Shaping Civil Society: Media, Donors and Public Trust in Southeast Asian NGOs

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines how perceptions of civil society are shaped by social media, organizational attributes, and elite media narratives. Empirically, I focus on perceptions of environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs) in Southeast Asia. Combining a cross-national survey, a conjoint experiment, and machine learning analysis, this three-paper dissertation investigates the following questions: (1) How does social media usage influence trust in NGOs compared to governmental institutions in hybrid and authoritarian regimes? (2) What organizational traits drive donor support for ENGOs? (3) How do elite media portrayals of ENGOs differ based on their service or advocacy orientations? Chapter 1 utilizes the Asian Barometer Data to explore if social media enhances trust in NGOs by creating civic spaces for political expression, while eroding confidence in governmental institutions due to public scrutiny of the state on these platforms. I determine that social media usage is associated with reduced trust in governmental institutions but enhances trust in NGOs. Chapter 2 uses a conjoint experiment in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore to examine donor preferences for ENGOs. I find that individual donors favor organizations that prioritize regional issues, partner with

regional organizations and promote gender inclusive leadership. Chapter 3 analyzes English-language media coverage of Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) using machine learning techniques. I find systematic biases against advocacy orientated organizations. Service-oriented ENGOs like WWF received positive, trust-laden portrayals while groups like Greenpeace are framed as disruptive and face negative sentiment. This dissertation advances debates on civil society's role under restrictive regimes and the potential future of environmental organizations in emerging donor markets. The findings highlight the importance of a locally rooted civil society, one that is funded and supported by domestic actors, as a foundation for greater legitimacy.

Contents

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Introduction

This dissertation explores public perceptions of civil society in Southeast Asia with a focus on environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs). Through mixed-method approaches, including a cross-national survey, a conjoint experiment, and machine learning, the dissertation advances our understanding of how social media, organizational attributes and media narratives shape public trust, perceptions, and depictions of ENGOs.

Perceptions of Civil Society

Perceptions of institutions play an important role in shaping their legitimacy and their capacity to function effectively. Institutional legitimacy is rooted in public acceptance, where perceived alignment with shared norms, values, and expectations determines whether institutions are viewed as deserving of support (Suchman, 1995; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). For civil society, public perceptions are particularly significant, as legitimacy is based not on formal authority but on societal values, accountability, and tangible outcomes (Boli and Thomas, 1999; Ebrahim, 2003). Negative perceptions can erode trust, limiting civil society's influence and sustainability. Conversely, positive perceptions enhance legitimacy, public engagement, donor support, and collaborative opportunities with state actors. This is especially important in hybrid and authoritarian regimes, where civil society operates under restrictive environments. Therefore, understanding how perceptions are formed and contested is important for determining how civil society can be shaped by perceptions of institutional legitimacy and trust.

Trust forms the basis upon which civil society and its organizations are evaluated and deemed legitimate. Kydd (2000) defines trust as a belief that others will behave in a cooperative manner rather than exploit vulnerabilities. This belief is fundamental for citizens when they assess non-state actors, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and nonprofit

organizations. NGOs are uniquely positioned as intermediaries between citizens and the state. Tocqueville (1835) observed that the capacity to form associations is integral to a functioning democracy. This association building forms networks of trust that bolster civic engagement and help cultivate social capital (Welzel and Inglehart, 2009; Putnam, 2000). Such networks are critical because they generate expectations about accountability and responsiveness from both governmental and non-governmental actors.

Rule based institutions reduce uncertainty by setting clear norms and delineating roles within social systems (North, 1990; Ostrom, 1990). This institutional framework supports a reliable system where citizens can expect predictable outcomes from their interactions, thereby reinforcing trust. When trust in formal institutions declines, whether due to perceived inefficiencies or failures in service delivery, citizens increasingly look to civil society to fill the gap (Weisbrod, 1988). The "Associational Revolution" of the 1980s marked the state's retreat from direct public service provision and exemplifies how non-state actors stepped in to provide essential services, thereby gaining public trust (Salamon, 1994).

However, the relationship between trust and civil society is multifaceted. In contexts where institutions are faltering, alternative governance structures emerge. Börzel and Risse (2010) discuss how actors like NGOs and nonprofits may assume roles traditionally occupied by the state. This underscores the importance of trust in determining the legitimacy of these actors. Yet, this very legitimacy is highly vulnerable. For instance, the phenomenon of NGOization demonstrates a troubling tradeoff because as civil society groups increasingly depend on foreign funding and international partnerships, they risk becoming detached from local needs (Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Lang, 2012). This dependence can erode trust among locals who begin to view

these organizations as extensions of external agendas rather than authentic and legitimate (Burger and Owens, 2010; Chahim and Prakash, 2014).

The partnerships forged between NGOs and international or regional bodies also complicate this narrative. Collaborations with international organizations can amplify the capacity of NGOs to influence policy and implement projects (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Tallberg et al., 2018). Nevertheless, Balboa (2018) warns of a "paradox of scale" whereby the practices that secure legitimacy and resources on the global stage may simultaneously undermine local accountability and trust. As these organizations adapt to the pressures of competing for scarce resources, they may shift their missions away from grassroots advocacy and towards funder driven goals. This process further jeopardizes their local credibility (Prakash and Potoski, 2016; Bloodgood et al., 2014; Dupuy et al., 2015).

These processes are compounded by what Bratton (1989) describes as the lingering influence of the state even on ostensibly autonomous civil society actors. Despite offering alternatives to state governance, NGOs continue to operate within the broader framework of the state, often constrained by its shadow. This duality demonstrates a central challenge for NGOs where they must balance global engagement and resource acquisition with responsiveness to local needs and creation of localized trust and legitimacy. These connections between state failure and NGOization continue to redefine trust in civil society, making the determination of perceptions of NGOs an important area for understanding contemporary governance.

Environmental Nongovernmental Organizations

ENGOs have evolved from smaller, locally focused organizations into large, transnational actors that play a central role in environmental governance. Originally established in response to threats to wildlife and landscapes in the mid-nineteenth century, ENGOs have expanded their

scope over time (Hadden and Bush, 2021). Their agendas grew to encompass not only individual species but also broader issues of biodiversity and climate change. This growth was paired with an increasing recognition that environmental challenges could not be contained by national boundaries, leading to a global environmental movement.

Central to their growth has been the dual process of external and internal institutionalization, also known as NGOization. Externally, governments and international bodies came to recognize ENGOs as authoritative voices on environmental matters. For instance, the European Commission created civil society forums, such as the European Environmental Bureau, thereby integrating ENGOs into the policymaking process (Cichowski, 2007). Internally, rapid growth during the 1970s and 1980s led to increased membership and professionalization. However, with expansion came bureaucratization and NGOization, and eventually compromise on organizational missions and strategies. The case of Friends of the Earth illustrates this tension where legal injunctions forced the organization to withdraw from direct action, provoking criticism from groups that valued direct-action activism (Berny and Rootes, 2018).

These tensions have profound implications for perceptions of civil society. Donors and citizens alike assess ENGOs not only on their ability to deliver environmental goods but also on the moral legitimacy they convey. Lundberg et al. (2019) describe the donor decision process as one that weighs both rational considerations but also value-driven concerns. Environmental issues, in particular, require the perception that NGOs are “doing the right thing” (Botetzagias and Koutiva, 2014). However, as ENGOs increasingly rely on foreign funding and international partnerships, they risk being perceived as detached from local communities. This perception can erode trust, particularly when external influences appear to take over grassroots concerns.

Pressures faced by ENGOs are compounded by the political contexts in which they operate. If states are restrictive towards civil society and have authoritarian tendencies this can limit the potential of environmental governance and partnerships via civil society. Under authoritarian states, civil society can often be limited through targeted legislation, cumbersome registration requirements, or violence and intimidation (Heiss, 2019; Chaudhry, 2022). However, the phenomenon of green authoritarianism, best exemplified by China, has meant that ENGOs are able to exert influence under restrictive conditions and partner with states to implement green policy objectives (Beeson, 2010). Under green authoritarianism in China, a form of "consultative authoritarianism" has emerged, in which the regime permits certain organizations to operate in order to benefit from their expertise while making occasional policy concessions (Teets, 2014; Zeng et al., 2018; Froissart, 2019). For example, Han (2014) finds that ENGOs have leveraged deliberative democracy mechanisms introduced by the state to advocate for greater transparency and participation in river damming policies. Therefore, despite strict political constraints, green authoritarianism has often led to partnerships between the state and ENGOs, allowing the latter to contribute technical expertise. These openings have enabled ENGOs to mobilize and secure modest policy concessions that extend beyond environmental issues to broader civil society concerns. In these contexts, maintaining trust, legitimacy, and positive public perception is important for ENGOs to sustain their influence on environmental policy.

Southeast Asian Nongovernmental Organizations

Southeast Asia's NGO sector is characterized by both its vibrancy and vulnerability. Multiple Southeast Asian states rank highly in global philanthropy indices, yet empirical work on the nature of the NGO sector has been lacking (CAF, 2024). This dissertation situates its analysis within the region's unique sociopolitical context, where authoritarian and competitive

authoritarian governance and environmental precarity intersect. The region's hybrid regimes are marked by limited political freedoms alongside robust civic participation. They offer important insights into how NGOs negotiate public perception and legitimacy in constrained environments.

The region's civil society scene has steadily grown from early anti-colonial movements in the 1960s and 1970s and has thrived despite state crackdown (Weiss and Hansson, 2023). The economic liberalization of the 1980s and foreign aid inflows led to the rise of developmentalist NGOs and the creation of service-oriented organizations. The establishment of the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN Peoples' Forum in 2004 further integrated NGOs into regional decision-making processes, enhancing civil society's political role (ASEAN Peoples' Forum, 2015). Environmental organizations developed in this context and focused on issues such as deforestation, land rights and pollution but overt political advocacy was limited (Eccleston and Potter, 2005). More recently, environmental groups have integrated concerns over indigenous rights and climate justice, leveraging digital platforms for mobilization (Pye, 2023).

ENGOs in Southeast Asia occupy an important but precarious position as the region grapples with growing climate crises. Home to some of the world's most ecologically significant ecosystems Southeast Asia has faced existential threats from rising sea levels, deforestation, and pollution (Glover and Onn, 2008). ENGOs have emerged as important actors in bridging grassroots advocacy and international climate policy. However, their legitimacy and efficacy are contested, shaped by tensions between local priorities and global funding structures. Civil society in Southeast Asia operates within a contested legitimacy space, shaped by political structures and societal expectations (Alagappa, 2004). In these contexts, legitimacy is often tied to two competing narratives: NGOs as agents of empowerment that allow for civic engagement, or as disruptors challenging state authority and social cohesion (Rother, 2015).

Perceptions, particularly trust in NGOs and governmental institutions, are also changing in the region. Historically Asia has generally enjoyed high levels of institutional trust and a legacy of authoritarian legitimacy (Huang and Schuler, 2018; Jiang and Zhang; 2021). Nathan (2020) highlights this paradox where authoritarian governments in Asia often garner stronger public trust than their democratic counterparts, challenging assumptions that equate democracy with legitimacy. However, trust has been changing with digital access. Social media penetration has exposed citizens to global discourses, enabling scrutiny of state action and amplifying grassroots movements. In Myanmar, for example, online platforms fueled the 2021 pro-democracy uprising, while in Vietnam, digital spaces have become arenas for environmental activism despite strict censorship (Ryan and Tran, 2024; Vu; 2017). Authoritarian and hybrid regimes now grapple with the dilemma of restricting internet access. This risks economic stagnation, but unchecked connectivity empowers civil society. This tension is recalibrating institutional trust, raising questions about the legitimacy of NGOs as alternatives to state authority. As hybrid regimes in Southeast Asia increasingly weaponize legal and digital tools to constrain civil society, ENGOs must build significant local coalitions, positive associations, and community trust (Aspinall and Weiss, 2012; Rodan, 2022). Their success will depend on navigating the region's complex political terrain, where trust is contingent on transparency, cultural resonance, and the ability to deliver tangible benefits to vulnerable populations (Kim, 2014; Bano, 2019).

Dissertation Plan

The dissertation comprises three chapters, each addressing distinct aspects of how social media, organizational attributes, and media narratives influence perceptions of civil society organizations. The first chapter entitled, "The Impact of Social Media on Trust in Civil Society

and Governmental Institutions: A Southeast Asian Perspective," examines the dual role of social media in shaping public trust towards NGOs and governmental institutions. I argue that social media usage enhances trust in NGOs by providing platforms for political expression and virtual civic engagement, while simultaneously diminishing trust in governmental bodies due to increased visibility of governmental shortcomings and community mobilization. Utilizing data from Waves 4 and 5 of the Asian Barometer, the analysis demonstrates that social media usage is associated with increased trust in NGOs and decreased trust in various levels of governmental institutions across Southeast Asian countries. This analysis finds that the long-standing institutional trust in governmental institutions is eroding in Southeast Asia, while trust in NGOs is increasing with exposure to social media platforms.

The second chapter, entitled "Public Support for Environmental NGOs: A Conjoint Experiment in Southeast Asia", investigates donor preferences towards ENGOs. The chapter addresses concerns regarding the influence of Western funding and potential misalignments between local needs and international NGO agendas. Through a forced choice conjoint experiment conducted with a cross nationally representative sample from Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore, the study assesses how organizational attributes, such as regional identity, gender representation and government affiliation, influence willingness to donate. Findings indicate a preference for NGOs that are regionally based, address local environmental issues, and maintain partnerships with relevant regional organizations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Additionally, donors show a favorable inclination towards NGOs with higher women's representation in board positions.

The final chapter, titled "Service vs Advocacy: Environmental NGOs and their Depictions in Elite Media", explores how news media portray ENGOs in Southeast Asia. The

study focuses on the distinction between service-oriented organizations and advocacy groups. By analyzing media representations of Greenpeace and the World Wide Fund for Nature, formerly known as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the study examines how differing organizational activities influence media framing. I use machine learning techniques on a corpus of newspaper articles from six major English-language newspapers in the region and I find that media narratives associate service-oriented NGOs like WWF with service-related campaigns while linking advocacy groups like Greenpeace with direct action activism. Sentiment analysis reveals that Greenpeace is often depicted negatively whereas WWF received more positive portrayals. Furthermore, articles concerning WWF have higher levels of trust associated language, with this trend increasing over time in the corpus. These findings suggest a media bias favoring service delivery over advocacy within the ENGO sector.

Chapter 1

The Impact of Social Media on Trust in Civil Society and Governmental Institutions: A Southeast Asian Perspective

Abstract:

Does social media usage enhance or diminish trust in civic and governance institutions? I argue that social media usage in emergent democracies and competitive authoritarian regimes can enhance trust in civil society organizations, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), while decreasing trust in governance organizations. Under restrictive regimes, social media provides an outlet for the venting of political opinions and can create virtual civic spaces which connect users with advocacy organizations. As a spillover effect, these platforms create distrust in governments because citizens can voice their concerns and mobilize against specific policies. Using the Asian Barometer, I find that social media usage across Southeast Asian countries enhances trust in NGOs while decreasing trust in a variety of governance institutions at all levels. Furthermore, paradoxical trust in governmental institutions is found where citizens in states with higher levels of democracy trust their governmental institutions less than citizens in more autocratic environments.

Keywords: social media, NGOs, institutional trust, Southeast Asia, civil society

Introduction

Since the launch of early social media platforms such as MySpace and Facebook in 2003-2004, the number of global social media users has grown to over 5 billion (Kemp, 2024). Increasing levels of internet access, coupled with the widespread availability of low-cost smartphones, has enabled individuals across the world to engage with a variety of social media platforms (Silver et al., 2019). This raises important questions about the effects of social media use in competitive authoritarian and authoritarian regimes, particularly regarding citizen perceptions of civil society actors and governmental institutions. While social media has allowed for increased political participation, governments have responded by either attempting to regulate digital spaces or by leveraging these platforms for their own communication strategies (Deibert, 2019).

Under authoritarianism and competitive authoritarianism, regimes do provide limited "venting" outlets and there are varying levels of freedom of expression. However, malaise over issues such as corruption, lack of freedoms, and advocacy for democracy are not tolerated, or often, simply ignored and dismissed. The online space of social media can provide an outlet for users to discuss their opinions, while engaging globally with others. Social media platforms provide a civic space where individuals can express their opinions. These spaces create pockets of solidarity and allow people to connect with organizations and express themselves politically. On these platforms, digital advocacy occurs, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) articulate their missions and connect with potential donors and volunteers. As a result, social media can enhance trust in civil society by strengthening connections between individuals and advocacy groups. NGOs, in turn, play a critical role in shaping virtual civic spaces and generating solidarity among citizens (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Furthermore, trust in civil

society, particularly in NGOs, has broader implications for democratization and the effectiveness of social institutions (Herrold and AbouAssi, 2023).

If social media enhances trust in civil society, it may also have consequences for trust in government institutions. There are two competing perspectives on this issue. Drawing on Putnam's (2000) framework, one argument is that social media strengthens interpersonal connections, which in turn increases generalized trust, including trust in governance institutions. According to this perspective, governments that coexist with civil society and demonstrate accountability should benefit from higher levels of trust.

However, social media might facilitate negative feelings or even citizen mobilization against governments as well. Authoritarian regimes, recognizing the potential of social media to unite opposition movements, have actively sought to censor online discourse and control digital narratives (Bellin, 2012). The Arab Spring exemplifies the power of social media to facilitate collective action and mobilization (Tudoroiu, 2014). In response, many authoritarian governments have sought to restrict NGOs and regulate digital spaces to limit their role in allowing for political engagement and opposition (King et al., 2013; Dupuy et al., 2015; Chaudhry, 2022). In addition, social media can raise awareness of issues like fraud and corruption, that can sometimes undermine authoritarianism (Reuter and Szakonyi, 2015). Social media can be a uniting force for civil society but also expose corruption despite limited political competition and accountability (Enikolopov et al., 2018). Furthermore, social media can allow frustrated citizens to voice their concerns and anger over governance institutions and thus find connections and solidarity with others. By amplifying public grievances and providing spaces for political discourse, social media may contribute to declining trust in government institutions.

I examine these claims in the context of Southeast Asia, one of the fastest growing social media markets. Countries such as Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand rank among the highest globally in daily internet usage (Kemp, 2024). These nations exhibit a range of political systems, from flawed democracies to authoritarian regimes, many of which have enacted legislation to regulate civil society organizations and social media platforms. However, despite restrictions their citizens are highly engaged in online spaces and continue to use social media platforms for political organization (Abbott, 2011; Sinpeng, 2021). Using the Asian Barometer, I find that individuals who use social media platforms are more likely to trust civil society institutions like NGOs. However, social media usage is also associated with lower levels of trust across a variety of governmental institutions from the executive to the local level. These findings contribute to our understanding of the complex relationship between digital engagement, civil society, and governance in Southeast Asia.

Literature

Trust and Media

Trust is a reciprocal relationship where actors feel that cooperation and inputs into a relationship will be mutually respected. As Kydd (2000) notes, interpersonal trust means that actors believe that the other side is likely to reciprocate cooperation rather than opportunistically exploit it. There is a relational aspect to trust whereby individuals make themselves vulnerable to others (Levi and Stoker, 2000). Institutions are part of these trust relationships. One important component of institutional efficiency is trust or perceptions of trustworthiness from the users of said institutions. Institutions with high levels of trustworthiness can induce higher levels of political participation and even shifts in perceptions on democracy (Sztompka, 1999; Inglehart, 2018). Institutional trust can also be understood as a component of political legitimacy (Tyler

and Jackson, 2014). Furthermore, higher trust in institutions is often associated with more accountable and accessible governments, high social capital, system support, and better social cohesion (Putnam, 2000; Paxton, 2002; Yap, 2019). Determining where trust in institutions lies is an important aspect of regime development and democratic growth.

Trust in institutions is enhanced with open communication between governors and the governed. Traditionally, media in the form of newspapers and television news networks filled the role of political communicator with publics. New forms of media production have shifted how individuals understand communication and have also created new civic spaces. The global rise of the internet and the wide availability of smartphones has led to over 63% of the world's population (5.17 billion people) using social media platforms (Shewale, 2024). New forms of political communications and civic engagement have emerged rapidly. Bennett (20, 2003) states that internet communication "enabled people to organize politics in ways that overcome limits in time, space, identity and ideology, resulting in the expansion and coordination of activities that would not likely occur by other means". As a result, social media led to a shift in how publics consume news and conduct political dialogue.

However, questions remained over whether social media translated to real life civic participation and thus greater interaction with civic institutions. Studies have linked social media use with higher participation in political behavior (Bode, 2012; Xenos et al., 2014; Gainous et al., 2019). Additionally, a meta-analysis of 36 studies has determined that there is a positive relationship between social media use and civic participation (Boulianne, 2015). However, with increased online civic participation comes downsides. Valenzuela et al. (2019) find that in Chile increased social media usage for news was often associated with the spreading of misinformation. Other studies have found that disinformation and misinformation is mostly

spread by individual citizens on social media (Golovchenko et al., 2018; Allcott et al., 2019). Therefore, despite the increased civic participation of individuals, social media can bring out an element of distrust and uncertainty. Social media users with lower levels of political knowledge are more likely to distrust news media (Stubenvoll et al., 2021). Furthermore, social media also shapes trust in institutions on partisan lines, leading to polarized trust in the government (Klein and Robison, 2019).

The literature on trust and social media has mostly focused on Western, democratic states. Studies on trust in non-Western, competitive authoritarian and authoritarian states have focused on the paradox of high trust in governments despite repression (Zhai, 2018; Nathan, 2020). However, as citizens become more educated and more exposed to social media discourses, do their levels of trust change? Nathan (165, 2020) states "the more authoritarian regimes succeed in their modernizing mission, the more they undermine the prevalence of traditional social values among their populations". With the spread of liberal democratic values through education and global internet access, the inevitable is possible. Some predict the erosion of this paradox of trust over time due to concerns with regime effectiveness and exposure to the internet (Zhong and Zhan, 2021; Chen, 2017).

Under competitive authoritarian and authoritarian regimes, social media serves as an outlet for citizens to engage in civil society and vent their frustrations. Consequently, social media is often restricted, and regimes can digitally disconnect when they feel threatened by online political discourse (Howard et al., 2011). These regimes often use their own social media accounts to control messaging and political content (Gunitsky, 2015). Despite these restrictions, limited forms of discussion and critique are sometimes tolerated, allowing civil communities to form. Gainous et al. (2015) find that in the East Asia context, internet usage provides a valuable

source of dissident information and leads to negative attitudes towards governments and less obedience. Those who are engaged with internet media feel negatively towards governments and are more likely to engage in protest behavior when compared to those who trust government media sources (Gainous et al., 2019). Social media enables users to connect over shared concerns and form political communities. Therefore, we should expect social media usage to be negatively associated with trust in governmental institutions under competitive authoritarian and authoritarian regimes.

Creating Civic Spaces: NGOs and Social Media

Nonprofit organizations and NGOs play a significant role in service provision and advocacy. They are often perceived as principled actors distinct from firms, but they are also strategic entities concerned with their operations and funding (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Johnson and Prakash, 2007; Sell and Prakash, 2004). The same tools that a firm would use to advertise itself and communicate with customers, an NGO would also find useful for its purposes. Social media has become an important site for the engagement of volunteers and donors by civil society organizations. Increased usage by NGOs of social media as a space for campaigning, soliciting donations and promoting certain causes exposes them to more social media users.

However, this exposure can have a dark side. High-profile scandals such as those involving Oxfam in Haiti, WWF in Congo, and Amnesty International, are more likely to be encountered with internet access. Goncharenko (2023) finds that the emergence of the #MeToo movement added to the visibility of non-profit scandals on social media. The apologies offered by organizations like Oxfam International were deemed inadequate and pointed to a general problem global NGOs face with crisis communication in the social media age (Janssen Danyi, 2020). NGOs use social media in a stilted and unidirectional fashion, often not engaging with

users on platforms and instead emphasizing messaging without interaction due to fear of loss of narrative control (Quinton and Fennemore, 2013; Comfort and Hester, 2019).

Beyond reputational management, NGOs face structural challenges, such as the growth of "briefcase" NGOs which siphon foreign funding, crowd out local organizations and diminish NGO legitimacy (Prakash and Potoski, 2016). Governments, aware of external influence, impose funding restrictions that further constrain NGO operations (Bloodgood et al., 2014; Dupuy et al., 2016). With intense competition for resources, NGOs are therefore highly mindful of their reputations and thus their image as trustworthy actors. If the public are distrustful of NGOs, then they will operate in hostile environments without local support. This is a vicious cycle which then further entrenches their reputation as foreign actors especially since they lack incentives to push for locally specific goals (Burger and Owens, 2010). The visibility of negative discourse on social media may further erode public trust in NGOs.

However, despite these issues with civil society, the influence of social media can often lead to positive engagement. Although NGOs often use social media in a "one-way" fashion (Lovejoy et al., 2012; Guo and Saxton, 2014), these studies have often focused on organizations in the Global North. Research on consolidating democracies finds that NGOs often use social media in an interactive way and seek engagement with potential donors and volunteers (Adjei et al., 2016; Armstrong and Butcher, 2018). Furthermore, social media usage can enhance the image of an NGO and promote trust in its brand (Gregory et al., 2020, Bilgin and Kethüda, 2022). Social media can also be a powerful space for civic engagement and NGOs can speak directly to users without direct state intervention (Leggett, 2017; Vu et al., 2021).

