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Politics and administration in times of crisis: Explaining the Swedish response to the COVID-19 crisis

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Abstract

The Swedish response to the COVID-19 pandemic is different not only to the response of other European countries, but also to other Scandinavian countries, which are geographically proximate and culturally similar. The question that emerges from an analysis of the Swedish case concerns the reasons why the country chose to take such a relatively liberal crisis response to the onset of the pandemic compared to the rest of Europe. In this paper, I treat the national response to the pandemic as the outcome variable, which I seek to explain through an analysis of the intersection of dualism in the model of Swedish public administration and the devolved governance system that bestows operational autonomy on public agencies and local public authorities. The duality that characterizes the relationship between politics, policy, and administration in Sweden resulted in a response that was necessarily decentralized. The decentralized response in conjunction with high political trust among the citizenry necessitated, and was conducive to, broad guidelines. I conclude the article with a discussion placing the Swedish response in perspective for further comparative research.

摘要

瑞典对新冠肺炎大流行的响应不仅不同于其他欧洲国家，还不同于其他斯堪的纳维亚国家，后者在地理和文化上都与

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瑞典相似。浮现的问题则有关于瑞典选择自由式危机响应的原因。本文中，我将国家对大流行的响应作为结果变量，试图通过分析瑞典公共行政与下放治理体系（将操作自治权交予公共机构与地方公共机构）模式中二者的交集，对该变量进行诠释。瑞典政治、政策与行政之间的关系的双重性导致对危机的响应必然是去中心化的。去中心化响应加上全体公民高度的政治信任，不仅使广泛的指南成为必需，同时有益于该指南。我以一项探讨作为本文结论，这项探讨诠释了瑞典的危机响应对进一步比较研究的重要性。

KEYWORDS

politics–administration dichotomy, dualism, Sweden, crisis management, COVID-19

1 | INTRODUCTION

The Swedish government stood out in its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in how it privileged a series of voluntary guidelines (or 'nudges') rather than mandating a lockdown, the closure of schools, gyms, and hair salons, or the wearing of face covering in public (Pierre, 2020). The Swedish strategy diverged not only from that of other European countries, but also internationally, and perhaps more importantly from the containment strategies of the culturally similar and geographically proximate Scandinavian countries. The national approaches of Denmark, Finland, and Norway were more stringent in that they included mandated closures to varying degrees and some form of lockdown for some period of time (Christensen & Lægreid, 2020; Giritli Nygren & Olofsson, 2020; Neuvonen, 2020). Concomitantly, during the initial phase of the pandemic (roughly between the end of January and the end of May 2020), Sweden witnessed more deaths per million than Denmark, Finland, and Norway, at a rate that was indeed higher than the European Union (EU) as a whole. The two figures that follow place the Swedish case in perspective particularly in respect to its Scandinavian neighbors making the case for a closer theoretical look (Figures 1 and 2).

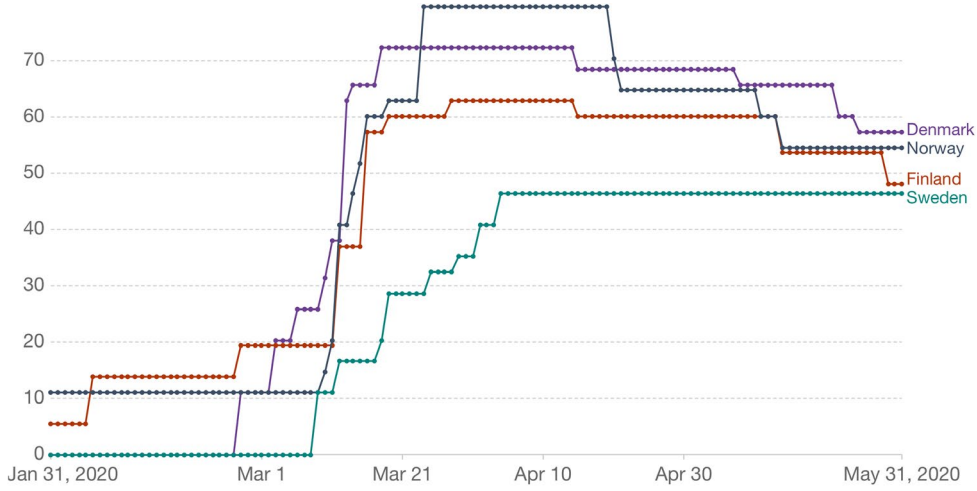

FIGURE 1 National responses in terms of stringency in Scandinavian countries.[3] Source: Oxford University, 2020

