

Cooperation and Conflict in Florida's Response to COVID-19

Paper Prepared for the LeRoy Collins Institute

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At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis made it clear that he would not issue a statewide mask mandate, but he allowed local governments to issue their own mask mandates. However, in October 2020, Governor DeSantis issued an executive order stating that local governments could not enforce mask mandates. By February 2021, Governor DeSantis voided all fines issued by local governments – retroactively, to the beginning of the pandemic – to businesses for violating county mask mandates. Small counties, such as Liberty County (8,365), may have deemed mask mandates unnecessary. However, large counties, such as Miami-Dade County (2,662,874), may have experienced fewer spikes in COVID-19 cases with a continued ability to enforce mask mandates (Florida Demographics 2021).

Local officials immediately expressed their disapproval of Governor DeSantis’s order. St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Kriseman stated, “I still like having that tool in my tool belt.” He went on, comparing the order to “telling somebody we have a speed limit, we expect you to follow the speed limit, but we’re not going to give you a ticket if you do violate it.” Miami Beach Mayor Dan Gelber believed that the order was politically motivated, “he’s listening to Donald as opposed to epidemiologists and infectious disease specialists” (Allen 2020).

Intergovernmental disagreement is certainly not new; federalism scholars have long examined the sometimes-conflictual relationships between the federal and state governments and, to a lesser extent, between state and local governments. But the 2020 pandemic provides an opportunity to look at these relationships in times of crisis – and when the federal government largely decentralized its power to states in a time of emergency (Artiles et al. 2021; Karch 2021). However, much of the research on these relationships has focused on the federal-state interactions, largely overlooking how local governments responded to state directives as illustrated in the Florida mask example.

We address the state-local relationships during COVID in Florida by asking two research questions: Were state-local relations characterized by cooperation or conflict during COVID-19? Was this relationship a one-off, or does it foreshadow future state-local relations? We deploy a three-part survey of Florida city managers distributed by the Florida League of Cities. The first part asks city managers about their COVID-19 response, including the various shutdown and reopening policies in their counties. The second part asks city managers about their post-COVID-19 predictions. This includes the extent to which they believe the Florida state government has centralized its power during the COVID-19 crisis, and how future centralization might change as a result. The third part asks city managers how closely they worked with their county officials during the COVID-19 crisis. Sixty-

seven Florida city managers responded to our survey, garnering an 18 percent response rate. The survey was conducted from August to October 2020.

1. Florida cities took a mix of actions to close and then reopen in response to COVID-19.

The survey asked respondents if they had taken actions to close and then reopen their cities. They were given nine possible closing actions and nine possible reopening actions. These are listed in Table 1.

As shown in Figure 1, Florida cities used a number of the possible closing actions; the mean value was 5.58 out of nine possible actions. Fifty-one percent of the cities reported six or more closing actions. The maximum number of closing actions in our sample was eight out of nine. The most common closing measure was declaring a state of emergency (51 out of 57), with banning large group gatherings being a close second (49 out of 57). The least common closing measure was establishing a curfew (11 out of 57), with issuing a stay-at-home order being the second least common action (30 out of 57). Over half or more cities closed non-essential businesses (41 out of 57), closed beaches, parks, and boardwalks (44 out of 57), required masks (44 out of 57), and closed down bars (44 out of 57).

