

How did the media shape the image of federalism during the Covid-19 pandemic?

A systematic examination of newspaper reporting in Germany
with special focus on citizens' perspectives

Iris Reus

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Abstract

The media plays an important role in modern societies by influencing perceptions and attitudes through the way they report. This contribution represents the first comprehensive and systematic analysis of media reporting on German federalism. The study examines 449 statements related to the Covid-19 pandemic published by 14 daily regional newspapers during the first wave (i.e., between March and September 2020). The first part focuses on patterns of evaluations, with the results confirming what is generally expected in the literature: A clear majority of all statements published by the newspapers turns out to be negative towards federalism. This finding was not changed for the period of uniformity of regulations following the states' decision for a nationwide lockdown. The successful stabilization of the occurrence of infection 'despite' different relaxations in the *Länder* led to less negative reporting in absolute terms but not to substantially positive statements. An overall majority of negative statements can be found for almost all population groups – citizens, journalists and politicians. Only politicians at the *Länder* level with a partisan affiliation to CDU/CSU had a majority of statements with positive views on federalism. Thus, the second part is dedicated to a more differentiated evaluation of citizens' perspectives by taking a closer look at readers' letters. This also confirms a central thesis of the literature, namely that the negative attitude of the German population towards federalism is primarily due to different regulations in the federal states. The desire not only for uniformity but also for a powerful top-down policy by the 'strong man' is taking on a dimension that also raises questions about citizens' attitudes towards democracy.

Author

Iris Reus is Post-Doc-Researcher at the Otto-von-Guericke-Universität Magdeburg. She holds a PhD from the University of Heidelberg, with a thesis on *Länder* policymaking in the German federation after the Federalism Reform of 2006. Her main research interests comprise comparative policy analysis and federalism research, focusing on the subnational level. The present contribution is part of her research project "Democracy and Diversity in German Federalism – The 'unitary federal state' in times of crisis", which was funded by the Volkswagen Foundation and examines *Länder* policymaking and media responses during the Covid-19 pandemic. Currently, Iris Reus is conducting a research project on local climate governance. She can be reached at iris.reus@ovgu.de.

Keywords

Media Reporting, Germany, Federalism, *Länder* Policymaking, Covid-19 Pandemic.

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Introduction

How governments responded to the Covid-19 pandemic has generated a wealth of literature. From the beginning, the literature has also addressed the question of how the specific conditions of federations – where, in contrast to unitary states, responsibilities are shared between political levels – affect policymaking when fighting pandemics (e.g., Büthe et al. 2020, Easton et al. 2020, Kettl 2020, Kuhn & Morlino 2021, Erkoreka & Hernando-Perez 2021, Murphy & Arban 2021). In Germany, the debate about the performance of the federal system, i.e., whether federalism leads to a more or less successful response to the pandemic than in centralized states, was present not only in the literature (e.g., Kropp 2020, Montag 2020) but also in the public and the media (Reus 2021). The reporting on federalism in daily newspapers led to the research question of this study: “How did the media shape the image of federalism during the Covid-19 pandemic?”.

A systematic and comprehensive evaluation of media reporting on federalism has not yet been carried out - either during the pandemic or in general. This analysis, therefore, represents the first step towards filling this research gap. The sample analyzed includes 449 statements from 14 daily newspapers during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, from March to September 2020. The analysis combines quantitative and qualitative approaches. After an overview of policymaking in the German federation during the pandemic (Chapter 1), the state of research in the literature, including the research gap, is presented (Chapter 2). The explanation of selection and coding (Chapter 3) is followed by the empirical analysis (Chapter 4). The article concludes with a summary and a brief outlook.

1 Policymaking in the German Federation during the pandemic

In the Federal Republic of Germany, the dominance of legislation in ‘regular times’ is at the federal level, while the states (‘Länder’) have their own area of legislation but are mainly responsible for implementation (Rudzio 2019: 261f.). The responsibility for implementation comprises both the state laws and the federal laws. In contrast, during the crisis, the *Länder* dominated (Lemke 2020: 3, Thiele 2012: 78f.). While the federal law regulated basic aspects of possible protective measures, the *Länder* determined independently whether, when, and to what degree these are introduced¹.

The German federation can be classified as ‘cooperative federalism’ (Kropp 2010: 10), which generates a higher degree of entanglement due to the division of tasks between the federal and state levels (ibid.: 9). Already in the 1960s, coordination took place at and between all levels of government to such an extent that Hesse (1962) called Germany a “unitary federal state”. During the pandemic, one of the coordination committees, the so-called *Ministerpräsidentenkonferenz* (MPK, translates into Conference of Prime Ministers), in which the prime ministers of the 16 *Länder* meet, gained special relevance. The

¹ The situation changed during the so-called ‘Federal Emergency Brake’ (April 23, 2021), but generally there was a lot of scope for the states.

conferences took place regularly, with the chancellor joining upon invitation, and led to several joint agreements. Such agreements are not legally binding but usually have a high political binding effect.