In authoritarian contexts, NGOs adapt their strategies to navigate internet restrictions. NGOs on Weibo (a popular social media platform in China) use colloquial language and emojis

to communicate with followers and build legitimacy (Zhou and Pan, 2016). These interactions can build legitimacy and create community spaces online despite internet restrictions. Independent media is also able to engage with users more freely on social media platforms, especially in repressive states where news broadcasts might be more tightly controlled. Lee et al. (2012) found that in the former Soviet Union independent media is positively associated with trust in NGOs. Therefore, social media engagement can potentially enhance trust, provide opportunities for engagement, and legitimacy-building. Furthermore, despite issues facing NGOs, Chapman et al. (2021) found that global trust has increased in the nonprofit sector.

Southeast Asia Case

The chapter examines the effects of social media usage on trust in governmental institutions and NGOs in Southeast Asia. The region is characterized by emerging democracies, competitive authoritarian and authoritarian regimes, and a resilient civil society. There is a high level of mobile phone and internet penetration in the region. Over 400 million people use the internet and internet penetration is over 70% in most countries (Von Kameke, 2024). Most Southeast Asians use the internet via mobile phones (over 70%), which changes the experience of the internet and social media platforms (Sinpeng and Tapsell, 2020). Instead of long form articles and websites, internet usage is often in the form of shorter videos on social media platforms like WhatsApp and TikTok. Internet users are mostly under the age of 35, however, older people are also increasingly using mobile phones for social media access, leading to complaints from younger users about misinformation in online groups populated by older users (ibid).

Government agencies and public officials often communicate via social media and there is robust political discussion on platforms. For example, the success of the Move Forward Party

in Thailand is attributed to their strong engagement on social media platforms (Habib and Habib, 2023). In Indonesia, the use of TikTok in the 2024 election was critical and Prabowo Subianto's party was able to position him as a "gemoy" (cute and lovable) character to attract younger voters (Wahid, 2024). However, state-controlled messaging is also used for repression, as demonstrated by the Myanmar military's misinformation campaign against the Rohingya on Facebook (Kyaw, 2021).

Given young populations and access to increasingly affordable smartphones, how has exposure to these platforms affected institutional trust? Generally, Asian states maintain high levels of trust in governmental institutions (Huang and Schuler, 2018; Jiang and Zhang, 2021). Furthermore, in highly centralized states like China hierarchal trust is an important component of public trust, and citizens tend to trust the central government more than local authorities (Zhai, 2022). Authoritarian and competitive authoritarian regimes in the region have high levels of trust, such as Vietnam and Singapore (Ikeda, 2013). There is debate over whether this is related to the theory of "Asian values" which posits that valuing paternalism and harmony as a political orientation might led to stronger trust in societies and social cohesion (Wong et al., 2011). Others note that social desirability bias is strong in states like Vietnam where interpretations of the concept of trust might be related to government competency and quality of life (Chu and Huang, 2010; Cheema and Popovski, 2010). However, given the disruptive effects of social media, I argue that increased exposure to these platforms will lead to lower trust in governmental institutions, challenging the assumption of persistently high institutional trust in the region.

The impact of social media on trust in civil society is less clear. The region has a growing civil society sector, however, research on the NGO and nonprofit sector has mostly focused on Western and East Asian contexts. The environment for civil society has been largely repressive

and there are a significant number of legal restrictions for NGOs in the region (Springman et al., 2022). However, the number of NGOs in the region has been consistently growing since the liberalization of regimes in the 1980s (Rodan, 2022). The "new social movements" in the West inspired the growth of many service and advocacy oriented NGOs in the region (Loh, 2004). Despite restrictions, NGOs in Southeast Asia have a wide range of strategies that they engage in such as advocacy, direct action, and lobbying (Xie and Garland, 2019). Furthermore, although the region was a major recipient of foreign funded NGO services in the 1980s and 1990s, the growth of grassroots organizations has meant that a locally specific group of NGOs has developed across the region (Weiss and Aspinall, 2012). Organizations also widely use social media as part of their outreach campaigns and despite repression civil society regularly use these platforms to communicate and coordinate activities (Lim, 2023). Therefore, given the presence of online civic spaces and the potential for social media to connect disaffected citizens, I argue that exposure to these platforms will increase trust in NGOs. While social media may erode confidence in state institutions, it can simultaneously strengthen civil society through community-building among users and direct engagement.

Hypotheses on Trust and Institutions

The relationships between trust and social media are formalized with the following hypotheses:

H1: Social media usage is associated with an increase in trust in NGOs.

H2: Social media usage is associated with a decrease in trust in direct governance institutions (executive, national government, parliaments, and local government).

H3: Social media usage is associated with a decrease in trust in indirect governance institutions (courts, police and military) due to their association with government at large.

Direct governance refers to institutions where citizens either elect members of these organizations or in more restrictive regimes they "vote" for the party they provide allegiance to. Indirect governance refers to institutions where one might not explicitly elect an official but because these organizations represent the state, and they are involved in day-to-day governance they are likely to also face discrimination by individuals. Therefore, social media usage should affect trust in both direct and indirect levels of governance.

Data and Methods

The Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) has been monitoring trust in institutions since the early 2000s. The survey is conducted by the Hu Fu Center for East Asia Democratic Studies at National Taiwan University, and it is the most comprehensive survey of the Asian region on a variety of social and political topics. Respondents are polled on a range of questions which measure political beliefs, attitudes on traditionalism, economic perceptions and demographic data. For this paper, I am using both Wave 4 and Wave 5 of the ABS. Wave 4 was collected in 2013-2016 and Wave 5 was collected in 2018-2021 across Asia. For the purposes of this study, I have only included the Southeast Asian region. In Wave 4 these countries are: the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Cambodia. In Wave 5 these countries are: the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Myanmar. The data for Wave 5 is not available for certain countries that were included in Wave 4 (Singapore and Cambodia).

The Asian Barometer includes a barrage of questions on political trust which asks respondents to score from 1 (a great deal of trust) to 4 (do not trust at all) on a range of institutions. From the trust portion of the barometer, I am using the series of questions of trust (Q7 – Q19) which refer to the following institutions: NGOs, national government, parliament,

local government, the executive, courts, the police, and the military. These were transformed from ranked variables to binary (1 for trust, 0 for distrust) for ease of interpretation. For the independent variable of social media engagement, I used a question which asked respondents whether they used any of the top three most popular social media platforms in their respective country (Q50). The question was answered as a binary, either 1 (yes) or 2 (no). The full wording of the trust barrage and the social media question are available in the Appendix (Figures 1 and 2). I include a set of individual level controls in the models for the socio-demographic attributes: gender (0 for male, 1 for female), age (continuous variable), residence in a rural or urban area (0 for rural, 1 for urban), education level (ranked variable from 1 to 3), employment (0 for unemployed, 1 for employed), and income level (ranked variable from 1 to 5). For the aggregate level effects, I controlled GDP per capita (log) and the country's polyarchy (electoral democracy) score from Varieties of Democracy (Coppedge et al., 2024). Individual level respondents are within country/year observations. Summary statistics for all variables used are available in the Appendix (Table 1).

To test the hypotheses, I employed Generalized Linear Mixed Models (GLMM) to accommodate for individual effects of respondents (Level 1) and aggregate effects at the country level (Level 2). GLMMs account for both fixed and random effects and are useful when data is nested. For this paper, a binomial GLMM is used to account for the binary nature of the response variable. As prior research has indicated, GLMMs have challenges with model convergence and multicollinearity (Enders and Tofighi, 2007; Bolker et al., 2009). To help with these issues, the GDP and polyarchy score variables were centered (standardized) using Z-scaling. A check for multicollinearity (variance inflation factor test) does not indicate issues with multicollinearity. Given the nature of the data, the GLMMs were checked for potential issues with over dispersion

and zero inflation using the DHARMa package (Hartig, 2024). Additionally, the models were examined for potential heteroscedasticity issues using QQ plot residuals. There are no significant issues with these diagnostics, indicating that the models are well-specified for the data. The mixed level models can be formally specified as follows (using H1):

Level 1:

$$\textit{Trust in NGOs}_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_1 \cdot \textit{Social Media}_{ij} + \beta_2 \cdot \textit{Age}_{ij} + \beta_3 \cdot \textit{Gender}_{ij} + \beta_4 \cdot \textit{Employed}_{ij} + \beta_5 \cdot \textit{Income}_{ij} + \beta_6 \cdot \textit{Urban\_Rural}_{ij} + \beta_7 \cdot \textit{Education}_{ij} + \epsilon_{ij} \quad (1)$$

where β_{0j} is the country-specific intercept for country j, β_1, β_2, β_3, β_4, β_5, β_6, β_7 are the fixed effects coefficients for individual-level predictors, and ϵ_{ij} is the individual-level residual error.

Level 2:

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 \cdot \textit{log (GDP per Capita}_j) + \gamma_2 \cdot \textit{Polyarchy Score}_j + u_j \quad (2)$$

where γ_0 is the intercept, γ_1, γ_2 are the fixed effects coefficients for country-level predictors, and u_j is the country-level random effect. These two levels of the model can be brought together for the full mixed level model:

$$\textit{Trust in NGOs}_{ij} = (\gamma_0 + \gamma_1 \cdot \textit{log (GDP per Capita}_j) + \gamma_2 \cdot \textit{Polyarchy Score}_j + u_j) + \beta 1 \cdot \textit{Social Media}_{ij} + \beta 2 \cdot \textit{Age}_{ij} + \beta 3 \cdot \textit{Gender}_{ij} + \beta 4 \cdot \textit{Employed}_{ij} + \beta 5 \cdot \textit{Income}_{ij} + \beta 6 \cdot \textit{Urban\_Rural}_{ij} + \beta 7 \cdot \textit{Education}_{ij} + \epsilon_{ij} \quad (3)$$

Where Trust in $NGOs_{ij}$ is the dependent variable for individual i in country j. β_{0j} is the country-specific intercept and γ_0 is the overall intercept at the country level. γ_1, γ_2 are the fixed effects coefficients for country-level predictors and β_1, β_2, β_3, β_4, β_5, β_6, β_7 are the fixed effects coefficients for individual-level predictors. u_j is the random effect for country j and ϵ_{ij} is the individual-level residual error. In total eight models were run to test H1, H2 and H3. Model 1

predicts trust in NGOs conditional on social media usage (H1). Models 2, 3, 4 and 5 respectively predict trust in direct governance institutions: the executive, national government, parliament/ruling body and local government (H2). Models 6, 7 and 8 respectively predict trust in indirect governance institutions: the courts, military and police.

Results

Results from GLMMs and Discussion

Results from the models on NGOs and the four direct governance institutions are listed in Table 1. From these estimates we can see specific outcomes of the effect of social media usage on trust in institutions. The log-odds coefficient can be converted to an odds ratio for better intuition and doing so provides the multiplicative change in the odds of the outcome occurring for a one-unit increase in the predictor variable. Figures 1 to 5 visualize these odd ratios in forest plots for a straightforward interpretation of the results. Due to variation in the polyarchy score variable the score has large confidence intervals and has been plotted as a secondary plot for each of the models for ease of interpretation.

Table 1. GLMMs predicting trust in direct governance institutions (standard errors in brackets)

	Model 1: Trust in NGOs	Model 2: Trust in the executive	Model 3: Trust in national	Model 4: Trust in parliament	Model 5: Trust in local
(Intercept)	1.03 **	2.63 ***	2.62 ***	2.17 ***	2.70 ***
	(0.40)	(0.41)	(0.41)	(0.34)	(0.33)
Key independent variable					
Social media	0.33 ***	-0.88 ***	-0.92 ***	-0.79 ***	-0.83 ***
	(0.09)	(0.13)	(0.12)	(0.10)	(0.13)
Country Level					
GDP PPP (log)	0.75 ***	-0.08	0.05	-0.26 **	-0.16
	(0.08)	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.10)	(0.08)
Polyarchy Score	0.19	-0.99 ***	-1.04 ***	-1.04 ***	-0.71 ***
	(0.10)	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.14)	(0.18)
Individual Level					
Urban	0.13 *	-0.02	-0.09	-0.09	-0.09
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.07)
Gender	0.06	0.13	0.09	0.21 ***	0.16 *
	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.07)
Education	-0.03	0.02	0.01	-0.03	-0.02
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Income	-0.04	0.01	0.02	0.04	-0.06
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.04)
Employed	0.02	0.06	0.01	-0.00	-0.04
	(0.06)	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.08)
Age	-0.05	-0.11 **	-0.19 ***	-0.16 ***	-0.13 ***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.04)
N	7845	9479	9360	9265	8864
N (COUNTRY)	8	8	8	8	8
AIC	8631.22	6251.84	6788.96	7834.55	6217.19
BIC	8707.87	6330.56	6867.54	7913.02	6295.18
R2 (fixed)	0.13	0.18	0.19	0.22	0.12
R2 (total)	0.36	0.40	0.40	0.38	0.27

All continuous predictors are mean-centered and scaled by 1 standard deviation. The outcome variable is in its original units. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Model 1 indicates that social media usage is associated with an increase in the trust of civil society institutions like NGOs. In other words, when an individual uses social media, the odds of trusting NGOs increase by 39%. This result supports H1 which states that social media increases exposure to online civic spaces and will be associated with increased trust in NGOs. The estimates also indicate that individuals who are living in urban environments and in states with higher GDP per capita are also more likely to trust NGOs. Models 2-5 demonstrate that social media usage is negatively correlated with trust in direct governance institutions. The odds ratios for these results indicate that an individual who uses social media is 59% less likely to trust the executive government, 60% less likely to trust the national government, 55% less likely to trust in parliaments, and 57% less likely to trust in local governments. These results support H2 which states that social media usage provides access to venting spaces where individuals can express their discontent openly. In these critical spaces, citizens have access to information and alternative perspectives that can enhance certain outlooks while affecting institutional trust.

Figure 1: Odds ratios and confidence intervals for Model 1, Trust in NGOs.

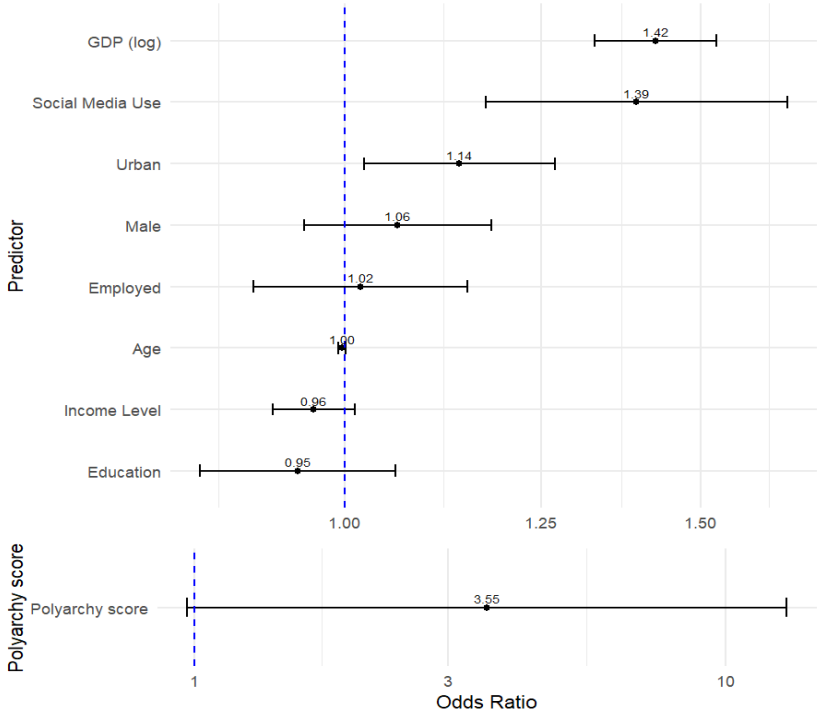


Figure 2: Odds ratios and confidence intervals for Model 2, Trust in the executive.

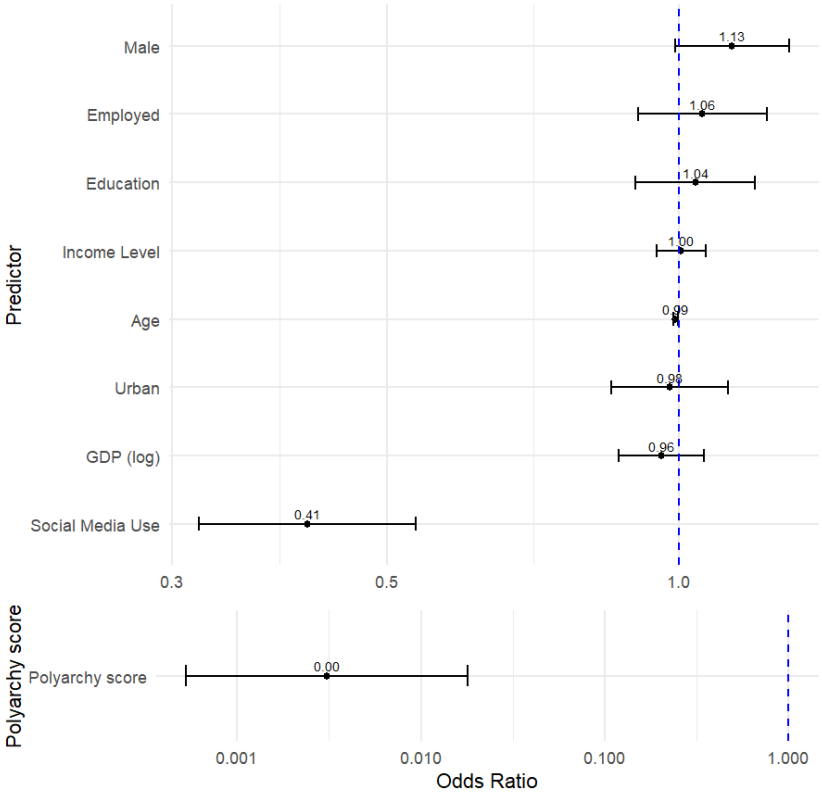


Figure 3: Odds ratios and confidence intervals for Model 3, Trust in national govt.

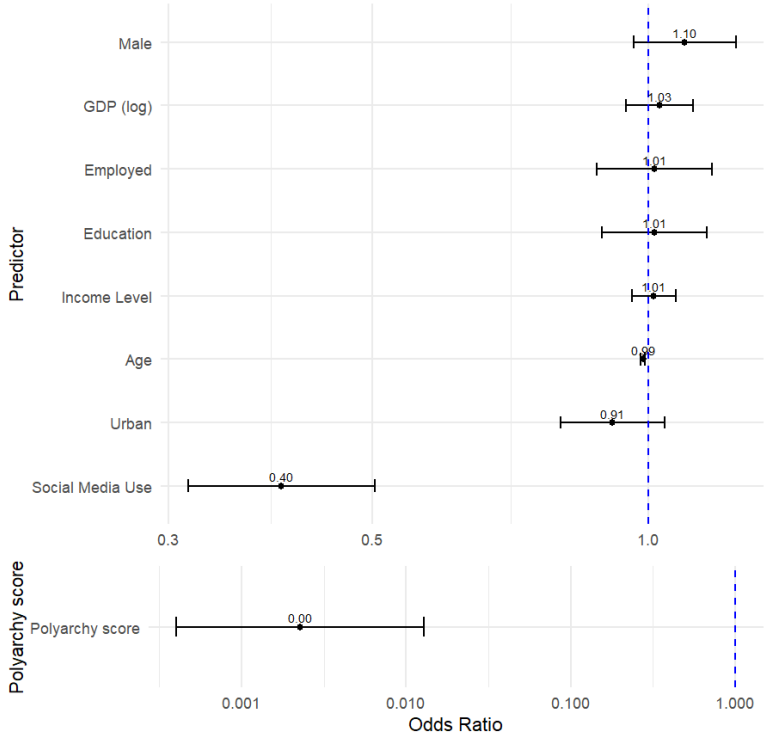


Figure 4: Odds ratios and confidence intervals for Model 4, Trust in Parliament.

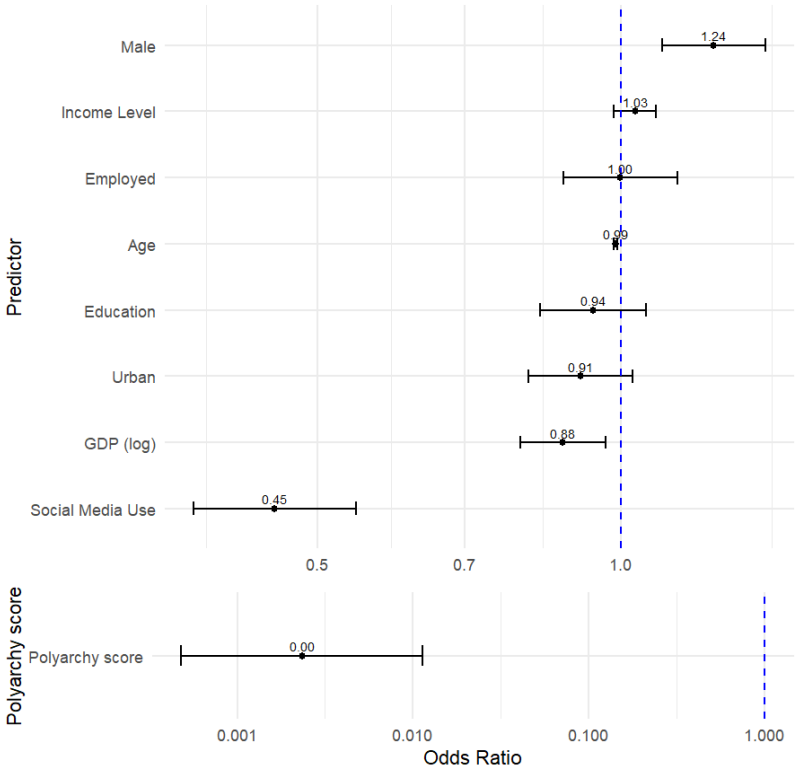
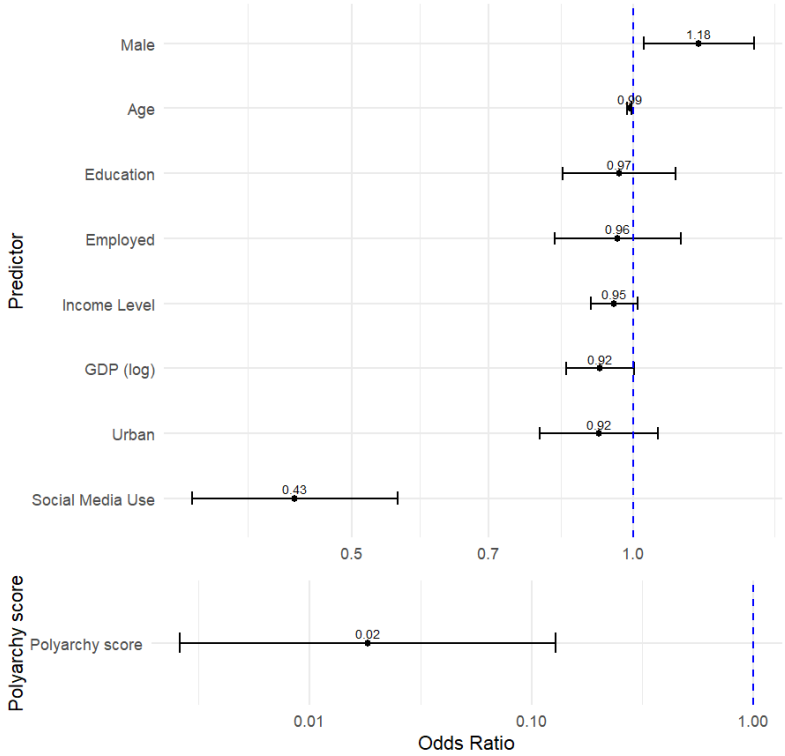


Figure 5: Odds ratios and confidence intervals for Model 5, Trust in local govt.



The results from the models on indirect governance institutions are available in Table 2. Models 6, 7 and 8 show that trust in less direct representations of the state is also affected by social media usage. Figures 6-8 visualize these models for interpretation of the odds ratios. Institutions like the courts, the military and the police are symbolic of the government, but they are often not elected positions. However, people are more likely to interact with these institutions on a day-to-day basis when compared to the elected government. The models for indirect governance indicate that social media usage is negatively associated with trust. When an individual uses social media, they are 59% less likely to trust in the courts, 27% less likely to trust in the military and 43% less likely to trust in the police. The results support H3 which states

that trust in indirect governance institutions will be negatively associated with social media usage due to these institutions being connected to the government at large.

Table 2: GLMMs predicting trust in indirect governance institutions (standard errors in brackets)

	Model 6: Trust in courts	Model 7: Trust in military	Model 8: Trust in police
(Intercept)	2.41 ***	2.99 ***	2.34 ***
	(0.32)	(0.41)	(0.31)
Key independent variable			
Social Media Usage	-0.90 ***	-0.31 *	-0.56 ***
	(0.11)	(0.14)	(0.10)
Country level			
GDP PPP (log)	-0.02	0.07	0.03
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.06)
Polyarchy Score	-0.83 ***	-0.73 ***	-0.41 **
	(0.14)	(0.20)	(0.13)
Individual level			
Urban	-0.10	-0.21 *	-0.06
	(0.06)	(0.08)	(0.06)
Gender	0.09	-0.04	0.07
	(0.06)	(0.08)	(0.06)
Education	-0.00	0.09 *	0.02
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)
Income	0.00	-0.09	-0.10 **
	(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.03)
Employed	0.01	-0.20 *	-0.16 *
	(0.07)	(0.10)	(0.07)
Age	-0.27 ***	-0.13 **	-0.08 *
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)
N	9376	9470	9548
N (COUNTRY)	8	8	8
AIC	7228.74	4714.56	7301.01
BIC	7307.34	4793.27	7379.82
R2 (fixed)	0.16	0.11	0.04
R2 (total)	0.31	0.34	0.20

All continuous predictors are mean-centered and scaled by 1 standard deviation. The outcome variable is in its original units. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Figure 6: Odd ratios and confidence intervals for Model 6, Trust in courts

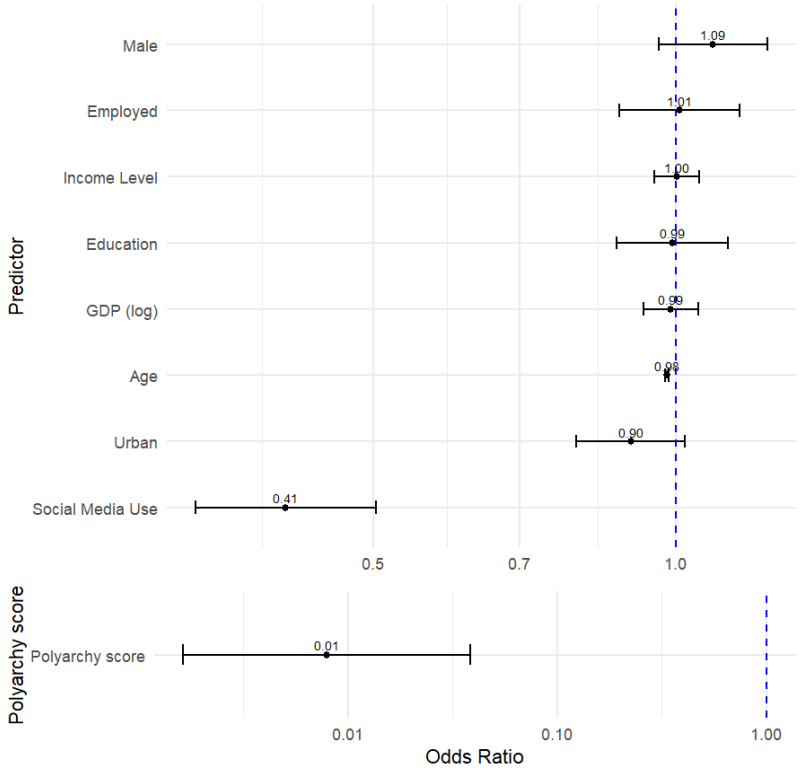


Figure 7: Odds ratios and confidence intervals for Model 7, Trust in military

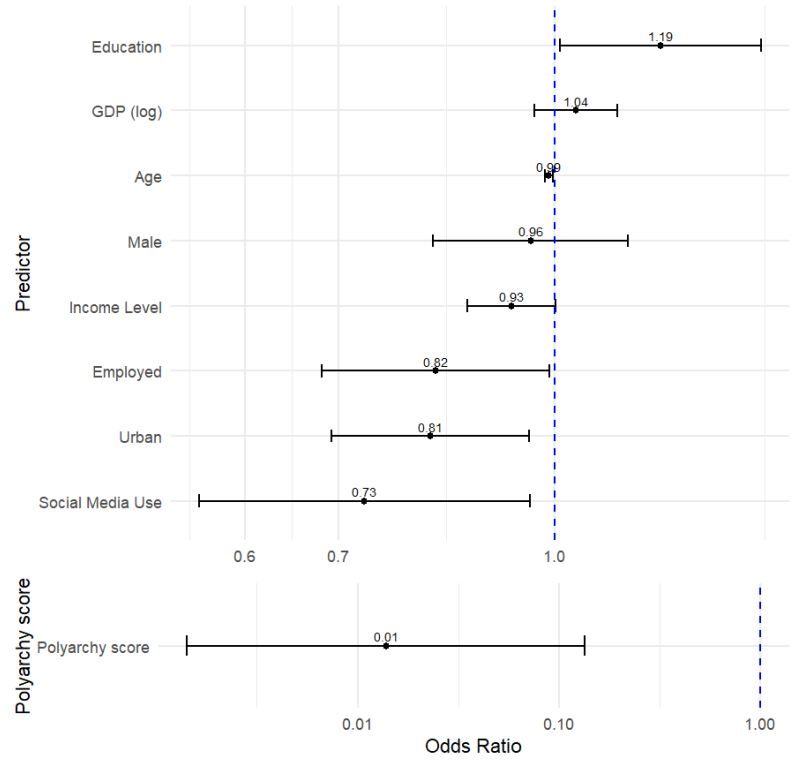
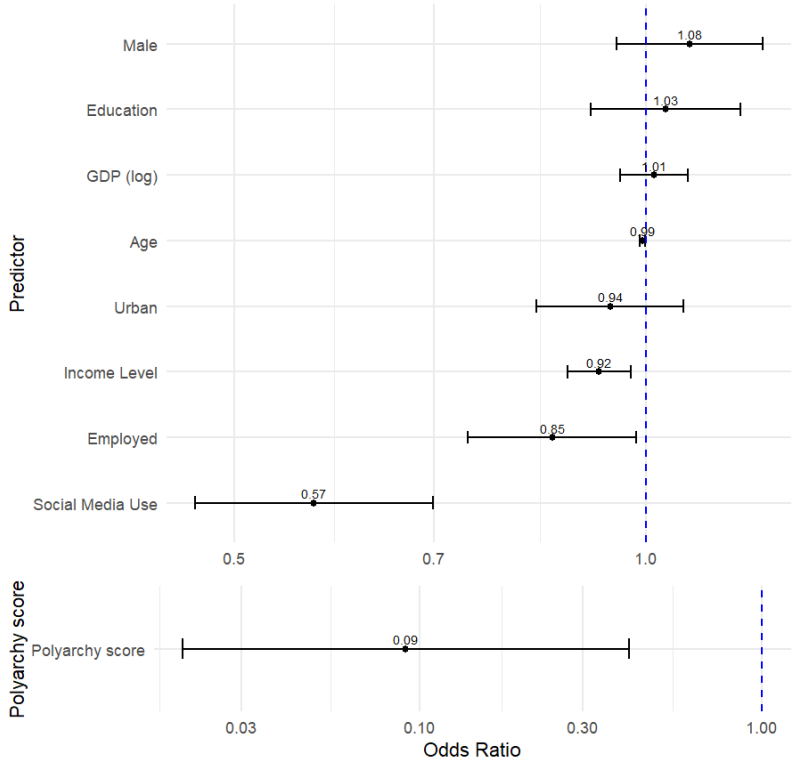


Figure 8: Odds ratios and confidence intervals for Model 8, Trust in police



Apart from the results on social media, another key finding is that individuals in countries with higher polyarchy scores are also less likely to trust in governance institutions. Therefore, those in more democratic states are less trusting of governmental institutions compared to those in authoritarian states. This is not a surprising finding given that previous research has found that across Asia there are paradoxical patterns with regards to trust and governance. Inoguchi (2017) found that democratic states like Japan, Taiwan and South Korea have low levels of political trust but that Southeast Asian states, including competitive authoritarian and authoritarian regimes, have high levels of trust. Jiang and Zhang (2021) note that in authoritarian states the phenomenon of hierarchal trust exists whereby individuals express high levels of trust in all levels of governance. They hypothesize that political propaganda might play a role here since under authoritarian regimes political news is strictly regulated. Their study indicates that

individuals who consume political news in authoritarian states are more likely to support their governments, when compared to individuals who consume news in more democratic states. If individuals are captured by certain narratives about their government, despite exposure to social media, they might still hold this hierarchical trust. Therefore, the findings are consistent with prior research on trust in the Asian region.

Robustness checks

Is there a negative association between trust and social media generally? There could be a situation where social media simply creates lower levels of trust, including interpersonal trust with others. Even if social media is leading to higher levels of trust for NGOs, does it potentially create low levels of trust for interpersonal relationships? I use two ABS questions: trust in one's neighbor (Q25) and trust in other people (Q26) to check this assumption. The models indicate that social media is positively associated with interpersonal trust. When the estimate is converted to an odds ratio, we can see that trust in one's neighbor increases by 16% if the respondent uses social media. There is a larger effect size for trust in other people which increases by 36% with social media usage. In addition, there could be a scenario where social media reduces trust in all other forms of mainstream media. Mainstream media institutions like television and newspapers could be conflated with traditional governance institutions. To check for this possibility, I also ran models on two other ABS questions: trust in television (Q53) and trust in newspapers (Q54). Similar to the tests for interpersonal trust, social media is associated with an increase in trust in other forms of news media. Trust in television news increases by 36% and trust in newspapers increases by 33.6% if a respondent uses social media. These models are available in the Appendix (Table 2).

Is this an effect that is particular to traditional governance institutions? I performed the same GLMMs on other trust variables related to political institutions: political parties, election commissions and civil servants. These models indicate that social media is associated with a reduction in trust in these institutions (available in the Appendix: Table 3). When the estimates are converted to odds ratios, we see that social media usage decreases trust in political parties (all parties, including one's preferred party) by 61%, trust in the election commission by 35% and trust in civil servants by 54%. Therefore, the effect remains consistent across traditional governmental institutions.

One potential driver of the results could be the specific countries themselves. The region is diverse and certainly each country has its own political situation and varying access to social media platforms. Large-n pooled models face heterogeneity issues. To check if a particular country or a group of countries is distorting the results I perform a jackknife analysis where a country is excluded from each run of the models to see if there is an outsized effect. The results can be found in the Appendix (Table 4). The analysis demonstrates that when countries are removed or run individually in the GLMM, the direction of the estimates remains consistent and significant across the models. The primary model which loses all statistical significance is Model 7 for trust in the military. When jackknife analysis is conducted here the model is not significant without pooling. This is not surprising given that military institutions are generally highly trusted in Southeast Asia. The question on trust in the military from the ABS showed that 92.4% of respondents said they trusted the military to varying degrees. Muhtadi (2022) found that the military was the highest trusted state institution in Indonesia. Most countries in the region have universal conscription which would make the institution one which most adult men, and some women, have participated in (Nga, 2024). Therefore, the model losing significance when

countries are analyzed individually is indicative of the largely high level of trust the institution has when compared to the few respondents who report distrust. While large-n regional analysis can be useful for getting an overview of trust in institutions, more specified models that are unique to the environment of each state can be helpful to pick apart these nuances.

Discussion

The findings indicate that social media usage is associated with significant changes in trust in governmental institutions and NGOs. They support the argument that exposure to social media is associated with an increase in trust in NGOs while simultaneously eroding confidence in direct and indirect governmental institutions. Social media functions as an avenue for civic engagement, allowing individuals to interact with advocacy groups, access alternative sources of information and participate in online discussions. These findings align with research demonstrating that digital platforms provide marginalized voices with a means of expression and allow for grassroots mobilization, even in environments where civic space is restricted (Aspinall and Weiss, 2012; Lim, 2023). Furthermore, because citizens can express dissatisfaction and challenge official state narratives, we see the eroding of institutional trust across the Southeast Asian region. Prior work has noted that digital platforms increase negative sentiment towards governmental institutions by increasing exposure to corruption scandals, government mismanagement, and citizen grievances (Sinpeng and Tapsell, 2020). The effect of social media on trust levels may be particularly pronounced in Southeast Asia because many governments maintain varying levels of media control and suppression, leading individuals to rely on social media platforms for unfiltered political discourse.

Furthermore, an important finding from the analysis is that individuals residing in more democratic states are less likely to trust governance institutions. This result is consistent with

previous studies highlighting the paradox of political trust in Asia, where authoritarian and competitive authoritarian regimes often report higher levels of institutional trust compared to democratic states (Inoguchi, 2017). One potential explanation is the role of state-controlled media and political propaganda in shaping public perceptions. In authoritarian states, where political discourse is tightly regulated, citizens may be more likely to internalize positive narratives about governance, whereas individuals in democratic environments have greater access to critical perspectives and independent journalism. Jiang and Zhang (2021) argue that in authoritarian regimes, hierarchical trust is reinforced through controlled media narratives, creating a perception of government competence. The findings in this study provide further empirical support for this theory, suggesting that even as social media challenges state narratives, underlying patterns of hierarchical trust persist in some contexts. This reinforces the complexity of political trust in Southeast Asia, where high levels of government confidence do not necessarily correspond to democratic performance or institutional integrity.

However, the erosion of trust in institutions is a growing global concern, affecting both democratic and authoritarian states. Trust in governance has been declining worldwide, and public support for democracy has weakened over time (Brady and Kent, 2022; Citrin and Stoker, 2018; Diamond, 2022). Rising inequality, political corruption and dissatisfaction with elite governance could be sources of this discontent. The spread of social media has further complicated this shift since it provides platforms for alternative narratives, political extremism and populist movements. While social media itself might not be the root cause of declining institutional trust, it serves as a space for the airing out of existing grievances. In many countries, right wing movements and fascist ideologies have gained traction through social media, taking advantage of algorithmic biases that promote sensationalist content (Fielitz and Marcks, 2019).

In Southeast Asia, while these right-wing elements are less prominent than in the West, religious fundamentalism is a growing problem in online spaces. In Malaysia, the government has been actively monitoring and removing extremist content from TikTok, as a significant portion of takedowns relate to violations of religious and ethnic tolerance laws by Islamic fundamentalists and ethnic supremacists (Saidin and Azrun, 2024).

This rise in extremism and declining trust in institutions suggests that the political landscape is undergoing a broader transformation in which traditional authorities are questioned. While governments in the region attempt to counter these trends through regulations, takedowns and legal restrictions, such measures often deepen public skepticism rather than restoring confidence in institutions (Lim, 2024). The increasing trust in NGOs alongside declining trust in governments also illustrates this shift. Disillusionment with mainstream politics and institutions have led many individuals to disengage and seek alternative sources of legitimacy. This aligns with Hirschman's (1970) exit, voice and loyalty framework, in which dissatisfied individuals may choose to either express their grievances (voice), remain loyal to the existing system, or may choose to disengage entirely (exit). In some cases, this exit can take the form of turning to NGOs as alternative avenues for political and social action (Lindenberg, 1999; Zuhlke, 2021).

Government failure theory suggests that people rely on nonprofits to fill gaps left by ineffective or unresponsive governments, particularly service provision (Weisbrod, 1977; Salamon, 1987). In contexts where governments fail to meet needs, NGOs might be perceived as more efficient and trustworthy alternatives. However, empirical evidence complicates this assumption. Lecy and Van Slyke (2013) find that government funding plays a significant role in the expansion of the nonprofit sector. Paarlberg and Zuhlke (2019) also determine that demand heterogeneity amongst the public does not affect nonprofit goods provision, and instead larger

government leads to a larger nonprofit sector. Therefore, while distrust in the government might drive public reliance on NGOs and trust in them, state support remains crucial for their functioning and growth.

Additionally, trust in NGOs does not necessarily indicate a complete rejection of state institutions. In some cases, civil society operates in collaboration with governments, even under authoritarian settings. NGOs often engage in consultations with governments to push forward agendas and obtain concessions from restrictive regimes (Teets, 2014). However, while social media may reduce trust in government, it does not lead to entirely oppositional civil society. NGOs are embedded in political and economic structures, and their ability to function is often tied to the state or international funding. Growing trust in civil society but eroding institutional trust might indicate a larger change in how individuals perceive legitimacy and accountability in a time of greater digital connection and political uncertainty.

Conclusion

This study has explored the impact of social media usage on institutional trust, demonstrating that while social media usage tends to diminish trust in governmental institutions, it enhances trust in NGOs. Despite government efforts to suppress online dissent and control digital spaces, social media provides a space for community building online, thereby strengthening civil society even in restrictive regime environments. Limited research on nonprofits and NGOs has been conducted in the Southeast Asia region despite a resilient civil society. With a growing middle class, we should expect a strong nonprofit and NGO sector to continue to develop. Furthermore, with an engaged and youthful population on social media, nonprofits and NGOs have an opportunity to grow their outreach. This study contributes to a growing literature on civil society organizations in developing countries and the Asian third

sector. Future work in Southeast Asia should continue to focus on the society-NGO relationship and how organizations can best generate trust from local populations.

However, this study is not without limitations. The use of cross-national survey data from the Asian Barometer provides only a snapshot in time, which may introduce heterogeneity issues common in large-scale studies. Country-specific analyses can offer more nuanced insights on how regime types and internet access challenges influence trust in institutions. Future work using the Asian Barometer could further investigate whether other aspects determine trust in governance institutions or civil society, such as feelings towards globalism or traditionalism. Discovering what allows for greater trust in NGOs can enhance our understanding of how non-profits and other service organizations can better direct themselves towards donors and volunteers in the region.

Additionally, a significant data limitation was the lack of detailed information on individual social media behaviors. Understanding the specific activities and engagements of users on these platforms is important, as social media can serve as a tool for both civic engagement and authoritarian control. Grassroots groups can use social media as a form of resistance to state intervention. For example, the Prey Lang forest community in Cambodia engaged in an online photography-based campaign to protect their forest lands from development. Despite prior protests in the 2000s, the 2012 online campaign was the one that attracted significant support from urban youth and led to the Cambodian government listing their ancestral lands as a national wildlife sanctuary (Young, 2021). However, civic spaces can also be manipulated to incite hatred and violence from uncivil society. Mass disinformation campaigns and authoritarian control of these platforms are not accounted for in the paper. Digital and media literacy are important for an engaged and active online civil society, but these literacy levels

highly vary across nationalities and age groups. Evidence from Myanmar suggests that a robust online civil society with low digital and media literacy can lead to intercommunal tension and ethnic violence (Rio, 2021). When considering the normative implications of social media, evidence suggests that while these platforms provide valuable civic connections, they are also implicated in authoritarian violence and control.

The long-term effects of social media on institutional trust are difficult to determine, making ongoing research in the region necessary. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to understand how sustained social media usage influences trust over time. Investigating the specific content and interactions that users engage with on these platforms can provide deeper insights into the mechanisms driving changes in trust. Additionally, examining the role of digital literacy could inform strategies to mitigate the spread of misinformation and its detrimental effects on institutional trust. Understanding these factors is important for both policymakers aiming to enhance institutional trust and for NGOs seeking to enhance their legitimacy within communities.

Appendix for Chapter 1

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Variable	Attribute	Count
Trust in the executive	1 (trust)	16432
	0 (no trust)	1765
	Total	18197
Trust in the national govt.	1	15737
	0	2106
	Total	17843
Trust in parliaments	1	14950
	0	2542
	Total	17492
Trust in local govt.	1	15546
	0	1795
	Total	17341
Trust in NGOs	1	11640
	0	3925
	Total	15565
Trust in courts	1	15273
	0	2494
	Total	17767
Trust in military	1	16877
	0	1374
	Total	18251
Trust in police	1	15770
	0	2654
	Total	18424
Social media usage	1 (use one or more of the top 3 platforms)	8590
	0 (do not use social media at all)	1942
	Total	10532
Demographics		

Gender	Male	9491
	Female	9716
	Total	19207
Age	Min	17
	Max	108
	Average	40
Education	No formal education	1660
	Primary to secondary education	14024
	College education	3485
	Total	19169
Employed	Employed	13123
	Unemployed	6075
	Total	19198
Income	1st quintile (lowest)	4021
	2nd	4764
	3rd	5062
	4th	2338
	5th quintile (highest)	1796
	Total	17981
Location	Urban	9381
	Rural	9841
	Total	19222

Table 2: Models on interpersonal and other media trust

	Model 1: Trust in neighbor	Model 2: Trust in other people	Model 3: Trust in television news	Model 4: Trust in newspaper news
(Intercept)	1.14 ***	0.45	1.22 *	0.83 *
	(0.21)	(0.27)	(0.49)	(0.40)
Social Media Usage	0.15 *	0.31 ***	0.31 ***	0.29 ***
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.07)
GDP PPP (log)	0.49 ***	0.50 ***	0.88 ***	0.74 ***
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.08)	(0.07)
Polyarchy Score	0.04	0.61 ***	0.68 ***	0.80 ***
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.11)
Urban	0.25 ***	0.21 ***	0.26 ***	0.29 ***
	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Gender	-0.32 ***	-0.31 ***	0.20 ***	0.13 **
	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Education	0.03	0.03	-0.12 ***	-0.13 ***
	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Income	-0.03	-0.05 *	-0.05	0.02
	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Employed	0.03	-0.00	-0.02	0.00
	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Age	0.15 ***	0.05 *	0.09 ***	0.02
	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)
N	9720	9684	9545	9201
N (COUNTRY)	8	8	8	8
AIC	10279.70	12343.23	9487.59	10520.17
BIC	10358.70	12422.19	9566.39	10598.57
R2 (fixed)	0.08	0.15	0.21	0.22
R2 (total)	0.16	0.27	0.50	0.43

All continuous predictors are mean-centered and scaled by 1 standard deviation. The outcome variable is in its original units. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Table 3: Models on other government trust

	Model 5: Trust in political parties	Model 6: Trust in election commission	Model 7: Trust in civil servants
(Intercept)	1.96 ***	2.14 ***	2.97 ***
	(0.42)	(0.19)	(0.25)
Social Media Usage	-0.92 ***	-0.43 ***	-0.76 ***
	(0.09)	(0.13)	(0.13)
GDP PPP (log)	-0.87 ***	-0.07	-0.05
	(0.16)	(0.08)	(0.08)
Polyarchy score	-1.00 ***	-0.45 *	-0.45 **
	(0.12)	(0.19)	(0.17)
urban	-0.18 **	0.08	-0.08
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.07)
gender	0.24 ***	0.17 *	-0.09
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.07)
education	-0.03	0.03	0.08 *
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)
income	0.00	-0.06	-0.07
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)
employed	-0.01	-0.10	-0.08
	(0.06)	(0.08)	(0.08)
age	-0.12 ***	-0.18 ***	-0.10 **
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.04)
N	9273	6674	9455
N (COUNTRY)	8	7	8
AIC	8745.91	5582.41	5805.29
BIC	8824.39	5657.28	5883.98
R2 (fixed)	0.29	0.07	0.06
R2 (total)	0.49	0.10	0.14

All continuous predictors are mean-centered and scaled by 1 standard deviation. The outcome variable is in its original units. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Table 4: Jackknife analysis for Models 1 – 8

Model 1 (trust in NGOs)

Country	**Estimate**	**Std. Error**	**z-value**	**p-value**
Philippines	0.224758	0.095335	2.357572	0.018395
Thailand	0.22749	0.095172	2.390314	0.016834
Singapore	0.341351	0.093469	3.652044	0.00026
Malaysia	0.336052	0.097329	3.452731	0.000555
Vietnam	0.359573	0.097361	3.693182	0.000221
Cambodia	0.336178	0.087714	3.832674	0.000127
Myanmar	0.227669	0.094932	2.398224	0.016475
Indonesia	0.363071	0.091926	3.949594	7.83E-05

Model 2 (trust in executive)

Country	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p-value
Philippines	-0.8683	0.1383	-6.28	3.39E-07
Thailand	-0.9792	0.1442	-6.7891	1E-10
Singapore	-0.7988	0.1362	-5.8628	4.6E-09
Malaysia	-0.835	0.1535	-5.4404	5.32E-08
Vietnam	-0.8968	0.1377	-6.5107	7E-10
Cambodia	-0.908	0.133	-6.8254	9E-10
Myanmar	-0.4219	0.1428	-2.955	0.003127
Indonesia	-0.5075	0.1487	-3.4116	0.000646

Model 3 (trust in national government)

Country	**Estimate**	**Std. Error**	**z-value**	**p-value**
Philippines	-0.9874	0.1296	-7.6186	2.56E-11
Thailand	-0.9046	0.1287	-7.0262	2.12E-10
Singapore	-0.8602	0.1224	-7.0291	2.08E-10

Malaysia	-0.8232	0.1317	-6.2483	4.15E-10
Vietnam	-0.9792	0.1251	-7.827	4.99E-11
Cambodia	-0.9297	0.12	-7.7453	9.53E-10
Myanmar	-0.4678	0.1317	-3.5533	0.00038
Indonesia	-0.5137	0.1373	-3.7415	0.000183

Model 4 (trust in parliaments)

Country	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p-value
Philippines	-0.8601	0.1016	-8.4674	2.51E-11
Thailand	-0.8382	0.1008	-8.3149	9.18E-10
Singapore	-0.7843	0.09807	-7.9974	1.27E-10
Malaysia	-0.5687	0.1034	-5.498	3.84E-09
Vietnam	-0.8584	0.09876	-8.6918	3.57E-12
Cambodia	-0.7937	0.09553	-8.3087	9.67E-10
Myanmar	-0.2863	0.1037	-2.7607	0.00577
Indonesia	-0.2454	0.1261	-1.946	0.0517

Model 5 (trust in local governments)

Country	**Estimate**	**Std. Error**	**z-value**	**p-value**
Philippines	-0.9626	0.142	-6.7811	1.19E-11
Thailand	-0.9127	0.141	-6.4717	9.69E-11
Singapore	-0.8341	0.1302	-6.4048	1.51E-10
Malaysia	-0.598	0.1375	-4.3492	1.37E-05
Vietnam	-0.8077	0.1375	-5.8744	4.24E-09
Cambodia	-0.8278	0.1294	-6.398	1.58E-09
Myanmar	-0.5013	0.144	-3.4802	0.000501
Indonesia	-0.4416	0.1479	-2.9862	0.002825

Model 6 (trust in courts)

Country	**Estimate**	**Std. Error**	**z-value**	**P-value**
Philippines	-0.908	0.1117	-8.13	4.30E-16
Thailand	-0.909	0.1099	-8.27	1.30E-16
Singapore	-0.862	0.108	-7.98	1.47E-15
Malaysia	-0.659	0.1154	-5.71	1.13E-08
Vietnam	-0.925	0.1092	-8.47	2.53E-17
Cambodia	-0.889	0.1062	-8.37	5.65E-17
Myanmar	-0.497	0.1219	-4.07	4.63E-05
Indonesia	-0.505	0.1338	-3.78	1.59E-04

Model 7 (trust in military)

Country	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	P-value
Philippines	-0.417	0.1555	-2.679	0.0074
Thailand	-0.255	0.1493	-1.71	0.0872
Singapore	-0.356	0.1463	-2.437	0.0148
Malaysia	-0.176	0.1458	-1.21	0.2264
Vietnam	-0.362	0.1476	-2.45	0.0143
Cambodia	-0.339	0.1408	-2.406	0.0161
Myanmar	0.122	0.1647	0.742	0.458
Indonesia	-0.099	0.1448	-0.681	0.496

Model 8 (trust in police)

Country	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	P-value
Philippines	-0.62	0.1094	-5.67	1.43E-08
Thailand	-0.666	0.1112	-5.993	2.06E-09
Singapore	-0.563	0.1043	-5.402	6.60E-08
Malaysia	-0.335	0.1098	-3.052	0.0023
Vietnam	-0.583	0.1076	-5.416	6.08E-08
Cambodia	-0.58	0.1032	-5.617	1.95E-08
Myanmar	-0.279	0.1193	-2.338	0.0194
Indonesia	-0.104	0.1164	-0.891	0.373

Chapter 2

Public Support for Environmental NGOs: A Conjoint Experiment in Southeast Asia

Abstract:

The decision to donate to a nonprofit or non-governmental organization (NGO) is influenced by multiple factors, including identity and perceptions of local relevance. In Southeast Asia, several countries rank highly on global charity indexes, and the region faces severe climate change risks. However, concerns about reliance on Western funding and misalignment between local needs and the priorities of international NGOs have led to skepticism toward some environmental initiatives. Despite the region's charitable engagement, little research has examined how identity and localism shape donor preferences for environmental NGOs. This study employs a forced-choice conjoint experiment on a cross-nationally representative sample of Malaysians, Indonesians, and Singaporeans to assess whether organizational attributes related to local identity, gender representation, and government funding influence willingness to donate. The findings indicate that donors strongly prefer NGOs that are based in the region, address environmental challenges specific to their countries, and collaborate with locally relevant organizations. Additionally, donors favor NGOs with higher shares of women on their boards. These results suggest that local identity is central to shaping support for environmental NGOs in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: NGOs, conjoint survey, environmental organizations, donors, Southeast Asia

Introduction

The growing urgency and political dissatisfaction that people feel over climate change action has led to increasing private funding of climate organizations. Foundation funding dedicated to climate change increased from USD 900 million in 2015 to over USD 3 billion in 2021 (Global Philanthropy Tracker, 2023). The changing visibility of climate events and increasing climate related disasters has made global warming and intense weather events like heat waves and flooding a top issue for many (Leiserowitz et al., 2023). Given this growing interest in joining or funding climate change initiatives, how do individuals determine what types of organizations they might support? In this study I examine the preferences of individual donors with regards to environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs).

The behavior of donors in the Global South has been largely understudied when compared to the donation behaviors of Western donors. The question then remains, what determines whether individuals choose to donate to a non-governmental organization (NGO)? What attributes are important when evaluating organizations? How donors choose their favored NGOs will have implications for civil society management, growth, and reputation building strategy. Public perceptions of these organizations have an impact since individuals have scarce donation possibilities, both financially and time wise, and thus must make choices in the civil society they wish to patronize.

In emerging donor markets, such as those in Southeast Asia, understanding donor preferences and their sensitivity to specific nonprofit and NGO attributes is important. In many Southeast Asian countries, communities often prioritize initiatives that resonate with regional and cultural values (Doan, 2022). Relying heavily on external support presents significant challenges for NGOs in these regions (Antlöv et al., 2012; Nurlinah et al., 2025). Foreign

funding often comes with conditions that may not align with local priorities, leading organizations to pursue initiatives that meet donor requirements but fail to address pressing community concerns. As donor markets in the region transition from dependence on international funding to becoming more self-sustaining, cultivating credibility through local engagement is imperative. Determining the preferences of local donors in emergent markets is important for understanding the growing philanthropic sector in transition economies. Furthermore, understanding individual donor-led climate change funding is essential for understanding how climate-vulnerable populations in developing donor markets will address the challenges posed by climate change and the green transition.

Using a forced-choice conjoint experiment, I examine whether donors in developing donor markets respond favorably to NGOs that are aligned with local priorities. I also investigate whether donors prefer NGOs with women on their boards and if donors prefer NGOs with lower levels of government funding, viewing them as more independent and locally focused. I find that respondents favor NGOs with a local headquarters and a commitment to regional issues. NGOs with official partnerships with regionally relevant organizations, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), are also preferred. Country-level results reveal variations linked to localized experiences. Additionally, respondents show a preference for NGOs with women on their boards, with both male and female respondents favoring organizations with higher shares of women on their boards.

This study is among the few that focus on donor preferences in a developing donor market like Southeast Asia. The findings highlight the importance of tailoring NGO strategies to meet the unique needs and concerns of Southeast Asian donors, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of nonprofit organizations operating in these emerging markets.

These insights can help NGOs better engage with their donor base and drive more impactful and locally relevant initiatives.

Why Donate?

The professionalization of the third sector and the rise of NGOs with professional funding departments, donor outreach programs and brand appeal has meant that donors have a larger market of organizations than ever from which to choose. How do donors choose which organizations to prioritize and what are some factors that might attract potential donations? Donation behavior is influenced by both internal factors, including individual donor characteristics. Research is divided between rational choice theory, which suggests that giving is rational due to benefits like the warm glow effect or tax incentives (Andreoni, 1990; Brown and Landford, 1992), and social psychology, which emphasizes altruism, empathy, and perceptions of organizations (Clary and Snyder, 1991; Davis, 1994; Bennett, 2003). Additionally, demographic factors such as age, gender, wealth, marital status, and religiosity play a key role in shaping donation behavior (Neumayr and Handy, 2019).

In addition to internal motivations, external factors also influence donation behavior. Prior literature indicates that when individuals choose to donate, they often evaluate the characteristics of organizations and the specifics of their campaigns. For example, they are more likely to support national level campaigns, give to perceived innocent victims, and donate generously to campaigns focused on environmental disasters (Casale and Baumann, 2015; Van Leeuwen and Wiepking, 2013; Sargeant and Woodliffe, 2007; Smith and McSweeney, 2007). Additionally, organizational image and branding are important facets of how individuals perceive NGOs and whether they are willing to donate to them (Michel and Rieunier, 2012; Do

Paco et al., 2014). How an NGO is perceived, particularly in new contexts where the nonprofit market is still developing, can shape its potential future with donors. In the context of authoritarian and restricted regimes, the public are still familiarizing themselves with the concept of the NGO and the third sector (Henderson, 2011; Wang, 2023). Therefore, in these "embryonic fundraising regimes" how NGOs present themselves to the public plays an important role in how they can attract and sustain donor support (Wiepking et al., 2021).

This study focuses on the external, "front facing" attributes of NGOs and how their specifics shape the potential donation behaviors of individuals. By utilizing a forced choice conjoint experiment, the study tests several hypotheses on what motivates donor choice. The survey is one of the first to investigate whether formal affiliations between NGOs and international organizations are favorable to donors. By understanding these funding and partnership decisions that NGOs and nonprofits make as part of their brand identity, we can gain insights into how these choices impact their ability to attract donors. In addition, the focus on the Southeast Asia region provides an insight into the preferences of donors in the Global South, a demographic that is important in global philanthropic trends. In the following section, I propose several hypotheses on how the external attributes of an NGO influence donor support.

Arguments and Hypotheses

Since the end of the Cold War, funding from the Global North for development projects in the Global South has grown, often channeled through NGOs (Barnett, 2018). While these funds have supported various initiatives, they have also created tensions between recipient states, nonprofit organizations, and donors. The patron-client relationship between foreign donors and NGOs has led to a perception of NGOs as extensions of foreign interests rather than independent entities (Henderson, 2002). As Suchman (1995, 574) argues, organizational legitimacy requires

actions to be "desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions." Therefore, when NGOs are perceived as merely implementing external agendas, they struggle to establish local legitimacy. This becomes particularly problematic when organizations operate outside state-sanctioned frameworks, as they face challenges in demonstrating their alignment with local institutional norms. In response, governments in the Global South have enacted restrictive laws to limit the operations of civil society organizations (Dupuy et al., 2016). These developments underscore concerns about the imposition of external values and priorities by actors from the Global North.

Do emergent donor markets care about local issues and wish to fund locally relevant causes? Research on philanthropic behavior suggests they should. Bekkers and Wiepking (2011) identify awareness of need, values alignment, and perceived efficacy as key drivers of charitable giving. Organizations embedded in local contexts may be better positioned to demonstrate these qualities to emerging market donors. By understanding these emerging preferences, we can tailor nonprofit strategies better to align with the unique needs and priorities of donors in emerging markets. Therefore, I propose examining the extent to which donors in these markets prioritize local concerns and how this influences their funding decisions.

H1: Donors will favor NGOs that prioritize and align with local concerns.

The location of an NGO's headquarters often signals its level of connection to the communities it serves. Western donors frequently scrutinize where campaigns are conducted and how funds are used (Alesina and Dollar, 2000; Schons et al., 2017). Global South donors may share similar concerns. Danković and Pickering (2017) found that in the former Yugoslavia,

local populations perceived Western-supported NGOs as disconnected from community needs and overly focused on abstract issues. NGOs perceived as out of touch may struggle to achieve meaningful advocacy or service outcomes. Headquarters' location serves as a useful proxy for foreign influence. Therefore:

H1a: Donors will favor NGOs headquartered in local cities.

The issues that NGOs choose to address are critical to their identity and appeal. Donors often discriminate based on the relevance and salience of the problems being tackled (Carlsson and Martinsson, 2001). Prior research shows that NGOs focusing on charismatic flora and fauna tend to attract greater support than those working on less visible environmental issues (Veríssimo et al., 2018). In Southeast Asia, the destruction of rainforest habitats and the resulting haze are urgent and visible concerns (Varkkey, 2022). Compared to more abstract and technical issues like ocean acidification, these visible problems will resonate more with local populations. Therefore:

H1b: Donors will favor NGOs advocating for locally salient issues.

The partnerships NGOs maintain with international organizations significantly influence their reputation and relationships with local donors. These official partnerships are important for NGO operations (Reimann, 2006; Tallberg et al., 2013). A relationship with an international governance organization like the United Nations can enhance an NGO's reputation among local donors. However, such affiliations can also damage an NGO's legitimacy if the local community

is skeptical of foreign funding. For instance, Wasif and Prakash (2017) found that donors in Pakistan were less supportive of organizations accepting funding from Saudi Arabia and the United States. Growing anti-Western sentiment is a concern in the nonprofit sector, especially as donors in the Global South begin to assert their preferences. The narrative of civil society actors implementing projects with poor local outreach is well-documented (Balboa, 2014; Dolšak and Prakash, 2022). Therefore, the decisions NGOs make regarding accepting funding from international organizations can affect their reputation among local donors.

Several regionally specific contexts can influence donor preferences regarding partnerships. For example, contentious issues with the European Environmental Bureau (EEB) over palm oil sustainability have strained relations between Malaysia, Indonesia, and the EU (WTO, 2019). Additionally, concerns over World Bank funding have led to skepticism about institutions like the Asian Development Bank (ADB), despite being regional, due to their perceived association with Western funding and loans (Kilby, 2011). Conversely, an organization like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a homegrown institution focusing on regional economic development and strategic security. This study is one of the first to assess whether donors discriminate based on official partnerships with international organizations.

H1c: Donors will favor NGOs with partnerships involving regionally relevant organizations.

Apart from alignment with local priorities, gender representation in NGO governance has emerged as a critical dimension of organizational legitimacy and effectiveness. Donors, especially women, might respond positively to an organization that has women in decision

making roles. Historically, women make up the bulk of employees in nonprofits, while men are overrepresented in senior level positions (Gibelman, 2000; Damman et al., 2014). In recent years there has been a push to highlight this issue of gender diversity on nonprofit and NGO boards (Lee, 2019). The benefits of gender diversity on boards are both at the institutional level and the donor level. Research indicates that boards with more gender diversity have better financial outcomes and strategic engagement (Post and Byron, 2015). Furthermore, having women on boards increases the likelihood of receiving donations from all donors (Lin et al., 2018).

However, one aspect to consider in the context of the study is gender roles and traditionalism in the region. While certain countries, such as Malaysia, have historically not relied on patriarchal family systems, and women have participated in the workforce, recent years have seen an economic shift favoring women's roles at home, with men as primary breadwinners (Hirschman, 2016; Utomo, 2012; OECD, 2024). Given these prevailing norms, it is possible that donors in the region may not favor NGOs with higher shares of women on their boards.

H2: In the pooled sample of donors, NGOs with higher shares of women on their boards will not receive more favorable donor evaluations.

The differences between genders in terms of their donation preferences is a significant area of study, with conflicting results (Bekkers and Wiepking, 2011). Prior research has found that women are more likely to give larger amounts of money under dictator game restraints, they are more likely to divide resources evenly in token style games, and they are more generous than men when charity is elicited (Eckel and Grossman, 1998; Andreoni and Vesterlund, 2001; Piper and Schnepf, 2007). On the other hand, additional studies have also found that men are more likely to provide larger donations than women (Bekkers and Wiepking, 2006; Trelohan, 2022).

However, given the growing culture of traditionalism and a focus on "family values" in the region it might be more likely that female respondents express a stronger preference for more shares of women in board positions when compared to male respondents (Stivens, 2013). Even if there is a general disfavoring of women in positions of power, female donors are likely to still show a stronger preference for more women on boards compared to their male counterparts. Therefore:

H2a: Female respondents will favor NGOs with more shares of women on the board when compared to male respondents.

In addition to gender representation, NGO funding relationships with government institutions constitute another crucial dimension of their operating environment. Organizations might have advisory positions and provide information to governments for policy making. Or they might have more proactive roles and receive significant funding to help governments implement programs. Donors trust NGOs that have working relationships with local governments since this indicates legitimacy (Khanna et al., 1995; Okten and Weisbrod, 2000). On the other hand, crowding out effects from government funding and donor perceptions of nonprofits that receive government funds can also reduce donation behavior (Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Brooks 2000). However, these prior studies have mostly focused on Western contexts. While donors might also react positively to the government being involved with an NGO, in the Global South, donors might also punish NGOs that have close ties to governments given issues with corruption and perceived inefficiencies of the state (Chang and Chu, 2006). Therefore,

H3: Donors will favor NGOs with lower levels of funding from governments.

Besides these core dimensions, the study also examines other attributes that have historically indicated donor support. The size of an NGO's membership can signal importance, competence, and effectiveness. Larger organizations with more members and volunteers might indicate greater influence and an enhanced ability to generate revenue (Paswan and Troy, 2004; Nikolova, 2015; Ki and Oh, 2018). This attribute highlights the potential impact of organizational scale on donor decision-making. Additionally, the year of founding serves as an indicator of institutional maturity and stability. Older NGOs may be perceived as more established and effective, yet donors could also view them as wealthier and less in need of support (Okten and Weisbrod, 2000). Despite this possible tension, the longevity and sustained presence of older organizations may enhance their appeal to donors.

Subnational Hypotheses

Given the diversity in political and historical conditions that may influence donor behaviors, there are specific issues in each surveyed country that might be reflected in the results. Therefore, alongside the general hypotheses, I propose subnational hypotheses.

Ocean acidification, caused by rising CO2 emissions, threatens coral reefs, particularly in Indonesia. However, the issue has become contentious, with criticism that coral reef protection and policies for the Coral Triangle are overly top-down. Utomo (2017) describes how entire communities were moved away from their villages for reclamation programs, thus removing them from their connections with nature and the reefs which they have relied on for generations. Programs on ocean acidification have not been well received and there has been a lack of cultural

congruence between UN Sustainability goals and the local awig-awig (local rules and customs) (Satria et al., 2006). Therefore, topics related to coral reef management have taken on a frame of civil society forces and international groups imposing themselves onto local fisher people. As a result, ocean acidification is often viewed more negatively compared to other advocacy areas.

H4: Indonesian respondents will not favor NGOs that advocate for dealing with ocean acidification.

The EU's renewable energy directive is set to phase out palm oil by 2030 due to its link to deforestation in Southeast Asia. This has created tension, leading to an ongoing WTO dispute over the directive's legality and discrimination against Malaysia, which produces 26% of the world's palm oil (WTO, 2019; International Trade Administration, 2024). Rhetoric surrounding the EU directive has pitted the environmental interests of wealthy European states against the economic interests of palm oil exporting countries like Malaysia. Former PM Mahathir Mohamad made his position clear: "Trade wars are not something we like to promote but on the other hand it is grossly unfair for rich people to try and impoverish poor people." (Ananthalakshmi et al., 2019). This negative perception of the EU can be seen in the Edelman Trust Barometer (2024) where Malaysian respondents were noted as being "distrustful" of the EU. Therefore:

H5: Malaysian respondents will not favor the EEB.

.

Data and Methods

Sample

A conjoint experiment allows respondents to compare two NGOs side by side along identical attributes, but these attributes take on different values (Bansak et al., 2023; Malesky and Schuler, 2020; Bachke et al., 2014). The order in which attributes appear is randomized across participants. Because conjoint surveys allow participants to implicitly trade off across characteristics, they reduce social desirability bias (Hainmueller et al., 2014). Furthermore, the design of a conjoint experiment also allows for the comparison of multiple organizational attributes of an NGO simultaneously.

The study received University of Washington IRB approval (STUDY00019134) and was preregistered (pre-registration link). Participants were recruited via online panels of respondents available through the survey company Conjointly. Samples of adults (above 18 years old) from three countries were collected to provide a balanced panel of respondents across Southeast Asia. In total 759 people responded to the survey and 113 were flagged as being low quality after failing two instructional manipulation attention checks in the survey. This puts the attention check failure rate at 14.8%, within standard failure rates for online responses (Peer et al., 2017). While there is a debate on whether low quality respondents should be dropped or included, the analysis was conducted on both the attentive and inattentive respondents and results were substantively similar (Alvarez et al., 2019). Analysis of the exclusively attentive sample is available in the Appendix (Table 10 and Figure 5). The survey was provided in both English language and Bahasa Indonesia.

Participants were shown profiles of different NGOs where seven attributes were randomized according to four potential levels. These attributes and their levels are available in

Table 1. Based on these profiles of two NGOs presented side by side, participants were then asked which NGO they would prefer to donate their money to. Every participant undertook this paired comparison eight times. While the order in which attributes were listed remained the same for a given respondent, the values that specific attributes took varied randomly over different iterations of paired comparisons. After every paired comparison, respondents were asked about the NGO they would seek to donate to. Participants were given a hypothetical amount of money they could donate. I selected this amount so that it was equivalent to the average one-off donation amount recorded in each country: RM 20 (USD $5) in Malaysia, Rp. 100,000 (USD $6) in Indonesia and SGD 100 (USD $75) in Indonesia.

From the sample of 759 participants, I was able to collect 12,144 unique observations due to the nature of the choice task: 759 × 2 (NGO comparisons) × 8 (choice tasks). After the conjoint portion of the survey, the participants were then asked questions about their opinions on NGOs broadly and demographic data was also collected. In addition, concerns about low attentiveness due to the online nature of the survey were addressed by adding two attention check questions, one during the beginning of the survey and one during the conjoint portion of the survey. The conjoint portion of the survey was also designed so that respondents had to spend at least five seconds with the two tables in each comparison, and respondents were not allowed to "click off" the survey to count this time down. The sample collected was representative of the countries in the study and the panels were balanced according to gender and age. Summary statistics on the demographics of the sample can be found in the Appendix (Table 1). The entire survey instrument (in English language) is also available in the Appendix of this paper and a sample vignette of the survey pairs can be seen in Figure 1.

Case selection

In the Southeast Asian region growing donations to organizations are reflected in the fact that six Southeast Asian countries made the top 50 list for most giving countries in the World Giving Index (2022). Indonesians make the top list of donors globally and have been the most generous country for several years according to the World Giving Index (making the top position in 2022, 2021, 2018 and remaining in the top 20 going back to 2013 when the index started). Indonesia is a predominantly Sunni Muslim country where 87% of the population is Muslim and there is a long tradition of Islamic giving that is regulated by the Indonesian state (zakat), but also voluntary giving (sadaqah). Malaysia is a similar story where there is a strong history of mandatory giving that is state regulated alongside voluntary charity. Malaysians also make the top 30 ranking in the World Giving Index and there is a rich history of civil society and social movements (Weiss, 2006). Singapore is the wealthiest country in the region and regularly makes a strong appearance in the World Giving Index.

With an increased focus on climate security in the region there has been a renewed focus on the role that organizations like NGOs will play in managing natural resources and mitigating climate related risks (Jasparro and Taylor, 2008; Elliott and Caballero-Anthony, 2012). However, the operational environment for NGOs is often unclear and legal challenges pose significant hurdles for organizations in the region (Springman et al., 2022). On the other hand, regardless of regulations, civil society in the region has managed to thrive and private giving has benefitted from legislation that promotes philanthropic endeavors, such as zakat. Kailani and Slama (2020) demonstrate how there has been a steady increase in sadaqah amongst the middle class in Indonesia. Given this substantial donor pool in the region, it is important to determine what influences donor preferences, and which organizational attributes can help civil society in their efforts to establish donation sources. The challenge of climate change will require multiple

stakeholders, particularly ENGOs who play an important role in service provision, advocacy, information provision, and policy development.

Table 1. Attributes and their levels

Attribute	**Possible Levels:**			
Size of membership	50	100	1000	10,000
Year of founding	1970	1990	2010	2020
Location of headquarters	London	New York City	Singapore	Bangkok
Proportion of women in leadership positions	No women	¼ of positions	½ of positions	A majority of positions
Area of advocacy	Rainforest deforestation	Green energy advocacy and promotion	Ocean acidification	Endangered animal conservation
Official partnership	Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)	United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP)	Asian Development Bank (ADB)	European Environmental Bureau (EEB)
Percentage of government funding	No funding	5% of funding	15% of funding	30% of funding

Figure 1. Sample vignette of conjoint survey shown to Malaysian respondents

In this scenario you have been given RM 20 to donate to a non-governmental organization (NGO). Each of these NGOs is different and we ask you to choose to one out of each pair to donate your RM 20 to.

Which of the following non-governmental organizations would you donate to?

	NGO 1	**NGO 2**
Size of Membership	50	100
Proportion of Women in Leadership Positions	A half of leadership positions	A quarter of leadership positions
Area of Advocacy	Rainforest Deforestation	Ocean Acidification
Percentage (%) of funding from local government	15% of funding from local government	30% of funding from local government
Location of Headquarters	Singapore	Bangkok
Year of Founding	1990	2010
Has an official partnership with:	United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP)	Asian Development Bank (ADB)
	CHOOSE	CHOOSE

Analysis

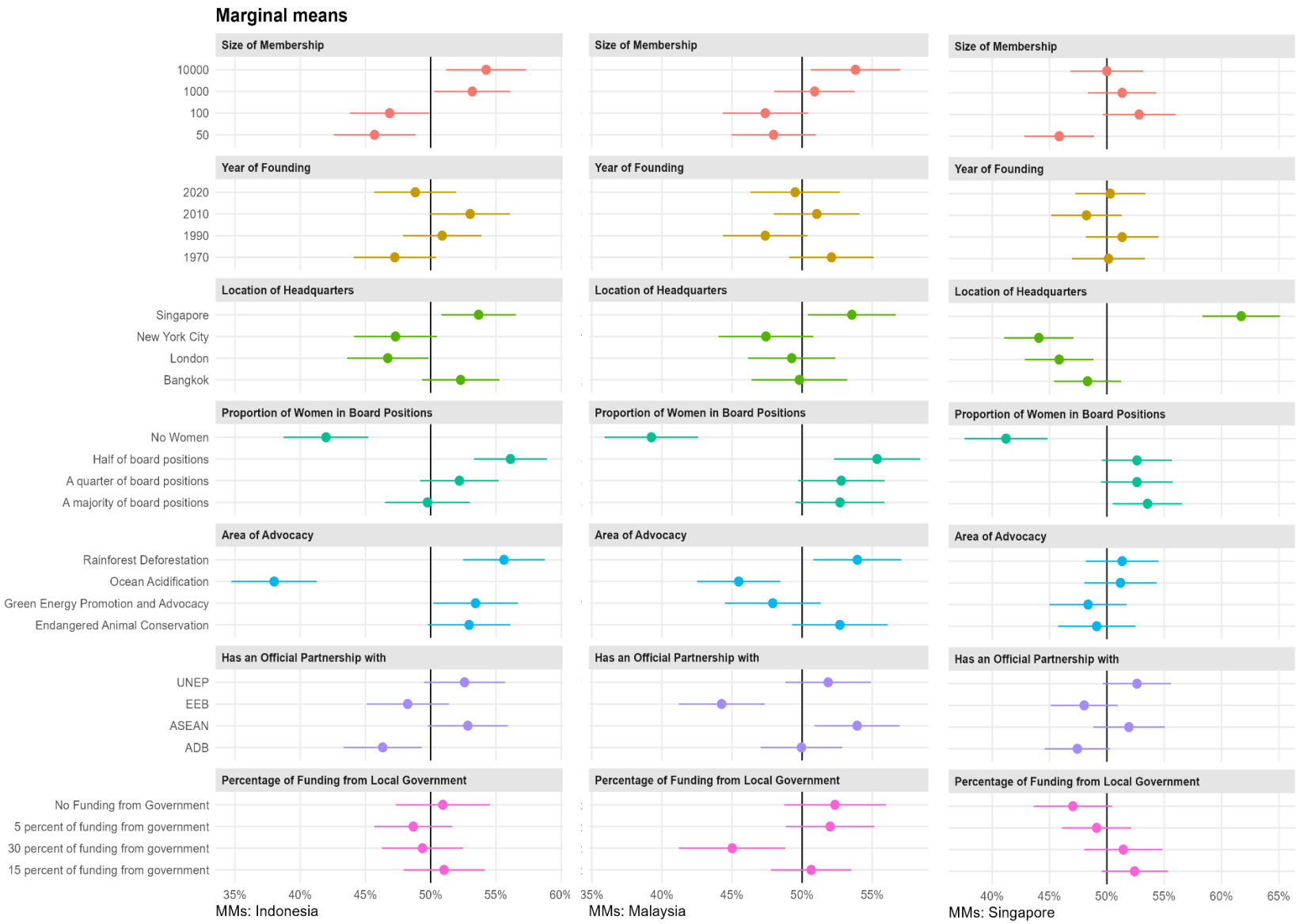
For the analysis, I estimate the marginal means (MMs) (Leeper et al., 2020; Mrchkovska et al., 2024). MMs are descriptive in their nature and help explain the general preferences of respondents. I also estimate the average marginal component effects (AMCEs) which are relative estimands. The AMCEs are available in the appendix (Table 2 and Figure 1). Unlike AMCEs, MMs are conditional averages, and they allow us to answer the question: "Consider the average donor, which attributes do they prefer when it comes to NGOs regardless of the other attributes available?". As noted by Springman et al. (2022) and Heiss (2023), MMs are compared at the 0.5 level (50 percent) which reflects the probability of selection in a forced choice. If the MM estimate for an attribute is above the 0.5 (50 percent) level then that increases the likelihood of selection, below 0.5 (50 percent) indicates the opposite effect.

Results

Figure 2 presents the main results for the pooled sample, while Figure 3 displays the results by country. I report the unadjusted marginal means (MMs) for ease of interpretation, where values above 50% indicate a favorable inclination toward a given NGO attribute, while values below 50% suggest a decrease in donor preference. The complete MM tables are available in the Appendix (Tables 3–6).

Figure 2. MMs for the Pooled Sample. Table of MMs is available in the Appendix (Table 3).

Figure 3: MMs converted to percentages for Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore



Localized Concerns

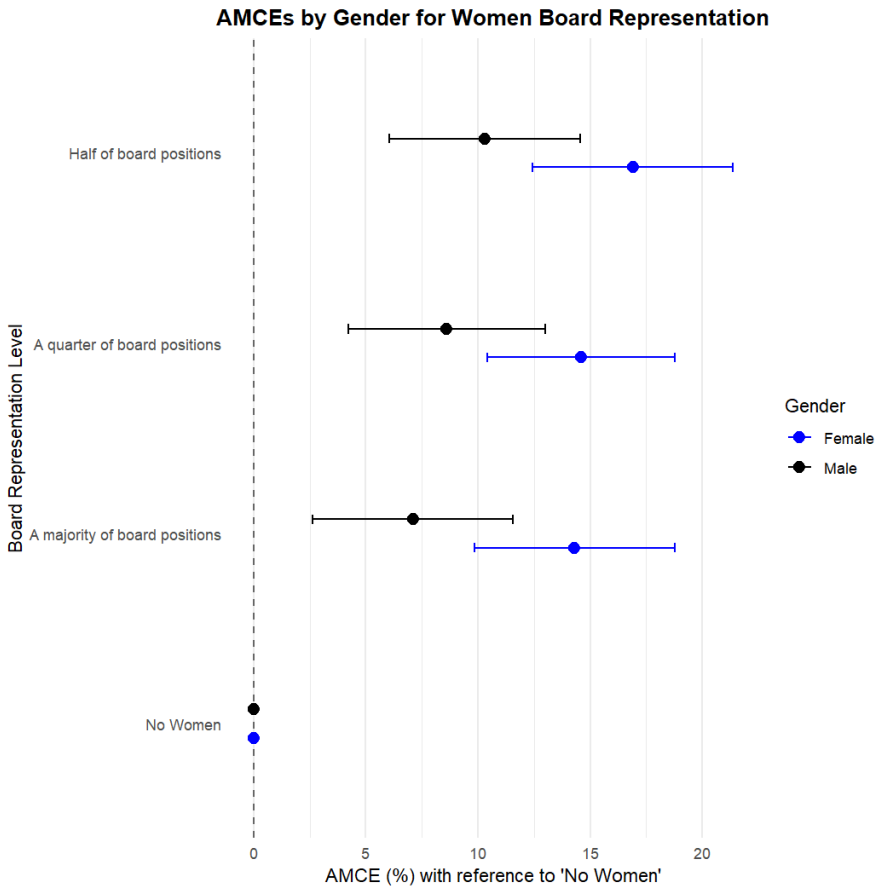
H1 states that respondents will favor NGOs that prioritize and align with local concerns. The results suggest a favoring of NGOs that are closely connected to the region and address issues of local significance, supporting the hypothesis that alignment with local and regional concerns plays a key role in donor favorability. Specifically, respondents are more likely to support NGOs headquartered in Singapore (MM = 50%) over those located in London (MM = 46%) or New York City (MM = 46%), supporting **H1a**. Singaporean respondents drive this preference, but it is also evident among respondents from Indonesia and Malaysia (Figure 3).

Regarding advocacy focus, NGOs working on rainforest deforestation receive the highest support (MM = 54%), while those focusing on ocean acidification receive the lowest (MM = 45%), supporting **H1b**. Advocacy efforts related to green energy promotion (MM = 52%) and endangered species conservation (MM = 52%) are also viewed favorably. Additionally, respondents favor NGOs partnered with ASEAN (MM = 53%) and UNEP (MM = 52%) over those associated with the EEB (MM = 47%), supporting **H1c**.

Gender Representation

Organizations with an equal share of women on their boards receive the highest support (MM = 55%), while those with no women receive the lowest (MM = 41%). NGOs with boards consisting of a quarter (MM = 52%) or a majority (MM = 53%) of women are also viewed favorably. Both male and female respondents exhibit this preference, though women are significantly more likely to support gender-balanced and female-majority boards, supporting **H2a**. Figure 4 displays the AMCE results for each gender. The differences in AMCE preferences are available in Table 9 (Appendix) and the results indicate that female respondents are more inclined toward equal shares (6.72% difference, $p < 0.05$) and majority shares (7.2% difference, $p < 0.05$) compared to male respondents.

Figure 4: AMCEs for Male and Female Respondents on issue of Women on Boards. AMCE tables available in Appendix (Table 7 and 8). Differences between group preferences table available in Appendix (Table 9).



Government Funding

Crowding out from the government did not affect donor preferences. Therefore, **H3** is not supported. Respondents did not discriminate against organizations based on their level of funding from the local government.

Additional Results

Beyond the primary hypotheses, respondents exhibited a preference for larger NGOs. Organizations with 10,000 members were favored 53% of the time. However, respondents did not display a clear preference regarding the year of founding.

Subsample Results

The subnational analysis of marginal means reveals notable variations in donor preferences across Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. In Indonesia, respondents show a favoring for NGOs addressing rainforest deforestation (MM = 54%), compared to ocean acidification, which has the lowest support (MM = 45%). This pattern suggests that rainforest conservation resonates more with Indonesian donors, supporting **H4**.

In Malaysia, respondents exhibit lower support for NGOs partnering with the EEB, with marginal means indicating a preference for partnerships with ASEAN at around 53%, compared to approximately 47% for the EEB. This supports **H5**, highlighting a regional favoring of partnerships with Asian institutions. Additionally, Malaysians show a reluctance to support NGOs receiving substantial government funding, as organizations with no government funding have marginal means near 51%, whereas those receiving 30% government funding have lower estimated support, around 49%. This suggests a favoring of financial independence among NGOs operating in Malaysia.

Beyond country-level differences, I explore whether specific demographic factors shape donor preferences. Most findings suggest broad similarities across demographic groups. For example, Muslim respondents express the same level of support for gender-balanced NGO boards as other religious groups (Appendix, Figure 3). Additionally, responses to a climate change belief question indicate that most respondents believe in human-caused climate change and support action to address it (Appendix, Figure 4).

Discussion

Local Identity and Relevance

The findings indicate that donor preferences in Southeast Asia are shaped by regional identity and local relevance. Respondent support for NGOs addressing rainforest deforestation signals a clear prioritization of environmental issues with immediate, visible impacts. In contrast,

less politically salient concerns, such as ocean acidification, tend to attract lower levels of comparative support. The subnational analysis, for instance, shows that Indonesian respondents favor deforestation initiatives over ocean acidification efforts. Local controversies surrounding coral reef protection have also contributed to this preference. In some coastal communities, restrictions associated with reef protection have led to tensions, with fishermen expressing discontent over measures that limit traditional practices (Utomo, 2017). This pattern aligns with prior research on norm incompatibility and skepticism toward externally imposed development agendas, such as in Pakistan (Jamal and Baldwin, 2019), and Kazakhstan (Luong and Weinthal, 1999).

Another significant finding concerns the influence of geographic location on donor preferences. NGOs headquartered in highly developed regional cities like Singapore were preferred over those based New York or London. This preference could highlight a broader shift in development paradigms, where donors increasingly prioritize organizations perceived as embedded within their geographical and cultural context. Furthermore, Singapore's appeal likely stems from its position as a regional leader and model for sustainable development, making it a symbol of professional credibility.

However, despite a clear preference for local institutions, the findings reveal that the UN remains a highly trusted global actor in Southeast Asia. Donors value partnerships with ASEAN but also favor NGOs that collaborate with the UN, reflecting an awareness of the strategic benefits these relationships provide. Partnerships with regional entities signal responsiveness to local needs, while collaborations with global actors like the UN could convey access to resources and international legitimacy. Notably, the UN's reputation remains stronger than that of organizations like the EEB, which faces less favorability among Malaysian respondents. This distrust likely stems from tensions over the ongoing trade war involving palm oil, where

European environmental directives are viewed as unjust trade barriers (Ananthalakshmi et al., 2019).

The importance of understanding the preferences of Global South donors cannot be overstated. These findings demonstrate how emerging local donor bases could redefine the donor market that was once dominated by international funding. As local philanthropic efforts gain momentum, it is important to explore how specific contexts shape giving behavior. The study's findings align with recent discussions from NGO leaders like Halima Begum (Oxfam GB) on "decolonizing" the international NGO sector which have emphasized the need shift from a model based on "solidarity, not charity" (Ahmed, 2025). As the literature on Global South giving expands, it should examine emergent markets to determine how context-specific donor preferences develop and influence the strategic trajectory of NGOs. This approach will provide valuable insights into how emerging funding sources may create diverse preferences across different regions.

Gender Representation

The findings suggest that gender considerations have become a central criterion in donor evaluations of NGOs in Southeast Asia. In recent years, local iterations of the #MeToo movement have prompted a public reckoning of institutional practices, increasing awareness of the need for gender equity in decision-making spaces (Parahita, 2019). As a result, donors now expect organizations to be mindful of their gender composition. Both male and female respondents show a strong preference for NGOs with a balanced representation of women on their boards, although female respondents express even greater support for gender-balanced leadership. This trend corresponds with evidence that gender-diverse leadership can improve business performance and create a culture of inclusion (Perrault, 2015; Huang et al., 2020; Kirsch, 2022). Traditionally, in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore there have been women in

visible positions of political power, yet strong gender norms persist across many sectors. The preferences expressed by respondents in this study signal a shift, as they increasingly favor gender-equal leadership boards, suggesting a growing recognition of the value of inclusive practices. In practice, these findings indicate that gender diversity is not merely a symbolic measure but a strategic asset that enhances an NGO's credibility and operational effectiveness, potentially boosting donation growth and promoting long-term organizational success.

Government Funding

Despite the null finding regarding government funding, the result is theoretically significant as it challenges the prevailing assumption that donors inherently distrust state-affiliated institutions (Edwards and Hulme, 1996). This suggests that, in evolving contexts of state-civil society relations, institutional credibility can be decoupled from relations with the government. However, Malaysian respondents deviate from this trend by showing clear aversion to NGOs that receive government funding. This negative perception likely stems from the lingering fallout of the 1MDB scandal, which has severely damaged the reputation of the Malaysian government (Kelleher, 2019). Years of political disruption and corruption appear to have heightened donor wariness toward government-linked funding in Malaysia, indicating that NGOs overly dependent on state support risk alienating a significant portion of the donor base.

Conclusion

This study advances our understanding of emerging donor markets by determining how donor preferences reflect broader shifts in local identity. By examining donor behavior in Southeast Asia, the study contributes to theories of donor preferences that have traditionally been grounded in Western contexts. The findings suggest that effective environmental organizations must navigate a donor market where local embeddedness, gender representation, and institutional

partnerships interact to shape credibility. This challenges conventional wisdom about the universality of donor preferences and suggests a more nuanced framework that recognizes the importance of regional identity and local cultural contexts in shaping donor behavior.

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. Conjoint experiments, while effective for measuring stated preferences, may not fully capture real-world donor behavior, as actual monetary contributions involve considerations beyond those tested in a survey setting. Future research should explore how these preferences manifest in different contexts, particularly in regions experiencing similar tensions between local identity and global integration. In terms of generalizability, the study is limited to three countries in Southeast Asia, and findings may not be generalizable across the entire region. Expanding the scope to include other countries in the region could provide a more comprehensive understanding of donor behavior in developing states. Additionally, reliance on hypothetical scenarios means that respondents may not face the same trade-offs they would in real donation decisions. Future work should consider how actual monetary incentives influence donor decisions compared to simulated scenarios.

Climate change calls for widespread civil society involvement, and Southeast Asia is well-positioned to lead efforts focused on local solutions. Despite this, research into the preferences of potential donors in the region has been scarce. This study fills a gap by examining how international partnerships influence donor preferences for ENGOs, offering valuable insights into this growing donor population. The findings underscore the need for further investigation into donor attitudes, as well as policy recommendations for NGOs operating in Southeast Asia. Research into donor preferences can further refine our understanding of what drives donor behavior and provide policy advice for organizations in the region. Given the

challenges faced by NGOs, diversifying funding sources and creating inclusive environmental programs are important for expanding civil society efforts.

Appendix for Chapter 2

Table 1: Summary of Individual Respondent Characteristics

Demographics	Response	N	%
Gender	Female	385	51.20%
	Male	366	48.67%
	Non-binary	1	0.13%
Age	18 to 24	120	30.45%
	25 to 34	229	26.46%
	35 to 44	199	19.15%
	45 to 54	144	15.96%
	55 to 65	60	7.98%
Marital Status	Married	433	57.58%
	Single	271	36.04%
	Separated/Divorced	23	3.06%
	Living-in as married	20	2.66%
	Widow/Widower	5	0.66%
Education	Primary school completion	17	2.27%
	Less than secondary school completion	30	4.00%
	Secondary school diploma	215	28.67%
	Undergraduate degree	364	48.53%
	Postgraduate degree	124	16.53%
Income	Less than national average	251	33.47%
	National average	295	39.33%
	More than national average	189	25.20%
	No income	15	2.00%
Employment Status	Full time employment	547	72.84%
	Part time employment	87	11.58%
	Student	37	4.93%
	Looking after the home	25	3.33%
	Retired	16	2.13%
	Unemployed, looking for work	31	4.13%
	Unemployed, not looking for work	8	1.07%
Employment Industry	Private Sector	364	48.40%
	Education	72	9.57%
	Freelance Work or Business Owner	65	8.64%
	Manufacturing and Trades	64	8.51%
	Public Service and Government	60	7.98%
	Retired or Homemaker	28	3.72%

	Student	28	3.72%
	Agriculture and Farming	19	2.53%
	Nonprofit and Social Work	9	1.20%
	Unemployed	43	5.72%
Religion	Islam	385	51.20%
	Christianity	141	18.75%
	Buddhism	126	16.76%
	Hinduism	23	3.06%
	Taoism	14	1.86%
	Confucianism	3	0.40%
	Ancestor Worship and folk religion	2	0.27%
	I do not follow any religion or belief system	58	7.71%
Religiousity level	Moderately religious	360	47.87%
	Lightly religious	200	26.60%
	Very religious	128	17.02%
	Not religious at all	64	8.51%
Climate Change Attitudes	Climate change is due to human activity and we must act now to prevent further damage.	615	81.78%
	Climate change is due to human activity and there is not much we can do about it.	88	11.70%
	Climate change is due to natural causes and there is not much we can do about it.	34	4.52%
	There is no evidence of climate change or global warming.	15	1.99%
NGO Attitudes			
NGO donation frequency	Frequently in the past year	98	13.03%
	A few times in the past year	338	44.95%
	Once in the past year	182	24.20%
	Never	134	17.82%
Percentage of those who said they donated to the following:	Human Rights Organizations	244	32.44%
	Religious Organizations	298	39.73%
	Humanitarian Organizations	389	51.72%
	Environmental Organizations	326	43.35%
	Medical Charity Organizations	285	37.89%
	Others	26	3.45%
	None	71	9.44%

Employment in an NGO or family employed in NGO	No	617	82.16%
	Yes	96	12.78%
	Not sure	38	5.06%
Country specific: Ethnicity and Voting Patterns			
Ethnic Identification: Malaysia	Malay	147	59.76%
	Chinese	69	28.05%
	Indian	21	8.54%
	Orang Asal (Indigenous persons)	4	1.63%
	Multiethnic	5	2.03%
Ethnic Identification: Singapore	Chinese	184	72.73%
	Malay	36	14.23%
	Indian	14	5.53%
	Multiethnic	2	0.80%
	Other	17	6.72%
Ethnic Identification: Indonesia	Javanese	122	48.22%
	Sundanese	25	9.88%
	Malay	21	8.30%
	Batak	18	7.11%
	Betawi	8	3.16%
	Chinese	7	2.77%
	Multiethnic	15	5.93%
	Other	37	14.62%
Voting in last election: Malaysia	Pakatan Harapan (PH)	105	43.21%
	Perikatan Nasional (PN)	65	26.75%
	Barisan Nasional (BN)	35	14.40%
	Did not vote in last general election	29	11.93%
	Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS)	5	2.06%
	Parti Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS)	4	1.65%
Voting in last election: Singapore	People's Action Party	129	50.99%
	Worker's Party	41	16.21%
	Singapore Democratic Party	29	11.46%
	Did not vote in last general election	27	10.67%
	Progress Singapore Party	12	4.74%
	National Solidarity Party	8	3.16%

	Decline to answer	7	2.77%
Voting in 2019 elections: Indonesia	Joko Widodo	151	59.68%
	Prabowo Subianto	79	31.23%
	Did not vote in election	23	9.09%
Voting in 2024 elections: Indonesia	Prabowo Subianto	151	59.68%
	Anies Baswedan	59	23.32%
	Ganjar Pranowo	26	10.28%
	Did not vote in election	17	6.72%

Table 2: AMCEs for Pooled Sample

Attribute	Level	estimate	std.error	z	p	lower	upper
Membership	50	0.000	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
	100	0.026	0.014	1.815	0.069	-0.002	0.054
	1000	0.054	0.015	3.701	0.000***	0.025	0.082
	10000	0.063	0.016	4.003	0.000***	0.032	0.093
Year of Founding	1970	0.000	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
	1990	0.002	0.015	0.145	0.885	-0.027	0.031
	2010	0.010	0.015	0.646	0.518	-0.020	0.040
	2020	-0.002	0.015	-0.113	0.910	-0.032	0.028
Location	Bangkok	0.000	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
	London	-0.029	0.015	-1.946	0.052	-0.057	0.000
	New York City	-0.039	0.015	-2.567	0.010**	-0.069	-0.009
	Singapore	0.061	0.015	4.067	0.000***	0.032	0.090
Women	A majority	0.000	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
	A quarter	0.007	0.015	0.458	0.647	-0.023	0.037
	Half	0.029	0.014	2.032	0.042*	0.001	0.056
	No Women	-0.111	0.016	-6.781	0.000***	-0.143	-0.079
Area of Advocacy	Animal Con.	0.000	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
	Green Energy	-0.017	0.016	-1.043	0.297	-0.049	0.015
	Ocean Acidification	-0.068	0.016	-4.343	0.000***	-0.099	-0.037
	Rainforest Deforest.	0.020	0.016	1.298	0.194	-0.010	0.051
Partner	ADB	0.000	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
	ASEAN	0.049	0.014	3.389	0.001***	0.021	0.077
	EEB	-0.012	0.014	-0.813	0.416	-0.040	0.017
	UNEP	0.045	0.014	3.153	0.002**	0.017	0.073
Govt funding	15 percent	0.000	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
	30 percent	-0.028	0.014	-1.952	0.051	-0.056	0.000
	5 percent	-0.015	0.015	-1.043	0.297	-0.044	0.013
	No Funding	-0.014	0.016	-0.867	0.386	-0.046	0.018

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

Table 3: Marginal Means for Pooled Sample

Attribute	Level	estimate	std.error	z	p	lower	upper
Size of membership	50	0.465	0.009	50.632	0.000	0.447	0.483
	100	0.490	0.009	52.159	0.000	0.472	0.509
	1000	0.518	0.009	59.060	0.000	0.501	0.535
	10000	0.527	0.010	55.323	0.000	0.508	0.546
Year of Founding	1970	0.498	0.009	52.709	0.000	0.480	0.517
	1990	0.499	0.009	54.297	0.000	0.481	0.517
	2010	0.508	0.009	54.729	0.000	0.490	0.526
	2020	0.495	0.009	52.462	0.000	0.477	0.514
Location	Bangkok	0.501	0.009	53.967	0.000	0.483	0.520
	London	0.473	0.009	51.394	0.000	0.455	0.491
	New York City	0.463	0.009	48.741	0.000	0.444	0.481
	Singapore	0.563	0.009	59.747	0.000	0.545	0.582
Women	A majority	0.520	0.009	55.313	0.000	0.501	0.538
	A quarter	0.525	0.009	57.600	0.000	0.507	0.543
	Half	0.547	0.009	61.378	0.000	0.529	0.564
	No Women	0.408	0.010	40.431	0.000	0.388	0.428
Area of Advocacy	Animal Con.	0.516	0.010	52.102	0.000	0.496	0.535
	Green Energy	0.499	0.010	49.988	0.000	0.480	0.519
	Ocean Acidification	0.449	0.010	46.875	0.000	0.430	0.467
	Rainforest Deforest.	0.536	0.009	56.721	0.000	0.518	0.555
Official Partnership	ADB	0.479	0.009	54.487	0.000	0.462	0.496
	ASEAN	0.529	0.009	57.930	0.000	0.511	0.547
	EEB	0.469	0.009	51.156	0.000	0.451	0.486
	UNEP	0.524	0.009	57.210	0.000	0.506	0.542
Govt Funding	15 percent	0.514	0.009	57.569	0.000	0.496	0.531
	30 percent	0.486	0.010	46.793	0.000	0.466	0.507
	5 percent	0.499	0.009	54.286	0.000	0.481	0.517
	No Funding	0.501	0.011	47.254	0.000	0.480	0.522

Figure 1: AMCEs for pooled sample (marginal effects converted to percent). Table of AMCEs is available in the Appendix (Table 2).

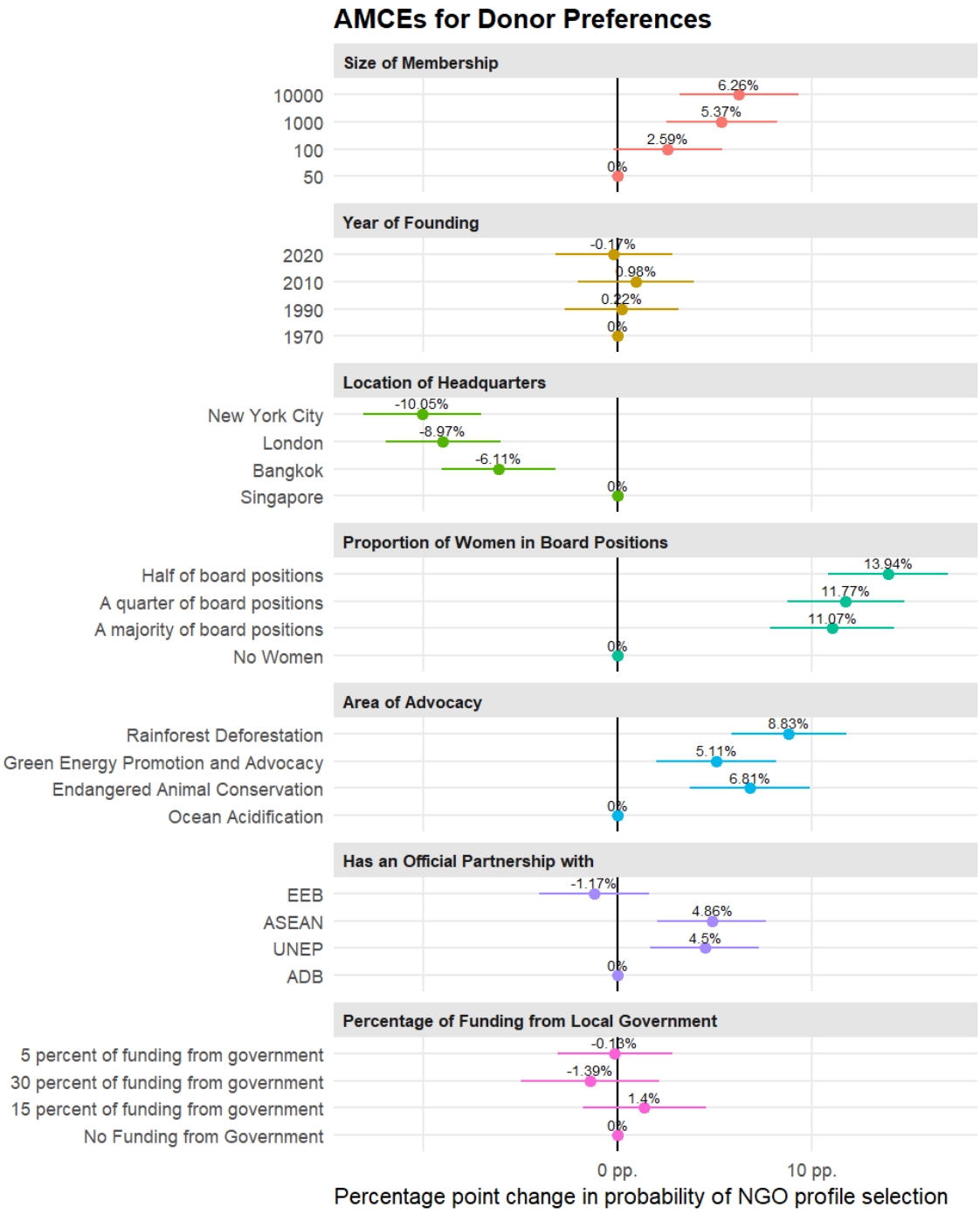


Figure 2. AMCEs for subgroup analysis: Countries listed as Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia.

Table 4. MMs for Indonesia Sample

Feature	Level	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p-value	95% CI
size_mem	50	0.457	0.017	27.358	<0.001	(0.424, 0.49)
size_mem	100	0.469	0.016	29.076	<0.001	(0.437, 0.5)
size_mem	1000	0.532	0.015	34.881	<0.001	(0.502, 0.562)
size_mem	10000	0.543	0.016	33.173	<0.001	(0.51, 0.575)
year_found	1970	0.472	0.017	28.514	<0.001	(0.44, 0.505)
year_found	1990	0.509	0.016	32.439	<0.001	(0.478, 0.54)
year_found	2010	0.530	0.016	32.395	<0.001	(0.498, 0.562)
year_found	2020	0.488	0.017	29.279	<0.001	(0.456, 0.521)
location	Bangkok	0.523	0.015	33.907	<0.001	(0.493, 0.553)
location	London	0.467	0.016	28.842	<0.001	(0.435, 0.499)
location	New York City	0.473	0.016	29.168	<0.001	(0.441, 0.505)
location	Singapore	0.537	0.015	36.068	<0.001	(0.508, 0.566)
women	A majority	0.498	0.017	29.420	<0.001	(0.464, 0.531)
women	A quarter	0.522	0.015	34.123	<0.001	(0.492, 0.552)
women	Half	0.561	0.014	38.798	<0.001	(0.533, 0.589)
women	No Women	0.420	0.017	24.952	<0.001	(0.387, 0.453)
advocacy	Animal Conservation	0.529	0.016	32.238	<0.001	(0.497, 0.562)
advocacy	Green Energy	0.534	0.017	31.909	<0.001	(0.502, 0.567)
advocacy	Ocean Acidification	0.380	0.017	22.386	<0.001	(0.347, 0.413)
advocacy	Rainforest Deforestation	0.556	0.016	34.141	<0.001	(0.524, 0.588)
partner	ADB	0.463	0.016	29.641	<0.001	(0.433, 0.494)

Feature	Level	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p-value	95% CI
partner	ASEAN	0.528	0.016	33.571	<0.001	(0.498, 0.559)
partner	EEB	0.482	0.016	29.580	<0.001	(0.45, 0.514)
partner	UNEP	0.526	0.016	32.280	<0.001	(0.494, 0.558)
govt	15 percent	0.510	0.016	31.158	<0.001	(0.478, 0.542)
govt	30 percent	0.494	0.016	30.464	<0.001	(0.462, 0.525)
govt	5 percent	0.487	0.016	31.271	<0.001	(0.456, 0.517)
govt	No Funding	0.509	0.019	27.122	<0.001	(0.472, 0.546)

Table 5. MMs for Malaysia Sample

Feature	Level	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p-value	95% CI
size_mem	50	0.480	0.016	30.932	<0.001	(0.449, 0.51)
size_mem	100	0.474	0.016	30.023	<0.001	(0.443, 0.505)
size_mem	1000	0.509	0.015	34.418	<0.001	(0.48, 0.538)
size_mem	10000	0.538	0.017	32.193	<0.001	(0.505, 0.571)
year_found	1970	0.521	0.016	33.353	<0.001	(0.49, 0.552)
year_found	1990	0.474	0.016	30.392	<0.001	(0.443, 0.504)
year_found	2010	0.510	0.016	31.941	<0.001	(0.479, 0.542)
year_found	2020	0.495	0.016	30.137	<0.001	(0.463, 0.527)
location	Bangkok	0.498	0.018	28.059	<0.001	(0.463, 0.533)
location	London	0.493	0.016	30.669	<0.001	(0.461, 0.524)
location	New York City	0.474	0.018	27.036	<0.001	(0.44, 0.509)
location	Singapore	0.535	0.016	33.253	<0.001	(0.504, 0.567)
women	A majority	0.527	0.016	32.559	<0.001	(0.495, 0.559)
women	A quarter	0.528	0.016	32.933	<0.001	(0.496, 0.559)
women	Half	0.553	0.016	34.647	<0.001	(0.522, 0.585)
women	No Women	0.392	0.017	23.162	<0.001	(0.359, 0.426)
advocacy	Animal Conservation	0.527	0.018	30.020	<0.001	(0.492, 0.561)

Feature	Level	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p-value	95% CI
advocacy	Green Energy	0.479	0.018	27.112	<0.001	(0.444, 0.514)
advocacy	Ocean Acidification	0.455	0.015	29.622	<0.001	(0.425, 0.485)
advocacy	Rainforest Deforestation	0.539	0.016	32.927	<0.001	(0.507, 0.571)
partner	ADB	0.500	0.015	32.934	<0.001	(0.47, 0.529)
partner	ASEAN	0.539	0.016	34.452	<0.001	(0.509, 0.57)
partner	EEB	0.443	0.016	27.736	<0.001	(0.411, 0.474)
partner	UNEP	0.519	0.016	32.715	<0.001	(0.487, 0.55)
govt	15 percent	0.506	0.015	34.037	<0.001	(0.477, 0.536)
govt	30 percent	0.450	0.019	23.104	<0.001	(0.412, 0.488)
govt	5 percent	0.520	0.016	31.585	<0.001	(0.488, 0.552)
govt	No Funding	0.523	0.019	28.250	<0.001	(0.487, 0.56)

Table 6. MMs for Singapore Sample

Feature	Level	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p-value	95% CI
size_mem	50	0.458	0.015	29.685	<0.001	(0.428, 0.489)
size_mem	100	0.528	0.017	31.575	<0.001	(0.495, 0.561)
size_mem	1000	0.513	0.016	33.000	<0.001	(0.483, 0.544)
size_mem	10000	0.500	0.016	30.592	<0.001	(0.468, 0.532)
year_found	1970	0.501	0.017	29.854	<0.001	(0.469, 0.534)
year_found	1990	0.513	0.016	31.417	<0.001	(0.481, 0.545)
year_found	2010	0.482	0.016	30.593	<0.001	(0.451, 0.513)
year_found	2020	0.503	0.016	31.446	<0.001	(0.472, 0.534)
location	Bangkok	0.483	0.015	32.205	<0.001	(0.454, 0.513)
location	London	0.458	0.016	29.561	<0.001	(0.428, 0.489)
location	New York City	0.441	0.015	28.478	<0.001	(0.41, 0.471)
location	Singapore	0.617	0.017	35.766	<0.001	(0.583, 0.651)
women	A majority of board positions	0.535	0.016	34.260	<0.001	(0.505, 0.566)
women	A quarter of board positions	0.526	0.016	32.638	<0.001	(0.495, 0.558)
women	Half of board positions	0.526	0.016	33.320	<0.001	(0.495, 0.557)
women	No Women	0.412	0.019	22.050	<0.001	(0.375, 0.449)
advocacy	Endangered Animal Conservation	0.491	0.017	28.202	<0.001	(0.457, 0.525)
advocacy	Green Energy Promotion	0.484	0.017	27.871	<0.001	(0.45, 0.518)

Feature	Level	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p-value	95% CI
	and Advocacy					
advocacy	Ocean Acidification	0.512	0.016	31.307	<0.001	(0.48, 0.544)
advocacy	Rainforest Deforestation	0.513	0.016	31.301	<0.001	(0.481, 0.545)
partner	ADB	0.474	0.015	32.021	<0.001	(0.445, 0.503)
partner	ASEAN	0.519	0.016	32.266	<0.001	(0.488, 0.551)
partner	EEB	0.480	0.015	31.479	<0.001	(0.45, 0.51)
partner	UNEP	0.526	0.015	34.058	<0.001	(0.496, 0.556)
govt	15 percent of funding from government	0.524	0.015	34.780	<0.001	(0.495, 0.554)
govt	30 percent of funding from government	0.514	0.018	28.573	<0.001	(0.479, 0.55)
govt	5 percent of funding from government	0.491	0.016	31.214	<0.001	(0.46, 0.522)
govt	No Funding from Government	0.470	0.018	26.542	<0.001	(0.436, 0.505)

Table 7. AMCEs for Male Respondents subsample

feature	level	estimate	std.error	z	p	lower	upper
size_mem	50	0.0000					
	100	0.0357	0.0206	1.7289	0.0838	-0.0048	0.0761
	1000	0.0452	0.0211	2.1467	0.0318	0.0039	0.0865
	10000	0.0496	0.0223	2.2222	0.0263	0.0059	0.0934
year_found	1970	0.0000					
	1990	0.0340	0.0221	1.5367	0.1244	-0.0094	0.0774
	2010	0.0124	0.0218	0.5665	0.5711	-0.0304	0.0552
	2020	0.0240	0.0216	1.1150	0.2648	-0.0182	0.0663
location	Singapore	0.0000					
	Bangkok	-0.0468	0.0209	-2.2391	0.0251	-0.0878	-0.0058
	London	-0.0740	0.0223	-3.3226	0.0009	-0.1176	-0.0303
	New York City	-0.0886	0.0220	-4.0326	0.0001	-0.1317	-0.0455
women	No Women	0.0000					
	A majority	0.0712	0.0234	3.0421	0.0023	0.0253	0.1171
	A quarter	0.0855	0.0224	3.8230	0.0001	0.0417	0.1294
	Half	0.1027	0.0217	4.7381	0.0000	0.0602	0.1451
advocacy	Ocean Acidification	0.0000					
	Animal Conservation	0.0856	0.0224	3.8162	0.0001	0.0417	0.1296
	Green Energy	0.0640	0.0232	2.7608	0.0058	0.0186	0.1094
	Rainforest Deforestation	0.0986	0.0221	4.4631	0.0000	0.0553	0.1419
partner	ADB	0.0000					
	ASEAN	0.0339	0.0210	1.6177	0.1057	-0.0072	0.0751
	EEB	-0.0287	0.0207	-1.3848	0.1661	-0.0694	0.0119
	UNEP	0.0191	0.0211	0.9041	0.3659	-0.0223	0.0605
govt	No Funding	0.0000					
	15 percent	0.0345	0.0235	1.4679	0.1421	-0.0116	0.0805
	30 percent	0.0172	0.0271	0.6362	0.5246	-0.0358	0.0703
	5 percent	0.0251	0.0222	1.1286	0.2591	-0.0185	0.0687

Table 8. AMCEs for female respondents subsample

feature	level	estimate	std.error	z	p	lower	upper
size_mem	50	0.0000					
	100	0.0151	0.0200	0.7509	0.4527	-0.0242	0.0543
	1000	0.0592	0.0204	2.8999	0.0037	0.0192	0.0992
	10000	0.0729	0.0221	3.2935	0.0010	0.0295	0.1163
year_found	1970	0.0000					
	1990	-0.0281	0.0199	-1.4105	0.1584	-0.0672	0.0110
	2010	0.0070	0.0212	0.3311	0.7406	-0.0346	0.0486
	2020	-0.0239	0.0217	-1.0989	0.2718	-0.0665	0.0187
location	Singapore	0.0000					
	Bangkok	-0.0756	0.0218	-3.4690	0.0005	-0.1184	-0.0329
	London	-0.1048	0.0209	-5.0222	0.0000	-0.1457	-0.0639
	New York City	-0.1086	0.0221	-4.9123	0.0000	-0.1519	-0.0653
women	No Women	0.0000					
	A majority	0.1432	0.0228	6.2726	0.0000	0.0984	0.1879
	A quarter	0.1459	0.0213	6.8581	0.0000	0.1042	0.1876
	Half	0.1699	0.0228	7.4576	0.0000	0.1252	0.2145
advocacy	Ocean Acidification	0.0000					
	Animal Conservation	0.0524	0.0220	2.3855	0.0171	0.0093	0.0954
	Green Energy	0.0394	0.0215	1.8276	0.0676	-0.0029	0.0816
	Rainforest Deforestation	0.0827	0.0213	3.8866	0.0001	0.0410	0.1245
partner	ADB	0.0000					
	ASEAN	0.0608	0.0197	3.0870	0.0020	0.0222	0.0993
	EEB	-0.0013	0.0203	-0.0648	0.9483	-0.0410	0.0384
	UNEP	0.0662	0.0194	3.4225	0.0006	0.0283	0.1042
govt	No Funding	0.0000					
	15 percent	-0.0012	0.0225	-0.0520	0.9585	-0.0453	0.0430
	30 percent	-0.0414	0.0248	-1.6668	0.0956	-0.0900	0.0073
	5 percent	-0.0278	0.0206	-1.3497	0.1771	-0.0681	0.0126

Table 9. Differences between AMCE estimates and significance test

Level	Difference	SE_Difference	Z_Score	P_Value
A majority of board positions	0.0720	0.0327	2.2038	0.0275
A quarter of board positions	0.0604	0.0309	1.954	0.0507
Half of board positions	0.0672	0.0315	2.135	0.0328

Figure 3. MMs for preferences of women on boards by religious group. Non-believers have a slightly stronger preference for women as a majority of the board when compared to other groups, however across groups there is a strong penalty for NGOs that do not have women on their boards. The majority religious group, Muslims, have similar preferences when compared to other religious groups and they favored equality in NGO profiles (half of board positions).

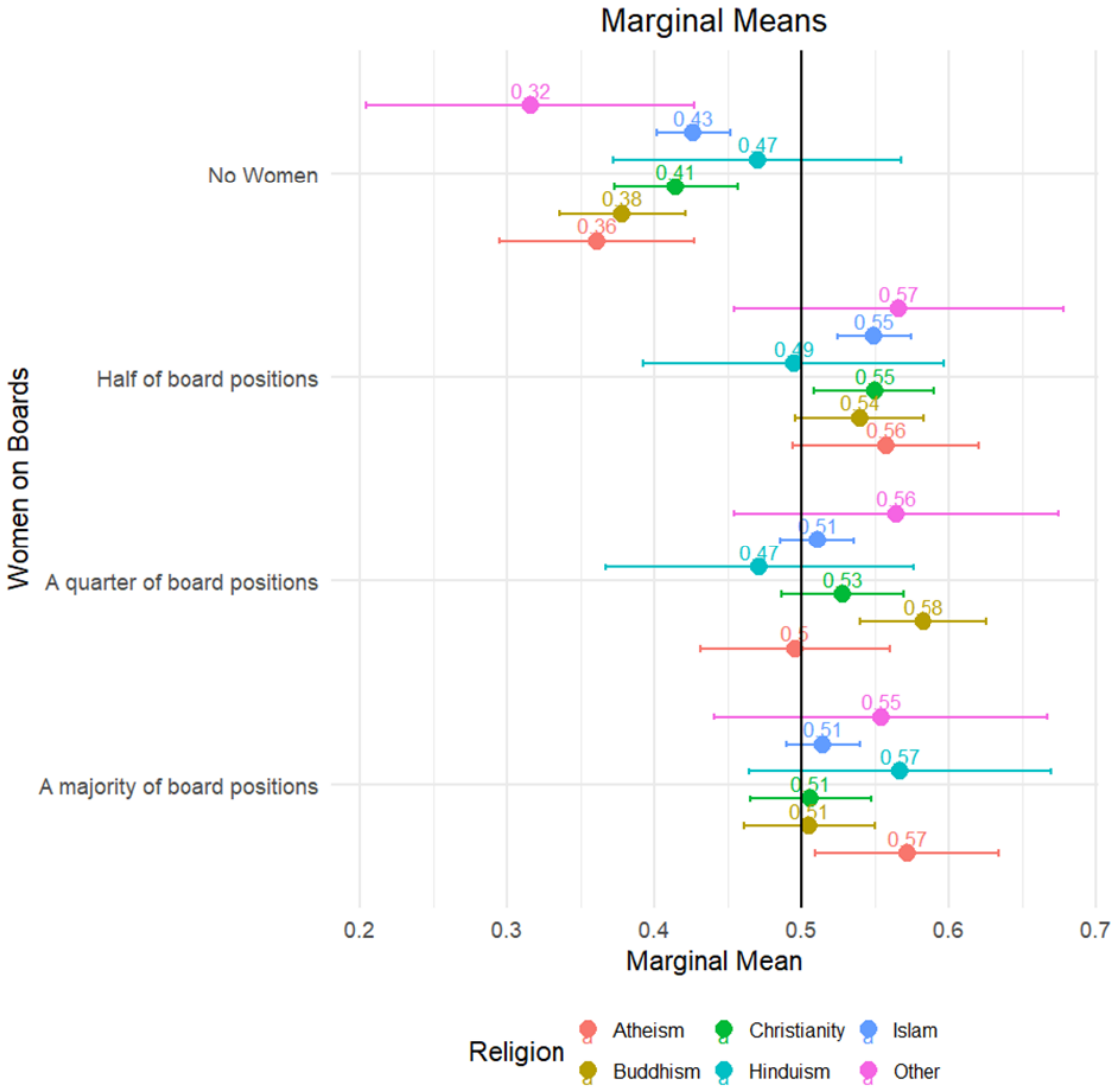
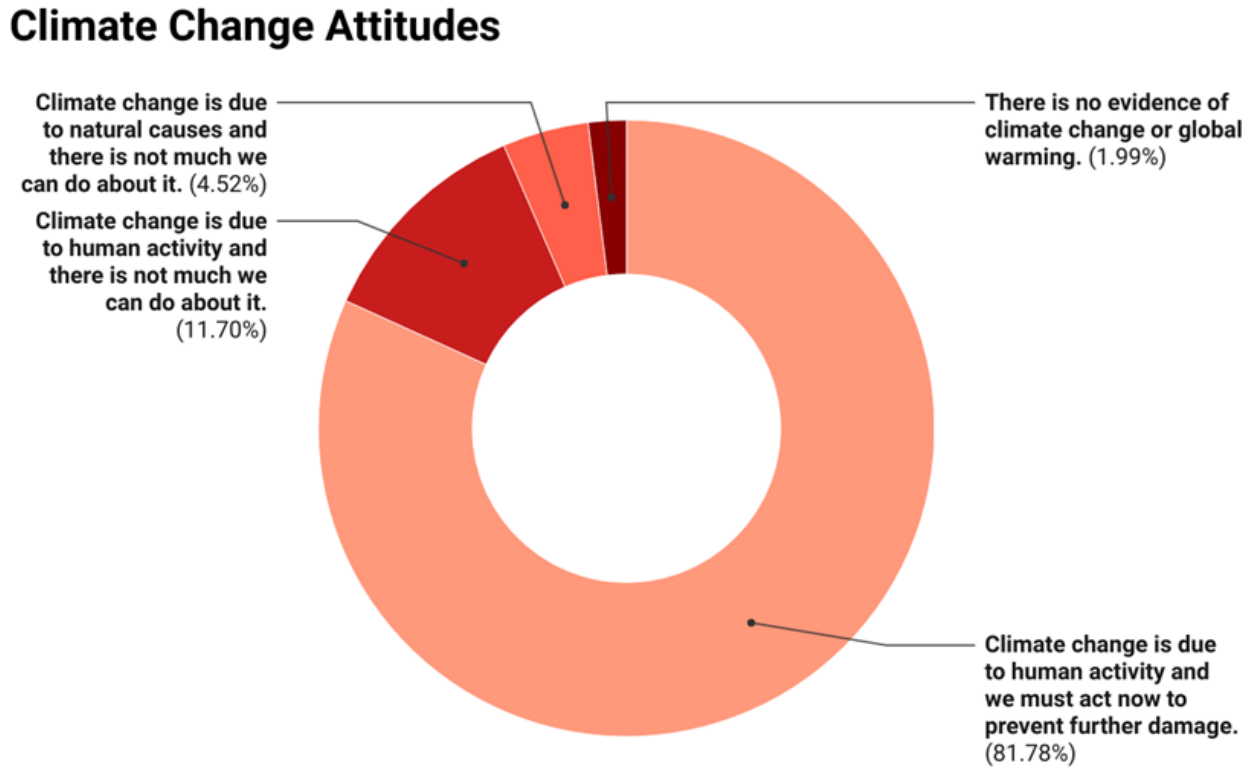


Figure 4. Percentage converted totals for each category of question on climate change beliefs. The question was worded as follows, adapting from prior work from Mrchkovska et al., (2024): "Which of these statements is closest to your personal position on the issue of climate change?". Respondents then choose from a click down list of four statements. Findings from this question are similar to other recent climate change related research in the region, indicating that preferences amongst the populations are converging on climate change as human caused and the issue being worthy of policy intervention (see Azhari et al., 2025).



Attentive sample analysis

Table 10. Marginal Means for Attentive Sample (n = 646)

Attribute	value	estimate	std.error	statistic	p.value	conf.low	conf.high
size_mem	50	0.457529	0.009817	46.60391	0.00E+00	0.438287	0.476771
	100	0.492832	0.009997	49.29831	0.00E+00	0.473239	0.512426
	1000	0.520404	0.009401	55.3587	0.00E+00	0.501979	0.538829
	10000	0.529321	0.01025	51.64222	0.00E+00	0.509232	0.54941
year_found	1970	0.493582	0.010108	48.82929	0.00E+00	0.47377	0.513394
	1990	0.506533	0.009909	51.11645	0.00E+00	0.487111	0.525956
	2010	0.505031	0.009864	51.20073	0.00E+00	0.485698	0.524364
	2020	0.494765	0.010091	49.03243	0.00E+00	0.474988	0.514543
location	Bangkok	0.497099	0.00998	49.80849	0.00E+00	0.477538	0.51666
	London	0.473197	0.009794	48.31655	0.00E+00	0.454002	0.492392
	New York City	0.463938	0.010368	44.74777	0.00E+00	0.443617	0.484258
	Singapore	0.565368	0.01027	55.05214	0.00E+00	0.54524	0.585497
women	A majority	0.515292	0.010206	50.48951	0.00E+00	0.495289	0.535296
	A quarter	0.525542	0.009702	54.1687	0.00E+00	0.506526	0.544557
	Half	0.555124	0.00946	58.68257	0.00E+00	0.536583	0.573665
	No Women	0.404551	0.010956	36.92391	0.00E+00	0.383077	0.426025
advocacy	Animal Conservation	0.514341	0.010667	48.21935	0.00E+00	0.493435	0.535247
	Green Energy	0.506358	0.010699	47.32795	0.00E+00	0.485389	0.527328
	Ocean Acidification	0.441987	0.010252	43.11263	0.00E+00	0.421893	0.46208
	Rainforest Deforestation	0.537152	0.010055	53.42126	0.00E+00	0.517444	0.556859
partner	ADB	0.471318	0.009349	50.41422	0.00E+00	0.452994	0.489641
	ASEAN	0.532227	0.009566	55.63773	0.00E+00	0.513478	0.550976
	EEB	0.473439	0.009611	49.26044	0.00E+00	0.454602	0.492276
	UNEP	0.522815	0.009841	53.12887	0.00E+00	0.503528	0.542102
govt	15 percent	0.51304	0.009542	53.76423	0.00E+00	0.494337	0.531743
	30 percent	0.489977	0.01118	43.82573	0.00E+00	0.468064	0.51189
	5 percent	0.498255	0.009726	51.22732	0.00E+00	0.479192	0.517318
	No Funding	0.498844	0.011642	42.84837	0.00E+00	0.476026	0.521662

Figure 5. Marginal Means for Attentive Sample (n = 646)

Full Survey instrument (English version for Indonesian Respondents). This survey was hosted on the Conjointly platform.

- Q1

Welcome to this survey!

