Generalitat de Catalunya
Escola d'Administració Pública de Catalunya

Ethics and legitimacy of institutions solving wicked problems: the Catalan elections during the COVID-19 crisis

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REDEM Workshop Reconstructing Democracy in Times of Crisis: A Voter-Centred Perspective. Strengthening Electoral Participation

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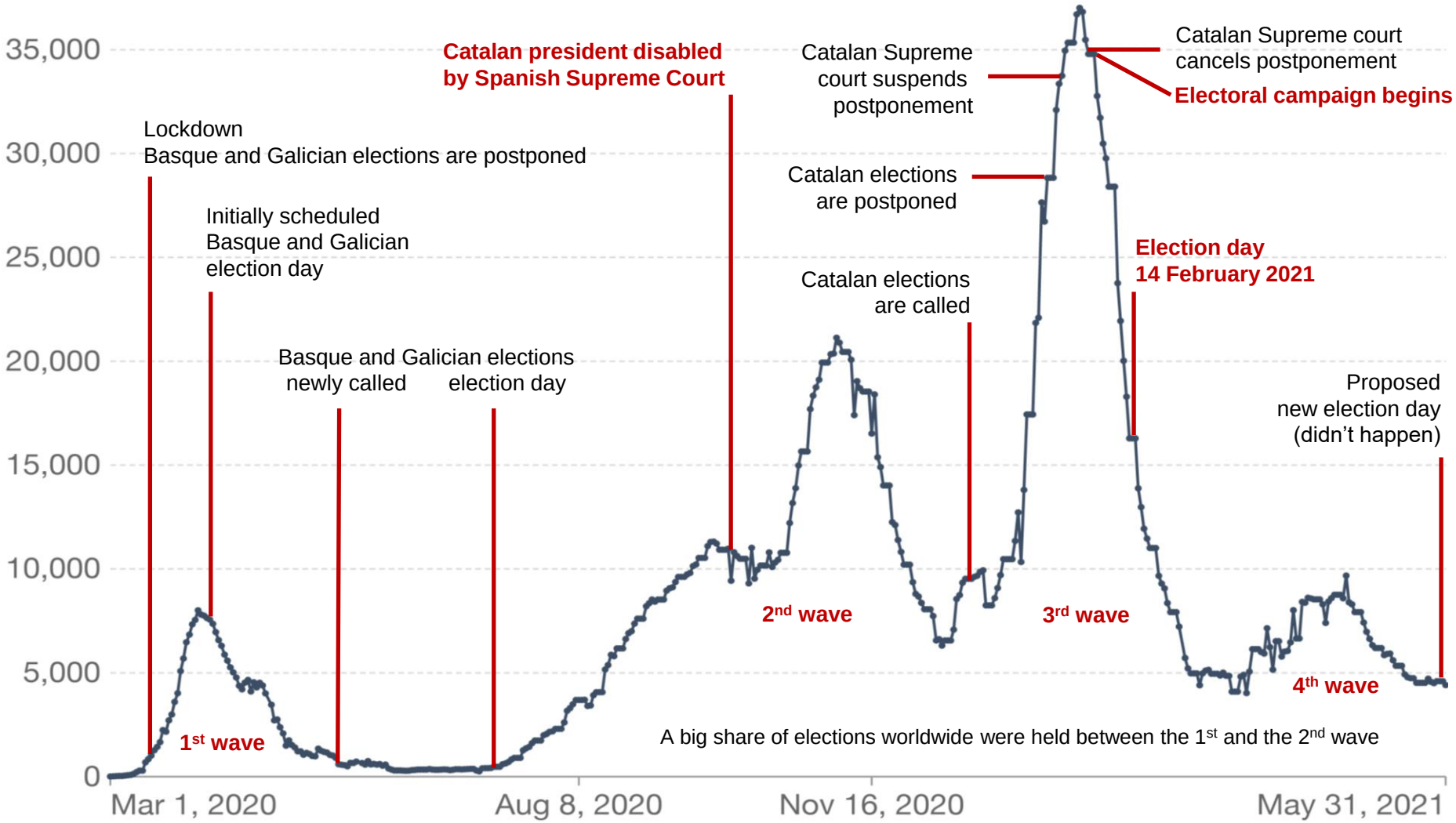
A wicked problem

Elections and the COVID crisis: Catalan Parliament 2021



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Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases, 7-day rolling average.
Source: OurWorld in Data / Johns Hopkins University CSSE COVID-19 Data

A wicked problem

- There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem.
- Wicked problems have no stopping rule.
- Solutions to wicked problems are not true-or-false, but better or worse.
- There is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem.
- Every solution to a wicked problem is a "one-shot operation".
- Wicked problems do not have an enumerable (or an exhaustively describable) set of potential solutions.
- Every wicked problem is essentially unique.
- Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem.
- The existence of a discrepancy representing a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways.
- The social planner are liable for the consequences they generate.

Rittel, H.W.J. & Webber, M.M. (1973). “Dilemmas in a general theory of planning”.

The solutions

Splitting the problem into smaller parts

The **health** scenario

- Minimize the risk to vote
- Minimize the risk of taking part in the organization (esp. polling stations)

The **right to vote** scenario

- Everyone has to be able to vote, no exceptions
- Prevent abstention for non-political reasons (e.g. fear)

The **legitimacy** scenario

- Maximize transparency and consensus about the electoral process
- Minimize boycott to the electoral institution, intended and unintended

Open Government

The **transparency and open data** component

- All data open: health, budget, protocols, procedures, minutes of meetings… and also: doubts, dissensus, issues
- Minimize the risk of taking part in the organization (esp. polling stations)

The **participation** component

- G2G, political parties, citizens
- Active listening

The **collaboration** component

- Co-design
- Co-management

The Administration as a Platform

Protocols

- Polling stations and voting procedures
- COVID Office (i.e. protection)
- Electoral campaigning
- Institutional communication and ways of voting
- Parties' Table of Dialogue (political parties + government)

Tools for different profiles to foster autonomy and empowerment

Voters	Polling stations	Infected and disabled people	Elderly people
Local administrations	COVID Officers	Representatives of the Administration	Candidates Media

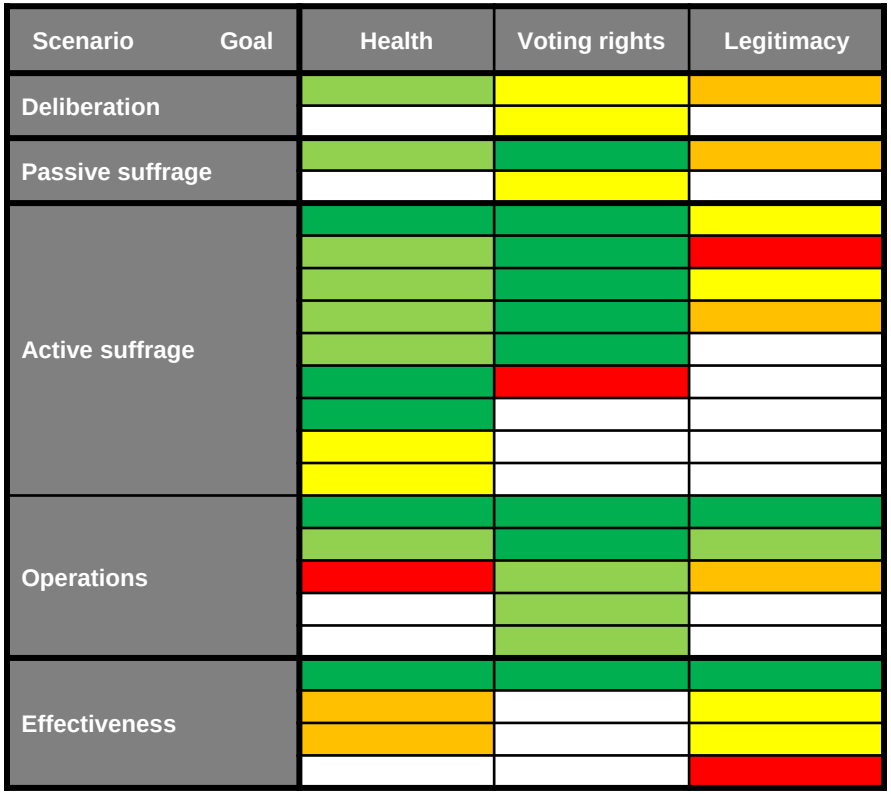
The instruments

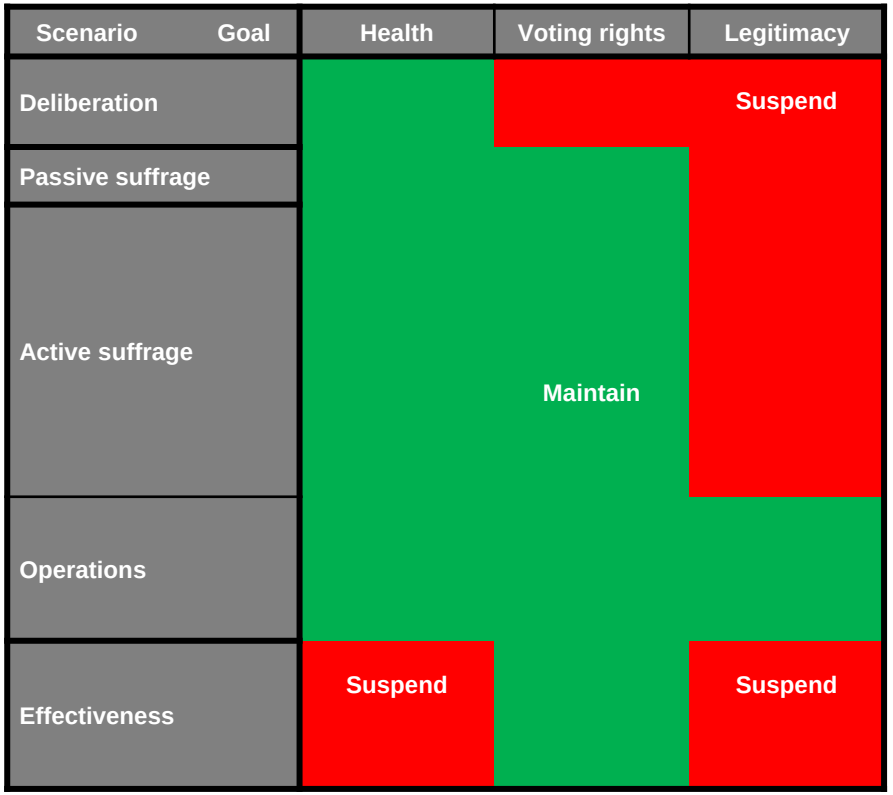
Scoreboard, indicators and decision thresholds

Health scenarios for elections

Scenario	EPC21-Normal	EPC21-Newnormal	EPC21-Local	EPC21-Stage4	EPC21-Tram3	EPC21-Stage2	EPC21-Stage1	EPC21-Stop	EPC21-Lockdown
Mobility Social Activity Voting issues Electoral Protocol COVID19	Progression according to ▪ Value of RT significantly and persistently varies ▪ Number of hospitalizations significantly and persistently varies								