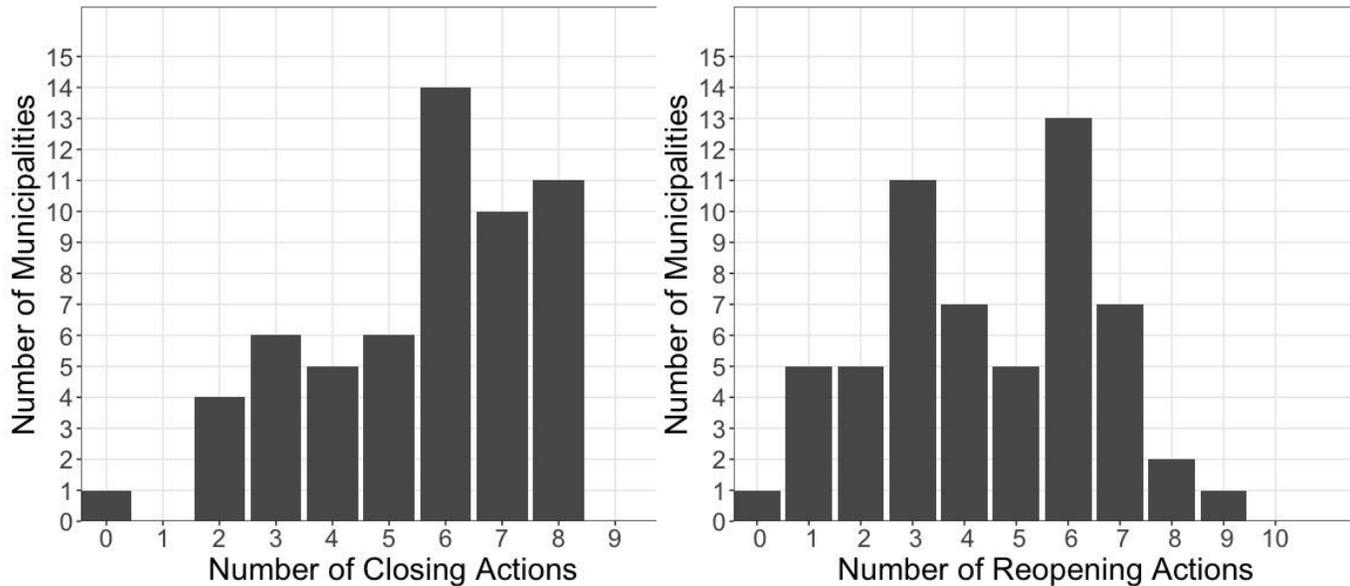
As expected, given the high number of closing actions, nearly all cities in our sample reopened to at least some degree, although the mean value was only 4.4 out of 9 (see Figure 1). Almost every city in our sample underwent at least one reopening action, and one city reopened entirely. The most common reopening measure was reopening non-essential businesses (40 out of 57). A close second was reopening beaches, parks, and boardwalks (39 out of 57). The least common reopening measure was lifting mask requirements (7 out of 57).

In summary, Florida cities were actively engaged in both closing and reopening activities during the COVID-19 crisis alongside the issuance of executive orders of the governor. Florida issued more COVID-related executive orders than the average state. Moreover, Florida was especially preemptive in its executive orders, removing power from its localities (Weissert et al. 2021).

Table 1. Closing and Reopening Topics Covered in Survey

Curfew	State of emergency
Large group gatherings	Stay-at-home order
Non-essential businesses	Masks
Beaches, parks, and boardwalks	Bars and restaurants
Other	

Figure 1. Closing and Reopening Actions in Florida During COVID-19

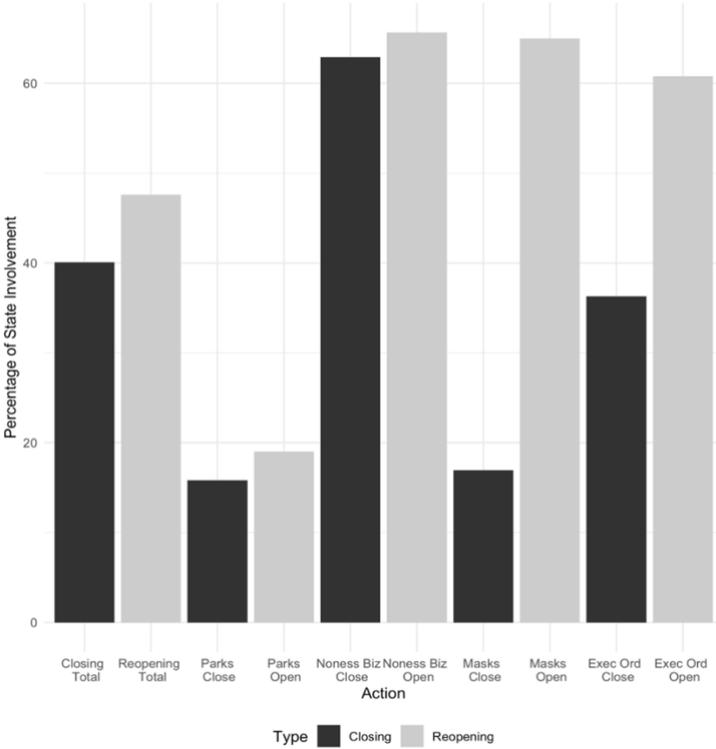


2. *City managers felt that the state of Florida was mildly involved in their local affairs.*

Figure 2 presents the extent to which city managers felt that the state of Florida was involved in various closing and reopening measures. For each of the nine closing and nine reopening activities, we asked the local officials to rate on a scale of 0-100 how involved the state was in those activities. Across both closing and reopening actions during the COVID-19 pandemic, city managers rated state involvement a 43 out of 100. Interestingly the state involvement was perceived to be greater in the reopening period (48 out of 100) than the closing period (40 out of 100). This likely reflects that fact that Governor DeSantis was more eager to reopen than to close. In fact, in September 2020, Governor DeSantis vowed, “we will never do any of these lockdowns again” (Swisher 2020).