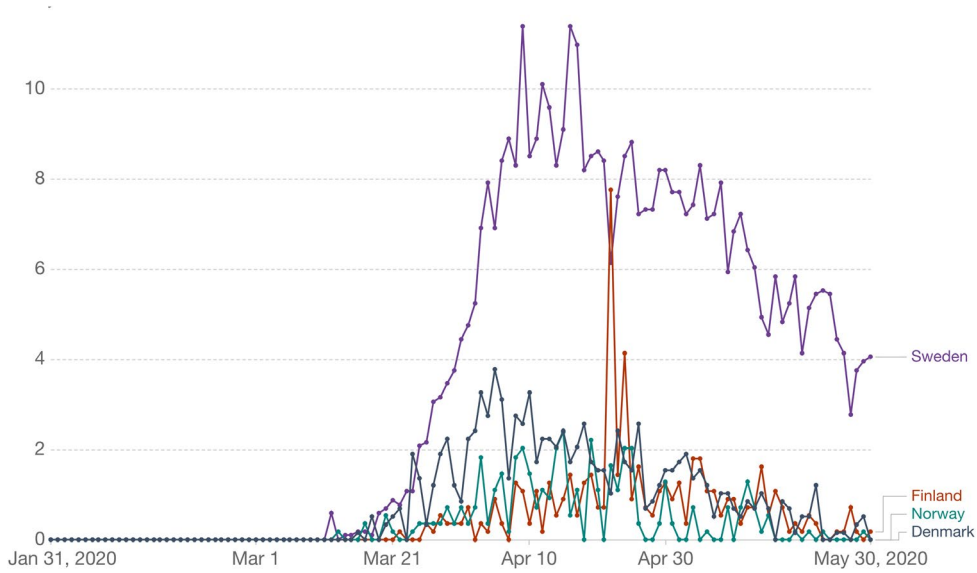

FIGURE 2 Confirmed deaths with COVID-19 per million in Scandinavian countries compared to the EU average. Source: Oxford University, 2020a

The question that emerges centers on why the Swedish approach was so radically different from that in the rest of the world. The research question guiding this paper is as follows: *What factors explain the Swedish liberal approach to the containment of the pandemic?* I treat the national response to the pandemic as the dependent variable, which I seek to explain through an analysis of the intersection of dualism in the model of Swedish public administration and the devolved governance system that bestows operational autonomy on public agencies and local public authorities. I use the pandemic response as a case study to show that the articulated line between politics and administration as well as the authority that the municipalities hold even (and perhaps especially) during times of extraordinary events.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: After a brief theoretical overview of the dichotomy between politics and administration, I elaborate on the Swedish devolved system and governance and the high political trust it enjoys. I then outline the response to the pandemic, which is followed by a discussion. I wrap up the paper with some concluding remarks that put the analysis in perspective for future comparative research.

1.1 | Politics and administration: Dichotomy, relationship, dualism

The relationship between the two spheres of government, namely 'administration' and 'politics', has been perhaps the most controversial issue in public administration and concerns *"the appropriate relationship between the politically elected representatives of the legislature and the permanent bureaucracy of the executive branch"* (Stillman II, 2005, 438). It can be traced back to the origins of modern public administration (Frederickson et al., 2012). Early American orthodoxy envisioned this relationship as dichotomous based on the Wilsonian idea that politics is dirty and that systems of administration have to rise above the corrupt and biased locus of politicians (Wilson, 1887), while the Weberian notion of separation arrived at the same conclusion but from the other end of the spectrum,

namely with the departure point that politics was not strong enough to curb the power of administrators (Overeem, 2005).

However, there is no consensus among scholars as to what this relationship expressed as dichotomy in the 'politics-administration dichotomy' actually means. It has been characterized as "*slippery*" and may mean *"complete separation and its opposite—which does not have a generally agreed upon label— entail[ing] total intermixture*" (Svara, 2008, 46). The normative cornerstone and indeed practical imperative of this relationship, especially if it is expressed in terms of dichotomy, is that of political neutrality. Overeem (2005) understands the political neutrality of public administrators to be not a kind of political apathy, but the idea that the administrator ultimately and in the long term is at the service of the polity and must have its best interest at heart, rather than the (short-term) interest of the government in power. He focuses his argument on the concept of 'politics' rather that of 'dichotomy' and comes to the conclusion that although public administrators must not be involved in partisan politics, they are, and indeed must be, an integral part of policymaking. The concepts of polity, politics, and policy are interrelated, of course. While the study of politics focuses on processes, including party cleavages (which can be manifested as partisan politics), the notion of polity concerns institutional structures, while policy analysis puts emphasis on the content of public policies (Knill & Tosun, 2012).

