

CALL FOR PROPOSALS

State and Local Government Review

2020 Special Issue:

“Filling a Vacuum: Subnational Governance amidst National Government Inaction”

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As the United States battled the coronavirus pandemic in early April, President Donald J. Trump tweeted that the role of the national government was to serve as a “backup” to state and local governments. This remark sparked sharp criticism from governors across the country, and even Republicans like Governor Asa Hutchinson of Arkansas called for a new approach to procuring essential medical supplies. States, localities, and the national government struggled to coordinate with one another and frequently found themselves locked in conflict.

Subnational officials always play a central role during disasters, and the coronavirus pandemic is no different. While many called for a national “stay-at-home” order, the decision to declare a state of emergency or to shutter public schools and other institutions fell to governors, mayors, and school superintendents. This dynamic caused one observer to urge voters to “remember that who sits in state and local offices, and how they engage with federal authorities, may be the most important decision they have to make” (Roberts 2020).

While the coronavirus pandemic is (hopefully) a once-in-a-lifetime event, the intergovernmental dynamics it sparked are not uncommon in the contemporary United States. Partisan polarization has rendered the national government unwilling or unable to address a range of pressing issues, leading subnational governments to try to resolve them on their own. Examples abound of policy arenas where the national government has either failed to craft realistic solutions or has instead sent mixed signals. Often these problems are then passed down to states and localities where they cannot be ignored. States and localities have taken the lead on issues like immigration, adopting a wide range of approaches in a domain that many once viewed as the exclusive responsibility of the national government. Similarly, the absence of a national policy on sustainability has sparked a “contested federalism” dynamic as American lawmakers grapple with the challenge of climate change (Rabe 2011). The delayed reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the repeated congressional failure to address the issue of Internet sales taxation provide additional illustrations of intergovernmental policy issues where the national government has been slow to act.

The objective of this special issue is to publish original research that examines the implications of this emerging intergovernmental dynamic. We hope to include five or six short articles (about 6,500 words each) on individual policy areas where subnational governments have filled the vacuum left by national government inaction. Appropriate policy areas are not limited to the ones listed above. The specific implications addressed in individual articles can take multiple forms, but two types of consequences seem especially significant. First, what does state and local government activity imply for governance in a federal system? Do subnational officials have the necessary expertise, financial resources, and administrative capacity to implement effective

programs in a specific domain? Do the designers of these policies demonstrate the ability to learn from earlier successes and failures? Do they take into account the possibility of policy overload? Do they put evaluation mechanisms in place to assess whether a program is achieving its objectives?

The governance-related implications of subnational leadership extend beyond individual policy arenas, and we welcome manuscripts that think broadly about what it means for the functioning of the American political system. In a recent book, Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek (2017, 6) describe the emergence of a “policy state” that renders “achievements provisional, protections unreliable, and commitments dependent on who is next in charge.” Does the absence of national leadership, and the primacy of state and local governments, in a specific policy area indicate that the federal system is somehow out of balance, or is it an indication that the system is functioning as intended? Customization and experimentation are typically portrayed as benefits of American federalism. Do scholars need to reconsider this standard assessment? Has subnational leadership produced geographic variation or policy gyrations that undermine programs’ abilities to achieve their goals?

In an era of partisan polarization, it is not enough to note that subnational governments are filling the vacuum left by national government inaction. They are also moving in different—often very different—policy directions. States and localities under Republican control are taking actions that diverge considerably from those occurring in jurisdictions where Democrats control the levers of power. This variation generates a second significant set of implications. What it means to belong to the American community is increasingly defined in geographic terms. The rights that residents possess, such as the ability to exercise the right to vote or to bear arms, depend on where they live. The government services available to them, and their ability to gain access to those services, depend on where they live. Does this variation indicate that the federal system is working largely as intended, or are there specific policy domains in which geography should be irrelevant? Does the partisan nature of this variation prevent state and local officials from the institutional learning that is characteristic of good governance? Articles might grapple with these and other normative questions as they consider recent developments in specific policy domains.

Please submit a proposal that identifies a specific policy arena in which subnational governments have adopted major policy changes in response to the inaction of the national government. The proposal should clearly describe the nature of this subnational activity and the research strategy that will be used to assess its implications. If this assessment will be based on quantitative data, please indicate whether these data have already been collected. To ensure that the manuscript can meet the tight schedule outlined below, please also identify the current status of the research and writing.

We encourage proposals from all disciplines including but not limited to public administration, political science, sociology, economics, and planning. We expect to publish papers where there is collaboration between academics and practitioners and authors both from inside and outside the United States.

Proposals should be submitted **between April 15, 2020 and June 1, 2020** to the following email address: slgrspissue@gmail.com.

The proposals should be double-spaced and include no more than two pages of text. There is no need to include tables or appendices, and references do not count against the two-page limit. All proposals will be subject to editorial review. *Please do not send complete papers—if you have a draft of your paper, please note that in the proposal.*

Submissions will be evaluated with respect to the following criteria:

- **Relevance.** The proposed manuscript should examine a policy area where state and local governments filled a vacuum left by national government inaction. It should investigate the broader implications of the subnational policy activity, not simply describe it.
- **Viability.** The proposal should represent an achievable manuscript project within the tight time constraints outlined below.
- **Scope of Interest.** Papers of broad interest to scholars *and* professionals will be preferred.
- **Organization and Coherence.** The proposal should follow a logical structure, read clearly, and thoroughly represent the available research.
- **Insight for Future Work.** The proposal should convey important implications for *both* future research and practice related to local government.

Due to editorial constraints, it is vital for authors to adhere to the following strict timeline. If you have any questions, please contact the Editor at mscicc@ufl.edu or by phone at (352) 846-2874.

Relevant dates* are as follows:

- **April 15 - June 1, 2020:** Proposals due to the *State and Local Government Review* to be sent to slgrspissue@gmail.com
- **June 15, 2020:** Final decision on proposals and initial feedback provided to authors.
- **September 15, 2020:** Full draft of paper due to *State and Local Government Review*.
- **October 15, 2020:** Review and feedback to authors on full paper.
- **November 15, 2020:** Final paper submitted to *State and Local Government Review*. Final manuscripts should be no longer than 18 pages of text with standard margins and font size.

Please note that these are basic guidelines; each paper may require a different number of revisions or timing to make the **November 15, 2020 deadline*

Feel free to email (ajkarch@umn.edu) me if you have any questions regarding your proposal or manuscript.

References

Orren, Karen, and Stephen Skowronek. *The Policy State: An American Predicament*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017.

Rabe, Barry. 2011. Contested Federalism and American Climate Policy. *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 41(3):494-521.

Roberts, Patrick S. 2020. "Never Mind Trump. Coronavirus Shows Why Electing Competent State and Local Officials Is Vital." *The Washington Post*. March 8.