The first pandemic containment measures in Germany were imposed in February 2020 at the local level due to limited outbreaks (for the following see Färber 2021: 52-56). The number of people infected with the Covid-19 virus rose sharply from the beginning of March. After single *Länder* had already passed policy measures to restrict social contact, more extensive measures were agreed upon on March 12. On March 22, the German chancellor and the heads of *Länder* governments agreed to a comprehensive lockdown of almost all areas of public life. All businesses (except basic services) had to close, as did schools, universities, restaurants, theatres, opera houses, sports venues, and the like. On March 25, 2020, the federal parliament – with the consent of the *Länder* in the Bundesrat – declared an “epidemiological situation of national significance” and imposed a nationwide lockdown two days later. As of the end of May 2020, the number of new infections had declined sharply, and so the restrictions were gradually eased or lifted by the *Länder*. Consequently, the agreements led to uniformity whereas federal diversity unfolded in a clearly visible way outside the period of agreement (Reus/Nelles 2022: 136f.).

2 State of research and research gap

Although being a federation is part of the unalterable core of the German Constitution (Article 20 (1) of the Basic Law, Article 79 (3) of the Basic Law), the associated notion of federal diversity has been overlaid for decades by the guiding idea of the ‘equivalent living conditions’ (Hesse, 1962: 12, 20; Mehde, 2012: 444-446). As surveys have shown several times, the unitary orientation of the population is strong, with the vast majority favoring nationwide uniform policies (Grube, 2001: 109 f.; Oberhofer, Stehlin & Sturm, 2011: 183; Petersen 2019: 122f., Scharpf 2008: 510). Based on this, Roland Sturm (Sturm, 2007: 42) doubts whether, in Germany, “the basic idea of every federalism culture, namely that subsidiarity and diversity do not represent a danger, but rather constitute the essence of federalism, is sufficiently anchored”.

Since journalistic news media remain a central source of political information for most people despite the increasing importance of social media, political communication research assumes that political attitudes are shaped largely by media coverage (Potter 2011 for an overview of media effects). The media do not simply depict political events but can evoke emotional and rational reactions to the object of reporting through the type of reporting (e.g. Loge and Taber 2005). Through a certain framing, a positive or negative evaluation of the topic can be generated in the recipient. For example, studies show that problem-oriented reporting on topics such as immigration (Brader et al. 2008) or terrorism (Gadarian 2010) tends to trigger negative feelings, while highlighting positive aspects of immigration or humanitarian reasons for going to war can evoke positive feelings about the same topic (Scheufele and Gasteiger 2007).

Such media effects unfold direct political relevance if they influence recipients' attitudes towards the political system (e.g. Graber and Dunaway 2018 on the issue of disenchantment with politics). In the Federal Republic of Germany, federalism is one of the unchangeable basic principles of the political system (Article 20 (1) of the Basic Law). If constantly a negative image of federalism was transported to the public via the media, this could have potentially threatening consequences for the political system, as citizens' support and consequently the willingness to participate at the various levels of the federal democracy could get lost.

Previous research has focused primarily on the attitudes of the population. Concerning the media, although there are references in the literature that the unitary culture in Germany is supported by the media (Kropp, 2010: 226), the “unitarism of the media” (Scharpf, 2009: 109) has not yet been examined

in detail. The only statement with a certain empirical basis can be found in Albert Funk (2013), who states a unitary tendency based on readings of the larger national newspapers. Although some take a more federalist approach, there is, at best, "a greater or lesser degree of unitarism" (Funk, 2013: 221). The unitarizing influence of the media has already been demonstrated in a comparative analysis of non-smoker protection legislation in the 16 states (Reus, 2016, p. 14), whereby the reporting itself was not the object of investigation but an explanatory factor for the policies of the states.

During the pandemic, due to the broad policy responsibility of the states leading to potentially different regulations in the 16 states, the conflict over the unitary orientation of the citizens came to force even more. Concerning citizens' attitudes, Juhl et al. (2022) analyzed which factors influence support of additional discretionary powers for the federal government, i.e., centralization, using daily panel data from the Mannheim Corona Study collected during the first wave of the pandemic. Their analysis indicates that more heterogeneous regulations at the state level, as well as the perception of a higher personal threat by the virus, led to more support. Managing the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, therefore, also turned into a "test of federalism" (Ensminger 2020). The image of federalism conveyed by the media in this test was – according to first commentaries – as negative as had been expected. Kropp (2020: 1) states that federalism "once again found itself in the crosshairs of already critical reporting", and Münch (2020: 209) notes that "hardly any journalist or presenter (...) got along without the words 'patchwork' and 'pressing ahead'".