The survey is anonymous. The information you provide will not be stored or used in any way that could reveal your personal identity. There are no known risks posed by participating in this survey. The survey has been reviewed by a human subject review (STUDY00019134). Your participation is voluntary, and you may discontinue participating in the survey at any time.

This survey will produce meaningful results only if you read the questions carefully and express your true opinion.

If you have any questions about this study, please email (the author), (author's email)

By completing this survey, you are consenting to participate in this study. We are grateful for your participation.

- Q2

The survey is open to Indonesian residents who are at least 18 years of age. If you want to participate in this survey, please select "I have read this statement and agree to participate in this survey" at the bottom of this page.

- I have read this statement and agree to participate in this survey.

- Q3

Please read the following statement carefully.

- Q4

The United Nations' International Panel on Climate Change, a body composed of leading scientists, tells us that 2023 was one of the hottest years on record. Scientists have determined that human activities have fueled climate change which will bring about more intense heat waves, droughts, floods and sea level rise. In Southeast Asia this could mean longer haze seasons and potential climate refugees from sinking coastal regions and islands.

These ongoing concerns with climate change have prompted non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to dedicate themselves to protecting our communities and flora and fauna from the effects of climate change. NGOs, are growing in number across Southeast Asia. They lobby governments, international organizations and firms to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and also to invest in protecting communities, cities and villages from drought, sea level rise, and forest fires. But NGOs, depend, in part on public donations to support their activities.

In the next pages, we will display two hypothetical environmental NGOs that we ask you to compare. In each comparison, you will see characteristics of these organizations. In total, we will show you five tables with different organizational comparisons.

For each pair, compare the two options, and tell us which organization you would be willing to donate 100,000 Rp to.

- Q5

We want to make sure that you are paying attention to this survey. Please select 'Strongly Agree' to show you have read the question.

o Strongly Disagree

o Disagree

o Agree

o Strongly Agree

- Q6

Now, we ask you to compare two environmental NGOs. For each pair, compare the two options, and tell us which organization you would be willing to donate 100,000 Rp to. You will complete this task 5 times in total. Please read the descriptions of the two groups carefully.

- Q7

In this scenario you have been given 100,000 Rp to donate to a non-governmental organization (NGO). Each of these NGOs is different and we ask you to choose one out of each pair to donate your 100,000 Rp to.

Which of the following non-governmental organizations would you donate to?

< CONJOINT SURVEY IMBEDDED HERE> SEE APPENDIX TABLE 2 FOR ALL ATTRIBUTES. FIGURE 1 IN MAIN PAPER FOR IMAGE OF HOW CONJOINT LOOKED TO PARTICIPANTS.

- Q8 (This question appeared randomly during the 8 pairs to ensure concentration during the conjoint portion of the survey).

We want to make sure that you are paying attention to this survey. Please select 'Agree' to show you have read the question.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

- Q9

Thank you for indicating your donation choices. How important were the following factors in shaping your responses? 1 means not at all important and 5 means very important. You can use the slider to indicate your choice or the box on the side.

o The organization's year of founding

o The size of the organization's membership

o The location of headquarters

o Their area of advocacy

o The proportion of women in leadership positions

o The organization's official partnership

o The percentage of funding from local government

- Q10

In the last year, how often have you donated to a non-governmental organization?

o Frequently in the past year

o A few times in the past year

o Once in the past year

o Never

- Q11

If you did donate in the past year, what kind of organizations did you donate to? Select all that apply.

o Human rights organization

o Religious organization

o Humanitarian aid organization

o Environmental organization

o Medical charity organization

- Other: Other
- None of above: ❌ None of the above

- Q12

Do you or any of your family members work for an NGO?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Q13

Which of these statements is closest to your personal position on the issue of climate change?

- Climate change is due to human activity and we must act now to prevent further damage.
- Climate change is due to human activity and there is not much we can do about it.
- Climate change is due to natural causes and there is not much we can do about it.
- There is no evidence of climate change or global warming.

- Q14

How old are you? (numeric entry box)

- Q15

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to answer

- Q16

What is your ethnicity? (You can choose more than one)

- Javanese
- Sundanese

- Malay
- Batak
- Madurese
- Betawi
- Chinese
- Other: Other

- Q17

What is the highest level of education that you have achieved?

- Postgraduate degree
- Undergraduate degree
- Secondary school diploma
- Less than secondary school completion
- Primary school completion
- No formal education

- Q18

What is your marital status?

- Single
- Living-in as married
- Married
- Separated/Divorced
- Widow/Widower

- Q19

What is your current employment status?

- Full time employment
- Part time employment
- Student
- Retired

- o Looking after the home
- o Unemployed, looking for work
- o Unemployed, not looking for work

- Q20

Which industry are you currently employed in?

- o Private Sector
- o Education
- o Public Service and Government
- o Agriculture and Farming
- o Manufacturing and Trades
- o Nonprofit and Social Work
- o Freelance Work or Business Owner
- o Retired or Homemaker
- o Student
- o Unemployed

- Q21

What is your household yearly income before tax?

- o Less than Rp 120,000,000/year
- o Between Rp 120,000,000/year to Rp 150,000,000/year
- o Above Rp 150,000,000/year
- o No income

- Q22

What is your current religious affiliation or belief system?

- o Islam
- o Christianity
- o Hinduism
- o Buddhism

- o Sikhism
- o Taoism
- o Confucianism
- o Ancestor Worship and folk religion
- o I do not follow any religion or belief system
- o Other: Other (please specify)

- Q23

Would you describe yourself as very religious, moderately religious, lightly religious, not religious at all?

- o Very religious
- o Moderately religious
- o Lightly religious
- o Not religious at all

- Q24

In the 2019 general election, which Presidential candidate did you vote for?

- o Joko Widodo
- o Prabowo Subianto
- o Did not vote

Chapter 3

Service vs Advocacy: Environmental NGOs and their Depictions in Elite Media

Abstract:

This paper examines how elite news media portray environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs) in Southeast Asia, with a particular focus on the contrast between service-oriented and advocacy-focused organizations. Specifically, it investigates how the media's depiction of Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) varies, given their differing organizational activities. Using machine learning analysis of a novel corpus of newspaper articles from six major English-language newspapers in the region, this study explores how these organizations are framed in relation to their service and advocacy roles. Through automated topic modelling, I find that articles not only differentiate between service-provision and advocacy dimensions of the ENGO sector but also have different sentiments over these activities. They associate service-oriented ENGOs like WWF with more service-related campaigns, and advocacy-oriented groups like Greenpeace with direct-action activism. Sentiment analysis shows that Greenpeace is often associated with more negative sentiments. In contrast, WWF is linked to more positive depictions. Furthermore, articles on the WWF have significantly higher levels of trust associated words compared to Greenpeace and these trust associations have been increasing with time. These findings highlight how elite news media differentially depict different types of ENGOs and tend to favor service delivery over advocacy.

Keywords: NGOs, Environment, Media, Greenpeace, WWF, Sentiment Analysis

Introduction

During the post-war associational revolution, civil society organizations grew globally, with some becoming well-known, global NGOs. These organizations, both service providers and advocates, are often seen as principled actors (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). However, state backlashes and scandals have spurred calls for NGO accountability (Bloodgood et al., 2014; Clarke, 2021). The media in particular plays an important role in shaping public perceptions, with frames that can highlight NGOs as moral entities or, conversely, as "foreign agents" in non-Western environments (Bano, 2012; Cooley, 2015; Heiss, 2019).

Furthermore, service and advocacy strategies are often at odds with one another. Service-oriented NGOs focus on supplying merit goods and welfare services, while advocacy groups push for systemic change and policy reform. Service organizations may be cautious about advocacy efforts that could jeopardize relationships with governments or donors, while advocacy groups see challenging existing power structures as important in achieving lasting impact. This difference can lead to friction, especially in politically sensitive environments where advocacy risks provoking state crackdown, potentially affecting funding from foreign sources, and operational freedom. Therefore, determining how NGOs are portrayed in the media is important in understanding how framing can affect perceptions. If NGOs are understood as troublemakers who stand against development policies, then they could be viewed as elite, even neocolonial, in their efforts (Petras, 1999). However, if NGOs are framed as locally connected, engaged with communities, and providing essential services, then they could have a positive reception among the public and viewed as trustworthy in the community.

Environmental advocacy and conservation services have long been prominent areas of focus for civil society organizations. Established groups such as Greenpeace and the Worldwide Wildlife Fund (WWF) have become emblematic of global environmental efforts. In Asia, these and other environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs) and environmental non-profits operate extensively. They provide important conservation services and advocate for climate-related issues, often filling critical roles in environmental protection. However, NGOization, driven by foreign funding, has led to accusations of foreign influence, prompting regulatory crackdowns (Dupuy et al., 2016). ENGOs in politically restrictive environments face strategic dilemmas. They must navigate difficult trade-offs between service-oriented missions and advocacy campaigns. In regions governed by authoritarian or competitive authoritarian regimes, ENGOs must work to maintain credibility.

Despite the proliferation of NGOs in the region, there are few studies on media coverage of civil society. Furthermore, perceptions of environmental organizations have not been discussed widely in the literature even though climate change will dramatically affect Asian regions, causing mass climate refugee inflows and destruction of agricultural assets. Given the increasing prevalence of environmental damage and biodiversity loss, it is important to know how these organizations are portrayed and how media outlets depict these groups. This paper determines how ENGOs are depicted by media across the region, the sentiments that are associated with ENGOs, and how these sentiments depend on the types of activities that ENGOs are engaged in.

This chapter draws on newspaper articles collected from six major English-language newspapers across Southeast Asia which cover Greenpeace and the WWF, two prominent ENGOs with substantial regional operations. To investigate how these articles depicted service-

oriented versus advocacy-focused ENGOs, I employ sentiment analysis via large language model (LLM) approaches. I use the Bidirectional encoder representations from transformers approach (BERT) to initially label topics and two sentiment labelers, VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary and sEntiment Reasoner) and the NRC Emotion Lexicon to examine the emotional tones of articles. This approach allows for categorizing words associated with specific emotions, and the analysis reveals a significant difference in how these groups are portrayed. Articles on Greenpeace tended to evoke more negative sentiments compared to WWF, highlighting the nuanced media sentiment towards each type of ENGO. Furthermore, the emotion of "trust" was more associated with WWF related articles compared to Greenpeace. Using time series analysis, I also find that articles on WWF have been significantly growing in their association with the emotion of "trust", while Greenpeace has not demonstrated a change in depiction across the years in the corpus.

I start by discussing the existing literature on media perceptions of civil society, specifically environmental civil society, and the tensions between service and advocacy-based groups. I conduct sentiment analysis on a split corpora of newspaper articles to determine whether perceptions are positive or negative and specifically whether groups are depicted as more or less associated with the emotion of "trust". Time series analysis is used to determine whether over time depictions have changed since emotional associations may build over the years. I conclude the chapter by noting the future work that can be done on environmental non-profits and ENGOs using sentiment analysis, and the contributions of the project to our understanding of Southeast Asian civil society.

Service vs. Advocacy Organizations

After WWII, civil society organizations proliferated globally in what Salamon (1994) called the "associational revolution". Many became household names, serving dual roles as service providers and policy advocates. This prominence led to their reputation as principled, moral actors (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Yet states have increasingly pushed back against these organizations. Recent years have seen funding restrictions and heightened scrutiny (Bloodgood et al., 2014; Chaudhry et al., 2016; Adolph and Prakash, 2022). This tension between states and civil society organizations stems in part from the distinct approaches these organizations employ to pursue social change.

Service provision and advocacy represent two fundamental but competing strategies through which NGOs pursue social change (Jenkins, 1987; Edwards and Hulme, 1996). Weisbrod (1988) notes that service delivery NGOs emerge due to the twin failures of the government and markets. Governments can provide public goods to the median voter, but some alternative goods might be desired by those not represented by the state, thus they turn to NGOs or the market to provide services. Markets work well in some sectors but often experience failure in product provision because of information asymmetry or failure to supply merit goods to poorer individuals who do not have the resources to participate in the market process. This creates space for nonprofits and NGOs to emerge because they are perceived as more trustworthy given that they do not work to enrich their shareholders (Hansmann, 1980). Therefore, service-oriented often NGOs focus on direct assistance and program implementation. These organizations focus on delivering merit goods such as healthcare, education, humanitarian aid, or other concrete support to beneficiary populations that cannot afford to purchase them in the marketplace.

The twin failure hypothesis also explains the existence of advocacy organizations. Although governments provide regulatory standards for externalities, such as market failures like environmental pollution, sometimes they fall short in providing robust enough regulations to correct these failures. NGOs can act as a vehicle to respond to this government failure by providing the public with an outlet for "voice" whereby they can lobby and provide their multiple viewpoints (Hirschman, 1970; Johnson and Prakash, 2007). Advocacy NGOs engage in activities aimed at structural change through policy reform, norm entrepreneurship, and shifts in public discourse. This includes lobbying governments, running awareness campaigns, and mobilizing constituencies around specific causes (Jordan and van Tuijl, 2000).

The distinction carries important implications for organizational strategy, funding relationships, and public legitimacy. Service provision often aligns with state interests and donor preferences, offering relatively stable funding streams and institutional support (AbouAssi, 2013). Advocacy work, while potentially transformative, involves greater political risk and more complex assessment of outcomes (Andrews and Edwards, 2004). Many NGOs attempt to bridge this divide through what Minkoff (2002) terms "hybrid organizing" whereby NGOs use service delivery as a platform to build legitimacy while gradually expanding into advocacy. However, this hybrid approach requires careful management of stakeholder relationships and organizational identity (Mosley, 2011). Although NGOs often engage in both forms of work, researchers and practitioners make a distinction between service and advocacy focused organizations (Farid, 2019).

In addition, NGOs face distinct challenges in public perception as they balance service provision with advocacy work. Service-oriented NGOs often enjoy broader public support, as their contributions provide immediate, visible benefits to communities (Brass, 2012; Mitchell

and Stroup, 2017). However, when NGOs engage in advocacy, such as challenging government policies, promoting environmental regulations, or addressing human rights, they may encounter resistance from both state actors and the public (Brown, 2014; Heiss and Johnson, 2016). Indeed, one of the ways an NGO can fail is "representation" failure whereby the organization does not operate to the needs and preferences of their community (Dolšak and Prakash, 2022). Foxe et al. (2024) find that publics scrutinize environmental organizations that engage in disruptive activities and are less likely to donate to them. This tension creates a strategic dilemma because organizations must maintain legitimacy as service providers while pursuing advocacy goals that may antagonize powerful interests and the public. This becomes particularly acute in regions where states view policy advocacy as a challenge to their authority, forcing NGOs to carefully manage their public image through media engagement (Bob, 2005; Stroup and Wong, 2017). Media coverage often reflects this divide, applying negative frames towards activist activities and direct action (Scheuch et al., 2024).

In the Asian context, this tension between service and advocacy roles takes on additional complexity. Governments promote a development model that emphasizes economic growth and social stability over environmental or social advocacy (Lam and Tan, 2019). ENGOs must navigate these tensions carefully, as their conservation work often challenges state-backed development projects or corporate interests. Instead ENGOs might engage in "consultative authoritarianism" where they collaborate with the regime and push forward their goals within prescribed boundaries (Teets, 2014). Chinese ENGOs have developed a distinctive approach, framing their advocacy as technical assistance to help the government achieve its environmental goals rather than as opposition (Ho, 2007). Similarly, in Vietnam successful environmental organizations often combine tangible community services with subtle policy influence,

sometimes acting as bridging organizations, and avoiding direct confrontation (KimDung et al., 2016). This strategy reflects a broader pattern in Asian civil society, where NGOs adapt Western advocacy models to fit local political and cultural contexts that favor consensus-building over overt opposition.

NGOs and Media Depictions

High-profile scandals have sparked public outrage and demands for greater accountability (Clarke, 2021). Reputations often prove sticky, with a "halo effect" protecting NGOs' moral standing (Coombs and Holladay, 2006). However, some scandals inflict lasting damage (Mishina et al., 2012; Scurlock et al., 2020). These challenges require NGOs to maintain an active media presence and to cultivate relationships with the public that enhance their image.

Prior literature has determined that media coverage shapes public perception of NGOs and their legitimacy in communities (Schlesinger et al., 2004; Marberg et al., 2016). News reports employ "frames", central organizing ideas that help readers grasp the importance and context of issues (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). These frames determine which aspects of NGO work become most salient to the public. In some regions, media frames cast NGOs as Western-backed "foreign agents" (Bano, 2012; Wasif, 2020). This portrayal proves especially damaging in countries where anti-Western sentiment stems from colonial history. Yet despite scandals and questions about financial management, studies show that media coverage of NGOs remains largely positive (De Souza, 2010; Jacobs and Glass, 2002; Martens, 1996).

The growth of independent media across Southeast Asia has allowed for discussion of environmental and civil society issues. Even in restrictive environments with state-controlled media, some critical viewpoints are tolerated. For example, Chinese newspapers criticize the

national focus on economic growth despite government oversight of media (Tong, 2014). However, media criticisms, although tolerated, are often self-censored or criticisms are selectively applied to issues that do not directly target the state. Massey and Chang (2002) found that English-language Asian newspapers express an "Asian values" frame emphasizing harmony in domestic coverage of state related issues. In terms of environmental coverage, Massey (2000) found that Southeast Asian newspapers covered the 1997-1998 haze crisis using non-confrontational frames, avoiding politically sensitive issues that might blame specific countries. Additionally, Liu et al. (2020) determined that Malaysian and Indonesian media coverage of palm oil and peatlands related issues often reflect climate denialist narratives through nationalist frames.

ENGOs in Asia: WWF and Greenpeace

In addition to these changing media environments, the growth of the NGO sector across Asia has meant that globally recognized organizations have multiple branches to promote location-based activities and campaigns. The study focuses on two prominent ENGOs: Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), now currently known as the World Wide Fund for Nature. These two groups are well established in several major Southeast Asian cities and conduct large-scale campaigns and provide environmental services in the region.

In the case of Greenpeace, the organization has several branches in Southeast Asia (Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia). The Southeast Asia branch raised over $12 million USD and added over 9700 new donors across the region in 2022 (Greenpeace Southeast Asia, 2022). The organization does not accept money directly from political parties or governments but, like many NGOs in the region, does receive foreign sourced funding from

foundations and private donors (Greenpeace Southeast Asia, 2025). For example, the Hewlett Foundation, based in the United States, provided a substantial grant for Greenpeace's green energy and air quality initiatives in Asia (Hewlett Foundation, 2025).

The WWF Asia Pacific branches have been operating for decades and their primary branch in Singapore raised over $12 million USD and added over 14,500 new donors across the region in 2022 (WWF Singapore, 2022). WWF Asia Pacific is partnered with several foreign governments and corporations, usually helping to implement initiatives and acting as a bridging organization between the local government and foreign funders. Several significant ventures include the International Climate Initiative from the German government to create nature-based solutions in partnership with WWF Asia Pacific, and the Bezos Earth Fund which works with the WWF on mangrove forest preservation (Terranomics, 2024; WWF, 2025).

These two organizations are the largest ENGOs in the region. Given their high-profile campaigns and partnerships, this study focuses on the news media dialogues around these two ENGOs. In addition to their significant presence in the region and brand recognition, the two organizations were also selected for their explicit differences in their reputations and strategies. While both organizations engage in service and advocacy roles, Greenpeace has obtained a specific reputation for its direct-action activities and protest campaigns. Across the region, Greenpeace is an important actor in several direct-action initiatives, often connecting with local activists to elevate their concerns globally. In the Malaysian Broga Anti-Incinerator Campaign of 2002, Greenpeace played an important role in organizing resistance to the construction of an incinerator near a large suburban population who were concerned about dioxin contamination (Yew, 2016). In Indonesia, Greenpeace activists infiltrated a major oil company's building (Medco) to carry out a banner unfurling protest within the organization. An act that was

surprising even to local activists (Caballero-Anthony et al., 2012). Given the strong regional prohibition against direct action, Greenpeace's activities stand out, earning the organization a regional reputation comparable to its international image (Eyerman and Jamison, 1989).

Although the WWF does conduct several activist initiatives, they are most known for their conservation campaigns around charismatic flora and fauna. For example, the WWF panda is an iconic conservation image that has become their official symbol. In the 1990s, WWF embarked on an ambitious turn towards public sector partnerships which involved a complete commitment to conservation-based services via state development funding (Anyango-van Zwieten et al., 2019). WWF is one of a few organizations conducting poaching checks, conserving forests, citizen science initiatives, and providing important ecosystem services. Important regulatory services are also provided by the WWF, such as the creation of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil and the Heart of Borneo project which brought together Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei to conserve over 22 million hectares of rainforest (WWF, 2025). As a result, the image of WWF as an organization that provides extensive conservation services has solidified.

Given the distinctive differences between these two groups and their operations, are there differences between how a service-oriented NGO is depicted compared to an advocacy-oriented NGO? Understanding the emotional associations that are being made with ENGOs is important for gauging the progress that environmental civil society has made in the region and what reputational challenges they might continue to face. How do media sources portray NGOs, and what sentiments do these portrayals express? To answer these questions, this chapter analyzes articles from independent Southeast Asian newspapers, offering new insights into media coverage of environmental NGOs in the region. The study contributes to the LLM work in social

sciences and provides a demonstration of an underutilized tool for NGO and nonprofit studies. Given the substantial amount of text data that is available on nonprofits and NGOs LLMs can be an important tool in their analysis. Furthermore, advancements in language dictionaries allow us to conduct research in multiple country contexts.

In the next section, I will discuss my data collection strategy in terms of how I collected, cleaned, and processed news articles. To determine whether there are substantial differences between how WWF and Greenpeace are depicted, I first topic model articles associated with either organization. This initial step allows us to determine whether the texts are differentiated between the two organizations and whether identifiable advocacy or service terms are used thematically for the groups. I then conduct sentiment analysis on the text corpora for each group to demonstrate that service and advocacy groups evoke different emotional frames. I determine that emotional frames are significantly different between WWF and Greenpeace, with the latter generating more negative sentiment and less of the emotion "trust" in its depictions.

Data Collection

This chapter uses machine learning techniques to process news articles to better understand what topics NGOs are associated with and their general sentiments. Machine learning is a useful tool for the study of large amounts of data, particularly text data which is increasingly available through social media platforms, digital newspapers, and online documents (Wilkerson and Casas, 2017). The use of machine learning for studying topics and sentiments in large corpora is valuable and has been increasingly utilized in the field of NGO studies and non-profit studies (Wasif, 2020; Ma et al., 2018; Lecy and Thornton, 2015; Fyall et al., 2018).

For this chapter I scraped 2815 articles from six newspapers across Southeast Asia. I scraped the online news archives of each newspaper from the dates 2001 to 2022. The articles scraped were specifically on: Greenpeace and WWF. In total 1093 of the articles were on Greenpeace and 1722 of the articles were on WWF. The six newspapers are English language newspapers in the region, and they were chosen based on their readership levels and distribution. These newspapers are independently operated and are not associated with their respective governments or a specific political party.

A list of these newspapers and their readership are available in Table 1 along with proportional comparisons to city population size. Table 1 also provides the top vernacular newspapers for comparison of readership. These numbers reflect the physical distribution of newspapers and not their online footprint, which is increasingly the mode of consumption for news, therefore, online news readership could be significantly larger. For example, according to Google Analytics, the New Straits Times (Malaysia) has about 14 million page views every month, and the Bangkok Post (Thailand) has 14.8 million views. However, while some newspapers provide information on their website traffic, others on the list do not, making it difficult to compare them without using print readership numbers.

Table 1. List of Newspapers. Readership determined from newspaper websites, mission statements and financial filings

English Language			
Newspaper	Country of Distribution	Readership (Print)	Proportion - Largest City Population
Bangkok Post	Thailand	2,831,207	26.86%
Phnom Penh Post	Cambodia	86,280	3.80%
New Straits Times	Malaysia	175,000	2.13%
Straits Times	Singapore	2,047,000	34.99%
Manila Times	Philippines	2,000,000	68.12%
Jakarta Post	Indonesia	40,000	0.37%

Vernacular Language			
Newspaper	Country of Distribution	Readership (Print)	Proportion - Largest City Population
Thai Rath (Thai)	Thailand	1,000,000	9.49%
Koh Santepheap Daily (Khmer)	Cambodia	45,000	1.98%
Harian Metro (Bahasa Melayu)	Malaysia	2,400,000	29.23%
Lianhe Zaobao (Chinese)	Singapore	85,200	1.46%
Bulgar (Tagalog)	Philippines	600,000	20.44%
Kompas (Bahasa Indonesia)	Indonesia	293,784	2.73%

These newspapers are widely read in urban areas and by a diverse group of readers. Context matters in that countries like Singapore and the Philippines primarily conduct business and education in the English language because of strong colonial legacies. Therefore, the English language newspapers tend to be the primary news media in the country. In other countries like Thailand and Cambodia, elites, government officials, business owners and workers for NGOs and foreign companies are likely to read them due to their English language usage. In countries where English is not the main mode of business or education, mostly upwardly mobile, educated individuals are reading these English publications. The Bangkok Post (2019) claims that 46% of

readers have a bachelor's degree and majority of readers are employed in the business sector. A significant portion of readership comes from older foreign readers (expatriates who might be working or retired in the country) but over 53% of readers are Thais from the ages of 18-40. In this media environment, liberal readers might be more interested in environmental issues. Therefore, how major NGOs are portrayed can be influential, especially if stories reflect certain frames.

