Political institutions and their role during health emergencies of global scale (COVID-19)

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Abstract. This research consistently investigates the pivotal role and significance of political institutions during global emergencies, with a specific focus on pandemics. The analysis centers on the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has underscored the paramount importance of political institutions in orchestrating and formulating pandemic response strategies. Notably, health authorities, alongside the broader healthcare system, anchor their actions in alignment with guidelines and directives promulgated by political institutions spanning various tiers of government. In such exigent circumstances, the executive branch of political power plays a particularly vital role. The efficacy and seamless collaboration among these institutions become instrumental in executing successful crisis management policies. The COVID-19 pandemic serves as a vivid illustration of the situation, where executive branches at various governmental levels wielded substantial influence over decision-making processes and resource allocation. This paper contends that the harmonious interplay and synchronized efforts of political institutions are indispensable for effectively navigating and surmounting crises of global magnitude, such as pandemics.

Keywords: political institutions; state politics; politics in the field of health; health emergency of global scale; pandemics; COVID-19; global politics
Introduction

A significant role when considering modern politics is played by the analysis of the work of government institutions. One study in political science points out that “political institutions are both empirical and normative entities, which cannot be understood fully unless their normative foundations are laid bare” (Goodin & Klingemann:1998, p. 139). The authors point out that formal political institutions have historically structured the political process. It is noteworthy that the authors cite health policies in France, Sweden and Switzerland as examples. Thus, the authors indicate that interest groups influenced policy more than the initial power of these interest groups, explaining this process through an analysis of the political institutionalization of possible veto points. The authors also indicate different ways of social policy, depending on the administrative capabilities of the government, etc. As part of this paper, we will focus specifically on health issues that have become especially important amid the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19).

Political Institutions

Various scientific studies constitute a multifaceted landscape of assessments of the concept of political institutions. These concepts are based on the fundamentals and requirements depending on the scientific paradigm used. Political institutions carry out various work, being involved in political processes in their respective areas. Various approaches to understanding the role and directions of work of political institutions are based on the analysis of patterns, historical events and the influence of political institutions on management and social consequences.

The definition of the very concept of a political institution is also a subject of research and depends on the approaches of scientists based on the foundations of various political theories. Thus, Goodin and Klingemann (1998, p. 145) believe that “at their core, political institutions are the rules of the game,” questioning “what should be included in the concept of rules”. According to M. Westergren (2016: p. 46) political institutions can be defined as “institutions that rule or govern in some sense – and the
decisions, rules, and laws made within them and emanating from them.” The author puts the question of political justice into the basis for understanding the role of such institutions, highlighting Sociological justice and Normative justice.

According to Huntington (2006), the distinction between political institutions and social forces is often blurred in practice, as many groups exhibit both characteristics. However, theoretically, the difference is clear. People involved in politics are typically members of various social groups. A society’s political development depends on how political activists align with these institutions. In a society where everyone belongs to the same social force, conflicts are limited and resolved within that group, obviating the need for specific political institutions. Thus, coexistence needs institutionalization, and the creation of political institutions reflecting moral consensus and common interests is vital for building community in a complex society. These institutions give new meaning to common goals and foster connections among individuals and groups.

Evaluation of political institutions, as a rule, focuses on philosophical debates about issues of justice and power, often conceptualized by questions of ethical principles and moral imperatives that underlie the design and evaluation of such institutions. When assessing the role of political institutions, a significant part is played by assessing their functioning depending on the results of their influence on politics and changes in social dynamics. Interdisciplinary approaches, such as those that draw on economics, or sociology, etc. can provide a more nuanced understanding of political institutions as political institutions are interconnected with broader social context and it is important to consider multiple dimensions when evaluating their role and effectiveness.

Analyzing the concept of political institutions, some authors (Jordan, 2007: p.4) adhere to the original concept of institutions. Thus, the authors indicate that “institutionalism … connotes a general approach to the study of political institutions, a set of theoretical ideas and hypotheses concerning the relations between institutional...
characteristics and political agency, performance, and change.”

Political institutions play a significant role in the life of society. There are different approaches to the classification of political institutions. Such classifications vary depending on the political regime, system and many other factors. One of the definitions (Hornung, 2022: p.68) suggests that political institutions are “not only the rules governing behavior, but also the existence of agencies and organizations that shape the interaction between individuals and thus contribute to group formation and group action.” It is worth noting that this definition was proposed as part of a study comparing health policy development in France and Germany between 1990 and 2020. As part of this work, the author analyzed the institutional conditions necessary for the implementation of program actions. Even more interesting is the fact that the paper was prepared within the Department of Political Science at the Institute of Comparative Politics and Public Policy for scholars and students of public policy, public administration, and health policy. We believe that the interest of political scientists in health issues allows us to create a platform for further research on the role of political institutions in this field.

Role of political institutions in preparing policies on health emergencies of global scale - COVID-19 pandemic

Political institutions encompass various entities comprising the intricate framework of contemporary governments, including the head of state, legislatures, and political parties. These institutions are centrally concerned with the allocation of power within society. Their activities also cover different fields of life including healthcare. Amidst the global disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, political institutions have assumed a pivotal role in coordinating responses, allocating resources, and safeguarding public health.

