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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Politics or the economy? Weak economic performance and political support in East and Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

What are the effects of weak economic performance in East and Southeast Asia? In particular, does weak performance lead to citizens' dissatisfaction and, correspondingly, increase preference for stronger governments who may achieve economic targets more quickly? Recent elections in less-democratic nations and emergent democracies of East and Southeast Asia suggest growing support for political parties carries over from previous authorities. And, governments are harking back to policies of the past that emphasise economic performance over political development in order to motivate political support. However, few studies systematically assess how weak economic performance affects citizens' political support. This paper addresses this neglect. Using public opinion surveys from the Asian Barometer, we track how economic performance affects political support over time in countries with a multiparty system. The results offer two useful insights. First, economic performance is robustly and positively related to government approval. Thus, strong economic performance corresponds with strong support for government while weak performance yields weak support. Importantly, this finding is consistent with the large amount of literature on economic voting. Second, economic performance is not consistently related to democratic support; instead, political influence plays an intervening role in how economic performance affects democratic support. This underlines the significance of institution-building for political stability and political development in the region. Equally important, the results tie to the literature on political institutionalisation and democratic support. In conjunction, the results embrace East and Southeast Asia into the broader disciplinary research of motivation theory-building and empirical studies.

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Introduction

In the East and Southeast Asian countries where strong economic performance coincides with, if not elicits, citizens' political support or quiescence, what are the effects of poor economic performance on such support or quiescence? A vast amount of literature exists on the Asian economic miracle; even in the aftermath of the Asian

financial crisis, studies rose to investigate how the previous ‘miracle’ might underpin the crisis (Stiglitz and Uy 1996; Johnson 1997; MacIntyre 2001). In contrast, few systematically study how poor economic performance affects political support in East and Southeast Asian economies. The neglect is unfortunate. As Professor Amitav Acharya pointed out in his 2014 Presidential Address to the International Studies Association, the lack of comprehensive assessments leads to the marginalisation of Asian studies from theoretical developments in social sciences; it may also underline the ‘inhospitality’ of Asian studies to theory-building and empirical study (Acharya 2014). There is equal concern that this neglect likely leads to the persistence of dogmas such as ‘Asian values’ or Asian exceptionalism in policy-making, without contributing to predictive understanding or insights for the countries in the region.¹

This study addresses the neglect. In particular, we use at least two successive waves of public opinion survey data from the Asian Barometer Survey to assess how political support relates to economic performance. To ensure robustness and generalisability of the findings, we use the data of countries/regions with a multiparty system in East and Southeast Asia, including South Korea, Chinese Taiwan, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia. In addition, we follow the literature to distinguish the two main kinds of political support: government approval and political system. East and Southeast Asian countries are valuable for testing both types of political support because economic success has been frequently used to explain citizens’ tacit or explicit acceptance to less accountable governments and political systems in these economies. To answer the question whether poor economic performance elicits a corresponding withdrawal of political support will fill the gap in the understanding of the relationships between economic performance and political support. The data collected in several rounds of the surveys offer additional robustness checks of changes in citizens’ attitudes for each country over time.

Three results are relevant. First, the results show that economic performance is strongly and positively correlated to government approval; this is consistent and robust notwithstanding the effects of other variables. Strong economic performance, then, elicits strong approval for governments; correspondingly, weak economic performance means strong disapproval for governments. Importantly, this finding fits with the existing literature on economic voting (Pacek and Radcliff 1995; Shin and McDonough 1999; Duch 2001; Yap 2003). Like their contemporaries in other regions, then, governments in democratising Asia are under some pressure to bear positive results on the economic front. Second, economic performance is not consistently correlated to support for democracy or democratisation in these countries. Instead, the political influence variable – captured through the questions that ‘people like me do not have any influence on what the government does’ or ‘people have the power to change a government they do not like’ – attenuates the effects of economic performance on democratic support. Specifically, where political influence is insignificant or where survey participants express little influence on government, economic performance is positively correlated to democratic support; however, where survey participants express political influence over government, economic performance is negatively correlated to democratic support. This means that when the people have political influence, they will support democratic developments in the country, even if the economy performs poorly. Importantly, this result also ties with the larger

disciplinary researches on political institutionalisation and political support (Evans and Whitefield 1995; Gibson 1996; Duch 2001; Mattes and Bratton 2007). In conjunction, the results clarify that economic growth may keep a government in office but citizens' political influence undergirds the stability of the political system. These findings bring East and Southeast Asian studies into broader fields of social sciences in theory-building and empirical studies.

In the following, we discuss the tie-ins between economic performance and political support in the existing literature and describe recent developments in East and Southeast Asia before describing the variables and data used for analyses. We go on to report the results and conclude with a discussion of the implications of the findings.

Economic and political support in East and Southeast Asia

A vast literature heralds the economic performance of the tiger economies of East and Southeast Asia, as may be evident by the term 'Asian tigers' when referring to the Asian Newly Industrialized Economies (NIEs) of South Korea, Chinese Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong of China, or 'Asia's next tigers' when referencing the Next Newly Industrialized Economies (NNIEs) of Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia. These studies frequently note the correspondence between the high growth and a lack of political constraints on the governments in these economies. Importantly, several of these countries/regions, including South Korea, Chinese Taiwan, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, in the third wave of democratisation embraced new rules of accountability and transparency even as others continued to push the dictum of 'Asian values' to slow the pace of political development. Curiously, the explanations for political transition in East and Southeast Asia mirror the debate in the literature regarding the economic conditions under which democratisation takes place. In particular, democratisation is generally seen as occurring with a strong economic performance in South Korea, Chinese Taiwan, and Thailand while the converse is true for the Philippines and Indonesia (Thompson 1996; Haggard and Kaufman 1997; Lee 2002; Englehart 2003; Kwon 2004). Not surprisingly, the perceived divergence fans an ongoing theoretical discussion regarding economic performance, political support, and political change (Haggard and Kaufman 1997, 265).

Still, regardless of whether the countries embraced new rules or worked to slow the pace of political development, it seems clear that economic downturns potentially upset the political and social pacts between governments and citizens that buttress stability in the countries/regions. This has certainly been addressed in the literature. Some studies note that economic downturns threaten political support: in authoritarian regimes as well as in emergent democracies, economic downswings precipitate political changes (Yap 2005; Orenstein 2008; Cordova and Seligson 2009; Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Grosjean, Richa, and Senik 2013). For authoritarian regimes, economic downturns compromise their ability to coopt opposition through selective concessions or rents (Haggard and Kaufman 1997; Yap 2005; Gandhi 2008). For emergent democracies, budgetary shortfalls following weak economic performance may constrain the tasks of institution- and nation-building. Furthermore, governments and parties in emergent democracies that need to build and broaden

constituency support are generally unable or unwilling to abide by hard choices that address economic weaknesses and stem further downturns. In this regard, the trends of East and Southeast Asian countries are consistent with the broad literature, such as spiraling low government approvals among weakly performing economies.

However, while the prescriptive advice in the broad literature focusses on institution-building to buttress the political system, the governments in East and Southeast Asian countries appear to have toughened their stance against accountability. At the same time, there is a corresponding prioritisation of economic growth over political reforms, so as they harken back to less-democratic periods. Examples of the latter include President Duterte's election and extrajudicial campaigns in the Philippines, the electoral defeat of a popular governor over religious blasphemy charges in the capital city of Indonesia, and the military takeover in Thailand in 2014.

Will the populist appeal and consequent policies strengthen stability in the region? Or will they give rise to further instability? With the social turmoil and political disruption witnessed globally in recent years following the global financial crisis (GFC) between 2007 and 2013, it is timely, if not pressing, to ask: how do economic downturns affect political support in East and Southeast Asia? Clearly, not only do the answers to these questions enrich our understanding of the relationship between economic performance and citizens' political support in these countries, they also have implications for governments' prioritisation of growth over democratic reforms and institution-building to improve stability or peace in the respective countries.

To summarise, notwithstanding a large amount of literature on Asia and its miracle economies, few studies systematically address how poor economic performance affects citizens' political support in the countries/regions of East and Southeast Asia. In practice, the incomplete theoretical understanding means that the governments in the countries/regions assert exceptionalism and prioritise growth over political reforms or institution-building through political populist appeals, even at the expense of civil liberties. This study systematically assesses the effects of economic performance on political support by tracking government approval and political support separately. Next, we recount the recent events in the East and Southeast Asian economies to clarify the urgency of understanding the effects of economic performance on democratic support versus government approval.

Politics and society in East and Southeast Asia since the recent GFC

Political developments and their ramifications on societies in East and Southeast Asia are vitally important to scholars and policy pundits, as indicated in the large literature and frequent foreign policy pronouncements, such as 'America's Pacific Century' (Clinton 2011) or 'Australia in the Asian Century' (DPMC 2012). The region's quick recovery from the recent GFC has likely cemented this relevance (Bernanke 2009; Chin 2012), although the recent events in the region suggest that, notwithstanding Asia's economic recovery, governments have focussed on economic performance and done so at the expense of political development. This is unfortunate: the region's increasing mix of political regimes beyond the conventional one-party dominant states since the late 1980s, including successful democratising countries/regions (e.g. South Korea and Chinese Taiwan) and newly emerging ones (Indonesia and the

Philippines), had raised hopes of a broader envelopment of transparency and accountability of governments to undergird stability and development (Reilly 2007; Stockwin 2012). The recent set-backs, including but not limited to the political swings in Thailand, then, cause the concern that democratic progression will take a backseat to, if not be displaced by, economic priorities in the region. The following recounts recent political developments in the region.

South Korea

On 10 March 2017, the Constitutional Court of South Korea unanimously upheld the National Assembly's impeachment of former President Park Geun-hye, which occurred on 9 December 2016 with 234 to 56 votes (with two abstentions and seven invalid). The impeachment might suggest that political developments are on track in the country; yet, that would be a misapprehension. Until the Choi scandal, former President Park had consistently bucked the trend of failing performance approvals and, indeed, encapsulated the 'imperial president' in South Korea, i.e. the executive who successfully overrode the checks and allegations by other institutions of the government (Schlesinger 1973).

Perhaps the former President's third and fourth years in office illustrate the broad swath of power wielded. As a one-term (five-year) limited president, President Park's third and fourth years were marked by the battles to shield her aides from the political fallout of the 'door-knob' scandals over access to the president, and clashes within her party and with the opposition over candidate nominations and reform of that process. In these, President Park used her presidential powers comfortably: she vetoed a parliamentary bill on the National Assembly Act that would allow legislators to demand changes to executive legislation in 2015, and contemplated another veto in 2016 to the revised Act that would allow parliamentary committees to call for public hearings on bills. Her government also pushed through the state textbooks policy, which many critics argued whitewashed pro-Japanese activities during the colonial era as well as the country's experience with military dictatorship. In addition, her negotiated agreement with Japan over the Comfort Women issue drew ire for its lack of consultation and rash conclusion. Through these endeavours, President Park consistently stared down efforts by the legislature or within her party to wrestle the agenda away from her office, threatening to leave the party when key party members, such as former Party Chair Kim Moo-sung or former floor leader Yoo Seung-min, sought to take the party in a different direction (Yap 2016).

The election of Moon Jae-in to the President of South Korea on 9 May 2017 handed the political pulpit to the liberals in the opposition after almost a decade of conservative policies. Eyes are clearly on the new President whether he will be able to continue the momentum of changes that led to the impeachment of former President Park. There is clearly a reason for concern: notwithstanding the former President Park's impeachment, the candidate from her Liberal Korea Party (renamed from the Saenuri Party) received the second most votes in the election, a significant achievement for a candidate who had no broad appeal until the new President Moon was endorsed by the former President Park's sister, Park Geun-ryoung.

Chinese Taiwan

The election of the first female leader of Chinese Taiwan, Tsai Ing-wen, with a majority party support of the erstwhile opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in the legislature, is a momentous result, where the conservative party Kuomintang used to hold significant political and financial advantages. Yet, having a legislative majority support comes with challenges: Chinese mainland has been keeping a close watch on if, when, or how the executive and the legislature in Chinese Taiwan may adopt policies that veer away from the 1992 consensus of 'One-China'. Tsai Ing-wen's ability to maintain her steadfastness, which balances the demands of some of the core constituencies of the DPP on the one hand and the demands and pressures of Chinese mainland on the other, is clearly on trial.

The DPP, like most parties, comprises factions and has a core bloc in favour of independence. Tsai Ing-wen's previous run as the candidate for the DPP leader in 2012 drew on this core, and she lost out to Chinese Taiwan's former leader Ma Jing-yeou in that race. In the 2016 election, Ms Tsai was careful to apply the lessons learned: she had been steadfast in maintaining a cautiously-worded stance regarding relations with Chinese mainland – acknowledging the importance of the 1992 meeting that gave rise to the 'One-China' consensus but without explicitly recognising the 'One-China' principle. Moderates in her party support the delicate stance: in the Party Congress in July 2016, a motion was made to remove the objective of Chinese Taiwan independence from China contained in Article One of the DPP's charter. The new resolution, if passed, would change Article One to that '... it is the party's objective to establish cross-strait status quo ...'. However, at the same Congress, the pro-independence faction also moved to change the official title from the Republic of China to Taiwan, with the reminder that the DPP has legislative majority and control of the executive to effect changes. The second motion was also sent up to the DPP Central Executive Committee for review (Focus Taiwan [2017](#)).

It must be clear that the leader of Chinese Taiwan Tsai Ing-wen and her legislative party do not have an easy path to trudge: Chinese Taiwan's unique standing in the international community is bound in its relations with Chinese mainland, so that cross-strait relations reverberate onto domestic agenda and the government's policy-effectiveness. Chinese mainland has been very clear that it wants the leader Tsai to acknowledge the 1992's 'One-China' consensus in order to maintain ongoing political peace and economic stability. Meanwhile, the electorate is beating the drums for a quick economic turnaround but is resistant to painful reforms that are likely to be part of the turnaround, as demonstrated by continued protests against the pension reforms. In Chinese Taiwan, then, the tie-up between economy and politics will be tested thoroughly.

The Philippines

When he was campaigning for office, President Rodrigo Duterte's candidacy was, to say the least, colourful. Not one to shy away from controversy (indeed, he seemed to thrive on generating them), Duterte as presidential candidate likely riled as many voters as he won over. The final election tally showed 16.6 million votes for him,

6.5 million more than the next candidate, Mar Roxas, however, that constitutes only 39% of the votes cast. Perhaps as an olive branch to the other 61% voters, Duterte promised that he would act with restraint and gravitas once he takes office. The promised changes have yet to materialise. Meanwhile, the Duterte presidency is on track to deliver some of the more controversial promises.

Top on that list of President Duterte's promises is the war on drugs and law-and-order, particularly organised crime. The President pledged in his first State-of-the-Nation address that 'we will not stop until the last drug lord, the last financier and the last pusher have surrendered or been put behind bars or are below the ground if they so wish'. As if to make good on that pledge, on 8 August 2016, President Duterte named 159 'narco-officials' – mayors, judges, congress representatives, and police involved in the drug trade – and gave them 24 hours to surrender or be tracked down by security forces. Following this cue, policies and the military disarmed and relieved those in armed services on that list, and pulled out security escorts for those in the government (Paddock 2016; Regalado and Romero 2016). Indeed, backed by rewards and the President's assurance of protection, almost 3,000 killings (with about half attributable to vigilantes) have been reported since Duterte took office. The peril of being gunned down has led an estimated 700,000 to surrender, far exceeding the government's capacity to rehabilitate. Notwithstanding, President Duterte has refused to back away from sanctioning extrajudicial killings; instead, while expressing a 'cause for concern' regarding the vigilante murders, the Presidential Office has declared the war on drugs a success. And, President Duterte has hit back at the senate inquiry into extrajudicial killings with accusations that the chair, Senator Leila de Lima, is linked to drug syndicates.

On other fronts, President Duterte has also made good on his promise to address corruption in the country by declaring all appointive offices vacant on 22 August 2016, so that the positions could be staffed with appointments made by the Presidential Management Staff. The move affected thousands and left only those appointed after 30 June 2016 in office. The President also followed up on his pledge to work for former President Arroyo's release from prison: on 30 July the Supreme Court ordered her release on the ground that the case against her was built on insufficient evidence. And President Duterte has approved former President Marcos' burial at Libingan ng mga Bayani, or 'heroes cemetery', despite protests against this decision. It has been put on hold by the Supreme Court.

President Duterte is largely unfettered: he enjoys the support of a super-majority in the legislature and has a 91% trust rating (by way of contrast, Vice President Leni Robredo has 62%). His proposed constitutional change into federalism for the Philippines is unlikely to hit obstacles: to that end, President Duterte will move towards a constitutional assembly rather than a constitutional convention, so that lawmakers will draft and approve the changes. The use of a constitutional assembly has ignited concerns that legislators may carve a constitution which will save their jobs rather than the country. But President Duterte has assured the public that there is nothing to worry: he will treat self-serving lawmakers 'like drug addicts'. Given the political and social situation in the Philippines, this may not be an empty threat.

Thailand

Of the countries, the events in Thailand represent the furthest reversal to democratic progress: after months of prevarication and outright refusals to intervene through a six-month series of demonstrations and protest-occupation of government buildings and offices, the military declared martial law on 21 May 2014 and took over the government two days later (Shoichet 2014). Following the Thai King's endorsement of an interim constitution and government, General Prayuth Chan-ocha stepped down from his position as the army chief and coup-leader, and took over as Prime Minister with a cabinet comprising largely of supporters (Economist 2014).

A new constitution to replace the 2006 interim constitution was to be drafted by a 36-member-drafting committee following the principles advocated by the interim 250-member National Reform Council.² However, the new constitution was rejected, leading to concerns that the military regime would remain at the helm of the country for an extended period. The Thai Prime Minister has insisted that elections would be conducted in mid-2017, with or without a constitution (Hjariraksapitak 2016). Notwithstanding the rejected constitution, speculation of key elements of the new constitution include:

- Appointments to the House and Senate. The 2007 constitution provides for an elected House and a mix of elected and appointed senators. One of the controversial amendments in 2013 was the elected Yingluck Shinawatra government's successful passage to change the Senate into a fully-elected chamber (Ockey 2014). The amendment, passed in November 2013, partly triggered the first spate of protests against the government, and the wave of protests grew following the Constitutional Court's mixed ruling on 21 November 2013, which ruled the amendment unconstitutional but did not accordingly rule to dissolve the Pheu Thai Party that led the government (Ockey 2014). It is likely, then, that the new constitution would be girded to prevent constitutional changes to the structure of the government, even if those changes are put through by a popularly elected government with a clear majority in the legislature.
- A moratorium on blanket amnesty bills. Another controversial bill passed in November by the majority government was the amnesty bill for all political offences. The amnesty was opposed by the pro-government Red-shirts, who sought accountability of the government and the military for confrontation, and by the anti-government Yellow-shirts, who saw the bill as an effort to facilitate the return of ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (Ockey 2014). The opposition to the broad amnesty underlines the difficulties of reconciliation, so that a moratorium to deescalate hostilities is likely to occur.

Notwithstanding, the current non-elected government has failed to be expansive thus far. For instance, it has locked-out the previous majority government from political negotiations while focussing on reviving the economy, including implementing a US\$11 billion stimulus package (Economist 2014). While it may bode well for the economy, it fails to do the same for democratisation.

Indonesia

Elections in capital cities are often seen as bellwethers for national elections. The election in Jakarta, Indonesia, is no exception. Indeed, there were reasons to consider the 2017 gubernatorial election in Jakarta as deserving of particular attention. For instance, the candidate, Basuki 'Ahok' Tjahaja Purnama, was a highly popular governor who took over the mantle from a highly popular predecessor, Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo, when the latter won the presidential election in 2014. Both men were considered to break political traditions, so that their respective popularities underpinned hopes for wide support of political changes. The electoral defeat of Ahok by the former Education Minister, Anies Baswedan, might have dimmed those hopes (Yap 2017).

It is notable that Ahok and Anies were backed by political opponents at the national level. Ahok was supported by the Indonesia Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), of which President Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo was a member and former President Megawati Sukarnoputri was chair. Anies was previously a supporter of President Jokowi and served as the Education Minister of Jokowi's government between 2014 and 2016. However, in the 2017 contest, he drew support from the legislative opposition, namely the Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra), whose chair, Prabowo Subianto, was defeated in the 2014 presidential election, and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS, an Islamic party). Many remember the 2014 presidential election as a hard-fought contest, with Prabowo initially refusing to concede on the quickcount results and subsequently coalescing the Red-White majority opposition coalition to stymie the agenda of the elected President. Several parties in that opposition coalition have since jumped ship to join the President's Awesome Indonesia Coalition; as of May 2016, only Gerindra and PKS remained in the coalition. Political parties have been already gearing up for the 2019 election and Golkar has announced its support for the President Jokowi; Prabowo's interest in that election is not mistaken. Anies' successful election as a governor may help Prabowo's plans, and it is not a stretch for Prabowo to run the election with a similar strategy, i.e. dividing popular votes over religious groups. Anies himself sought the support of Islamist groups, including militant groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), known for hard-line stances and attacks against minorities.

The religious cleavage was thrown open in this governor election. The aggressive effort to charge Ahok with blasphemy against Islam, together with the regular reminder of the potential for unrest in a series of protests and rallies against the Chinese Christian governor, led to a significant erosion of Ahok's huge polling lead. The long and slow trial ended only following the election, with prosecutors dropping the blasphemy charges against Ahok that carry a possible two-year probation. The damage to Ahok was eclipsed only by the damage to Indonesian politics: as the home of the world's largest Muslim population, Indonesia's democratic trajectory may have been sidelined by the aggressive hard-line tactics used to unseat a popular, successful, non-Islam governor.

To summarise, political trends in the East and Southeast Asian countries give grounds for the concern that the governments have reoriented their focus on economic development at the expense of political and democratic progression. Does such prioritisation of growth over democratic reforms and institution-building improve

stability or peace in the respective countries? More directly, what are the effects of weak economic performance on political support in East and Southeast Asia? In the next section, we try to answer these questions by describing the data and variables systematically.

Data and variables

We rely on public opinion survey data collected in three successive waves of the Asian Barometer Survey. The first wave was conducted between 2001 and 2003 covering five countries/regions: South Korea, Chinese Taiwan, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The second and third waves include all five countries/regions in this study, with the second wave completed between 2005 and 2007 and the third conducted between 2010 and 2011. The successive waves provide citizens' responses over time and are particularly relevant for this study in tracking the significance of political trust. The following describes the variables used.

Dependent variables: democratic support and government approval

We are interested in the effects of economic performance on political support. The literature distinguishes at least two types of political support: support for government and support for political system. Accordingly, we follow the literature to capture support for government through government approval, applying the question 'how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the [name of present] government?' Responses are noted on a 4-point scale, with 1 capturing very dissatisfied and 4 reflecting very satisfied. We also measure support for political system, especially democratic support, based on responses to the question 'do you think democracy is suitable for our country?' (Duch 2001; Mattes and Bratton 2007; Yap 2013). The responses are captured on a 10-point scale, with 1 reflecting 'completely unsuitable' and 10 denoting 'completely suitable'. To ensure valid comparisons between support for government and support for political system, the 10-point scale is re-coded into a 4-point scale.

Independent variables of interest: economic performance and political influence

Economic performance

We ask two questions to capture economic performance: one on national economic conditions and one on family finance. The question on national economic conditions capture current economic evaluation: 'how would you rate the overall economic condition of our country today?' Egotropic evaluation is captured similarly: 'as for your own family, how do you rate your economic situation today?' A 5-point scale accompanies each of these questions, ranging from 1 (much worse/very bad) to 5 (much better/very good) and with 3 (about the same or so-so) marking the median.

Political influence

Studies highlight the need to consider the effects of political efficacy, i.e. 'the feeling that individual political action does have, or may have, an impact on the political

process', on political support (Campbell et al. 1960; Karp and Banducci 2008; Yap 2016). In particular, the capacity of a political system to regularly deliver political goods, such as contested and regular elections or civil and political liberties, enhances the sense of political influence on eliciting support for political system. Influence on governments is based on the question that 'people like me can have an influence on the government', which is scaled from 1 (much worse) to 4 (much better).³ The variable, then, taps at political efficacy with the political system.

Additional political and socio-economic control variables

To ensure that the findings are robust, additional controls, which are generally classified as political and socioeconomic controls, are included.

Political controls

The literature counsels the adoption of political controls, including party votes in the previous elections and partisanship. Party votes in the previous elections are included because citizens who vote for the governing-party may be more likely to support the government or political developments (Gomez and Wilson 2006). However, two considerations prompt our exclusion of the variable: first, the inclusion of the variable leaves out a significant number of respondents due to missing data or refusal to answer the question. For example, in South Korea all the subsequent waves (which include the variable) reduce responses by almost half, approximately 1,200 cases. Second, the results from excluding the variable are not significantly different. In the interest of preserving information, the variable is excluded. Partisanship, particularly the governing party, may enhance government approval. Depending on the strength of the governing party, this may extend to democratic support. This variable is coded from the question 'which party, if any, among the political parties listed here do you feel closest to?' Respondents picked their responses from a list that ran from about five parties (Chinese Taiwan and South Korea) to 28 parties (the Philippines). We code the variable where 1 captures respondents who chose the governing-party or a party in the governing coalition, and 0 captures parties in the opposition or 'none' response.

Socio-economic controls

We follow the literature to include the controls of education, age, social class and gender (Shin and McDonough 1999; Mishler and Rose 2001; Gomez and Wilson 2006). Education, age, social class, and gender are potentially relevant to the explanatory variables in the emergent Asian-Pacific democracies. For instance, those who are well educated may be more likely to support democratisation in spite of economic underperformance, while those who are older or with a lower social status may not be willing to support democratic development in the face of weak economic performance. Studies also suggest that women may be less likely to approve of government when economic performance is weak. Education is captured in ten categories (1 = no formal education; 2 = incomplete primary education; 3 = primary education; 4 = incomplete technical vocation; 5 = technical vocation; 6 = incomplete secondary; 7 = secondary;

8 = some university; 9 = university education; 10 = post-graduate degree). Age is listed as a continuous variable (1 = 18–24; 2 = 25–29; 3 = 30–34; 4 = 35–39; 5 = 40–44; 6 = 45–49; 7 = 50–54; 8 = 55–59; 9 = 60–70; 10 = 71–75; 11 = 76 and above). And, class is grouped into five classifications (1 = lower class; 2 = lower middle class; 3 = middle class; 4 = upper middle class; 5 = upper class).

