RESEARCH ARTICLE

PoliSEAmaking: Accountabilities in Economic Responses to COVID-19 of Southeast Asian Governments

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Abstract

This paper examines the connection between governments' accountability and their responses to the global economic crisis caused by COVID-19 through the lens of competing principals approach. Given that governments' sense of accountability towards groups of principals may vary, it may affect the policy outcomes as well. In the case of Covid-19 pandemic, the dilemma manifests in the extent to which the governments spend their resources on economic assistance to the people. By using the ever-growing corpus of data on economic responses, such as The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) as well as the compilation of several measures for political accountabilities, regime types, and COVID-related public health, this study finds that, unlike other regions in the world, the only type of accountability predicting Southeast Asian (SEA) governments' level of economic support to the people is diagonal accountability leveraged by the media and civil societies (CSOs). This finding not only illustrates the dilemma faced by the governments as an agent in a multi-principal scenario, but also indicate that a) SEA governments generally do not feel directly liable to its people; b) they do not feel pressured by the check and balances mechanisms of formal institutions, either; and c) they only feel obligated to do something when the issue is being publicized in the news or mobilized by the CSOs.

Keywords: *Accountability, Policymaking, Covid-19, Southeast Asia, Economic Response*

บทความวิจัย

ความรับผิดรับชอบและการให้ความช่วยเหลือทางเศรษฐกิจในช่วงโควิด-19 ของรัฐบาลในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความวิจัยนี้ศึกษาถึงความเชื่อมโยงระหว่างความรับผิดรับชอบของรัฐบาลและปฏิกิริยาต่อวิกฤตการณ์เศรษฐกิจที่เป็นผลมาจากการระบาดของโรคโควิด-19 โดยผ่านกรอบคิดเรื่อง competing principals ที่ชี้ให้เห็นว่าความรู้สึกรับผิดรับชอบของรัฐบาลต่อผู้มีส่วนได้ส่วนเสียต่าง ๆ นั้นอาจไม่เท่ากัน และอาจส่งผลต่อผลิตผลเชิงนโยบายด้วยเช่นกัน ในกรณีของการระบาดของโรคโควิด-19นั้น ผลเชิงนโยบายนั้นแสดงออกมาในรูปแบบที่รัฐต้องตัดสินใจว่าจะทุ่มเทรัพยากรเพื่อให้การช่วยเหลือทางเศรษฐกิจแก่ประชาชนกลุ่มไหน มากน้อยเพียงใด โดยอาศัยข้อมูลเชิงปริมาณและการเก็บสถิติเรื่องการให้การช่วยเหลือทางเศรษฐกิจของแต่ละประเทศจาก The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) และตัวชี้วัดแบบมหภาคอื่น ๆ งานศึกษาชิ้นนี้พบว่าภูมิภาคเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้นั้นมีความแตกต่างจากที่อื่น ๆ ในโลก กล่าวคือ ความรู้สึกรับผิดรับชอบของรัฐบาลต่อผู้มีส่วนได้ส่วนเสียต่าง ๆ แบบเดียวที่มีผลต่อระดับการให้การช่วยเหลือทางเศรษฐกิจต่อประชาชนของรัฐบาลในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ คือ แบบแนวทแยง (diagonal accountability) ซึ่งเกิดจากการที่สื่อมวลชนและภาคประชาสังคมเปิดเผยและให้ข้อมูลต่อสาธารณชนเพื่อสร้างแรงกดดันต่อรัฐอีกทางหนึ่ง ข้อค้นพบนี้ไม่เพียงแสดงให้เห็นถึงสภาวะกลืนไม่เข้าคายไม่ออกที่รัฐต้องเผชิญเมื่อมีผู้มีส่วนได้ส่วนเสียจำนวนมากในกระบวนการกำหนดนโยบายแต่ยังสะท้อนอีกด้วยว่า 1) รัฐบาลในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้อาจไม่ได้รู้สึกถึงความรับผิดรับชอบต่อประชาชนโดยตรงมากนัก 2) รัฐบาลในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้อาจไม่ได้รู้สึกถึงความรับผิดรับชอบต่อกลไกเชิงบริหาร เช่น การตรวจสอบและคานอำนาจเช่นเดียวกัน และ 3) รัฐบาลในเอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้จะรู้สึกว่าต้องทำอะไรบางอย่างเพื่อตอบสนองหรือให้การช่วยเหลือประชาชนก็ต่อเมื่อสื่อและภาคประชาสังคมเริ่มตีแผ่ปัญหาและให้ข้อมูลแก่สาธารณชน

คำสำคัญ: *ความรับผิดชอบ, การกำหนดนโยบาย, โควิด-19, เอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้, การตอบสนองทางเศรษฐกิจ*

Introduction

At the time of this writing, the spread of a novel virus known as Coronavirus or COVID-19 has been in full swing. So far, at least 4.3 million people around the world is infected and almost 300,000 lives have already been taken away by this pandemic ("Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Situational Report-116" 2020); there is no telling when this global health crisis will be fully contained. This pandemic also brought about other consequences, one of which is a global economic downturn caused by an abrupt halt in activities in almost every economic sectors.