In practice, politicians are normally generalists and rely on the professional expertise of career bureaucrats for input when formulating policy solutions. As Overeem (2005, p322) notes.

public administrators cannot (and should not) be excluded from the kind of politics that is inherent to policy-making, but they can (and should) be excluded from politics that has a more partisan character.

Overeem goes on to note that administrators are therefore quite involved in the policymaking process, though they do not have decision-making powers. The literature on policy implementation and specifically street-level bureaucrats (see, for example, Frisch-Aviram et al., 2018; Lipsky, 2010/1980) points to the salience of these actors in making policy through the act of implementing it.

In Sweden in particular, the relationship between politics, policy, and administration is characterized by dualism (Hall, 2016). This dualism is manifested empirically by a small government and a large number of autonomous agencies. A relatively small office with the prime minister as director, called Government Offices [Regeringskansliet], is the central administrative entity with staff assisting the Government [Regeringen] in preparing policy and governing the country. It consists of the Office of the Prime Minister [Statsrådsberedningen] and all the ministries (Petridou & Sparf, 2017). The entire office employs some 4,600 people (Government Offices of Sweden, n.d.), which makes for very small ministries by European standards. Conversely, more than 200,000 civil servants are employed in boards and more than 300 government agencies (Larsson & Bäck, 2008; Petridou & Sparf, 2017; Pierre, 2020; Sundström, 2016). Notably, Sweden is characterized by the absence of formal ministerial rule when it comes to public agencies. This means that even though agencies belong to a specific ministry, public agencies and civil servants have considerable freedom when it comes to interpreting laws or exercising public authority (Larsson & Bäck, 2008). Ministries focus on planning, budgeting, and delineating guidelines, while the managerial autonomy of agencies has increased in the past decades (Einhorn & Logue, 2003; Hall, 2016). More specifically, Article 2 of Chapter 12 of the Swedish constitution ensures the autonomy of agencies, including their independence from the ministry in which they belong.

> "[n]o public authority, including the Riksdag [parliament], or decision-making body of any local authority, may determine how an administrative authority shall decide in a particular case relating to the exercise of public authority vis-à-vis an individual or a local authority, or relating to the application of law"
>
> (Sveriges Riksdag, n.d., n.p.)

Not impinging on public agencies' decision-making processes does not necessarily imply that the government is bound by law to follow their recommendations. However, traditionally, this has been the case partly because it is understood that the decisions that public agencies make are depoliticized and are based on evidence and expertise.

When it comes to policymaking at the national level, the preparatory work in advance of a government bill is conducted by commissions of inquiry, a process that is accommodated by the relatively small size of the individual ministries. These commissions are appointed by the parliament, always include experts, and generally their members reflect the distribution of seats in parliament, though in two-thirds of cases a civil servant of the relevant ministry is part of the commission as an expert or secretary. There is a referral process after the completion of the report where the relevant ministries and agencies may submit comments. The process concludes with the government drafting a bill and submitting it to parliament (Larsson & Bäck, 2008). This consensus-based decision-making model is part of the Swedish duality (Hall, 2016). The authors of a commission report have regular meetings and constant negotiations with the politicians who ordered the investigation. In practice, any conflicts regarding the contents of the report are teased out during this period (Petridou & Sparf, 2017).

In summary, the relationship between politics, policy, and administration in Sweden is designed to accommodate conflicting interests by seeking compromise so that everyone can agree on the output; this is part of the Swedish exceptionality thesis (Pierre, 2016). Swedish policymaking is deliberative in the sense that problem-solving is done by technocrats, often in the process of commissions of inquiry and informally with input from the agencies (Hall, 2016). Furthermore, it is a rational process in that great efforts are made to amass as much information as possible about the political issue at hand (Petersson, 2015). It is an extensive process during which the proposal is sent out to all relevant organizations for feedback, encouraging a rational debate about the merits of a proposal and finding points of consensus among major parties and interest organizations so as to maximize the acceptance of the final product (Einhorn & Logue, 2003).