Policies to counter the pandemic were developed not only at the global level (primarily by the WHO), but also at the national level by individual countries. Thus, in the Republic of Azerbaijan (Mammadov, Jafarova, 2021: p.614; Jafarova,
2022) the “Strategy of vaccination against COVID-19 in the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2021-2022” as well as many other documents have been adopted as a policy-response to the pandemic. Azerbaijan was the first country in the South Caucasus region and one of the first in the world to secure delivery of COVID-19 vaccines and launch a vaccination program on January 18, 2021. Political institutions coordinated the work of various government agencies on multi-sectoral level. Coordination was implemented also among different levels of government and international partners.

To evaluate policies for health emergencies at the global level, it is necessary to understand what they mean. Thus, according to CDC (2022), Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) “is an extraordinary event that constitutes a public health risk to other countries through international spread of disease and potentially requires a coordinated international response.”

Any threats, including to public health, cannot remain without the attention of political institutions. COVID-19 has shown that health issues can have widespread negative impacts on society. Thus, as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, the Bureau of Global Health Security and Diplomacy (2023) was created in the United States. According to the official information from the website of U.S. Department of State, the Bureau has quite broad directions for activities as it “leads and coordinates the Department’s work on strengthening global health security to prevent, detect, and respond to infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS.” Tasked with leading U.S. diplomatic efforts, the Bureau aims not only to coordinate foreign assistance, but also to develop international cooperation on health threats; and Bureau’s official website notes global health security as “a core component of U.S. national security and foreign policy.” The creation of such Office in the United States, one of the G-7 countries, indicates an increased focus on health issues in the political lens.

J.M. Dostal (2020: p.542) analyzing German politics during the coronavirus pandemic indicates that it “has forced policy makers to react quickly with totally new policy-making approaches under conditions of uncertainty.” The author notes
that the rapid concentration of decision-making powers, as the first reaction of the country’s leadership, was at the top of the political hierarchy.

Political institutions are confronted with the formidable challenge of apportioning finite resources, including critical medical supplies and healthcare personnel, in a manner that is both equitable and efficient. The allocation of these resources often necessitates political decision-making and administrative processes that navigate intricate ethical quandaries arising from competing demands.

Within the realm of healthcare resource allocation, a delicate balance must be struck between the principles of equity and other ethical foundations (Mammadov, Jafarova: 2022, p.124). Equity underscores the imperative of ensuring that resources are distributed fairly, so that individuals and communities with the greatest need receive adequate care. This may entail prioritizing vulnerable populations, such as those with underlying health conditions or socioeconomic disadvantages. To address these challenges, political institutions often establish guidelines and frameworks that articulate resource allocation principles. As political leaders grapple with the responsibility of making decisions, it is imperative that they employ a comprehensive approach that accounts for the diverse needs of their constituents while upholding ethical standards and the pursuit of public health.

Global and national health issues are closely tied to political factors (Jafarova, Mammadov: 2022, p.33), especially during periods of political instability and conflicts like wars. These situations can have severe negative effects on the population's physical and psychological health, leading to casualties, disabilities, and mass displacement. Quality healthcare becomes a secondary concern in such environments, with the primary focus on healthcare accessibility and the safety of medical facilities. Politics also plays a crucial role in addressing public health problems through targeted state programs and support for vulnerable groups, often involving government-funded healthcare for these populations.

Various government agencies are also involved in
development of the crisis management plans that cover coordinated response during the decision-making processes. Political institutions participate in cooperative endeavors, exchange information, and make contributions to worldwide activities, such as involvement in the COVAX facility aimed at ensuring equitable distribution of vaccines.

Research of politics amid COVID-19

Research related to politics against the background of the coronavirus pandemic resulted in the emergence of the corresponding concept “COVID-19 Politics.” Thus, as of September 22, 2023, a search in Google Scholar (2023) for the query “COVID-19 politics” produces 1220 results, and “coronavirus politics” - 723, respectively.

Research into pandemic covers a variety of areas, but we will not focus on pure health and medical outcomes. In the prism of a political approach, studies covered different issues, such as trust in political institutions, etc. Thus, one study showed (Eichengreen, et. al., 2020) that people who were exposed to pandemic shocks in their youth tend to demonstrate lower levels of trust to political institutions in later life. Another study (Bottasso, et. al., 2020: p. 1138) indicated that “pre-existing perceived quality of political institutions may be a crucial mediating factor for the impact that a large shock such as the covid-19 one, may have on the evolution of political trust.” It concludes that the perceived institutional quality was crucial in maintaining trust in politics during the pandemic, at least temporarily.

One of the recent studies (Flores, et. al., 2022) showed that there is a direct relationship between the support of the population to politicians and the policies they implement. That is, measures proposed by a politician who has the support of the population, as a rule, are met with approval and vice versa.

The coronavirus pandemic was accompanied by fairly broad restrictive measures, such as lockdowns, which had economic consequences and directed public opinion accordingly. However, the increase in mortality also caused a negative attitude. Thus, most politicians tried to find a balance between protecting public health and economic support.
Conclusion

Political institutions play a prominent role in the management of global-scale health emergencies, encompassing the intricate task of addressing multifaceted challenges and executing measures aimed at safeguarding health of population. Effective governance during health emergencies of global scale hinges upon preparedness, streamlined coordination, and fostering international cooperation.

Research into the political dimensions of issues related to global health amid the coronavirus pandemic has gained wider significance. If earlier issues related to health were traditionally studied through the prism of medical science, today more and more works with a political orientation are appearing in the scientific literature.

In our opinion, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided some impetus for a broader and more comprehensive consideration of politics related to the public health, especially at the global level. Pandemics affect all segments of the population, making the need for political engagement more urgent. International cooperation in crisis situations necessitates political contacts, which accordingly puts the role of political institutions on the agenda.

References:


