 341 Schaeffer Hall, Iowa City, Iowa 52242-1409 (yuehong-tai@uiowa.edu).

[†]Wesleyan Media Project & Quantitative Analysis Center, Wesleyan University, 45 Wyllys Avenue, Middletown, CT 06459 (jyao01@wesleyan.edu).

[‡]Department of Political Science, University of Iowa, 341 Schaeffer Hall, Iowa City, Iowa 52242-1409 (elise-pizzi@uiowa.edu).