1.2 | Devolution and Trust

The Scandinavian model epitomizes the modern welfare state through the provisions of social services and transfer payments; an interventionist state managing capitalistic market economies to minimize unemployment and regulating the behavior of individuals, groups, and firms in order to restrict the need for welfare and thus keep the costs down (Einhorn & Logue, 2003). The Swedish extensive welfare system necessitates a decentralized administrative system that is close to its citizens. Municipalities are in charge of practically all welfare services, including secondary education and elder care, while the provision of healthcare is handled at the regional level (Lindström, 2016). A series of reforms over the years have adjusted the number of subnational units. The municipalities in Sweden today have been reduced from around 2,500 in 1951 down to 290, while there are currently 21 regions (Granberg, 2004).

This decentralization and considerable autonomy of the regional and local levels are encapsulated in the idea of 'local self-government', a negotiated concept articulated in the Swedish constitution and formally governed by the Local Government Act of 1991 (SFS 1991:900) (Montin, 2016). The term 'local government' includes both municipalities and counties/regions, which means that municipalities are not subordinate to the regional level; rather, the regional level acts as an intermediary between the local and the national levels. The decentralization of power in the Swedish system makes it legally very difficult for the central government to impinge on the jurisdiction of the country's 290 municipalities. Crisis preparedness and management are also the responsibility

of the municipality and are governed by three principles: (a) The principle of responsibility, under which the level of governance responsible for an activity during normal times retains this responsibility during a crisis or war; (b) the principle of parity, under which authorities retain their structure and location during a crisis or war, and (c) the principle of proximity, under which crises should be handled at the lowest possible level of government (SOU, 2001:41). In terms of crisis management, the Swedish constitution does not allow the declaration of a state of emergency during peacetime (Jonung & Nergelius, 2020).

Additionally, Scandinavian countries in general and Sweden in particular consistently rank high in terms of trust, attributed by some to relatively low levels of economic inequality and corruption (Delhey & Newton, 2005; Andersen, 2018; Kumlin & Rothstein, 2005; Rothstein, 2012; Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005). Political trust is defined as "*a basic evaluative orientation towards the government founded on how well the government is operating according to people's normative expectations"* (Hetherington, 1998). Notably, the political trust among the Swedish population has remained high during the pandemic crisis.

2 | METHOD AND DATA

The data used for the analysis include governmental statements and documents detailing the Swedish response plan to the pandemic. My aim was to shed light on the factors that affected the Swedish approach from the departure point that the government's strategy is highly contextualized in spatial as well as temporal terms. For this reason, in configurative, qualitative research, considerable attention is paid to the linkages between events, processes, and actors within an individual case, which are the main sources of leverage when it comes to outlining causal mechanisms (George & Bennett, 2005; Goertz & Mahoney, 2012). The exegetical narrative must then necessarily consist of 'thick description', focusing on depth (rather than breadth) of knowledge so that the reader can fully understand the specificities of the case and the individual components of the researcher's argumentation (Peters, 1998). A causal mechanism is understood to *be "a system of interlocking parts that transmits causal forces from X to Y"* (Beach and Pedersen, 2013, 29), or in other words, the processes through which causes articulate their effects (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012). I address equifinality by implicitly asking the counterfactual question: Would Sweden have issued this response if it did not have fairly autonomous agencies and municipalities and high trust among its citizens? The fundamental problem of causal inference is that we cannot rewind the series of events so that we can observe what happens if we change an event—or a value in a variable. The analysis of the counterfactual helps us assess what would have happened by applying general knowledge and in-depth knowledge of the particular case (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012).

We must note here the relative paucity of data in the sense that the current crisis situation does not allow for the collection of primary data, such as through interviews or surveys. However, the aim of this paper is to examine the Swedish crisis response as is articulated in measures and guidelines, so we deem the data to be sufficient. I refrain from using media sources, print or otherwise, with a couple of exceptions. The time period for the response is its initial phase, from late January to mid-May 2020.