As a systematic and comprehensive evaluation of media reporting on federalism has not yet been carried out - either for the time of the pandemic or in general – this contribution will take a first step to close the huge research gap. The research objects of the study are statements on German federalism in connection with Covid-19 that were published in German daily newspapers during the 'first wave' of the pandemic. The study period extends from March 1 to September 30, 2020. A combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches leads to two different outputs. First, quantitative patterns of evaluations expressed in the statements are presented for various aspects (course of time, groups of people, media outlets). Second, an in-depth analysis of readers' letters was conducted to reveal dominating topic areas as well as citizens' arguments pro and contra federalism.

3 Data basis and methodological approach

3.1 Selection of newspapers and articles

Initially, 14 daily newspapers were selected. These newspapers cover geographically as much as possible of the Federal Republic of Germany and have the highest possible circulation. For this reason, all German newspapers were sorted according to their circulation area and assigned to the individual federal states to select the newspapers (based on figures of 'Informationsgemeinschaft zur Feststellung der Verbreitung von Werbeträgern e.V. 2019'). Depending on the access to the respective newspaper's archive, each region's newspapers with the highest possible circulation, i.e., a broad readership, were selected. The 14 chosen newspapers include all federal states except Bremen and Hamburg (cp. Table 1).

Newspaper	Region/State	No. of articles with search term	No. of articles after content check	No. of statements coded
Allg. Zeitung Mainz-Rheinhausen	Rhineland-Palatinate	42	37	40
Der Tagesspiegel	Berlin	59	41	57
Frankfurter Neue Presse	Hesse	30	28	35
Freie Presse	Saxony	24	21	30
Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung	Lower Saxony	27	25	29
Kieler Nachrichten	Schleswig-Holstein	19	19	20
Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger	Northrhine-Westphalia	36	32	35
Lausitzer Rundschau	Brandenburg	23	22	27
Mitteldeutsche Zeitung	Saxony-Anhalt	31	27	28
Münchner Merkur	Bavaria	24	21	25
Ostsee-Zeitung	Mecklenburg Western-Pommerania	23	22	29
Saarbrücker Zeitung	Saarland	40	34	38
Südkurier	Baden-Württemberg	25	22	23
Thüringer Allgemeine	Thuringia	28	25	33
TOTAL		431	376	449

Table 1: Data basis (Source: own compilation)

The archives of the newspapers were filtered for articles containing the search term “[F]ederal* (föederal) AND (Corona* OR Covid*)”. The idea of including other terms frequently used in Germany in discussions on federalism, such as “Patchwork (*Flickenteppich*)” or “uniform (*einheitlich*)”, had to be rejected, as this would have led to selection bias. The trial evaluation of several random samples with the broader search term “states*(*Länder*) AND (government* OR cabinet* OR minister*) AND (corona* OR covid*)” showed that such common signal words are mainly found in negative reporting, while positive reporting uses different formulations depending on the context.

The search term including title, abstract, and article text, resulted in 431 articles from the 14 selected newspapers, which were manually checked for content match in a second round. For example, articles on federalism in other countries or the European Union were excluded. Articles were also excluded if they contained both parts of the search term but in different, unrelated parts of the article. Therefore, the final sample of 376 articles only includes articles that fulfill both parts of the search term, i.e., statements that refer to German federalism in connection with the Covid-19 pandemic.

3.2 Coding of the statements

A coding unit corresponds to a statement and is defined as the expression of one person. A statement can comprise several sentences and several aspects of content. This delimitation is due to the typical design of newspaper articles, in which third parties' statements are reproduced alongside the journalists' statements. If the article were coded as a whole, it would no longer be possible to differentiate between groups of people. The number of coded statements (449) is therefore higher than the number of articles (376).

In preparation for coding, all statements were first extracted from the articles and separated from each other. The content of each statement must relate to the search term, i.e., it must be connected to federalism and the Covid-19 pandemic. However, both terms do not have to be included in the individual statement but only in the article as a whole. The reason for this is that sometimes there are several statements relevant in terms of content, whereas the keywords are usually not repeated several times within the article. Instead, the same content is often referred to using other formulations.

The statements were coded following the method of standardized content analysis (cp. Krippendorff 2019, Neuendorf 2017). This method allows the systematic description of huge samples to generate intersubjectively comprehensible results. A codebook with anchor examples was developed and two human coders were trained to code each all 449 statements. Cases of doubt were discussed between the coders so that uniform coding across all units and codes could be reached.

As there is no previous work in the form of similar analyses which this study could build on, we concentrated on the question of how federalism is evaluated in the statements (for further aspects see the 4.1.4 and 4.1.5). Therefore, the statements were coded according to the following three categories:

- -1 = negative (towards federalism)
- 0 = neutral or ambivalent (towards federalism)
- 1 = positive (towards federalism)

As the search term was not further narrowed down, the statements refer to various aspects of federalism, from the responsibilities of both levels to the behavior of political actors in the federal system and the design of political measures. A negative assessment would therefore take position against *Länder* responsibility for acting, criticize the behavior of the *Länder* governments or evaluate the functioning of the federal system in the face of the coronavirus pandemic as unsuccessful. A plea for uniform regulations at the national level is also classified as a negative evaluation, as it implies a position against federalism and the resulting different regulations at the subnational level. The code 0 means that no evaluation or position-taking is contained in the statement (neutral), or that positive and negative aspects are juxtaposed without drawing a conclusion in one direction or the other (ambivalent). A positive evaluation would include the advocacy of state-specific responses to the pandemic, i.e., giving responsibility to the subnational level, as well as praise for the *Länder* governments or the functioning cooperation of both levels of government as well as for the success of the different measures in the *Länder*.

Due to the logic of standardized content analysis as a descriptive-classifying method, greater analytical depth can be achieved primarily by comparing different groups within the sample as well as over time (Rössler 2020: 15). Therefore, the date of publication was noted in the data set for each statement, the newspaper was assigned, and the person speaking was coded. "Journalists", "Politicians" and "Citizens" as well as a residual category "Others" were defined as groups of people.

4 Empirical results

4.1 Patterns of evaluations in media statements on federalism during the Covid-19 pandemic

In the first step, the distribution of statements is considered in its entirety without further differentiation. Therefore, no distinction is made as to who the respective statement originates from, but statements by the journalists writing the articles themselves and statements by quoted persons are included equally. This results in a majority of 56% negative statements (see Fig. 1). These statements either reject federalism (responsibility of the states or different regulations in the states) during the coronavirus pandemic or negatively assess the functioning of the federal system during the crisis. This contrasts with 17% neutral or ambivalent statements and only 26% positive or supportive statements on German federalism.

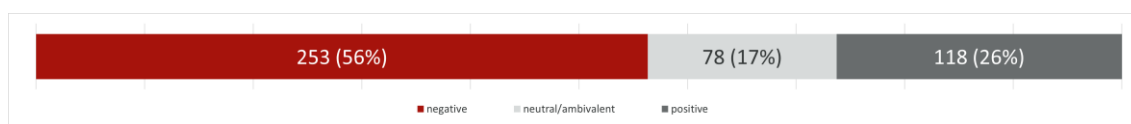


Figure 1: Distribution overall (Source: own compilation)

4.1.1 Evaluations over the course of time

As explained above, previous research has repeatedly shown in the form of survey results that negative assessments of federalism focus on the aspect of “uniformity vs. diversity”, with different policies at the federal-state level being rejected by German citizens. Over time, a clear variance in the degree of diversity of the regulations issued by the 16 states during the first wave of the pandemic can be observed. After the states had initially imposed restrictions at different speeds and to varying degrees from the beginning of March, a comprehensive lockdown was in place everywhere from the end of March to the beginning of May 2020. The states then eased the restrictions to varying degrees and at varying speeds. Since federalism in the sense of different policies is less visible in the case of harmonization, more positive statements would be expected in the phase of the nationwide lockdown.

Empirically, however, this picture does not emerge (see Fig. 2). Negative statements continued to predominate, and only in calendar week 14 (30.03.-05.04.2020) did the weekly average of statements slip into positive territory at 0.29. For April as a whole (the main lockdown period), the average was -0.42, which is even more negative than in March (-0.29) and May (-0.22), when the states were still pursuing different policies or were doing so again. Although regulatory differences - according to previous research, the main starting point for criticism of federalism in Germany - hardly came into play in April, this was not reflected in correspondingly positive statements. The majority of negative statements were concerned with the disputes that preceded the agreement at the meetings of the prime ministers (Ministerpräsidentenkonferenzen), as well as with delays and a lack of action due to the large number of players.

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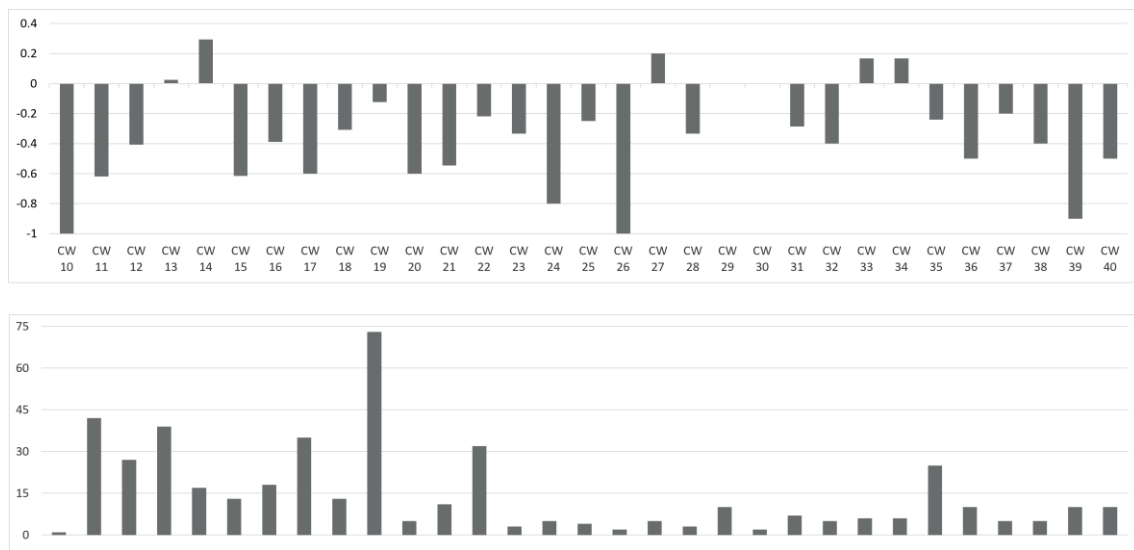


Figure 2: Average of codes (above) and number of statements (below) over time by calendar weeks (Source: own compilation)

Another factor over time is the success of the pandemic policy. In Germany, the number of infections and deaths was relatively low during the period under review (which ended in September 2020 and, therefore, before the second wave), while a look at neighboring EU countries always revealed possible negative scenarios. Thus, the statements on federalism should be more positive from the end of May or the beginning of June 2020, i.e., as soon as after successfully combating the emerging first wave through the lockdown a longer lasting stabilization of the infection rate at a low level - 'despite' different relaxations in the states after the nationwide lockdown - had been achieved.

Looking only at the codes (Figure 2 above), this expectation is not confirmed, as the weekly averages continue to be negative, except for three slightly positive weeks. In terms of content, reporting continued to be characterized by divergences between the states (or prime ministers) and concerns about possible negative consequences of different state regulations regarding the development of the infection situation. The negative value of -0.9 in calendar week 39 (21-27/09/2020) was due to the publication of a survey on education policy and the 'school summit' at the Chancellery. Both events were accompanied by reports on the negative consequences of federalism in education – generally and during the pandemic - and the population's rejection of a federal school system (e.g. *Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung*, 23/09/2020, "Planlos im Klassenzimmer"; *Kieler Nachrichten*, 23/09/2020, "Kein großer Wurf"; *Kölner Stadtanzeiger*, 23/09/2020, "Gigantische Mängel").

However, a parallel look at the codes and the number of articles published (Figure 2 below) shows that far fewer articles addressing federalism were published during the period of stable infection rates after the lockdown (June to August 2020). In absolute terms, the amount of negative reporting on federalism has decreased, as has the media pressure. Yet, there was no substantially positive reporting. Although the analysis of other articles outside the sample showed that the successes of the German pandemic policy were definitely reported - but this was rarely in connection with federalism, which is mainly mentioned in criticism.

4.1.2 Evaluations by groups of people

A further differentiated analysis according to groups of people shows that the highest percentage of negative statements is found in the citizen group, at 71%. At 22%, the lowest rate of positive statements is also found in the citizen group, on a par with journalists. In addition to quoted surveys by opinion polling institutes and surveys conducted among their own readership, the statements from the citizens are primarily based on readers' letters (for more details, see section 5.2). In some cases, there is massive anger at the "brake blocks from our federal healthcare system", combined with the desire for more powers for the health minister at the federal level, who is doing "an excellent job", as Ulrich Hildebrandt from Berlin-Charlottenburg writes, for example (Der Tagesspiegel, 26.04.2020, "Kampf gegen die Pandemie"). According to Herbert Bach from Langen, on the other hand, "of course ... the delayed, far too late action can also be blamed on our federal system" (Frankfurter Neue Presse, 16.03.2020, "Diktaturen im Vorteil").

Politicians had the highest proportion of positive statements on federalism at 39% and the lowest proportion of negative statements at 45%. A more detailed analysis (cf. Reus 2021) confirms the expectation that politicians at the federal level have a more negative attitude towards federalism than politicians at the state level. This seems logical insofar as politicians at the federal level are restricted in acting by the powers of the states, while the political existence of politicians at the state level is based on federalism. If one compares the averages of both groups, there are significantly more positive statements among state politicians (49%) than among federal politicians (29%), but no majority of positive statements in both groups.