In order to "flatten the curve" and relieved some burden from the overwhelmed healthcare systems, governments had adopted ranges of strict public health measures such as school and factory closures, interstate travel restrictions, and city lockdowns (Atkeson 2020). While these measures looked to be effective in curbing the infections, they had simultaneously impaired the economic productivities by limiting human mobility and business operations (Anderson et al. 2020; Eichenbaum, Rebelo, and Trabandt 2020). Gita Gopinath, Economic Counsellor and Director of the Research Department at the International Monetary Fund (IMF), warned that the economic impact of lockdown measures worldwide will "…makes the Great Lockdown the worst recession since the Great Depression, and far worse than the Global Financial Crisis (Gopinath 2020)." In the same blog post, she also reported that IMF's April World Economic Outlook had projected the global GDP growth in 2020 to decline to -3%, accumulating the loss of about 9 trillion dollars. This figure is significantly larger than the 2009 Global Financial Crisis when the world's GDP growth plunged to -1%. Similarly, other international organizations and consulting firms have expressed concerns about the economic impacts of COVID-19.

For governments around the world, they have been facing challenges beyond just plummeting macroeconomic figures. Initially, International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated the number of unemployed individuals due to the Coronavirus to be around 25 million, but as the pandemic progressed, they said that this number might be soon exceeded (Ryder 2020). Thus, the governments were expected to come up with viable solutions that could alleviate issues on all front, preventing the spread of this health crisis while at the same time absorbing the potential fallouts from social and economic catastrophe. Among many other measures and policies, majority of the countries chose to pass bills approving stimulus packages and rate cuts in order to jolt their markets from economic

stagnation as well as tiding both business owners and workers over in this tough time; however, the depth and breadth of such packages tend to vary.

Scholars have long been interested in explaining variations in policy choices. Specifically on policymaking during economic crises, Gourevitch (1986) analyzed five capitalistic countries' responses to three different global economic crises including one in the last quarter of the 19th century, the Great Depression and "the wide gyrations" of the 1970s and 1980s (Diebold, Jr. 1987).[1] He found that political coalitions played a significant role in policymaking as they determined the policy choices during the time of crisis. These coalitions, while effectively gave support to ruling parties and their policies, did not emerge and operate in a vacuum. Gourevitch argued that an arising crisis could potentially change the status quo conditions; thus, agitated the existing political orders and forces it to rearrange and affect the policy outcomes whether the governments choose to take on the neoclassical approach or welfare state assistance and everything in between (Gourevitch 1986). Later during the Great Economic Recession of 2008, Kregel (2011) observed a decline in the use of traditional Keynesian approach to economic policymaking like stimulus packages or expanded social expenditure for emergency; particularly, in the United States.[2] A more detailed discussion on other political factors and their roles in determining economic policies will be presented in the following section.

This paper seeks to explore the relationship between policymaking and the concept of accountability amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of Southeast Asia (SEA). The remaining of this paper proceeds as follow: first, I briefly review the extant literature on political determinants of economic policies. Second, a theoretical conjecture about how accountability to multiple principals may affect the governments' economic responses to COVID-19 is put forth. Then, research design and methodology are discussed before I present the results and discuss the contributions as well as the limitations of the findings.

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[1] The said five countries were Sweden, France, United States, United Kingdom, and Germany.

[2] While economists continue to advocate for Keynesian policies like stimulus packages to jolt the economy from recession resulted from the acute decline in output and rising unemployment that come after a paralysis of short-term money markets, such policies usually unable to obtain political support from politicians. This is because they think stimulus packages are just a short-term solution to the problem and sometimes ineffective because people who receive the payment are likely to save it rather than spending and stimulate the market with consumption (Kregel 2011; Lambro 2009; Gravelle and Hungerford, Thomas L. Labonte 2013).

Literature Review

The emphasis of this section of the paper is to review some political factors that scholars have suggested to have an impact on the governments' decision to enact certain economic policies. When democracy gained tremendous traction in the world after the end of Cold War and the collapse of Soviet Union, scholars became intrigued by linkage between electoral prospects and economic conditions. According to Lewis-Beck (1986), "when the economic conditions appear better (worse), voters are more (less) likely to favor the incumbent [317]." While studies in economic voting still lack a consensus on theoretical mechanisms as to whether and how economic conditions affect electoral behaviors, they have provided a clear rational choice explanation about the ruling government's incentive to improve its reelection probability by ensuring good economic conditions (Pacek 1994). Anchoring on that rationality, two related political terms arise—political surfing and political business cycles (PBCs). Political surfing occurs when the ruling government sets the date for general elections during when the economic conditions are good while PBCs refer to the government's attempt to manipulate the economy, usually through stimulus packages, during the election cycle (Chowdhury 1993).[3]