Tasks and risks scoreboard





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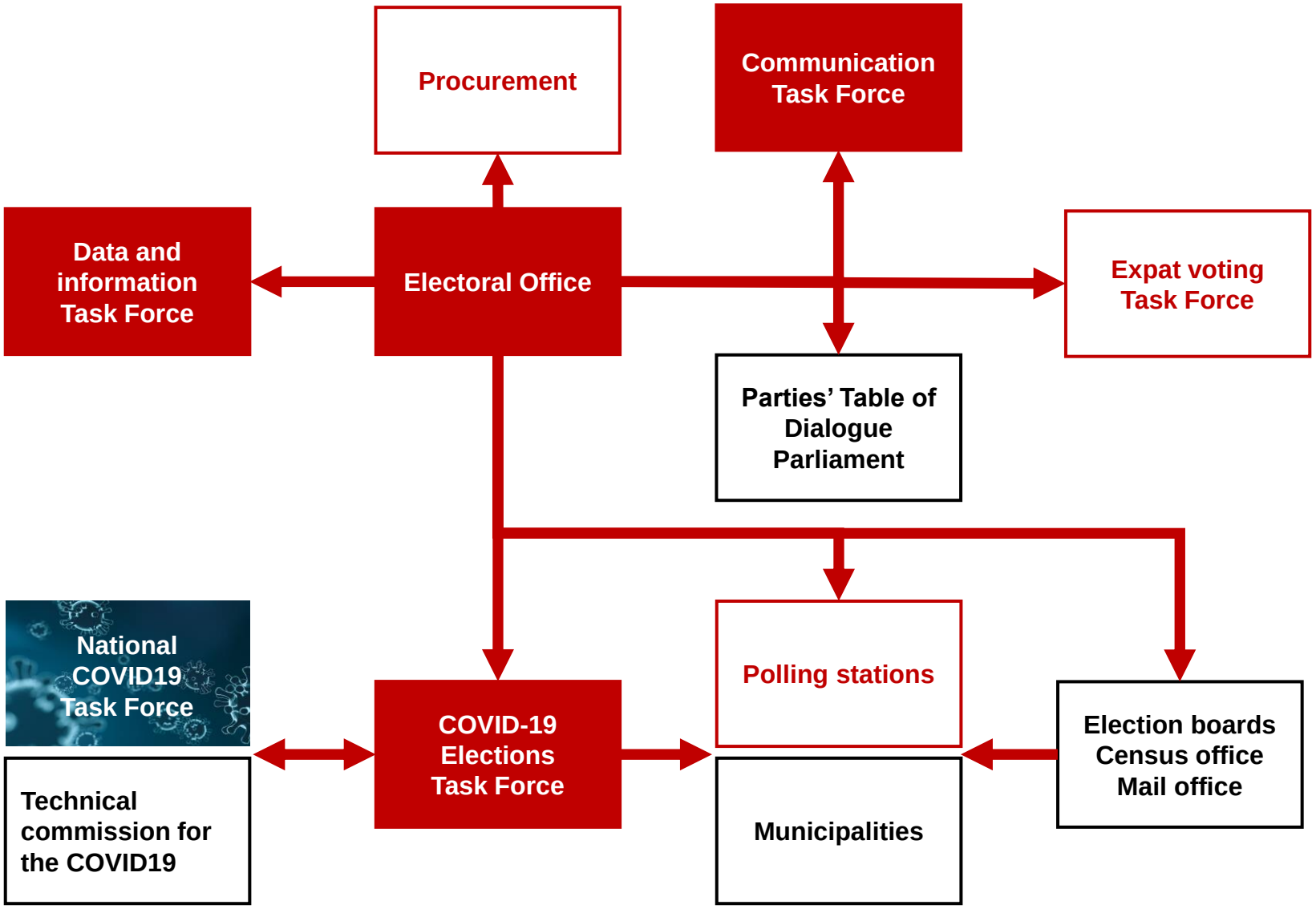
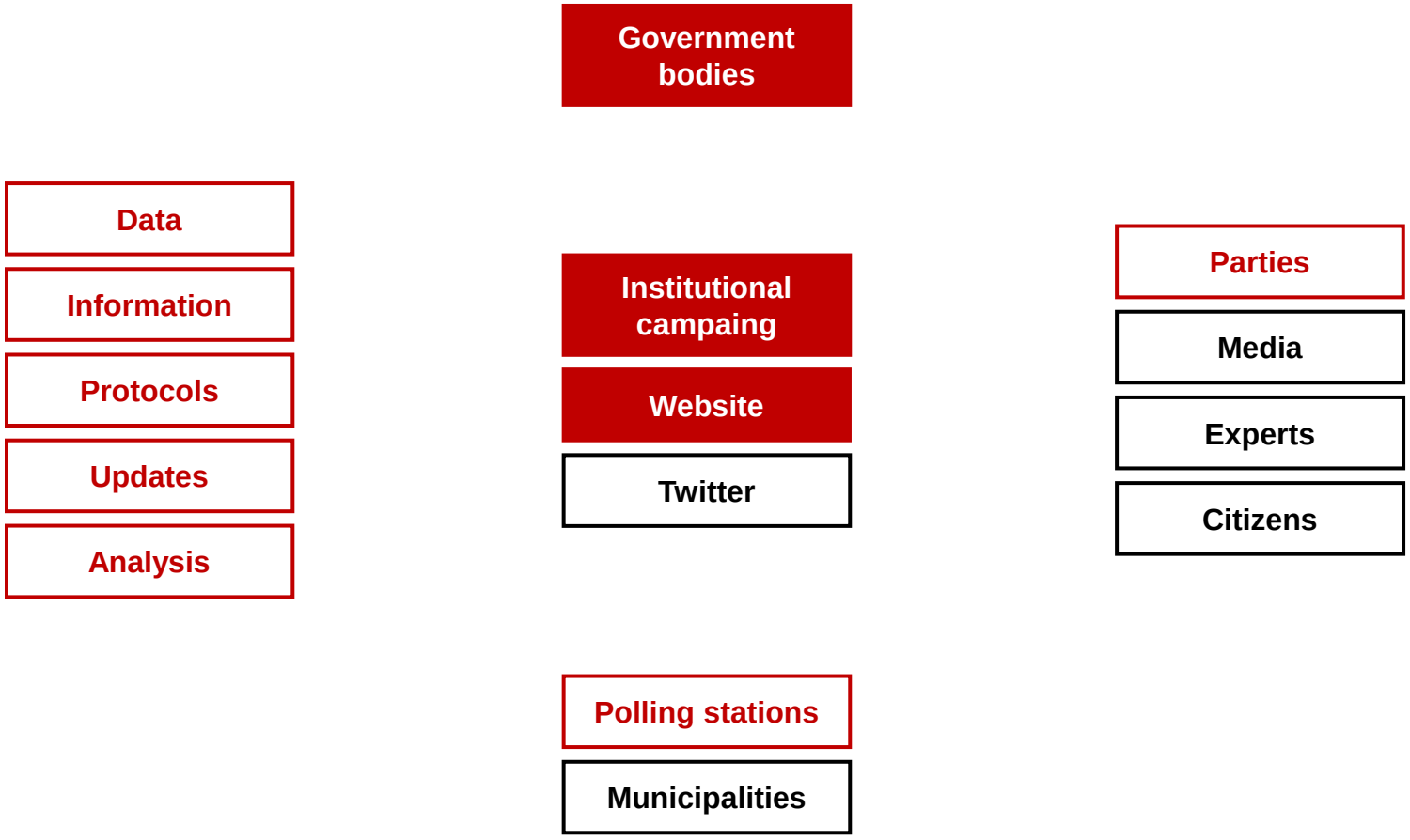
Was of great inspiration: James, T.S. & Alihodzic, S. (2020). "When Is It Democratic to Postpone an Election? Elections During Natural Disasters, COVID-19, and Emergency Situations".

Dedicated task forces & coordinating devices



Transmedia communication strategy



Last thoughts

Three main phases

- Design: be open and collaborative, name, frame
- Implement: work consensus, empower actors
- Explain: be defensive (i.e. protect both team and project)

Keys for legitimacy

- Plan in (much) advance, master the issue
- Set the pace, tone and level
- Radical transparency, become authority
- Be quick to advance the issues, leave no room for doubts
- Own the higher ground, leave no room for mis-/dis-information

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