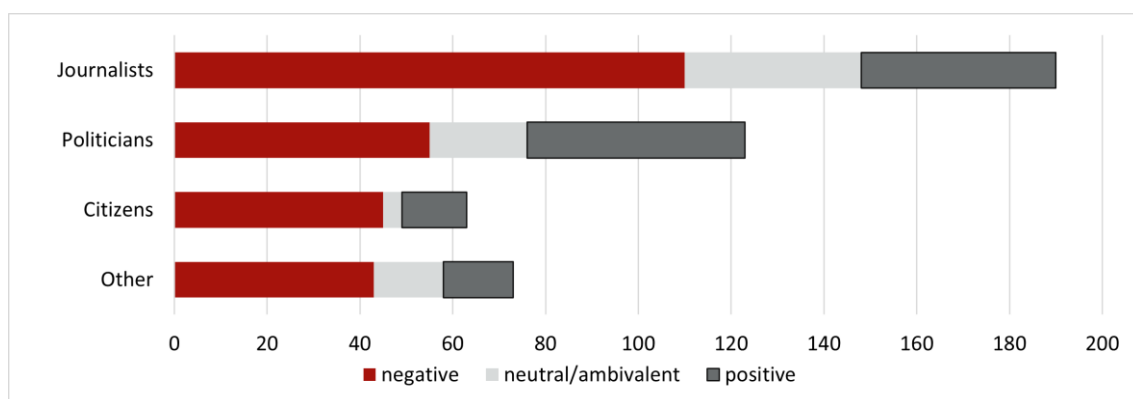


Figure 3: Distribution of statements by groups of people. Note: The residual category 'Other' consists of persons who could not be coded as separate groups due to the small number of statements (e.g., persons in business, sports, associations, administration, or scientists). (Source: own compilation)

When making positive statements, state politicians mostly emphasize the competence of the lower level to take appropriate measures for different regional situations. For example, Saxony's Prime Minister Michael Kretschmer said in an interview (Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung, 04.04.2020, "Grenzschießungen sind enttäuschend") that federalism was "precisely made for times like these. There are different circumstances, and you need regional expertise. You can only make the right decisions if you know all the heads of hospitals and district councils". However, it is striking that almost half of the statements at both levels (45% for both groups) are negative towards federalism. For understandable reasons, state politicians, unlike some of the federal politicians, do not advocate more powers for the federal government or binding national guidelines. Yet, most of these negative statements are appeals for an agreement on uniform regulations, i.e., not to realize differences that could emerge in a federal system. It should, however, be mentioned that these statements usually come from Prime Ministers who intend to convince their colleagues to take more restrictive measures.

Furthermore, a comparison of statements by state politicians according to party affiliation was carried out, including CDU/CSU (Christian Democratic/Social Union) and SPD (Social Democrats). It confirms the higher affinity to federalism attributed to the CDU/CSU in the literature (Schmid, 1990; Neumann, 2013). The party is more federally organized and generally tends to emphasize the principle of subsidiarity, according to which tasks should be performed by the lower level first. For the SPD, on the other hand, the elimination of social inequalities is a priority, which can only be achieved for Germany as a whole with corresponding federal competencies or uniform policies at the state level. During the first wave of the pandemic, statements by CDU/CSU politicians were significantly more positive (55%) than statements by SPD politicians (32%). CDU/CSU state politicians are thus the only group in which most statements on federalism are positive.

4.1.3 Evaluations by media outlets

Regarding quotes from third parties, it should not be forgotten when interpreting the results that public opinion was analyzed in terms of the statements published by the daily newspapers, i.e., a journalistic selection. For example, certain people were questioned in interviews, while others were not interviewed. Similarly, only certain readers' letters were considered, while others were not included in the public discussion. Therefore, the statements of quoted persons do not only represent the views of these groups of people but also allow conclusions to be drawn about the respective newspapers. There are apparent differences if we look at the average of all evaluations of the individual newspapers over the entire period (Figure 4). The range extends from 0.08 to -0.51. At 0.08, the 'Münchener Merkur' is the only newspaper with an overall (slightly) positive evaluation in its articles. The newspaper's circulation area is Bavaria, which confirms the widespread view in the literature of a more positive attitude towards federalism in this federal state (Jeffery 1999: 336f.). The most negative view is expressed by the newspaper 'Der Tagesspiegel,' which is located in Berlin.

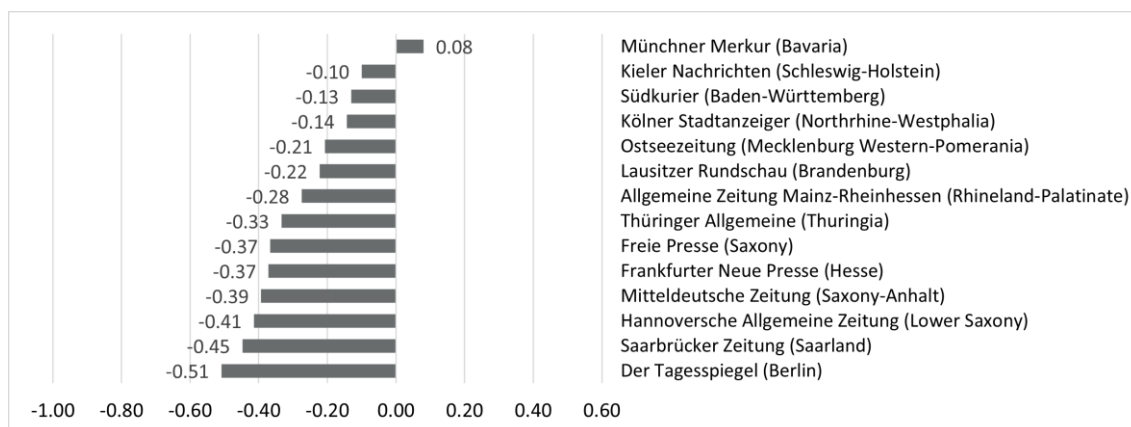


Figure 4: Average of evaluation by media outlets (Source: own compilation)