2.1 | The Swedish response to the pandemic

On January 31, the national Public Health Agency [Folkhälsomyndigheten] proposed that COVID-19 be classified as a danger to the public and society after the confirmation of the first

case in the country, while on March 2, the risk of contagion for the Swedem was upgraded to 'very high' (Folkhälsomyndigheten., 2020a; Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020b). On March 16, the Public Health Agency recommended that the people over 70 limit their social contacts (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020c). Also in March, the agency proposed that gatherings of over 500 people (and shortly after reduced to 50) be banned; that high schools, colleges, and universities switch to online teaching and that restaurants only serve at the table effectively eliminating buffet lunches, which are very popular with Swedes (Folkhälsomyndigheten., 2020d). The population was urged to not travel, but traveling per se was not forbidden. On April 1, new broad guidelines encouraged personal responsibility when it came to the containment of the virus and recommended that stores take appropriate measures in order to prevent overcrowding in their premises. What is more, volunteer associations (which are a part of the social Swedish fabric and include, for example, homeowner associations) were encouraged to postpone their annual meetings and recommended that employers take measures so that employees and visitors to the workplace have the capacity to physically distance. (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020e).

These measures and guidelines were communicated in daily press conferences held by the Public Health Agency, at times in the presence of other agencies or county-level officials, if needed. On March 22, Stefan Löfven, the Swedish Prime Minister and leader of the Social Democratic Party, held a televised address to the nation, an event quite unusual in Sweden's political tradition (Möller quoted in Bolling et al., 2020). Löfven contextualized the crisis caused by the COVID-19 virus as a threat to the health and the economy of Sweden and Swedish citizens (Regerigen, 2020). Health, the economy, and the unavoidable tensions in protecting both were a running theme of the speech: *" [t]he goal of the work of the government is to limit contagion so that not many people at once become seriously ill and to secure resources for health care as well as in these difficult times alleviate the consequences to you, the worker, and to our businesses"* (Regerigen, 2020, n.p). Löfven strikes a message of solidarity (a key concept in Swedish society) by stressing the importance of individual responsibility. He notes that the virus is a threat to the whole of society and only through individual responsibility, with all citizens obeying the guidelines issued by the responsible agencies and helping each other, can it be combatted: *"[n]ow we all have substantial personal responsibility"*(Regerigen, 2020, n.p.).[1]

The Swedish narrative of personal responsibility and solidarity has remained consistent despite some criticism. The Swedish response is based on measures that are considered to be sustainable in the long run with a goal of 'flattening the curve' that is, by controlling the number of infections in the population so they do not overwhelm the health care system, and 'herd immunity', the concept that when enough people are immune the spread of the disease slows down (see Colfer, 2020).[2] As state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell stated in an interview with *Nature* (Paterlini, 2020), the country's response is a corollary of culture, legal framework, and the above-mentioned long-term goals. Despite the sensationalist media coverage of people not physically distancing in bars in Stockholm, the reality is that generally people (two-thirds of survey respondents) did not visit bars and restaurants following the onset of COVID-19, avoided meeting others, did not travel, and avoided taking public transportation (Källebring, 2020).

The Swedish containment strategy is not without its critics. In an editorial published on 14 April in one of the two biggest dailies in Sweden, *Dagen Nyheter*, 22 researchers accused the civil servants of not being able to deal with the crisis. They offered as evidence the fact that people in elder care died in disproportionately high numbers due to a lack of PPE (personal protective equipment) and asked that politicians intervene and respond (Carlsson et al., 2020). Having said that, a report drafted by the National Institute for Economic Research (2020) forecasts a drop by slightly more than 6 percentage points in economic growth in the second quarter of 2020, while the economic contraction forecast for the year ranges between 2 and 7 percentage points (compared to global GPD contractions of between

0.8 and 3 percentage poins). Despite this, public trust in Stefan Löfven saw an upswing by 16 points during the crisis to 44 percent (Rosén, 2020).

3 | DISCUSSION

The message of the responsible individual trying to contribute to the crisis management of the collective is consistent with the general attitude when it comes to risk and crisis management in Sweden as evidenced *inter alia* in the brochure entitled *"If Crisis or War Comes*" sent by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) to all Swedish households in 2018. It builds on the normative notion and an ideal type of mutual trust between the bureaucracy and citizens: the public sector provides reliable information and evidence for the citizens to make informed decisions while the citizens in turn are trusted to conduct themselves responsibly. The situation on the ground of course diverges from this ideal type and even the dispatching of this brochure received criticism for not taking into account the variation within the Swedish population's spatial and socioeconomic specificities, for example (Petridou et al., 2019). Having said this, high levels of political trust alone do not explain the decentralization of the Swedish response, as all Scandinavian countries are high-trust societies and their responses were far more centralized in comparison. High political trust is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a decentralized response.