Results

We set out to evaluate how poor economic performance affects political support in East and Southeast Asia. In these countries where strong economic performance was previously associated with citizens' support or quiescence, the question is curiously neglected. Existing studies distinguish between two kinds of political support: government approval and democratic support. Many note that poor economic achievements will erode political support, particularly the support for government; however, it is less clear if poor economic performance will also erode support for political system. In particular, the literature suggests that institution-building leads to support for political system, and policy performance does not jeopardise this support. Based on these studies, the following hypotheses are evaluated:

Hypothesis one: Economic performance is positively correlated to government approval, controlling for social, economic and political considerations.

Hypothesis two: Economic performance is not correlated to democratic support if citizens have political influence, controlling for social, economic and political considerations.

Hypothesis one assesses the effects of economic performance for government approval while hypothesis two evaluates the effects of economic performance on democratic support, controlling for relevant political and socio-economic considerations. For hypothesis two, political influence may attenuate the effects of economic performance.

The results are reported in [Table 1](#) through [Table 5](#). [Table 1](#) reports the results for South Korea, [Table 2](#) for Chinese Taiwan, [Table 3](#) for the Philippines, [Table 4](#) for Thailand and [Table 5](#) for Indonesia. The first three columns in each table report the results for government approval, while the next three columns report the findings for political system support. In general, the results show that government approval is directly tied to economic performance: across all the countries and through all the waves, government approval is statistically explained by current and future expectations of economic performance. Interestingly, the results are not as consistent for democratic support: in several instances, economic performance has no effect on democratic support and, in the third wave, the economic performance of South Korea is negatively related to democratic support.

Specifically, the results show an unshakable tie-in between economic performance and government approval: through all the waves and for all the countries/regions, economic performance is statistically significant in explaining government approval. In some cases, such as South Korea and the Philippines, both national economic performance and personal financial conditions affect approval for the governments. Importantly, this relationship is robust to the effects of other variables over time in

Table 1. Ordered logit of public support through three survey waves for South Korea.

Dependent variable = support	Government approval			Democratic support		
	Wave 1 (2003)	Wave 2 (2006)	Wave 3 (2011)	Wave 1 (2003)	Wave 2 (2006)	Wave 3 (2011)
Current national economic performance	0.45*** (0.08)	0.83*** (0.10)	0.57*** (0.08)	0.28*** (0.08)	0.27** (0.09)	−0.17* (0.07)
Current family financial situation	0.29*** (0.08)	0.25** (0.09)	0.14 (0.08)	0.10 (0.07)	−0.12 (0.09)	−0.006 (0.08)
Age	0.003 (0.005)	−0.02*** (0.005)	0.01* (0.004)	0.002 (0.005)	0.004 (0.005)	−0.013** (0.005)
Education	0.03 (0.02)	−0.16*** (0.05)	−0.08* (0.04)	−0.01 (0.02)	0.05 (0.04)	−0.08* (0.04)
Gender (Male =1)	0.09 (0.11)	−0.16 (0.13)	−0.18 (0.11)	0.12 (0.10)	0.13 (0.13)	−0.02 (0.12)
Social class	0.24*** (0.08)	0.07 (0.05)	0.08* (0.04)	−0.07 (0.07)	0.07 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)
Partisanship	1.44*** (0.11)	1.78*** (0.20)	1.37*** (0.13)	0.18* (0.11)	0.12 (0.18)	0.49** (0.13)
People like me don't influence government	0.04* (0.02)	0.13 (0.08)	0.002 (0.07)	0.002 (0.02)	0.09 (0.08)	−0.18** (0.07)
N	1,494	989	1,145	1,467	975	1,138
Chi ² (Significance)	291.6*** (0.0001)	243.2*** (0.0001)	274.7*** (0.0001)	29.07*** (0.0005)	18.61*** (0.02)	34.79*** (0.0001)
Pseudo R ²	0.10	0.12	0.10	0.01	0.01	0.01

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .005$. Intercepts included but not reported in the table.

Data source: Asian Barometer Survey, Center for East Asia Democratic Studies, College of Social Sciences, National Taiwan University, Taiwan, China.

Table 2. Ordered logit of public support through three survey waves for Chinese Taiwan.

Dependent variable = support	Government approval			Democratic support		
	Wave 1 (2003)	Wave 2 (2006)	Wave 3 (2011)	Wave 1 (2003)	Wave 2 (2006)	Wave 3 (2011)
Current national economic performance	0.81*** (0.08)	0.74*** (0.06)	0.73*** (0.06)	0.10 (0.07)	0.14** (0.06)	0.06 (0.06)
Current family financial situation	−0.06 (0.08)	0.03 (0.07)	0.02 (0.06)	0.11 (0.07)	0.12* (0.07)	0.03 (0.06)
Age	0.003 (0.005)	0.01** (0.004)	0.002 (0.004)	0.002 (0.005)	−0.01*** (0.003)	−0.008** (0.003)
Education	0.14*** (0.02)	0.16*** (0.03)	−0.01 (0.02)	0.025 (0.017)	0.01 (0.01)	−0.001 (0.01)
Gender (Male =1)	−0.20 (0.12)	−0.09* (0.11)	−0.35*** (0.10)	0.19* (0.11)	0.27** (0.10)	0.40*** (0.10)
Social class	0.01 (0.01)	−0.02 (0.04)	0.01 (0.03)	0.02 (0.07)	0.09* (0.03)	0.15*** (0.03)
Partisanship	1.75*** (0.15)	1.82*** (0.15)	1.57*** (0.12)	0.46*** (0.13)	0.30 (0.13)	0.09 (0.11)
People like me don't influence government	−0.15 (0.10)	−0.06 (0.08)	−0.18* (0.08)	0.12 (0.09)	−0.11 (0.08)	0.05 (0.08)
N	1,103	1,332	1,428	1,097	1,321	1,420
Chi ² (Significance)	373.6*** (0.0001)	455.64*** (0.0001)	426.6** (0.0001)	31.14*** (0.0001)	59.67*** (0.0001)	60.04*** (0.0001)
Pseudo R ²	0.15	0.15	0.13	0.01	0.02	0.02

Note: * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$. Intercepts included but not reported in the table.

Data source: Asian Barometer Survey, Center for East Asia Democratic Studies, College of Social Sciences, National Taiwan University, Taiwan, China.

Table 3. Ordered logit of public support through three survey waves for the Philippines.

Dependent variable = support	Government approval			Democratic support		
	Wave 1 (2003)	Wave 2 (2006)	Wave 3 (2011)	Wave 1 (2003)	Wave 2 (2006)	Wave 3 (2011)
Current national economic performance	0.36*** (0.06)	0.53*** (0.06)	0.49*** (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)	0.18*** (0.06)	0.16** (0.06)
Current family financial situation	0.15** (0.08)	0.10 (0.06)	0.19** (0.07)	−0.03 (0.06)	0.02 (0.06)	0.01 (0.07)
Age	0.007* (0.004)	0.007** (0.004)	0.007 (0.004)	0.007 (0.004)	0.003 (0.004)	0.004 (0.004)
Education	0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	−0.03 (0.03)	−0.04** (0.02)	−0.004 (0.03)	−0.03 (0.03)
Gender (Male =1)	0.07 (0.11)	−0.24** (0.11)	0.13 (0.11)	0.09 (0.11)	−0.04 (0.11)	−0.05 (0.11)
Social class	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.03)	−0.02 (0.02)	0.004 (0.01)	0.01 (0.03)	0.02 (0.02)
Partisanship	1.44** (0.11)	0.49*** (0.14)	−0.14 (0.13)	0.31** (0.13)	−0.15 (0.14)	0.06 (0.13)
People like me don't influence government	0.04 (0.06)	0.19 (0.06)	−0.02 (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)	−0.06 (0.06)	0.10* (0.06)
<i>N</i>	1,197	1,125	1,111	1,196	1,092	1,113
Chi ² (Significance)	62.52*** (0.0001)	146.3*** (0.0001)	107.9** (0.0001)	21.74** (0.001)	14.02 (0.08)	16.81*** (0.03)
Pseudo <i>R</i> ²	0.02	0.05	0.04	0.01	0.005	0.006

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .005$. Intercepts included but not reported in the table.

Data source: Asian Barometer Survey, Center for East Asia Democratic Studies, College of Social Sciences, National Taiwan University, Taiwan, China.

Table 4. Ordered logit of public support through three survey waves for Thailand.

Dependent variable = support	Government approval			Democratic support		
	Wave 1 (2003)	Wave 2 (2006)	Wave 3 (2011)	Wave 1 (2003)	Wave 2 (2006)	Wave 3 (2011)
Current national economic performance	0.26*** (0.07)	0.58*** (0.07)	0.76*** (0.08)	0.21* (0.08)	0.29*** (0.08)	0.20** (0.08)
Current family financial situation	−0.08 (0.09)	0.05 (0.10)	0.25*** (0.09)	−0.31*** (0.11)	0.29* (0.12)	0.18* (0.08)
Age	−0.0002 (0.0006)	−0.001 (0.004)	−0.002 (0.004)	−0.001 (0.001)	0.003 (0.005)	0.004 (0.004)
Education	0.001 (0.002)	−0.16*** (0.04)	−0.07* (0.03)	0.001 (0.003)	0.01 (0.03)	−0.07* (0.03)
Gender (Male =1)	−0.19* (0.11)	−0.33** (0.14)	−0.27* (0.11)	−0.05 (0.14)	0.24 (0.13)	−0.02 (0.11)
Social class	0.001 (0.003)	−0.14** (0.05)	0.11*** (0.03)	0.01* (0.006)	−0.04 (0.06)	0.04 (0.03)
Partisanship	1.44* (0.11)	0.73*** (0.14)	1.86*** (0.16)	0.54** (0.19)	−0.16 (0.18)	0.41*** (0.12)
People like me can't influence government	0.04 (0.06)	0.007 (0.07)	0.03 (0.06)	−0.06 (0.07)	0.18* (0.09)	0.14* (0.07)
<i>N</i>	1,475	1,248	1,191	1,396	1,243	1,254
Chi ² (Significance)	68.51*** (0.0001)	176.0*** (0.0001)	334.2** (0.0001)	28.1*** (0.0004)	420.1*** (0.0001)	42.06*** (0.0001)
Pseudo <i>R</i> ²	0.02	0.06	0.11	0.02	0.02	0.02

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .005$. Intercepts included but not reported in the table.

Data source: Asian Barometer Survey, Center for East Asia Democratic Studies, College of Social Sciences, National Taiwan University, Taiwan, China.