In modern democracies, the media ideally fulfills the functions of criticism, control and informing (Drentwett 2009: 62 f.). The functions of criticism and control serves to expose grievances in the state, society, and the economy. In addition, it is the media's task to inform citizens in an objective and balanced manner without strongly influencing the formation of opinion in one direction or another. Empirical evidence from this study confirms the assumption in the literature that German media generally have a negative attitude towards federalism: Not only is the majority of statements - i.e., all published statements, including quotes from third parties - negative, but also the majority of journalists (59%) themselves express a negative view (cp. Figure 3). Although these statements serve the critical of the media, there is often a lack of differentiated (and in some cases no) justification as to why the situation is assessed negatively and therefore deserves criticism.

The proportion of neutral statements is on a par with the “Other” group and, at 20%, is significantly lower than one might expect given the informational function of the media. This applies particularly to the exceptional situation of the pandemic, in which the states had unusually extensive legislative powers, which, at least initially, was often accompanied by informative sentences such as “Due to the federal distribution of responsibilities, the federal states decide ...”. Even lower is the proportion of statements in which the journalists juxtapose positive and negative statements. An example of such weighing up can be found in the Freie Presse (28.08.2020, “Hochwertiger Flickenteppich”), which states on the one hand that it was right to leave the degree of relaxation to the states in the phase of manageable case numbers because the virus would have affected Brandenburg, for example, differently than Baden-Württemberg. At the same time, the downsides of federalism became apparent, with the patchwork of regulations confusing citizens and causing their understanding of necessary restrictions to crumble.

4.2 In-depth analysis of citizens' perspectives: examination of statements on federalism in readers' letters

For the analysis, the 46 statements that originated from readers' letters were first selected from all statements in the “Citizens” group. Two new characteristics were then coded, firstly the thematic areas to which the statements refer and secondly the arguments for or against federalism mentioned in the statements. The codes were developed inductively from the empirical material but based on themes and motives known from the literature. Statements that were too short or vague, so that the two characteristics could not be coded, were sorted out. The final sample thus comprises statements from 35 readers' letters.

4.2.1 Thematic areas covered in the readers' letters

The results of the coding (Figure 5) show that mainly two thematic areas are covered in these statements on German federalism during the pandemic. One area relates to actors in the federal system and deals with their behavior and relationship with each other. This is primarily about “federal vs. state”, with Chancellor Angela Merkel and 'the prime ministers' most frequently named as opponents, but also about the interactions of the 16 prime ministers. This thematic area contains 10 statements, including nine negative evaluations and only one positive evaluation.

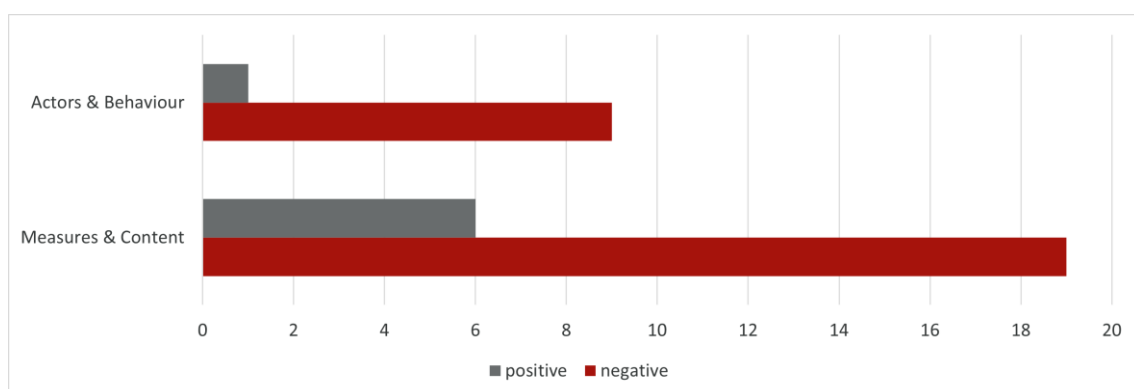


Figure 5: Thematic areas and evaluations in the readers' letters (Source: own compilation)

The other thematic area revolves around policies. This means measures to contain the spread of the Covid-19 virus and, from the beginning of May 2020, i.e., at the end of the nationwide lockdown, the

easing of measures. The statements focus on the extent to which there are differences between the regulations in the 16 states. The central conflict is therefore "uniform vs. regional". With 25 statements (compared to 10) this thematic area was much more touched by readers' letters. Once again, the vast majority of the statements are negative (19 out of 25), while only six are positive.