The Swedish response is also characterized by the prominent role of experts and an articulated focus on expert knowledge. The problem-solving oriented policymaking process in Sweden privileges the gathering of information and knowledge ahead of policy formulation. This feature, coupled with the character of this crisis that necessitates science-based solutions, resulted in the prominence of the state epidemiologist in public discourse. State epidemiologists have risen to prominence in other countries (such as Germany, Greece, and Ireland—see Naumann et al., 2020; Zahariadis et al., 2020 and Colfer, 2020, respectively) as well, but in Sweden, it was mainly Anders Tegnell, rather than politicians, who was the public face of the Swedish strategy and the one communicating directly to the public. His identity as a bureaucrat allowed him to communicate and legitimize the conveyance of scientific uncertainty, which is an integral component of the pandemic (Versluis et al., 2019).

The high level of autonomy of public agencies, which is an institutional feature specific to the Swedish context, and the fact that the Swedish constitution does not allow the national government to impose a national state of emergency and thus to centralize power during peacetime, are both articulations of the Swedish dualistic system. It resulted in the public agencies retaining their autonomy during the crisis. What is more, the Social Democrats, the current governing party, have traditionally preferred to keep their distance from crisis management processes and institutions, viewing the managing of crises as an operational task (Petridou & Sparf, 2017). Such a distance affords the possibility to protect the government from the repercussions of a controversial decision (Hall, 2016), though it could potentially backfire (Brändström, 2016). Further, the power of the municipalities within their jurisdictions is asserted legally and in practice, making any attempt by the national government to wrangle power away from them legally dubious and politically sensitive.

Thus far, I have explained why the Swedish strategy rested on the national agency and why a decentralized approach was required. The national government could initiate a vaccination regime as it did during the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, which Mulinari and Vilhelmsson (2020) viewed as the state exerting its power with a view to balance the health interests of its citizens with economic concerns. In the absence of a vaccine for COVID-19, the state held back, allowing the national agency to take the lead and institute a decentralized plan. Such a plan, if it is to be implemented across 290 municipalities which have authority in managing education, elder care, and crisis management, must necessarily be

in the form of broad guidelines. The high political trust among Swedes broadly ensures compliance in the absence of fines and coercive measures. In the Public Health Agency's communications, the modal verb construction was typically "ought to avoid" [in Swedish: bör undvika], rather than merely conveying advice, is understood by the Swedish audience in the imperative mood: "avoid!".

The preceding discussion begs the question of whether, given the same contextual specificities, Sweden could have issued a different strategy. To address equifinality, I turn this question on its head and pose the counterfactual question: Could the same strategy have been issued given a different context? I have argued a two-step reasoning: First, given a different relationship between politics and administration, Sweden would not have issued a decentralized plan. Instead, the national government would most likely have taken over, thus centralizing decision-making powers at the top. This was the case, for example, in Norway (Christensen & Lægreid, 2020). Though the two countries are very similar, both having a considerable degree of public agency autonomy and local-level independence, ministers are considerably more involved in the operations of public agencies in Norway, rendering them comparatively less autonomous than their Swedish counterparts. Since the plan was decentralized, and in the absence of legal authority to enact a state of emergency, the plan had to necessarily be limited to guidelines, which citizens in a high-trust society are highly likely to follow.

4 | CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

In this short paper, I have shown how the relationship between politics, policy, and administration influences policymaking not only during normal times, but, poignantly, during extraordinary times as well. Even though this is a single case study, it can shed light on the crisis management policies of other European and non-European countries alike by drawing attention to their administrative system. For example, even though this is not a comparative paper, I have, albeit briefly, placed Sweden in its broader Scandinavian context. Thus, I highlighted the explanatory value of the combination of dualism as praxis and legal imperative, devolution, and high trust when considering the Swedish national response.

Further research of a comparative character using the response to COVID-19 as a case study can enhance our understanding of crisis management administrative institutions and practices. Additionally, expressing the national responses in terms of the degree of centralization/decentralization may provide a useful tool for their assessment as well as lessons learnt on how to address (or not address) a pandemic.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Author's translation.

[2] It is beyond the scope of this paper to assess the scientific legitimacy of this concept, which has received considerable criticism.

[3] I do not report on Iceland, though it is a Nordic country and often considered Scandinavia (Einhorn and Logue 2003) because it is an island with a very small population. Since this is not a comparative paper, Denmark, Finland, and Norway are more fruitful in describing the broader context of Scandinavia in which to place Sweden.

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