



# The COVID-19 pandemic and the electoral performance of governing parties in electoral democracies

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had tremendous impacts on political, economic and social developments across the globe. Although some studies show that voters tend to hold incumbent parties accountable for managing the pandemic, the results of others suggest that the rally-round-the-flag strategy might be at plan. We contend that voters tend to hold the incumbent party accountable, even during an exogenous shock, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. We hypothesize that more stringent government responses to tackle the pandemic and more COVID-19 casualties tend to decrease the electoral support for incumbent parties. Using original data from 67 national elections in 56 electoral democracies from mid-March 2020 to May 2022, the empirical results support our hypothesis.

## Keywords

COVID-19, electoral democracies, incumbent party, retrospective voting, political accountability

## Introduction

Since January 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected all aspects of people's lives across different countries. Economically, governments have adopted different measures to reduce activity to curb the pandemic's spread. Many countries adopted reduced hours or complete closure of stores, curfews and lockdowns with various degrees of stringency. Socially, personal interactions in the domestic and international domains have significantly altered due to 'social distancing', which was implemented in the United States (Olney et al., 2021), Europe (Palomino et al., 2020) and Latin America (Zhu et al., 2020), among other regions. People have been instructed to keep at least a 1.5-meter distance between each other in all public spaces, and private as well as public gatherings,

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for the most part, have been forbidden or highly restricted. The dramatic change to the conduct of everyday life in our societies caused by the crisis produced severe consequences for people's lives, and, as a result, one can also say for their (public) choices. Hence, also for electoral politics.

In times like this, the direct question for election researchers is: 'How does the pandemic affect electoral outcomes in democracies?' Not all democracies have held elections since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, one can argue that for those whose elections were due, there was an additional and much more salient issue to deal with – that of COVID-19 and all its ramifications. Extant literature on the political effects of COVID-19 presents two alternative perspectives that can explain the link between the pandemic and electoral politics. Some works propose that voters tend to reward or punish politicians, and therefore support an electoral accountability line of thinking; others tend to focus on the fact that in times of great uncertainty, such as the one brought by the pandemic and its effects on society, people tend to stick to *the known*, or what is referred to as a 'rally-round-the-flag' strategy. One can also view the two alternatives as a reaction on the same continuum – that of satisfaction with the political status quo. There is, however, not enough evidence yet in favor of one side over the other, and the question about which explanation is the more plausible, and why, remains open.

Building on an established body of electoral politics literature on retrospective voting (Ashworth, 2012), we contend that the electoral accountability explanation is more central for two reasons. First, the literature on economic voting suggests that voters tend to punish those in power in worsening economic conditions. Despite being placed to safeguard public health, governmental restrictions and the closure of societies resulted in significant economic losses worldwide. Lewis-Beck and Lobo (2017) note that crises accentuate the economic vote. Furthermore, research points to the fact that when weighed against other factors, how well the economy is doing remains central to what voters choose (Stegmaier et al., 2017). Many social protests against governmental restrictions have taken place around the world, signifying an unhappy electorate that is likely to default on the government in the case of elections. Second, even in the event of initial support for the incumbent party, which could be a result of wanting to minimize the level of uncertainty in a difficult situation, such effect dissipates with time and voters 'sober up' from the initial stress that COVID-19 pandemic brought with it (Louwse et al., 2021).

Although most existing studies that test the political consequence of the pandemic use survey data, few studies examine the relationship between COVID-19 and elections using macro-level data.<sup>1</sup> This article aims to investigate how the state of the pandemic and the manner in which it was handled by the government affected electoral outcomes in democracies. Focusing on an original dataset of 67 national elections in 56 electoral democracies from mid-March 2020 to May 2022, we offer a quantitative analysis supporting the electoral accountability hypothesis. Specifically, the results show that the governing party's electoral support decreases with a higher level of government response stringency to the pandemic. Our findings have implications for governing parties and how they may want to mediate their responses in the future.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section critically examines the existing theoretical debates on the effect of COVID-19 and establishes testable hypotheses for our empirical analyses, which links that to the more extensive body of scholarship on electoral accountability. The third section describes our research design and justifies the choice of data and method. The fourth section discusses the empirical results, and the fifth section concludes.

## Theoretical debates

What explains the variation in governing party's electoral performance in times of unpredictable crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic? Existing literature suggests two competing explanatory

perspectives. The ‘electoral accountability’ hypothesis suggests that when a country has more severe conditions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, voters tend to punish the governing party in the election (Baccini et al., 2021; Mendoza Aviña and Sevi, 2021; Shino and Smith, 2021; Singer, 2021; Warshaw et al., 2020). Focusing on the American context, both Singer (2021) and Baccini et al. (2021) illustrate that presidential approval has been more closely linked to the diminishing level of health during the COVID-19 pandemic and that President Trump’s support has eroded as a result of his adopted reactions to the pandemic.

In contrast, the ‘rally-round-the-flag’ hypothesis, which originates in studies of severe international crises such as war and terrorism, suggests that to lower additional uncertainty that political change may bring, people tend to consolidate their support for the incumbent government irrespective of the policies it pursues. Many recent studies examine to what extent this logic fits the reactions of voters to the COVID-19 pandemic (Baekgaard et al., 2020; De Vries et al., 2021; Kritzinger et al., 2021; Schraff, 2021). Although Baekgaard et al.’s (2020) analyses provide support for the ‘rally-round-the-flag’ hypothesis in the case of Denmark, Kritzinger et al.’s (2021) study shows that support linked to the response to the health crisis, which could initially be found in Austria, dissipated over time, and voters’ attitudes in France do not exhibit a ‘rally-round-the-flag’ effect. Herrera et al.’s (2020) analyses of government approval rates for 35 countries show that a global ‘rally-round-the-flag’ effect could be found in the first weeks after the pandemic outbreak; however, incumbent approval rates dropped in countries where the COVID-19 crisis deepened, and stringent policy measures were not implemented effectively.

Considering these two alternative explanations and building on retrospective voting arguments from the electoral choice literature, we contend that the electoral accountability story is more plausible for explaining voter support for the incumbent party during the COVID-19 health crisis. We argue that as governments respond in a stricter manner and significantly curb their citizens’ rights – by adopting curfews, or ordering the closure of stores, schools and workplaces – incumbents are likely to be punished at election time. Much of this can be expected, based on the centrality of economic ramifications caused by the closure of society but also due to other ‘costs’ incurred by citizens, such as adding ‘cost’ in time that families with children and working parents needed to incur, for example. Retrospective voting is the act of evaluating the work of the incumbent government at the ballot box. Voters observe political behavior, collect information and make decisions about the future based on the retrospective actions of those in charge. A key point of contention here was the extent to which voters collect and process information. Fearon (1999) developed Key’s (1966) work on the ‘responsible electorate’, arguing that voters do not need much knowledge to keep governments accountable, but they can do that by focusing on simple observable (economic) metrics. To understand the complex formation of voter choice, Campbell et al. (1960) developed a model identifying long- and short-term factors that can all play a role in one’s vote choice, referred to as ‘the funnel of causality’. Stegmaier et al. (2017) argue that the more distant, stable factors like socioeconomic status, demographics and partisanship shape voter choice after being evaluated through the prism of more immediate factors related to the election at hand, such as salient issues and performance evaluation. Economic factors and how well the national economy is doing are central in voters’ decision making (Wilkin et al., 1997).

The general logic behind the results of retrospective voting is straightforward – incumbent governments get rewarded and re-elected if the policies they have adopted during their reign have been evaluated positively by voters, or they get punished, and ousted, if voters have not been happy during their leadership. In times of crisis, voters tend to consider crisis-related policies and outcomes in their evaluation of the government’s performance. Studies have found that incumbent parties’ electoral support decreases when they adopt fiscal austerity measures during economic crises (Hübscher et al., 2020; Talving, 2017). This is because austerity measures include

cutting government spending and increasing taxation, which cause economic strain for many voters (Bojar et al., 2022). In a similar vein, when the government adopts a stricter policy in response to the pandemic, it is likely that voters tend to suffer from the social inconvenience and economic loss resulting from the policy. For instance, Eichenbaum et al. (2021) find that, although stringent nonpharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) help save lives, these policies make an economic recession more likely. Potential losses to the economy have been simulated by Walmsley et al. (2021), who projected a 20% annual decline in US gross domestic product (GDP). Although the world got a better grip on COVID and economies are bouncing back, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a significant revenue loss, with small businesses being hit the hardest (Fairlie et al., 2023). Thus, we expect that a stricter stringent policy intervention undermines the governing party's electoral support.

Another critical question is whether voters make choices that can lead to increased public welfare. Gasper and Reeves (2011) have studied voter behavior in the face of natural disasters in the United States and found that voters are able to distinguish among actors at various levels of government in their responsibility to act and apply that to the way in which they give (or retain) their electoral support. Natural disasters, similar to the health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, are out of the incumbents' control, yet how the incumbents deal with disasters is crucial to how they will fare on the ballot (Achen and Bartels, 2016). Cole et al. (2012) and Healy and Malhotra (2009) show that voters tend to hold the incumbent party accountable for weather shocks by rewarding the incumbent party for responding vigorously by delivering more disaster relief spending. Heersink et al. (2022) further argue that whether voters reward or punish incumbents for their response to natural disasters is conditioned by pre-existing partisanship.

Considering the retrospective voting story, and especially its concerns about the amount of knowledge and information voters have, it can be argued that for high-level disasters, such as the number of deaths caused by a pandemic, the information that voters have to process requires very little. This, in turn, can be expected to increase the number of votes cast with this logic in mind, and we can expect that by just observing the reality around them, voters in elections during the COVID-19 pandemic act in rationalizing what they see. On the one hand, they see the devastation caused by illness; on the other, they see and hear about how their government responds to this health crisis. Given that a pandemic is not overt, but its happening is very obvious, so is the government's response to its outbreak. In that sense, the problem with the inability to process information, put forth as countering the logic of the retrospective voter theory, is irrelevant in this case.

Based on these contentions, we apply the retrospective voter theory to electoral results during the COVID-19 pandemic and test the following hypothesis:

*H1: The governing party's electoral support decreases with more COVID-19 death incidences before the election.*

Similarly, we expect people to evaluate the manner in which the government handles the crisis and, in particular, to make their voting decisions based on their judgment of the level of strictness of the policies adopted to fight the pandemic. Neundorf and Pardos-Prado (2022) suggest that during the pandemic, people might not only concern about public health policies that can effectively manage the pandemic crisis, but also concern about the economic costs associated with such policies. Therefore, there might be a health-economic trade-off facing stricter measures to cope with the pandemic. Empirically, although some studies provide evidence that people tend to prefer stringent policy measures protecting public health despite their damage to the

economy (Hargreaves Heap et al., 2020; Oana et al., 2021), other studies show that people might prefer to avoid income losses over reduction in the number of casualties caused by the pandemic (Belle and Cantarelli 2022). Given that the trade-off between human lives and economic losses is disputable, some existing studies find that voters tend to reward the incumbents when stricter measures are adopted (Bol et al. 2021; Giommoni and Loumeau 2022). These studies, however, are based on individual-level survey data. Therefore, it is not clear whether country-level data also show similar patterns.<sup>2</sup> Because the adoption of stricter measures tends to induce more economic losses, and because many voters may focus on their personal situation rather than the social good, we can expect that voters will instead punish rather than reward governments who implement stringent policies to tackle the pandemic. Therefore, we generate and test the following hypothesis:

*H2: The governing party's electoral support decreases with a stricter government policy in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.*

## Research design

To test the hypotheses about the pandemic impacts on governing parties' electoral performance, we conduct quantitative analyses for 49 parliamentary elections and 18 presidential elections in a total of 56 electoral democracies around the world. The period of examination is from mid-March 2020 to May 2022,<sup>3</sup> and the unit of analysis is a country-election.

## Dependent variable

The dependent variable for our empirical analysis is the vote share of the major governing party in the first national election in an electoral democracy after 11 March 2020, when the World Health Organization (WHO) announced the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic (WHO, 2020). Our analysis focuses solely on the first national election following the COVID-19 outbreak because such an election serves as the initial evaluation by voters of the government's performance in handling the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>4</sup> All our calculations of the dependent variable are based on the electoral data provided by the electoral management body of each country.

In many countries in our dataset, varying numbers of parties share power in the government. Parties might form alliances for electoral contests and coalition governments after the election. We focus on the vote share of the major party in office in the COVID-19 election to obtain a reliable, comparative measure for the incumbent vote. The major governing party is defined as the party that supplies the head of the government. Because the major governing party attracts the most public attention, voters tend to apportion to the party the most blame and credit for national policies among the governing parties during a government's tenure (Anderson, 1995).

For countries with a parliamentary system, the governing party is defined as the prime minister's party rather than all parties in the cabinet. If the prime minister is an independent politician, the party with the largest share of ministerial posts is considered the governing party. For presidential elections in presidential or semi-presidential systems, the governing party is defined as the president's party. We consider the president's vote share gained in the election if the president was an independent candidate. For legislative elections in presidential or semi-presidential systems, the governing party is defined as the president's party in the legislature.

We address several methodological issues to ensure the reliability of our coding for the dependent variable. First, we use the first-round vote share for the governing party for presidential

elections and parliamentary systems with a run-off system. Second, for presidential democracies that hold the presidential and parliamentary elections concurrently, we include both observations in the analyses. Third, for parliamentary elections in which a mixed electoral system is adopted,<sup>5</sup> we calculated the vote share for the governing party by weighting equally for its vote shares in the district-level tier and the proportional representation tier.

### *Independent variables*

To examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on governing parties' electoral performance, we consider two independent variables in our empirical models. First, COVID-19 death incidence is included as an indicator of the government's health crisis management. This variable is measured as the cumulative number of fatalities due to COVID-19 per 10,000 people in the country from the onset of the pandemic to the day before the election date (WHO, 2021). More COVID-19 death incidences indicate worse management to curb the COVID-19 crisis. We contend that a worse COVID-19 crisis tends to make voters less satisfied with the government, which will encourage these voters to turn their support to opposition parties or new parties. In this sense, we expect that a higher number of COVID-19 fatalities will have a negative effect on the governing party's vote share in the COVID election.

Second, government response stringency is included to capture how strictly the government managed the COVID-19 crisis. The source for this variable is the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) (Hale et al., 2021). The OxCGRT's stringency index, ranging from 0 to 100 (100=strictest), is an average of 9 ordinal items at the national level, which are school closing, workplace closing, cancelation of public events, restrictions on gatherings, public transport closing, stay at home requirements, restrictions on internal movement, international travel controls and public information campaigns (Hale et al., 2021: 530).

In our analysis, we calculate the average of the daily values of the stringency index recorded from the initial day of index recording until the day preceding the election. When the government adopts a highly restrictive policy intervention for crisis management, most economic and social activities are forced to be limited and monitored. Because voters might hold the governing party politically accountable for any inconvenience or negative impacts caused by such a stringent policy, we expect that a higher average level of government response stringency undermines the governing party's electoral support in COVID-19 elections.

### *Control variables*

In the empirical models, we control for a number of variables identified by the previous literature that might affect governing parties' electoral performance. First, we control for three institutional variables. A dichotomous variable for the parliamentary system controls for the possibility that pure parliamentary systems might reduce the governing party's vote share (Koch, 2011: 810). Another institutional variable we control for is whether a given election is for electing a chief executive or not. Because we pool different types of national elections in our analysis, governing parties' vote share might likely vary due to different levels of salience of the elections. The variable is dichotomous, coded 1 for: (a) parliamentary elections in parliamentary democracies; and (b) presidential elections in presidential and semi-presidential democracies. Moreover, it is coded 0 for: (a) legislative elections in presidential and semi-presidential democracies; and (b) presidential elections in parliamentary democracies.<sup>6</sup> The third institutional variable is 'terms in office', which aims to account for the cost of the ruling. This variable is measured by calculating the length of

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics ( $n = 67$ ).

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Vote share (percent) of the major governing party	34.593	18.520	0.664	92.183
Cumulative COVID-19 deaths per 10,000 people	8.429	11.315	0	46.870
Average level of government response stringency	58.493	14.702	11.11	87.733
Parliamentary system	0.448	0.501	0	1
Election for chief executive	0.642	0.483	0	1
Years of terms in office	7.720	7.542	0.397	43.416
GDP per capita growth <sub><math>y-1</math></sub>	-0.732	6.566	-24.181	9.616
Inflation rate (log) <sub><math>y-1</math></sub>	0.908	0.869	0	4.083
Population (log) <sub><math>y-1</math></sub>	15.729	2.030	10.572	19.610
Ethnic fractionalization	0.507	0.276	0.048	0.948

The term  $y-1$  refers to the previous year before the election date.  
GDP: gross domestic product.

time an incumbent party has held office; specifically, it is measured as the number of years between the incumbency's inauguration date and the COVID-19 election date.

In addition, previous literature on economic voting suggests that voters tend to punish the governing party by shifting their votes to other parties when the government fails to manage the economy well (Powell and Whitten, 1993). In the empirical models, therefore, we control for GDP per capita growth and inflation rates<sup>7</sup> lagged by one year to take into account the short-term impact of economic performance on governing parties' electoral performance. Furthermore, to control for factors that might affect the relationship between COVID-19 variables and the governing party's electoral performance, we control for the logged transformation of the population in the year prior to the COVID-19 election<sup>8</sup> and ethnic fractionalization.<sup>9</sup> Last, we control for the main governing party's vote share in the previous national election. Table 1 lists the descriptive statistics for the variables used in the analyses.

## Empirical results

### *Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the governing party's vote share*

To make the results more interpretable and easier to compare across dependent variables, we estimate our models with ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to analyze what explains the governing parties' vote share in the COVID-19 election. To consider the possibility that incumbent parties' electoral performance might be affected due to the timing of the election, we estimate the model with pandemic wave-fixed effects.<sup>10</sup> Table 2 demonstrates the empirical analyses of governing parties' performance in national elections during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Model 1, we examine the effect of the COVID-19 deaths variable only; in Model 2, we examine the government response stringency variable only; and in Model 3, we estimate the full model by including both independent variables. As can be seen, the coefficient for COVID-19 deaths does not achieve statistical significance in Model 1 and Model 3. Therefore, H1 is not supported by the evidence.

In contrast, the findings in both Model 2 and Model 3 indicate that a higher level of government response stringency has a negative and statistically significant effect on the governing party's vote share. This evidence provides strong support for H2, suggesting that fewer voters would support

**Table 2.** The COVID-19 pandemic and the electoral performance of major governing parties.

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Cumulative COVID-19 deaths per 10,000 people	0.112 (0.135)	—	0.169 (0.144)
Average level of government response stringency	—	-0.228* (0.118)	-0.245** (0.120)
Parliamentary system	4.577 (4.603)	4.121 (4.540)	3.324 (4.541)
Election for chief executive	-1.417 (5.129)	-1.952 (5.089)	-1.985 (5.117)
Terms in office	-0.424* (0.231)	-0.462** (0.222)	-0.500** (0.224)
GDP per capita growth <sub><i>y-1</i></sub>	0.526 (0.433)	0.272 (0.447)	0.354 (0.457)
Inflation rate (log) <sub><i>y-1</i></sub>	-2.125 (1.932)	-1.739 (1.932)	-2.399 (2.088)
Population (log) <sub><i>y-1</i></sub>	1.257 (0.951)	1.782* (1.012)	1.625 (0.992)
Ethnic fractionalization	-10.424* (6.127)	-10.307* (5.575)	-9.421* (5.416)
Vote share for the main governing party <sub><i>e-1</i></sub>	1.044*** (0.095)	1.019*** (0.083)	1.065*** (0.084)
Constant	-20.919 (16.684)	-11.345 (18.705)	-12.328 (18.333)
Pandemic waves dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes
R-squared	0.635	0.653	0.658
Number of observations	67	67	67

The term  $y_{-1}$  refers to the previous year, and  $e_{-1}$  refers to the previous election. Robust standard errors are given in parentheses (two-tailed tests).

\*\*\*Indicates that the coefficient is significant at  $p < 1\%$  level, \*\*at  $p < 5\%$  level, \*at  $p < 10\%$  level.

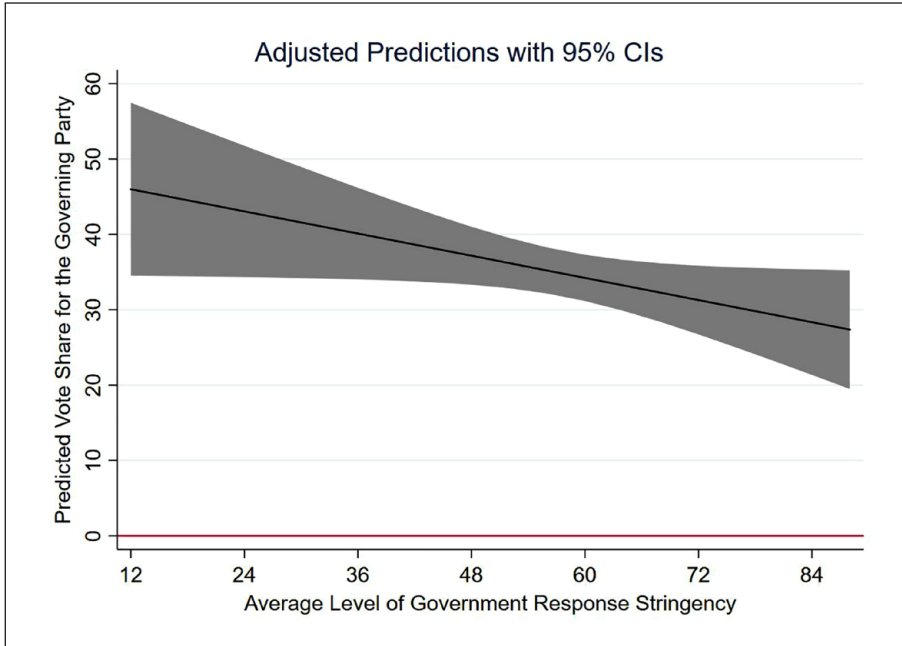
GDP: gross domestic product.

the governing party in the COVID-19 election if the government adopts a more stringent policy in response to the pandemic crisis before the election.<sup>11</sup> Figure 1 presents the predicted governing party's vote share at various levels of government response stringency.

Substantively, the results in Model 3 suggest that when the level of government response stringency increases by one standard deviation (15), the governing party's vote share is expected to decrease by 3.7 percentage points, *ceteris paribus*. According to the methodology of indices calculation of the OxCGRT,<sup>12</sup> such a change in increasing the level of government response stringency is similar to the following scenario: a country escalated the stringency level from adopting region-targeted measures of requiring closing schools at all levels to adopting nationwide measures of requiring closing all levels of schools.

Regarding the results for control variables, Model 3 shows that terms in office and ethnic fractionalization have statistically significant coefficients. Specifically, we show that a governing party that had stayed in power for a longer time tends to have poorer electoral performance during the pandemic. Moreover, the results demonstrate that the governing party's electoral support tends to be lower in a country with a higher level of ethnic fractionalization. Last, the findings suggest that a governing party that received more votes in the previous election tends to have better electoral performance in the COVID-19 election.



**Figure 1.** Government response stringency and predicted vote share for the governing party.

### Robustness checks

To ensure the robustness of our findings variables, we conduct a series of diagnoses and additional analyses. First, we use an alternative dependent variable by considering all governing parties' vote share in countries with coalition governments. The results of the re-estimation in Model 4 in Table 3 remain largely similar to the results of Model 3 in Table 2, showing that a higher level of government response stringency is associated with a lower share of governing parties.

Second, to ensure that our findings are not sensitive to coding decisions for the independent variables, we recoded COVID-19 death incidence and government response stringency based on different timing of the reported information. Given voters' retrospective myopia, it is possible that what matters for electoral accountability is the short-term government performance a few months before the election. Therefore, we operationalize the COVID-19 death incidence variable as the mean daily number of COVID-19 deaths for the prior 60 days in the month preceding the election. In addition, we operationalize the government response stringency variable as the mean values of the stringency index for the prior 60 days in the month preceding the election.<sup>13</sup> The results of the re-estimation of Model 5 in Table 3 are largely consistent with those reported in Table 2.

Third, to ensure that our findings in the OLS regression in Model 3 are not driven by unusual observations, we conducted diagnostic tests using Cook's (1977) distance measure and difference in fits (DFFITS) (Belsley et al., 1980) for observations with strong influence on the regression line. Identifying two outliers, we dropped the outliers from the dataset and re-estimated Model 3. The results of Model 6 in Table 3 are largely consistent with those reported in Table 2.

Last, to account for the possibility that unobservable variables bias our estimates, we employ the Stata *psacalc* package (Oster, 2019) to test how strong the selection on unobservables has to be to explain away the negative effect of government response stringency. The Stata *psacalc* command produces two estimates. The first estimate is the delta ( $\delta$ ), which indicates how large the

**Table 3.** Robustness checks.

Variable	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Cumulative COVID-19 deaths per 10,000 people	0.061 (0.193)	—	0.067 (0.126)
Average level of government response stringency	-0.286** (0.125)	—	-0.243** (0.096)
Average daily COVID-19 deaths for the prior 60 days in the month preceding the election	—	0.016* (0.009)	—
Average response stringency for the prior 60 days in the month preceding the election	—	-0.136* (0.073)	—
Parliamentary system	0.662 (5.708)	4.919 (4.618)	-0.911 (3.867)
Election for chief executive	-1.011 (5.144)	-1.145 (5.062)	3.199 (3.962)
Years of terms in office	-0.511* (0.261)	-0.463** (0.227)	-0.477** (0.200)
GDP per capita growth <sub><i>y-1</i></sub>	0.301 (0.498)	0.415 (0.421)	0.372 (0.412)
Inflation rate (log) <sub><i>y-1</i></sub>	-1.845 (2.544)	-1.726 (1.810)	-0.711 (1.524)
Population (log) <sub><i>y-1</i></sub>	1.335 (1.120)	1.262 (1.156)	1.323 (0.946)
Ethnic fractionalization	-8.012 (6.140)	-12.925** (6.360)	-6.268 (4.583)
Vote share for the main governing party <sub><i>e-1</i></sub>	—	1.060*** (0.086)	1.037*** (0.087)
Vote share for all parties in the government coalition <sub><i>e-1</i></sub>	0.984*** (0.137)	—	—
Constant	-2.324 (20.971)	-13.489 (19.225)	-8.194 (18.142)
Pandemic waves dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes
R-squared	0.612	0.658	0.737
Number of observations	67	67	65

The term  $y_{-1}$  refers to the previous year, and  $e_{-1}$  refers to the previous election. Robust standard errors are given in parentheses (two-tailed tests). The dependent variable in Model 4 is measured by considering all governing parties' vote share in countries with the form of coalition government. Model 6 excludes two outliers from the dataset, and they are East Timor 2022 presidential election and Iceland 2020 presidential election.

\*\*\*Indicates that the coefficient is significant at  $p < 1\%$  level, \*\*at  $p < 5\%$  level, \*at  $p < 10\%$  level.

GDP: gross domestic product.

impact of unobservables has to be relative to the effect of observables for the treatment effect to be zero. In our analysis,  $\delta$  can be interpreted as the proportional bias due to unobservables that would have to exist to drive the impact of government response stringency to zero. Altonji et al. (2005) use an upper bound of  $\delta=1$  for the robustness of the results to unobservable selection bias. The estimate of  $\delta$  based on Model 3 is 1.6, which suggests that our empirical result for government response stringency is robust.

The second estimate produced by *psacalc* is the bound coefficient estimate of the treatment variable when the *R*-squared in a regression of the dependent variable on all observable and unobservable controls (i.e. *R*max) is assumed to be 1, which is the most conservative approach (González and Miguel 2015: 32). After obtaining this bound coefficient estimate, we can estimate bounds on

the treatment effect where it ranges between the effect estimated from the main specification and the effect estimated under the assumption that observables are as important as unobservables ( $\delta = 1$ ). The treatment effect is considered robust if the bounding set excludes zero. In our estimates for Model 3, the bounding set is  $[-0.305, -0.245]$ , which does not include zero. Therefore, we can rule out the possibility that omitted variable bias drives our results.

Overall, our empirical analyses demonstrate that how the government tackles the COVID-19 crisis matters for explaining governing parties' electoral support in national elections during the pandemic. The empirical evidence supports H2, showing that a higher level of government response stringency is associated with a lower governing party's vote share in COVID-19 elections. The results are robust across different model specifications.

## Conclusion

This study examines how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected electoral politics. Although still a new phenomenon, a quickly increasing body of literature examines various relations between the world health crisis and politics. For example, a number of studies examine citizen attitudes, party stances and even compliance in connection to partisanship. There has yet to be any evidence, however, on how the COVID-19 pandemic affects national electoral competition. Given that many see the executive branch as the key responsible institution for how a country fares in a crisis, we are keen to understand how the pandemic has affected the electoral support of the major governing party in electoral democracies worldwide.

The existing literature proposes two competing explanations for this. An electoral accountability story, where the political party of the executive is held accountable, and thus punished or rewarded for the status of the country (e.g. Baccini et al., 2021; Mendoza Avaña and Sevi, 2021; Singer, 2021), and a 'rally-round-the-flag' story, which suggests that in times of crisis, citizens want to avoid additional uncertainty and therefore support the incumbent regardless of the policy choices they make (Baekgaard et al., 2020; De Vries et al., 2021). Although the logic of the latter is plausible in international crises such as war or terrorist attacks, for the COVID-19 pandemic we argue that the electoral accountability argument has more leverage in explaining voters' actions. The reason is that, first, many citizens see the adoption of restrictive policies as the cause of economic losses (albeit the fact that they are meant for the greater social good and are necessary to fight the spread of COVID-19), and, second, that the behavior of citizens is time-sensitive (see also Kritzing et al., 2021 and Herrera et al., 2020). Hence, the likelihood that voters would hold the executive accountable rather than support the executive blindly is more logical.

We test our hypotheses using an original dataset of national elections that have taken place in electoral democracies around the world between mid-March 2020 and May 2022. Our results offer strong support for the electoral accountability thesis. A more stringent government response to tackle the pandemic tends to reduce the electoral support for governing parties.

The results of our analysis are limited to the data availability and must therefore be treated with caution. However, we have shown solid support for the electoral accountability hypothesis regarding how COVID-19 or similar exogenous shocks affect the electoral success of the incumbent party. Socially, this is an important result, as it reveals, somewhat grimly, that people tend to care more about their well-being than making personal sacrifices for the common social good. An important implication for governments, therefore, is that when strict policy measures such as full or partial lockdowns need to be taken, the results of which will have a strong negative effect on the economy – such as significant GDP losses – such negative consequences need to be openly communicated with citizens in advance, and the government needs to offer alternative compensatory scenarios to curb these losses. Although we cannot make an argument without having survey data to confirm that, we contend that the electoral accountability effect of stringent government

interventions can be lowered by the above strategies – disclosure of information (which would likely increase trust in government) and compensation scenarios (which would provide a tangible reason for having to incur immediate costs).

For academics, the results are also important and telling. Our country-level analyses indicate that when the type of exogenous shock to the system is such that the individual and the social effect can be segregated, such as in a health crisis, and differently from war, the electoral accountability theory overpowers the ‘rally-round-the-flag’ story. This indicates that government response strategies for exogenous shocks need to be different for different types of shocks (war vs pandemics) and their implications, and hence, also, their counter-strategies will also differ. Examining the extent to which such shocks affect the electoral competition among parties (such as entry or exit options from the political space) would be a natural step for electoral politics studies.

Overall, this study contributes to the literature on the relationship between the global health crisis and party politics in electoral democracies. Substantively, it suggests that, when the governing party intends to implement stricter measures for coping with a national crisis, it might face a trade-off between effective management and electoral losses. Academically, the study creates new opportunities for a broader research agenda for the politics of pandemics. One possible extension is to conduct surveys on the mass public’s subjective views of the COVID-19 restrictions and voting behavior during the crisis, which could help reveal the micro-foundation of the hypotheses proposed by this study. It is also promising for future studies to explore the interactive effects of government response stringency with other institutional factors on electoral outcomes and party system development.

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### Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

### Notes

1. One exception is Baccini et al. (2021), which examines the relationship between the number of COVID-19 incidences and Donald Trump’s vote change between 2016 and 2020 at the county level.
2. We do not intend to argue that aggregate electoral data is better than survey data for examining the electoral consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The main reason that we use country-level data is that

cross-national survey data about attitudes regarding COVID-19 and electoral behavior are not available. Under such a research limitation, we can only make inference using country-level data if we want to study how the incumbent parties were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic across different countries.

3. See Appendix 1 for the observations included in the empirical analyses.
4. One issue with the case selection is that not all of the elections took place according to the original calendar. In our dataset, 18 out of the total 67 elections were postponed because of safety reasons during the pandemic. However, it is possible that the postponed election was a strategic choice made by the incumbent to avoid losing the election. We acknowledge that this possible endogeneity issue regarding postponed elections is a limitation of this study.
5. In our dataset, they are Bolivia, Georgia, Lithuania, Georgia, New Zealand, South Korea and Hungary.
6. In our dataset, parliamentary democracies with a directly elected president are Iceland, Kiribati and Moldova.
7. Following Kurtz and Brooks (2008), we assume that the impact of inflation below 1% (including deflation) on governing party's electoral performance is indistinguishable from that of an inflation rate of 1%. Thus, the logged inflation rate for these cases is coded zero.
8. The data for the economic variables and total population are from World Bank's World Development Indicators (<https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>).
9. The data for this variable are based on the ethno-linguistic fractionalization index (ELF) created by Kolo (2012).
10. We follow Naeimi et al. (2023) to consider six waves during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first wave was from late 2019 to June 2020, the second wave was from July 2020 to October 2020, the third wave was from November 2020 to March 2021, the fourth wave was from April 2021 to June 2021, the fifth wave was from July 2021 to December 2021 and the sixth wave was from January 2022 to May 2022.
11. One anonymous reviewer suggests that the negative impact of stringency is at odds with some studies' evidence that initially at least the stringent measures had a 'rally-round-the-flag' effect. Therefore, it might be worthwhile to examine time-period heterogeneity by splitting the data into two subsets to see whether the impact of stringency in the early stages of the pandemic (i.e. 2020) suggests a 'rally-round-the-flag' effect. Our re-estimated analysis does not change much, showing that in the early stages of the pandemic, the number of COVID deaths did not affect the electoral performance of incumbent parties, and that government response stringency did have a negative impact on the electoral performance of incumbent parties.
12. See 'Methodology for calculating indices' ([https://github.com/OxCGRT/covid-policy-tracker/blob/master/documentation/index\\_methodology.md](https://github.com/OxCGRT/covid-policy-tracker/blob/master/documentation/index_methodology.md)) and 'Codebook for the Oxford Covid-19 Government Response Tracker' (<https://github.com/OxCGRT/covid-policy-tracker/blob/master/documentation/codebook.md>).
13. We thank an anonymous reviewer for the suggestion of the new measures. Operationalizing these two variables based on the period for the prior 90 days in the month preceding the election yields similar results.

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### Appendix I. Observations included in the analyses

We follow Freedom House's criteria to determine whether a country is an electoral democracy or not in 2020 (see [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/2020\\_List\\_of\\_Electoral\\_Democracies\\_FIW\\_2020.xlsx](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/2020_List_of_Electoral_Democracies_FIW_2020.xlsx)). In our empirical analyses, the observations of parliamentary elections held in 2020 are Vanuatu (19 March), Kiribati (first round, 14 April), South Korea (15 April), Suriname (25 May), Serbia (21 June), Mongolia (24 June), Croatia (5 July), Dominican Republic (15 July), Sri Lanka (5 August), Trinidad and Tobago (10 August), Jamaica (3 September), Lithuania (first round, 11 October), New Zealand (17 October), Bolivia (18 October), Seychelles (22 October), Georgia (first round, 31 October), the United States (3 November), Belize (11 November), Burkina Faso (22 November), Romania (6 December) and Ghana (7 December). The observations of parliamentary elections held in 2021 are Ecuador (7 February), Liechtenstein (7 February), Kosovo (14 February), El Salvador (28 February), the Netherlands (17 March), Israel (23 March), Bulgaria (4 April), Peru (11 April), Cabo Verde (18 April), Albania (25 April), Cyprus (31 May), Mexico (6 June), Norway (13 September), the Bahamas (16 September), Canada (20 September), Germany (26 September), Czech Republic (8–9 October), Japan (31 October), Argentina (14 November) and Honduras (28 November). The observations of parliamentary elections held in 2022 are Barbados (19 January), Costa Rica (6 February), Colombia (13 March), Malta (26 March), Hungary (3 April), Slovenia (24 April), the Philippines (8 May) and Australia (21 May).

The observations of presidential elections held in 2020 included in the analyses are Malawi (23 June), Iceland (27 June), Poland (first round, 28 June), the Dominican Republic (5 July), Bolivia



(18 October), Seychelles (24 October), Moldova (first round, 1 November), the United States (3 November), Burkina Faso (22 November) and Ghana (7 December). The observations in 2021 are Portugal (24 January), Ecuador (first round, 7 February), Peru (first round, 11 April) and Honduras (28 November). The observations in 2022 are Costa Rica (first round, 6 February), East Timor (first round, 19 March), France (first round, 10 April) and the Philippines (8 May).