In *Political Control of the Economy* (1978), Tufte suggested that the incumbents vying for reelection have an incentive to inject economic stimuli into the market and manipulate retrospective voters before the elections. These stimuli, he said, usually come in a form of either direct transfers, such as social security, veterans' benefits, other cash payments, or even tax breaks before election periods since the incumbents prefer policy instruments that can deliver tangible and attributable (to incumbents) economic benefits to large numbers or targeted groups of voters. Contrastingly, some scholars (e.g., Alesina & Roubini, 1992; Alt & Chrystal, 1983; Hibbs, 1987) suspected that PBCs may only have little effect on electoral outcomes or are driven by partisanship more than self-interested personal motive of politicians. The evidence and counterevidence regarding the existence and importance of PBCs on votes have been found in both case-specific and large-N comparative studies.[4] As the field of electoral

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[3] In this section, I only reviewed studies on PBCs. Those who are interested in the political surfing, which has its own plethora of literature, may find works of Balke (1991); Chowdhury (1993); Heckelman (2001); Ito & Park (1988); Lächler (1982) to be good starting points in their endeavor.

[4] Drazen (2000), Franzese, Jr., (2002), and Wynia (2009) provided excellent review on political business cycles literature.

behaviors advances, our understanding about politics and economic policies become more contextually and theoretically nuanced. Adding upon a pivotal work of Tufte (1978), who characterized PBCs as a "murder mystery", the more recent works added cofounding factors that may affect such relationship. For example, similar to the work of Gourevitch (1986) previously mentioned, Goodhart (2000) and Tsebelis (2002) found that the interplay between coalitions and veto players within them may determine whether the governments would choose to manipulate economic policies or the timing of implementation. Moreover, Shi and Svensson (2006) also found that PBCs found in developing countries are larger in magnitude and are statistically more prominent than those in developed countries; hence illustrating the role of regime types in the breadth of economic stimuli.

In summary, the issue of politics and the economy are interrelated. Politicians, mostly the incumbents, have pursued electoral, personal, and partisan goals simultaneously through economic policies since they have the advantage of controlling the process of policymaking (Tufte 1978). However, factors such as coalitions, political business cycles, electoral rules, and institutional arrangement can alter the otherwise quite straightforward logic of economic manipulation for political gains. The extant literature discussed above is in no way a complete list of political factors that affect economic policies. Given the torrential amount of literature in political economy, one can only hope to cover it adequately. Nonetheless, I proceed to consider scholastic attempts to explore the variations in economic responses from the government specifically to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As aforementioned, this pandemic is a crisis like no other as it is on its way to causing one of the worst, if not the worst, economic recessions in modern history. Even Carmen Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff, whose seminal book debunked the myths surrounding the 2008-2009 credit crisis by demonstrating that it was not a unique phenomenon but rather a persistent pattern, speculated in their recent interview with *Bloomberg Markets* that, "It's [the Coronavirus pandemic] certainly different from prior pandemics (Kennedy 2020)."[5] Since there is still no cure to this virus and it is highly contagious, many governments are hard pressed to adopt severe public health measures such as school and factory

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[5] Reinhart and Rogoff's book is, ironically, called *This Time Is Different: Eight Centuries of Financial Folly* (2009)

closures, interstate travel restrictions, and city lockdowns although doing so will cripple the economy and productivity at least in short-term; or even longer (Atkeson 2020). Therefore, it is important to understand how governments around the globe produce policies to deal with the tradeoff between public safety and the economy. There are many news articles and academic working papers that have speculated the damage of COVID-19 on the global economy; yet there are still only few studies that examine the big picture of how the governments have reacted to the pandemic in a form of economic and/or financial assistance to its people.

For one, Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR) published a special series book called *Mitigating the COVID Economic Crisis: Act Fast and Do Whatever It Takes* (2020), where renowned economists contributed to the debate of how Coronavirus affect the global economy as well as how the governments should deal with the economic fallouts of health-related measures. Broadly, the idea that containment of the virus should take priority is unanimous among the contributors. Also, they similarly called for the governments to do several things in order to mitigate the risk of global economic crisis: 1) keeping people employed for as long as possible, and when that fails, fiscal packages like cash transfers or unemployment assistance need to be adopted immediately; 2) keeping small-medium sized businesses above the water by offering soft loans, tax waivers, and suspending loan payments; and 3) Central Banks or similar monetary authorities should also prop up banks that are lending to those SMEs in terms of liquidity (Baldwin and Weder di Mauro 2020)

From an empirical perspective, University of Oxford's Blavatnik School of Government created The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT), which has been systematically collecting "...information on several different common policy responses governments have taken, scores the stringency of such measures, and aggregates these scores into a common Stringency Index (Hale et al. 2020)." In the working paper that accompanied the launch of the Tracker and the dataset, the authors observed that government responses have become more stringent over the course of the outbreak; thus, the spread of the virus, as measured by infection rate, should be negatively correlated with the levels of stringency of the governments' measures. Similarly, as creators of COVID-19 Economic Stimulus Index (CESI), Elgin and his colleagues (2020) attempted to test the assumption that countries' economic responses are

shaped by country characteristics, pandemic-related variables and public health measures (Correia, Luck, and Verner 2020). They found that the median age of the population, the number of hospital beds per-capita, GDP per-capita, and the number of total cases are all predictors of the countries' economic policy responses to the pandemic (Elgin, Basbug, and Yallaman 2020). While it is intuitive that the governments may choose to deploy economic responses based on expected risks (e.g., elderly population who might be susceptible to the virus) or capacities (e.g., healthcare system capacity and economic capacity), this work overlooked some of the political indicators that may explain the observed variations in terms of economic responses to COVID-19.

This paper attempts to fill in the said gap by examining the connection between governments' accountability and their responses to the global economic crisis caused by COVID-19 through the lens of competing principals approach. I posit that the concept of accountability plays a role in policymaking; and it is rather important to explore where the governments' sense of accountability lies in time of crisis such as this. In the next section, I propose my theoretical conjecture regarding the concept of accountability and policymaking amidst the Coronavirus pandemic.

Theory

1.1 Accountability in Policymaking: Competing Principals Approach

Before I proceed, it is important to clarify the term "accountability," which is central to the conceptual framework of this paper. According to Brandsma & Adriaensen (2017), there are two mainstream definitions of accountability. American scholars stress on the responsiveness and transparency aspect of the term while European scholars also pay attention to the monitoring mechanisms as a factor that may alter agents' incentive to remain accountable to any specific principals. This paper adopts the middle ground definition of accountability that combines the two perspectives together to emphasize the principal-agent underlying of the term. Here, accountability refers to constraints put upon the government's use of power by principals in order to promote transparency. These constraints can be either through formal or informal mechanisms as they both can compel the government to justify its actions, becoming responsive to demands of the principals, or facing potential sanctions.

According to the principal-agent theory, any stable regimes require the governing body, a so-called agent, to be held accountable by groups of principals, though the coalition size or strength of those groups may vary.[6] In a scenario in which different groups of principals have different monitoring and sanctioning power, these groups' ability to solicit policy commitment from the government may vary as well. This scenario creates what are known as competing principals—relevant political actors all vying to influence the government's actions and policy outcomes through diverse ways and means. Scholars of democratization have characterized three main groups of principals who could hold the government accountable through different mechanisms as shown in **Error! Reference source not found.**. Since these principals are assumed to vary in terms of their ability to solicit policy commitment from the government, it should also be the case that the governments would be likely to prioritize principals based on their perception about monitoring and sanctioning power of each group. In this way, it is important to look at different types of accountabilities as antecedents to policy outcomes. Therefore, I adopt the following definitions for the additional types of accountabilities from V-Dem Project (Coppedge et al., 2020, pp. 285–287).
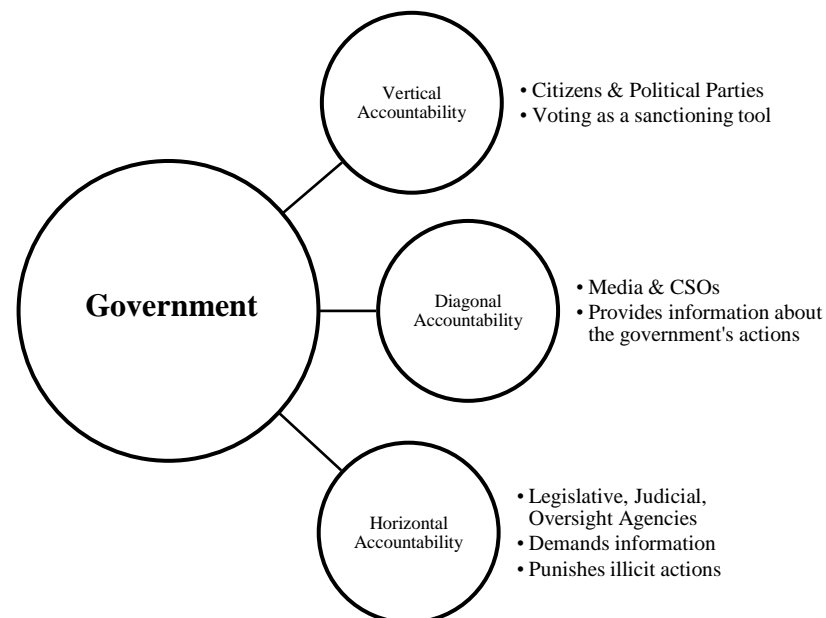

Figure 1 Different Types of Accountabilities
Note: compiled by the author

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[6] Principal-agent theory has long been discussed in the literature of legislative voting, particularly in the US context. See works such as Cox and McCubbins (1993); Maltzman (1997); Carey (2007) for example.

*"**Vertical accountability** captures the extent to which citizens have the power to hold the government accountable. **Diagonal accountability** covers the range of actions and mechanisms that citizens, civil society organizations CSOs, and an independent media can use to hold the government accountable. **Horizontal accountability** concerns the power of state institutions to oversee the government by demanding information, questioning officials, and punishing improper behavior. This form of accountability ensures checks between institutions and prevents the abuse of power."*

It is imperative to also note that while some may associate the concept of accountability with democracy, the two terms are not necessarily mutually inclusive; hence the reason this paper insofar focuses more on the former than the latter. There are, indeed, some autocratic regimes that perform better in terms of responding to the demands of their principals than some democracies (Schmitter 2004a). Now that we have elucidated the term "accountability" and separated it from any specific form of government, my theoretical conjecture is that the governments that are highly accountable to its principals may dedicate more resources on reviving the economy than those with lower accountability. However, due to the multi-principal nature of politics, one type of accountability may have higher leverage on the governments than others. Covid-19, apart from its adverse effects to the world, provides a unique opportunity for us to explore the relationship between the concept of accountability and policymaking. Specifically, amidst the pandemic, it is safe to assume that most groups in the society (the principals) want economic assistance from the government (the agent). So, it is to be expected that the government must produce some sort of policy outcome. However, the government's sense of accountability (i.e., which principal it perceives to be most influential) may determine the *how*, the *when*; and even the *how much* of the economic policy enactment.

1.2 Southeast Asia (SEA)

The scope of this paper is countries in the Southeast Asia because this region is highly heterogenous in terms of social, economic, and political aspect—all of which would lead to variations in policymaking. More importantly, since most Southeast Asian economies rely primarily on tourism and service sectors; particularly Cambodia and Thailand, the region had been hard-hit by this

pandemic as the spread of the virus led to more stringent travel restrictions across the globe, hurting tourism and its related sectors due to the dwindling in numbers of international travelers. A joint report from the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) named Southeast Asia as one of the most economically precarious regions in the world because of its dependency on travels, predicting an 8.4% loss to GDP in 2021 (Southeast Asia Development Solutions 2021). Additionally, SEA is also a home to international logistics hub since the Port of Singapore is the busiest transshipment and container port in the world, which was also crippled due to the lowering volume of international shipments during the peak of the pandemic. In this way, the pandemic-related restrictions tremendously affected the economies in this region, even outside of the tourism and service industries, too. Due to these reasons, it is essential to develop a better understanding about the dynamics of policymaking in Southeast Asia and the extent to which each of the principals can leverage their influences on the governments in order to formulate economic policies that aim to alleviated financial catastrophe for those affected by the pandemic.

Methods

This paper analyzes governments' economic responses to the COVID-19 pandemic with the data collected primarily by The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) and COVID-19 Economic Stimulus Index (CESI). The version of the datasets used here covers governments' policies adopted through May 7th, 2021. The data used to construct other variables are obtained from various databases such as World Bank, Polity V Project, Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project (World Bank Group 2020; Coppedge et al. 2020; Marshall and Jaggers 2018). They are all the latest releases, which usually cover through year 2018-2020.

Dependent Variables

The main dependent variable used in this analysis is the OxCGRT's economic response index. It is a composite index that captures the instances in which the government enacts economic policy in respond to COVID-19, including income support and debt relief. It is important to note that this index is not indicative of the level of effectiveness or efficiency in policymaking. It simply means that a country with a higher score has acted upon relevant economic measures and has dedicated more resources to economic responses to the pandemic to a larger

extent than a country with lower score.

Independent Variables

In this analysis, there are four main independent variables: a composite index of accountability and four other disaggregated measures of accountability from Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. The four measures of accountability include vertical, diagonal, and horizontal accountability. According to V-Dem Project's Codebook, the concept of *vertical accountability* describes "the extent to which citizens have the power to hold the government accountable (Coppedge et al. 2020, 268)." This accountability can come from several mechanisms such as the ability to freely organize and be represented through political parties or the ability to select the governing bodies under a free and fair electoral process. *Horizontal accountability* is defined as intra-government accountability through institutional checks and balances. It captures the extent to which the government can be questioned or punished for improper behaviors by other formal institutions. The key actors involve in horizontal government accountability "the legislature; the judiciary; and specific oversight agencies such as ombudsmen, prosecutor and comptroller generals (Coppedge et al. 2020, 270)." The final disaggregated measure, *diagonal accountability,* could be thought of as an effect amplifier of the other two measures as it highlights "...the range of actions and mechanisms that citizens, civil society organizations, and an independent media can use to hold the government accountable (Coppedge et al. 2020, 269). This may include the use of mass mobilization or investigative journalism to boost the ability to hold the governments accountable beyond conventional methods.

My expectation for these independent variables is that, on aggregate, the level of accountability should positively correlate with the economic response index. That is, a country with a higher level of accountability may choose to dedicate more of its resources on economic policies that alleviate negative consequences for those affected by the pandemic than its counterparts with lower level of accountability. However, as discussed, accountability can come in different shapes and forms. Therefore, I also take a more exploratory approach to see if different types of accountabilities may have different impacts on the economic response index as suggested by the competing principals approach.

Since the focus of this paper is the countries in Southeast Asia, consisting only 10 countries, there are not enough number of observations to make a

reasonable statistical inference if one were to use a split sample method. Therefore, I opted for the inclusion of an interaction term between the three types of accountabilities and a dichotomous variable called *SEA*. This variable takes a value of 1 for countries in Southeast Asia; and 0 if otherwise.

Control Variables

Since this paper is inspired by the work of Elgin et al., (2020), I intend to replicate their methodology as closely as possible. However, some of the healthcare-related indicators used in their analysis appear to be either outdated or quite poor in coverage. For example, the latest data available on healthcare expenditure and hospital beds per 1,000 people from World Bank was in 2015 for developed countries while the data for developing countries are even spottier than that.[7] Therefore, I omit these variables altogether for two reasons: 1) it is unlikely that the figures on those indicators would have remained the same for the past 4 years; and 2) while data imputation is a possible solution to missing values, the risk of biased estimates seems to outweigh the omitted variable bias here. That being said, I still keep variables that are specific to COVID-19 such as number of confirmed cases and deaths, and stringency index that are readily available from The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) in order to account for healthcare system's effects on governments' decisions to enact economic responses. Specifically, the stringency index is included as a measure for the stringency of COVID-related lockdown restrictions implemented by the government, which can range from a partial lockdown, travel ban, school closure, to even a full lockdown.

Moreover, I also include variables controlling for political conditions. As mentioned in the literature review, political business cycles (PBCs) may incentivize politicians to manipulate the economy and enhance their perceived competency. Thus, I include a dichotomous variable for elections, which takes a value of 1 if a country has either legislative or executive elections scheduled for 2021-2022; and 0 if otherwise. Lastly, I used Polity 2 from Polity V Project (Marshall and Jaggers 2018) to control for the regime effects. While the empirical evidence about the effects of regime characteristics on policymaking is still mixed, democracies are generally perceived to be more responsive to citizens' demands; but, their

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[7] Number of physicians per capita, a similar indicator that I think could also be a proxy for healthcare system readiness, also has a serious issue with missing values (≈55% of data is missing) though it seems to have a better coverage in 2015 than the two original variables.

cumbersome institutional arrangements may make them slower to respond in time of crisis than their autocratic counterparts (Norris 2011; Diamond et al. 1999). Table 1 below presents the descriptive statistics for variables used in the fully specified models as well as the theoretical expectations for them.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Theoretical Expectations

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Expectation
OxCGRT Index	8	53.12	33.9	0	100	--
Accountability Composite	8	.14	.68	-.99	1.03	+
Vertical Accountability	8	.42	.53	-.43	1.17	+
Diagonal Accountability	8	.04	.53	-1.21	.95	+
Horizontal Accountability	8	.02	.64	-1.38	.51	+
Confirmed Cases	8	438146.6	623966.4	1177	1697305	+
Confirmed Deaths	8	8723.5	16430.73	0	46496	+
Stringency Index	8	67.07	7.89	52.78	77.31	+/-
Elections (0/1)	8	.25	.46	0	1	+
Polity 2	8	2	6.59	-7	9	+/-

Estimator

Since the dependent variable, OxCGRT's economic response index, is a continuous variable by construction, I utilize simple OLS regression as an estimator. However, as aforementioned, the number of observations is not quite enough to make any statistical inference should one only look at Southeast Asian split samples. So, I opt for the inclusion of interaction terms instead. This conditional modeling method allows me to isolate the effect of being a Southeast Asian country while still maintaining the number of observations large enough for statistical inference. The following section demonstrates the findings from the models.

Results

As expected, accountability to different principals does have different impacts on the government, illustrating the dilemma faced by the governments as an agent in a multi-principal scenario. For the Southeast Asian governments, the principal with most leverage are the media and the civil societies (CSOs). Governments with higher levels of diagonal accountability tend to provide a more sizable economic stimulus package in response to the pandemic than their

counterparts with lower levels of accountability.[8] More importantly, one can also imply three things from the fact that other types of accountabilities yield no statistical significance in the models. First, it is plausible that SEA governments generally do not feel liable to its people through electoral procedure. This claim is reflected through the lack of statistical significance of both the vertical -

Table 2 OLS Regressions of Accountability Composites on OxCGRT's Economic Index

Variable	OxCGRT's Economic Index	OxCGRT's Economic Index	OxCGRT's Economic Index	OxCGRT's Economic Index
Accountability Composite x SEA	10.60 (16.74)			
- Vertical x SEA		12.41 (20.68)		
- Diagonal x SEA			10.28** (3.91)	
- Horizontal x SEA				16.33 (17.30)
Elections (0/1)	5.00 (5.94)	5.32 (5.81)	4.85 (5.85)	6.50 (6.01)
Confirmed Cases	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Confirmed Deaths	0.00 (0.01)	0.002 (0.007)	0.00 (0.01)	0.002 (0.007)
Stringency Index	0.44** (.14)	0.43** (0.14)	0.50*** (0.14)	0.43** (0.147)
Polity2 Score	-0.09 (0.80)	-0.42 (0.70)	1.49 (0.766)	0.08 (0.60)
N	143	143	143	143
R-Square	0.19	0.21	0.16	0.20

Condensed table. Main effects of accountabilities and SEA are excluded. Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

* $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$

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[8] One may note that the model with diagonal accountability as the independent variable has a lower R-squared than others. However, R-squares might not be an ideal metric to compare the goodness-of-fit of models with an interaction term or transformed variables. Moreover, in some cases, a lower R-square may only indicate more variations (i.e. "noise") around the fitted regression line and not a lowered predictive power (Finlay and Agresti 1986).

accountability and election variable. Second, the check and balances mechanisms from formal institutions do not sufficiently constrain them, either, as horizontal accountability variable shows no statistical significance. Lastly, the SEA governments are only compelled to do something when the issue is being presented in the news or mobilized by the CSOs. This might be due to the preexisting political instability in some of these countries that put them in a precarious position, incentivizing the governments to appear more responsive to the public's demands once the issue is being publicized in order to avoid further tensions.

No other variables seem to affect the OxCGRT's Economic Index except for the stringency index. This finding, while intriguing, is intuitive because when the governments choose to implement more stringent health-related policies such as home isolation or workplace and school closure, it is necessary for them to compensate the lack of economic productivity through stimulus packages. Relatedly, it also means that health-related indicators such as confirmed cases and deaths do not have any direct impact on governments' provision of economic assistance to their people; however, it might be the case that their indirect effects are already captured by the stringency index since it measures the strictness of policies in reaction to the pandemic, which would indeed take these health-related information into consideration. Electoral prospects do not appear to drive SEA governments to follow the political business cycle (PBS) strategy and inject more money into the market in the form of stimulus packages. Lastly, regime types, as measured by Polity score do not have a statistically significant effect on OxCGRT's Economic Index. This lends a partial support to the previous observation by Schmitter (2004b; 2011) that the concept of accountability is not mutually exclusive to democracy, but it is quite obvious that an unprecedented pandemic such as this would drive any governments to react one way or another regardless of their form of governance. The fact that the accountability composite variable fails to obtain any statistical significance is noteworthy as it contradicts with one of my hypotheses. However, I suspect that it is because this variable aggregates all four types of accountabilities into an index, which can potentially dilute the overall effect.

It is imperative to note, though, that due to the inclusion of an interaction term in these models, the beta coefficients cannot be interpreted directly as with

the regular OLS model. As one may notice, the reporting of results thus far only covers the implications derived from the directions and statistical significances of the relationship between variables. Rather, the true effect of diagonal accountability on the OxCGRT's economic response index score can only be gauged through marginal effect analysis as shown in Figure 2 below. On average, the figure shows a consistent increase in predicted OxCGRT's economic response index score as the level of diagonal accountability increases though the effect is not statistically significant at the lowest level of accountability. For instance, a SEA country with level of diagonal accountability at its mean (0.4) is expected to score OxCGRT's economic response at 16 points while being one standard deviation above the mean (0.9) leads to about 3 points higher in the expected score.
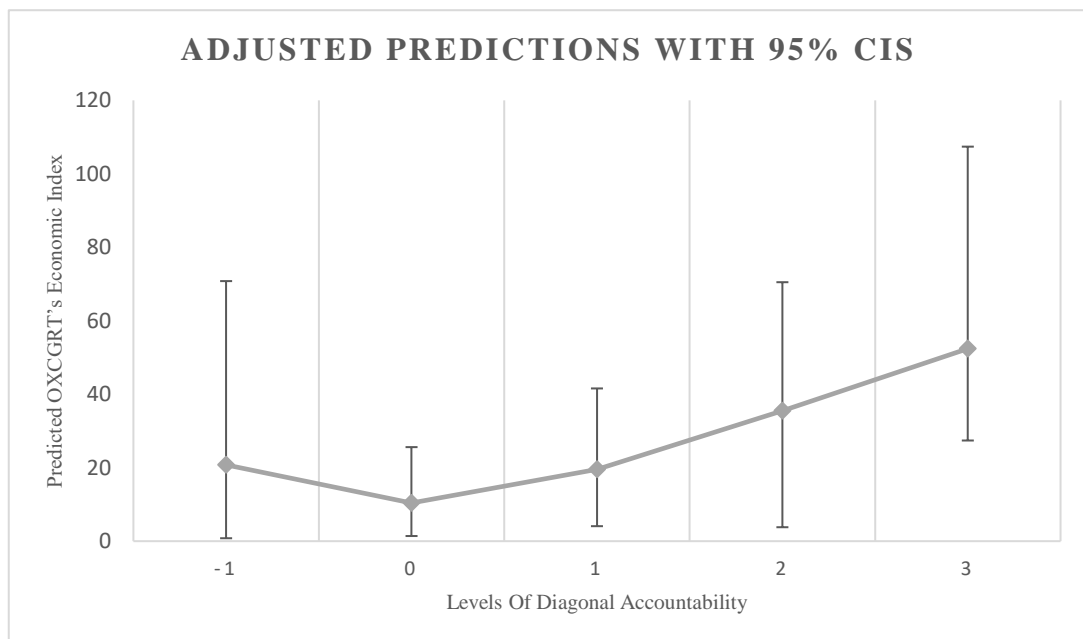

Figure 1 Marginal Effects of Diagonal Accountability

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper examines the connection between governments' accountability and their responses to the global economic crisis caused by COVID-19 in Southeast Asia (SEA) through the lens of competing principals approach. By using the ever-growing corpus of data on economic responses such as The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) and several other measures for political accountabilities, regime types, and COVID-related public health, it finds that diagonal accountability leveraged by the media and civil societies

(CSOs) has a statistically significant impact on SEA governments' decision to provide a more sizable economic support to citizens during the pandemic even after accounting for other political and health-related factors; notably, the level of stringency of lockdown measures. Therefore, the finding contributes to the body of knowledge in political accountability by providing empirical evidence that governments do not treat all relevant stakeholders equally, even in the time of crisis. As such, the ordinary people are almost always ended up on the losing side in policymaking unless they can leverage other agents for additional layers of accountability, such as their legislators, independent oversight bodies, or CSOs and media.

On the flipside, this finding also illustrates the dilemma faced by the governments as an agent in a multi-principal scenario where their attention is divided to serve different interest groups. However, the emergence of a global pandemic, such as COVID-19, serves as a unique opportunity to explore the concept of accountabilities. From this, one may also draw three underlying implications from it. First, it indicates that, on aggregate, SEA governments generally do not feel liable to its people. Due to the nature of the regime in most of these countries, voting may not serve as an effective sanctioning tool for the people to leverage themselves as one of the key principals, holding their government accountable. Second, SEA government also do not feel constrained by formal institutions. This can either reflect the ineffectiveness of institutional structure for interagency check and balance or the effectiveness of governing coalition in controlling other branches through formal procedures. Lastly, the finding shows that, even amidst the pandemic, the governments only feel obligated to do something when the issue is being publicized in the news or mobilized by the CSOs potentially due to the underlying instability of the regimes. This last bit is a particularly important finding in terms of empowerment of the public sphere as it shows that the media and CSOs can serve as an effective intermediary between the people and the government in Southeast Asia. If done right, it can be a positive thing for the people, who find themselves unable to influence the governments' behaviors through the traditional paths such as voting or signing petitions. However, this study was undertaken during the peak of the pandemic wherein the data availability and coverage were limited. Now that the situation has been relatively normalized, future research can benefit from a better quality of data; thus, the statistical models can be revisited. Moreover, it is

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important to reiterate that the dependent variable, economic responses index from the OxCGRT, only constitutes the size of economic response, not effectiveness of the response. In time of crisis, a country may need to also consider the quality simultaneously with the quantity, too.

Apart from the statistical modeling, these implications of the government's limited accountability match the reality of Thailand during the pandemic. Although the then-government of General Prayuth Chan-Ocha claimed its legitimacy through the 2019 general elections, its willingness to respond to the needs of the people remained debatable. For the provision of economic assistance, the information from CESI shows that the Thai government allocated only 10% more of its GDP on fiscal policy amidst the pandemic; most of which went to consumption incentive programs such as *Kon-la-Kreung* and *Ying Chai Ying Dai.*[9] To note, this was a relatively small expansion of spending for the people compared to the fact that Bank of Thailand had already cut down the interest rate on loans by 60%. Moreover, the formal check and balance through the parliamentary procedures and the opposition parties seemed to be futile in demanding accountability from the executive branch due to a strong governing coalition. For instance, the prime minister and several of his cabinets underwent no-confidence votes three times; all of which they survived despite the allegations against them about corruption and improper uses of power (BBC News Thai 2021). On top of that, proposition of new laws or amendments of old ones were effortless for the incumbent parties because they had also secured the Senate, whose members are directly appointed by the government. The opposite was also true for the opposition parties who found it next to impossible to propose any legislation. Finally, Thai government, as an apparatus, indeed appeared to be quite sensitive to what the media, civil societies, and the public had to say about them since the first wave of the COVID-19; particularly on social media. It was so eminent that the hashtag "#ประเทศนี้ขับเคลื่อนได้ด้วยการด่า (literal translation: this country runs by shaming [the government])" had been widely used online whenever people wanted things done—from filing the potholes on the street to prioritizing vaccines access to frontline medical professionals. One

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[9] According to the Bank of Thailand (BOT), direct transfer programs include "We Win" program, "Section 33 We Love Each Other" program, "Half-half" co-payment scheme, "Ying Chai Ying Dai" e-voucher scheme, Cash handouts for Social Welfare Card holders, Cash handouts for special groups, amounting to 219 billion THB as of June 1, 2021 (Bank of Thailand 2021)

may also argued that these concessions were a performative gesture from the Thai government who sought to appear more responsive to the people's demands. Indeed, the Thai government had the tendency to first address matters that are less politically-charged but of tangible significance to people's daily lives, like unfilled potholes and tangled landlines, to avoid them from being used for mobilization in a larger context of the anti-government demonstrations and pushes for democracy, which was ongoing since late 2019 up until 2022.

The Asia Foundation's report (2020) also showed some similar stories from CSOs in different Southeast Asian countries, including Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand and Timor Leste. In Malaysia, CSOs acted as front liners in the crisis, providing information and immediate assistance to the people. Simultaneously, they also worked with the local media to publicize the Malaysian government's failure to effectively response to the surging infection rate and even attempted to obscure the true figures. They complemented these activities with national-level policy dialogue through the National and Provincial Government Taskforce for COVID-19. The government then decided to respond by announcing periodic lockdowns when the news was circulated widely on social media.

Acknowledgement

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