Regarding overall, issue-specific ratings, city managers felt the state of Florida was more involved in non-essential businesses (64 out of 100) and bars (72 out of 100) than in mask mandates (29 out of 100) and parks (17 out of 100). The results for these categories are unsurprising, given that Governor DeSantis set state standards for restaurant and bar closures, but declined to mandate masks.

Figure 2. Perceived Involvement of State Government in Closing and Reopening Actions



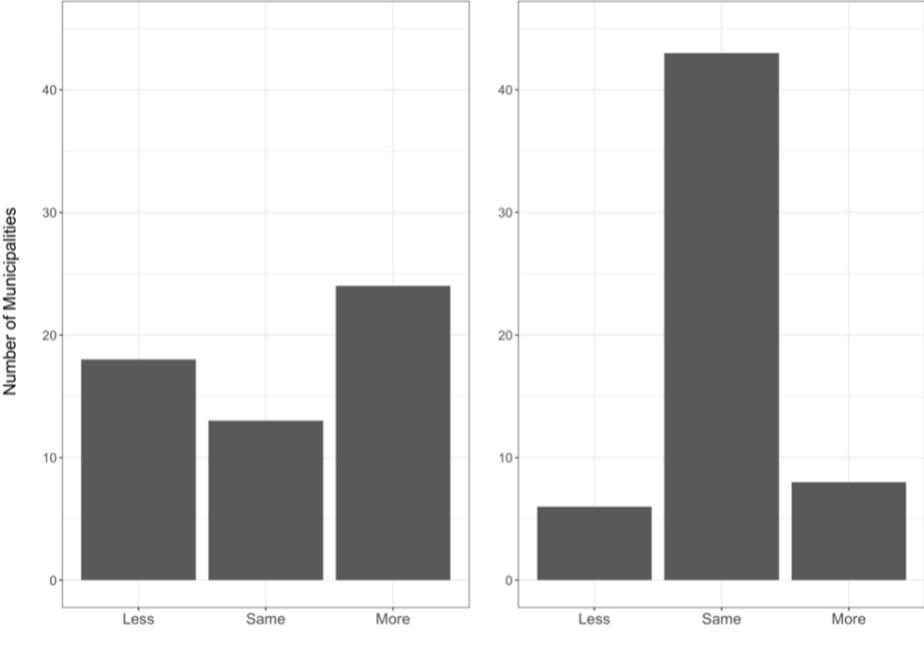
3. Is COVID-19 a game changer or a one-off in State-Local emergency responses?

Florida is no stranger to intergovernmental responses to emergencies—most notably hurricanes but also algae blooms, storms, wildfires, and most recently collapsed buildings. Yet the COVID-19 crisis was more sustained and involved the entire state (and the country) simultaneously in ways unlike anything previously experienced. The question for some scholars is whether the intergovernmental response was a game changer for future relationships or whether the state-local relationships would revert to previous levels.

We asked respondents two questions: to compare state action in COVID-19 to other emergencies and to predict whether they thought there would be a long-term impact of the state-local emergency response after COVID.

When asked to compare how state action in COVID-19 compared to other emergencies 44 percent of respondents said that state involvement in COVID-19 was higher, while 32 percent said it was lower. 24 percent said that state involvement was about the same. However, the city managers were more certain about the longer-term impact of this engagement. In short, they don't think there will be much impact. Some 75 percent expect state involvement in local affairs to return to about the same post-COVID-19. On the other hand, 14 percent expect state involvement to increase; 11 percent expect state involvement to decrease.

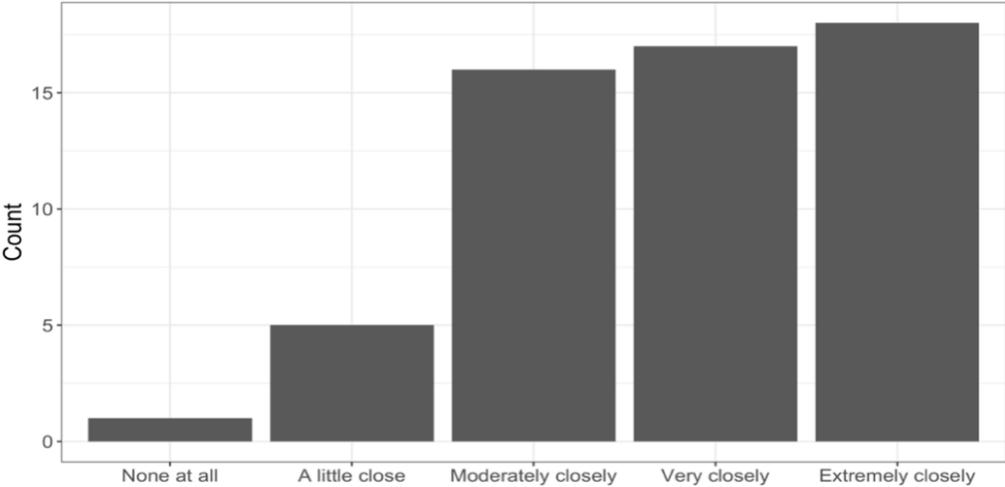
Figure 3. Perceived State Involvement, During and Post-COVID-19