Table 5. Ordered logit of public support through two survey waves for Indonesia.

Dependent variable = support	Government approval		Democratic support	
	Wave 2 (2006)	Wave 3 (2011)	Wave 2 (2006)	Wave 3 (2011)
Current national economic performance	0.49*** (0.07)	0.64*** (0.07)	0.22*** (0.07)	0.10 (0.07)
Current family financial situation	0.22*** (0.07)	0.06 (0.08)	−0.04 (0.07)	0.12 (0.08)
Age	0.015*** (0.005)	0.003 (0.005)	0.004 (0.004)	0.007 (0.004)
Education	0.02 (0.02)	−0.08*** (0.03)	0.03 (0.02)	−0.4 (0.03)
Gender (Male =1)	0.03 (0.11)	−0.10 (0.11)	0.14 (0.11)	0.01 (0.11)
Social class	0.003 (0.004)	0.04 (0.03)	0.08*** (0.03)	0.11*** (0.03)
Partisanship	0.30 (0.19)	0.94*** (0.22)	0.11 (0.20)	0.34 (0.20)
People like me don't influence government	0.02 (0.09)	0.24*** (0.09)	−0.08 (0.09)	0.12 (0.09)
N	1,417	1,052	1,339	1,181
Chi ² (Significance)	117.71*** (0.0001)	141.0*** (0.0001)	40.7*** (0.0001)	32.34*** (0.0001)
Pseudo R ²	0.04	0.07	0.02	0.01

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .005$. Intercepts included but not reported in the table.

Data source: Asian Barometer Survey, Center for East Asia Democratic Studies, College of Social Sciences, National Taiwan University, Taiwan, China.

the analyses. That is, even when other variables become statistically significant, and even over time, the effect of economic performance persists on government approval.

The same does not hold for democratic support, where the effects of economic performance are not consistent. In cases where political influence is not a significant explanatory variable, or when survey participants report low political influence, economic performance is sometimes statistically significant and positive in explaining democratic support. Importantly, when survey participants, such as in South Korea in wave three, disagree that 'people like me do not have influence over what the government does', economic performance is statistically negative on democratic support. This means that even when economic performance is poor, the respondents support democracy in the country. Also importantly, the effect of economic performance on democratic support is not consistent over time: where survey participants note low political influence, economic performance is statistically and positively correlated to democratic support; however, where political influence is not statistically significant over time, economic performance also wanes in its effects. Thus, Chinese Taiwan and Indonesia in wave three show no effect for economic performance.

In summary, the results show that economic performance matters for government approval but not consistently for democratic support. Indeed, the effects of economic performance appear to be attenuated by political influence over time. In conjunction, the results show that a focus on economic growth may keep a government in office, and political influence through institution-building may undergird the stability of the political system.

Conclusions

How does poor economic performance affect political support in East and Southeast Asia? Correspondingly, does the governments' prioritisation of economic growth over democratic reforms and institution-building improve stability or peace in the respective countries? In contrast to the vast literature on how strong economies of East and Southeast Asia legitimise the governments and political systems, there is a curious neglect of how poor economic performance affects government legitimation and political systems. This neglect is unfortunate on several levels: theoretically and empirically. Theoretically, the neglect means that Asian studies continue to be marginalised in social sciences since Asian studies seem 'inhospitable' to theory-building. In policy-making, the neglect means that governments may continue to justify dogmatic practices in the name of 'Asian values' or Asian exceptionalism. This certainly seems to be the case, as the governments in the region prioritise economic growth over democratic reforms especially when facing low government approvals.

This study systematically evaluates how economic performance affects political support. We follow the literature to distinguish two types of political support: government approval and democratic support. Also following the literature, we include various socio-economic and political considerations in assessing the effects of economic performance.

The results offer three useful insights. First, economic performance is robustly and positively related to government approval. Thus, strong economic performance corresponds with strong support for government while poor economic performance yields weak support. Second, economic performance is not consistently related to support for democratisation; instead, political influence plays an intervening role on how economic performance affects democratic support. In particular, where political influence is insignificant or if participants express little influence, economic performance is positively correlated to democratic support; on the other hand, where participants express their political influence, economic performance is negatively correlated to democratic support.

More broadly, these results are important in aligning Asian studies with the larger literature in the field. In particular, the results for government approval are consistent with the research in economic voting that report a willingness to throw out government for poor economic performance. At the same time, the results on the statistical relevance of political influence align with institution-building and political support in the literature where governments may be thrown out but the political systems are supported.

In conjunction, the results clarify that economic growth may keep a government in office but political institution-building undergirds the stability of political system. This implies that governments, which pursue growth over institution-building, have followed short-sighted strategies that may threaten, rather than deepen, political and social stability.

Notes

1. The uniqueness of Asia or 'Asian values' was first asserted by former Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, in an interview with Fareed Zakaria (1994) and upheld by other politicians in East and Southeast Asia to argue for slowing democratic reforms in

the respective countries in favour of political and social certainty and stability. Ironically, the uniqueness of ‘Asian values’ has been challenged by other politicians and roundly rejected by many Asian scholars. See, for instance, Thompson 1996; Lee 2002.

2. Translation of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, prepared by Legal Opinion and Translation Section, Foreign Law Division, the Office of the Council of State, Government Gazette, Vol. 134.
3. We note that the influence on governments is worded similarly for waves one and three but differently for wave two. Specifically, in wave two, the question is worded as ‘people have the power to change a government they don’t like’.

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