4.2.2 Arguments pro and contra federalism in the readers' letters

There are two different arguments for the positive and negative statements. Six of the seven positive readers' letters praise federalism for being able to respond better to different conditions in the states with regionally adapted measures. For example, Rainer Prosik (Münchner Merkur, 08.05.2020, "The direction is right") asks, "Why should other states such as Berlin or Brandenburg etc. with far fewer numbers [of infections] take equally strict and sometimes overly strict measures? (...) If you act regionally, you can create or end many things without affecting the entire country." In the other positive argument, the federal democratic constitutional state is presented as a positive counter-image to the situation in a dictatorship like China (Kölner Stadtanzeiger, 30.03.2020).

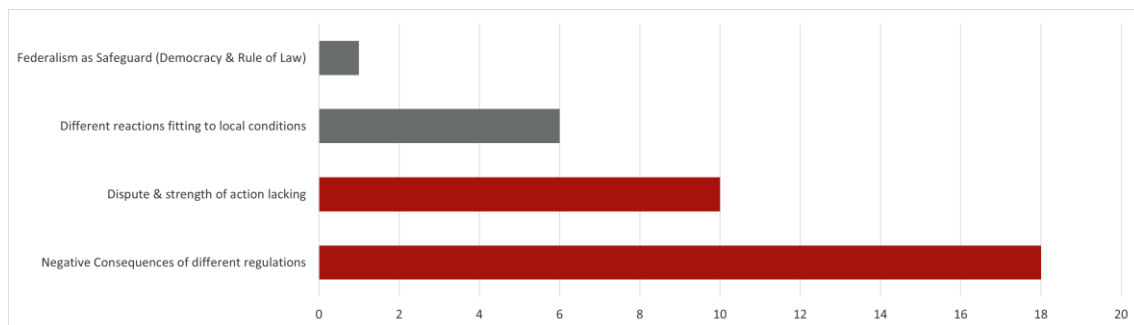


Figure 6: Arguments pro and contra federalism mentioned in the readers' letters (Source: own compilation)

Within the 28 negative statements, 10 statements express the argument that federalism leads to conflict due to many actors with different interests (and self-interest) and consequently that motivation to act would be lacking. Conflicts and disputes are addressed both between the different levels of government as well as between individual states. The large number of actors that decide for their states generally do so independently and lack coordination between them. As a result, this leads to the negative consequence that it was not possible to create a quick and effective policy reaction from a single source for Germany.

The most frequent argument (18 statements) refers to the negative consequences of different regulations such as chaos, confusion or unequal treatment of the citizens of the 16 states. Criticism is levelled at "the unspeakable nature of federalism" in the form of different regulations in the states, which "have in some cases grotesquely intensified during the coronavirus crisis" - as a result, citizens are "constantly concerned with what applies to them and their neighbors", writes, for instance, Bernd Richter from Freiberg (Freie Presse, 06.05.2020, "The curse of federalism").

Conclusion and outlook

"How did the media shape the image of federalism during the Covid-19 pandemic?" This question was examined on the basis of 449 statements from 14 German newspapers published during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic (March to September 2020). The overall answer is that negative assessments of federalism clearly dominate in this sample. In contrast, there were hardly any reports on the

advantages and benefits of federalism. Even the phase of uniformity in state regulations following the agreement on a nationwide lockdown did not change this. The successful stabilization of the infection rate 'despite' different relaxations in the federal states led to fewer negative statements (in absolute numbers), but not to substantially positive ones. A majority of negative statements can be found in the group of citizens, journalists and politicians as a whole; a majority of positive statements can only be found among CDU/CSU state politicians.

The in-depth analysis of citizens' perspectives based on readers' letters reveals a focus on measures and content. The predominantly negative evaluations are directed at the fact that the states have taken different measures during the pandemic, meaning that the regulations differ between the states. This is associated with negative consequences such as chaos, confusion and unequal treatment. The procedural dimension of policymaking is also viewed negatively, with different positions of the prime ministers always being seen as a dispute and the lack of political strength to act due to the large number of players being criticized. This suggests that - as frequently stated in the literature - reservations about federalism are deeply rooted in the Federal Republic of Germany. However, some of these reservations are alarming, as the desire for a powerful nationwide top-down policy by the 'strong man' is taking on a dimension that also raises questions about citizens' attitudes towards democracy.

The present study represents the first comprehensive and systematic investigation of media statements on German federalism. Future research should build on this and apply the research concept over a longer period of time. This should include the further course of the pandemic as well as a comparative period before and after to be able to record any changes over time. In a second step, the analysis could be extended to include a comparison of several federations to determine the extent to which the differences between the various cultures of federalism described in the literature are reflected in the media debate.

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