3. *City managers worked very closely with their fellow county officials.*

Intergovernmental relations are horizontal as well as vertical; cities work regularly with their county counterparts in both daily and extraordinary times. The response to COVID-19 was no different. As shown in Figure 4, city managers were asked about their interactions with their counties. Nearly 60 percent of respondents said they worked extremely closely or very closely with county officials, while 28 percent said they worked moderately closely. Only 11 percent of respondents said their interactions were a little close or not at all close.

Figure 4. Perceived Collaboration with County Officials



Horizontal cooperation between cities and counties was also documented in open-ended questions (see Table 2). These questions allowed city managers to give explicit feedback about their county governments – positive or negative. City managers were asked to provide examples of how they worked together. Many respondents highlighted the regular and frequent communication between the officials.

Other positive interactions noted were helping with obtaining supplies of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), seeking reimbursement from federal grants, participation in publicly televised events sponsored by the county, issuance of joint city-county orders on mask requirements and curfews, coordination of testing sites, emergency orders and food delivery programs, and seeking city input in county declarations.

Table 2. Positive Collaboration with Counties, Reported by City Managers

“Daily calls on all COVID-19 issues of all City Managers in the County with the County Managers’ office”
"Consistent policy development"
"Collaboration on policies related to partial reopening parameters"
"Reporting what the County is doing on a weekly basis”
“Regular conference calls to enhance communication”

4. However, the collaboration was not uniform; some city managers reported problems with their fellow county officials.

Many respondents highlighted a lack of communication about shutdown measures (see Table 3). Namely, respondents felt that their counties did not provide enough notice to cities, so that their cities could provide enough notice to residents, about shutdown measures. One respondent noted: “I’ve asked the County to try and avoid releasing news of new Emergency Orders late on a Friday so that cities had time to respond but that took more time than it should have to accomplish.”

Several respondents made mention of a federal law: The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Namely, respondents felt that their county government took too long to allocate this money. Several respondents felt that their county government did not do enough about enforcing different shutdown policies, causing “confusion regarding enforcement and applicability among the public.” Some respondents felt that their county was too preemptive on matters such as mask enforcement, citing their “overbearing” nature.

Table 3. Negative Collaboration with Counties, Reported by City Managers

“Overbearing on mask enforcement”
“County would not adopt beach closures during spring break”
“I’ve asked the County to try and avoid releasing news of new Emergency Orders late on a Friday so that cities had time to respond but that took more time than it should have to accomplish.”
“County making strategic decisions without input from municipalities, restricting input on EOC Zoom calls”
“There was very limited involvement by our city at the county level”

Conclusions and Implications

Deploying an original, three-part survey distributed by the Florida League of Cities to determine whether state and local relations were characterized by conflict or cooperation during the COVID-19 pandemic. We asked local officials about their closing and reopening measures, as well as their views on Governor DeSantis’

executive orders. These questions have been met with mixed evidence in the literature.

We found that, while intergovernmental relations are often characterized by conflict, this was not the case in Florida during the COVID-19 pandemic. City managers met Governor DeSantis' executive actions cooperatively and worked closely with county officials to meet the needs of their citizens. City managers acknowledged that centralization during COVID-19 was higher than during other emergencies. However, city managers also believed that this centralization was temporary, and would return to normal after COVID-19. These findings run contrary to the expectation that conflict would be a natural consequence of the ideological heterogeneity in Florida, especially between Republican Governor Ron DeSantis and many of his Democratic localities. The bottom line of our findings is quite optimistic: if cooperation can prevail in a state such as Florida, it can prevail in other states.

Based on our survey results, we provide the following recommendations to local administrators in Florida. We found that cooperation could permeate even in an electorally fractious state like Florida – at least for a portion of a national emergency. However, more research will need to be conducted to evaluate the strength of our survey's findings.

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