Methods and Results

After scraping these news articles, I categorized them according to their source and created corpora for unique datasets on ENGO coverage in Southeast Asian newspapers. To prepare the texts for machine learning tasks, I implemented a standardized text preprocessing pipeline. This process included the removal of numbers, stopwords, and punctuation, as well as stemming the words to reduce them to their root forms. Since the corpora are different sizes for each ENGO and to ensure robust comparison results, I balance the two corpora with a random down-sample for WWF corpus so it can match the Greenpeace corpus.

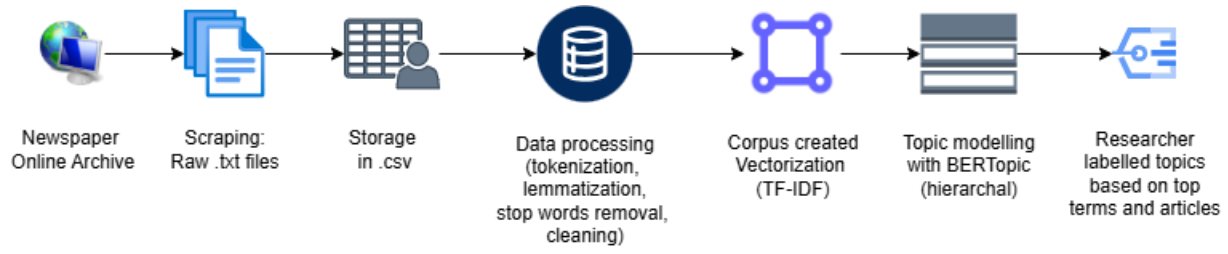
Determining Differences: Topic Modelling with BERTopic

I use BERTopic to analyze the two corpora of texts on WWF and Greenpeace to systematically identify the underlying topics within each (Grootendorst, 2022). I can uncover any substantive differences in the topics associated with each organization, allowing for a comparison. This comparison will help determine whether one organization, such as Greenpeace, is perceived as more activist-oriented than the other, WWF, based on the topics that emerge from

the corpora. Through this method, I can gain insights into how each organization is represented in public discourse and whether distinct service or advocacy topics appear.

For this purpose, an unsupervised hierarchal BERTopic model was used. The model first identifies a set of topics from the corpus using techniques like embeddings and density-based clustering. Then, it groups these topics into broader categories, creating a hierarchy that reflects the semantic relationships between them. The model operates in an unsupervised manner, meaning it does not rely on predefined labels, and it adapts to the data itself to discover latent structures. Hierarchal BERTopic can be useful for text data which might have significant overlap between topics or themes, such as news articles on ENGOs which will sometimes blur the boundary between environmental issues themselves and the actual roles of the NGOs. The hierarchy tree allows the researcher to qualitatively determine whether topics are overlapping and to pull out "sensical" topics that relate specifically to the ENGOs rather than the broader issues of environmental conservation or climate change. Figure 1 depicts the process of topic modelling from scraping to automated unsupervised labelling.

Figure 1. Text processing pipeline for BERTopic



The determination of the number of topics is inherently subjective, but several objective tests can guide the selection process. Following Lennert (2023), I applied a measurement from Cao et al. (2009) to assess the density of topics and a measurement from Deveaud et al. (2014)

that evaluates divergence across topics (plots in the Appendix). These tests suggested that 13 topics for both Greenpeace and WWF were ideal. For robustness, I checked several ranges of topic numbers ranging from 10 to 17 topics. Using these measures, the 13-topic configuration resulted in the most consistent and interpretable topics. The alternatives resulted in either overly broad or highly specific topics that could not be meaningfully interpreted.

In addition to the density and divergence tests, I used further measures to assess the robustness of the final topics. Following suggestions from Farea et al. (2024), I plotted topic coherence and prevalence. Coherence measures how closely related the words within a topic are, while prevalence indicates the topic's distribution in the corpus. The 13-topic model displayed high coherence and reasonable prevalence across the corpus. Additionally, I visualized topic connections using dendrograms, calculating the Hellinger distance between probability vectors, to assess the relationships between topics. These plots help verify whether topics are semantically coherent, sufficiently prevalent, and logically connected, ensuring that related themes, for example marine animals and ocean issues, are appropriately linked (available in Appendix).

After determining that 13 topics were optimal for each corpus, I used BERTopic to automate topic labelling and group the topics coherently. I then began the qualitative assignment of labels to these topics. Since hierarchal BERTopic is an unsupervised model, it ultimately is up to the researcher to assign label names to the topics that are generated by the model. However, this does not mean the assignment is arbitrary despite its qualitative nature. To best assign these topic labels, I consulted with two generated datasets from the automated labelling: the top terms of each topic and the top articles in the topic. I first analyzed the top terms for each topic to see which label would be best applied and some clear topics emerged from this analysis (Table 2 and

Table 3). I then looked at the top news articles within each topic to double check the top terms and their reliability. Based on this topic labelling we can determine the topics for each set of corpora. I determined that WWF had 11 distinct topics and Greenpeace has 10, that are focused on the ENGOs, from the 13 generated.

Table 2. Topics and Keywords for Greenpeace Corpus

Label	Unique Keywords
Sustainable Palm Oil Campaign	sustainable palm oil,palm oil industry,oil palm,sustainable palm,palm oil,palm plantations,greenpeace indonesia,palm,oil industry,asean
Plastic Pollution Campaign	plastic pollution,plastic waste,recycling,plastics,waste management,plastic bags,use plastic bags,electronic waste,landfills,tonnes plastic
Paris Agreement Statements	kyoto protocol,greenhouse gas emissions,global warming,intergovernmental panel climate,panel climate change,cut emissions,greenhouse gas,greenhouse gases,gas emissions,paris agreement
China Coal Emissions Campaign	beijing,china,carbon emissions,coal consumption,coal power,president xi jinping,shanghai,greenpeace east asia,emissions,coal
Maritime Union Activism and Anti Whaling Campaign	maritime,european union,seas,ships,shipping industry,eu,whaling,vessel,ship,fisheries
Anti GMO Campaign	gm crops,gmos,genetically modified,gmo,gm foods,gm food,gm rice,genetic engineering,biotechnology,monsanto
Greenpeace Ship Activism Against Drilling	greenpeace ship,greenpeace activists,diplomat,russian,detained,arrest,russia,putin
Sustainable Living Campaign	sustainability,sustainable living,sustainable,sustainable living plan,consumers,unilever asia,marketing,factories,sustainably,managers
Anti Nuclear Energy Campaign After Fukushima Disaster	fukushima daiichi nuclear,fukushima daiichi,fukushima,japanese government,nuclear disaster,tokyo stock,tokyo electric power,daiichi nuclear,nuclear power plant,nuclear power
Foreign Funding Controversy	ngos,singapore government,foreign donations,foreign contribution regulation,greenpeace amnesty,ngo,charities,foreign funding,charity,contribution regulation

Table 3. Topics and Keywords for WWF Corpus

Label	Unique Keywords
Wildlife Conservation Projects (Charismatic Fauna)	tiger conservation,wwf cambodia,wildlife conservation,endangered species,tiger population,elephants,elephant,endangered,sumatran,illegal wildlife
Sustainable Palm Oil Project	sustainable palm oil,oil palm plantations,sustainable palm,oil palm,palm oil,palm plantations,wwf indonesia,palm,asean,wwf malaysia
Shark Fin Soup Campaign	shark fin,shark fin soup,shark,whale shark,wwf singapore,sharks,fisheries,sustainable seafood,whales,fin
Earth Hour Campaign	earth hour global,earth hour,lights hour,year earth hour,hour global,awareness climate change,awareness climate,essential lights,turn lights,fund nature wwf
Plastic Waste Campaign and Clean up	recycling,plastic waste,plastic bags,environmentally friendly,sustainability,recycled,food waste,plastic bag,environmentally,plastics
Mekong Dolphin Conservation Project	dolphin conservation,dolphin dead,dolphins died,mekong dolphins,irrawaddy dolphin,dolphin population,dolphin,irrawaddy dolphins,dolphins,wwf cambodia
Climate Change Commentary	biodiversity loss,global warming,greenhouse gas emissions,greenhouse gas,biodiversity,warming,extinctions,emissions,extinction,deforestation
Environmental Programming (Art shows and musical performances)	artists,artworks,musical,perform,artist,tomorrow pm admission,exhibition,concert,pm admission,mrt esplanade city
Mekong River Management Project	mekong river,mekong river commission,mekong countries,mekong,lower mekong,sahong dam,songkhram river,mekong giant,laos,lao
Panda Conservation Project	chengdu panda,panda conservation,giant pandas,giant panda,panda,chengdu panda base,pandas,yangtze,yangtze finless,sichuan
Green Buildings Projects and Architecture Campaign	malaysian institute,malaysian institute architects,sultan abdul hamid,wwf malaysia,sultan abdul,malaysia,lumpur,abdul halim,ahmad,kuala

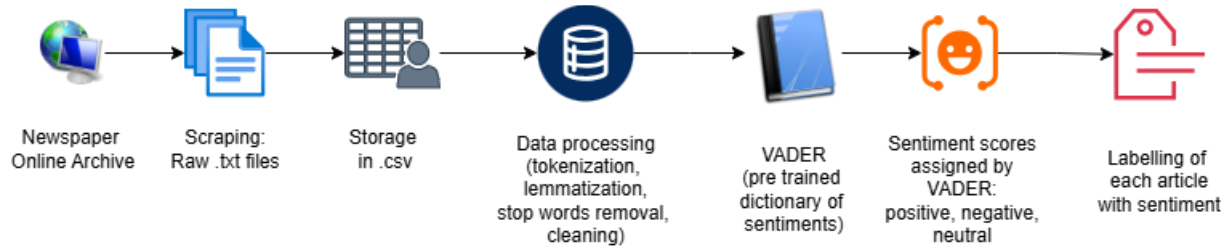
We can see distinct topics emerge for each ENGO which indicates the specific issues they are working on and how they are framed. Greenpeace and WWF both have key environmental campaigns that are connected to them and are part of their core mission in the region: Sustainable Palm Oil and Plastic Waste Pollution. There are distinct service projects connected to the WWF as part of its partnerships with states to monitor certain species: tigers, elephants, Mekong dolphins, sharks and panda conservation. There are also topics connected to their campaigns on Earth Hour and their public service initiatives for art and music performance, and green architecture.

The topics for Greenpeace were also aligned with campaigns in the region, such as their sustainable living campaign and their promotion of the Paris Agreement protocols. However, topics that highlight the direct-action style advocacy and activism that Greenpeace is known for also appear: Anti-whaling protests and maritime union activism, ship-based activities to disrupt drilling, and anti-genetically modified organism (GMO) and anti-nuclear energy protests. There is also a topic on a foreign funding controversy that Greenpeace Asia was embroiled in alongside Amnesty International. Through topic modelling, we can therefore determine that the two ENGOs are discussed differently in elite news media and that the articles reflect the difference between service and advocacy-based organizations. Apart from how the two groups are represented in terms of their activities, how do they differ in terms of the emotions associated with them? Using sentiment analysis tools, I first determine if there are significant differences between the two with regards to positive vs negative sentiment. I then fine-tune this analysis and investigate whether they are significantly different in terms of the feeling of "trust" associated with either.

Sentiment Analysis: VADER

Sentiment analysis can be best understood as the "computational study of people's opinions, attitudes and emotions towards an entity" (Medhat et al., 2014). In this chapter I use two types of automated sentiment analysis to determine the sentiments of the corpora: VADER and NRC. After cleaning the corpus in the topic modelling stage of the chapter, the corpus is then annotated with sentiment dictionaries which provide scores for each word in the document to determine whether the word is associated with a specific sentiment. To determine the general sentiment of the articles (positive, negative, neutral) I use VADER which has a dictionary trained on emotive text and follows a set of rules to determine the salience of the emotion in a text (Hutto and Gilbert, 2014). VADER has a lexicon of words with pre-assigned sentiment scores that account for polarity and the intensity of the sentiment being expressed. After VADER labels the texts based on its lexicon, we can determine proportions of the corpora that are positive, negative or neutral in tone. Figure 2 provides a pipeline illustration for the process of sentiment analysis.

Figure 2. Pipeline for Sentiment Analysis



After conducting VADER labelling of the sentiments, I determined that there are differing proportions of sentiments in the corpora. Figures 3 and 4 provide visualizations of these differences. There are more positively associated articles for WWF (71.73% positive, 27.79%

negative) compared to Greenpeace (58.2% positive, 41.33% negative). A chi-square test finds that the corpora differ significantly in their sentiments (χ_2 (1, N = 2739) = 52.72, *p = 3.789e-13*).

Figure 3. Sentiment Proportions for WWF Corpus

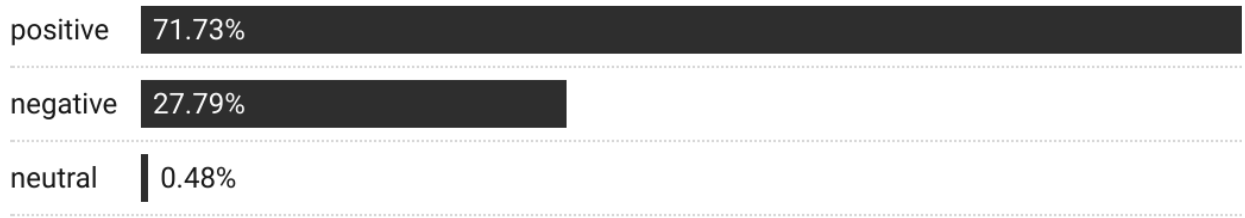


Figure 4. Sentiment Proportions for Greenpeace Corpus

In addition, I also examine the specific newspaper sources to see how sentiments break down depending on the country of origin. Visualizations of the differences can be seen in Figures 5 and 6. Chi-square tests find that three sources demonstrate significant trends on the two ENGOs. For the Bangkok Post, there are significantly more positive sentiments for the WWF articles compared to Greenpeace ($p < 0.05$), and there are more negative articles for Greenpeace ($p < 0.001$). The Straits Times (Singapore) has a similar significant relationship where negative articles are higher for Greenpeace ($p<0.001$) while positive articles are higher for WWF ($p<0.05$). For Manila Times there are more negative articles for Greenpeace compared to WWF ($p<0.001$). The other three newspapers (News Straits Times, Phnom Phen Post, and The Jakarta Post) do not have significant trends. They do not significantly depict more negative or positive articles for either organization. The full results can be found in the Appendix (Tables 1 and 2).

Figure 5. WWF proportional sentiments by source

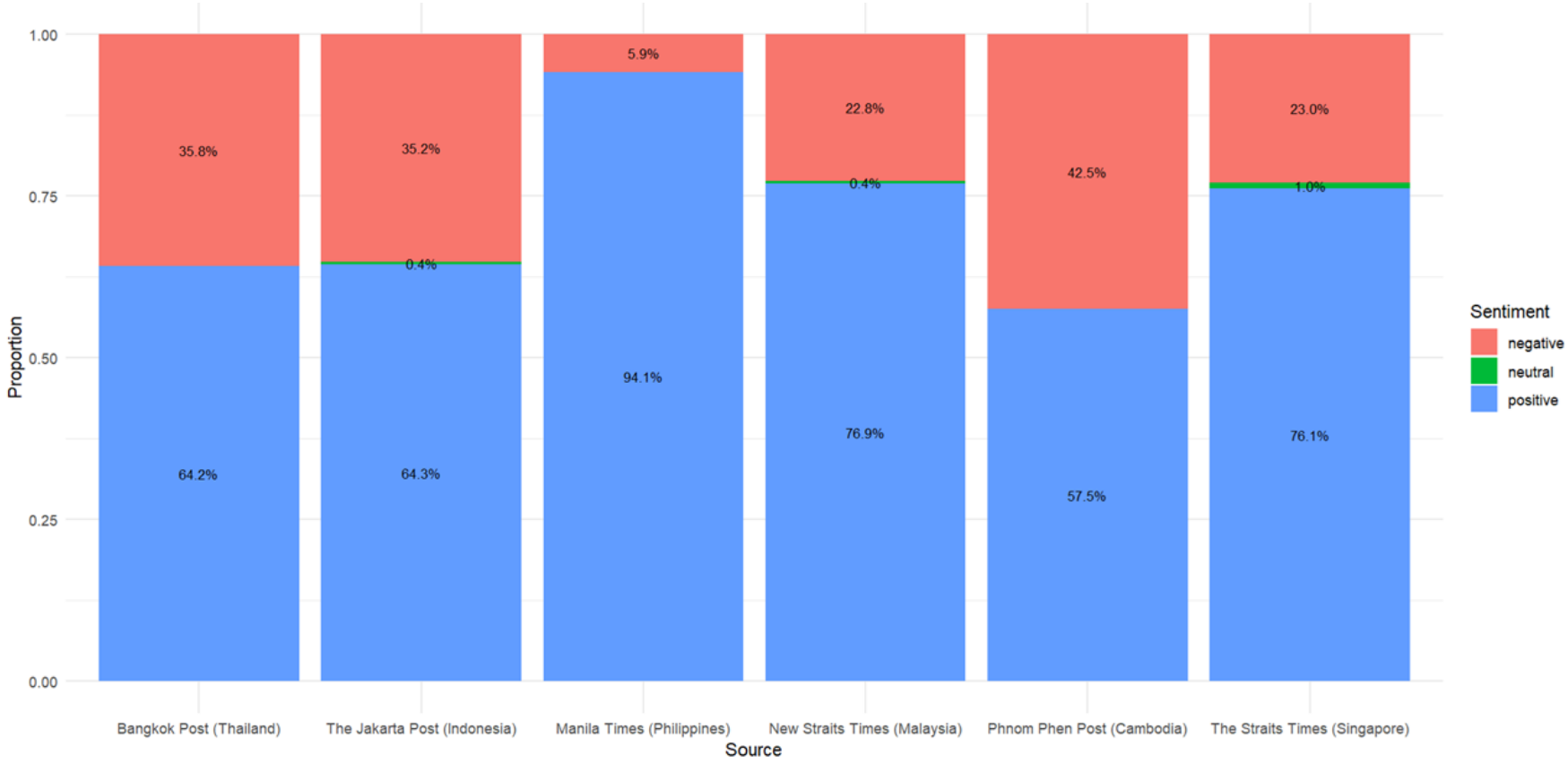
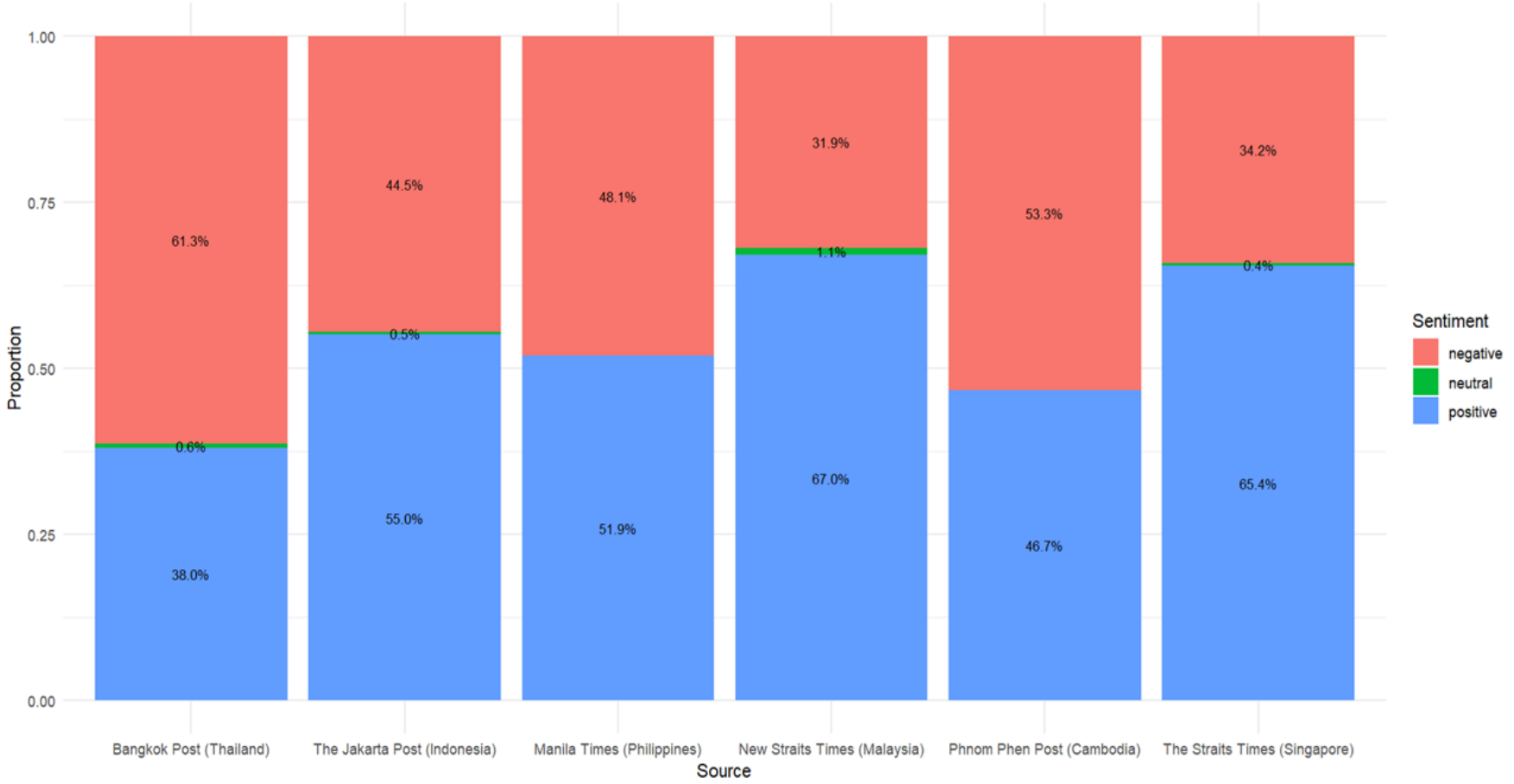


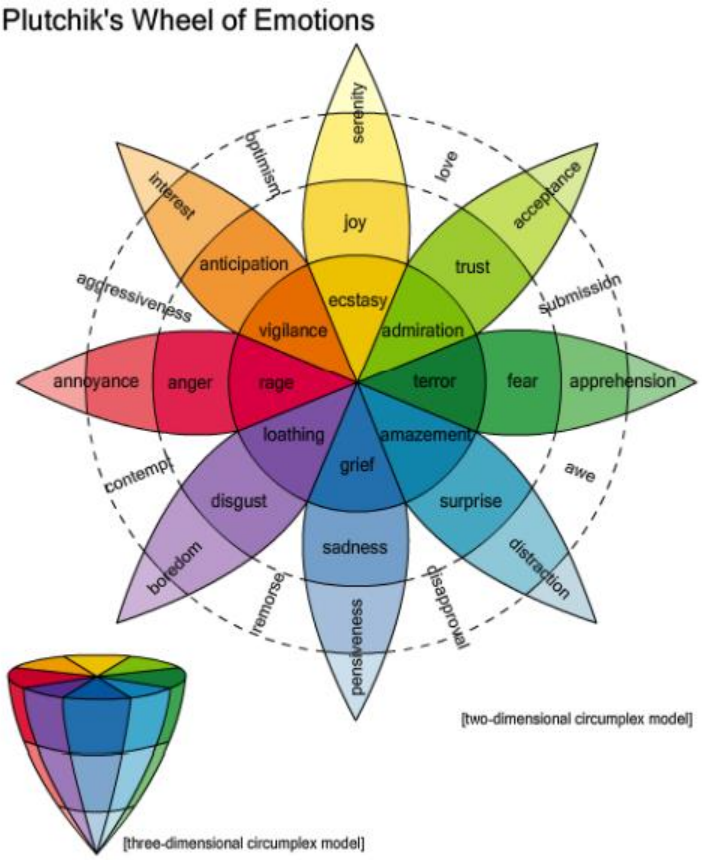
Figure 6. Greenpeace proportional sentiments by source



Sentiment Analysis: NRC Emotion Lexicon

VADER can only define whether an article is either positive, negative or neutral in its tone. Often there are nuances in tone such as fear or trust, which are important emotions particularly when it comes to environmentally related activities. Therefore, in addition to VADER, I use the NRC Emotion Lexicon (Mohammad and Turney, 2013; Mohammad, 2021). NRC is a word-emotion association dictionary that maps words to eight primary emotions (anger, fear, anticipation, trust, surprise, sadness, joy, and disgust). These emotions are derived from the "basic" emotions established by Plutchik (1994) and Ekman (1992) who claim that there are instinctual emotions all humans experience. Plutchik states that there are four opposing pairs of emotions: joy-sadness, anger-fear, trust-disgust, and anticipation-surprise. Figure 7 displays Plutchik's wheel of emotion which depicts the four dyads, the relative intensity of emotion as the wheel moves outwards, and the emotions that exist between categories. While this is a simplified concept of how emotions are experienced by individuals, the categorization of basic emotions allows researchers to conduct sentiment analysis and attempt some form of quantification of affective states within textual data.

Figure 7. Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions (1994). Taken from Mohammad and Turney (2013)



When analyzing text, NRC counts the occurrences of words associated with each emotion or sentiment category to determine the emotional profile of the text. Therefore, NRC labels each text with a series of counts for each emotion that is represented in each text. From these counts, I then determine what the overall sentiment expression is in the text and label it. I then determine the overall proportion of texts within each corpus and how the distribution is throughout the eight emotions. Figures 8 and 9 visualize this distribution.

Figure 8. NRC Proportional Labels for WWF corpus

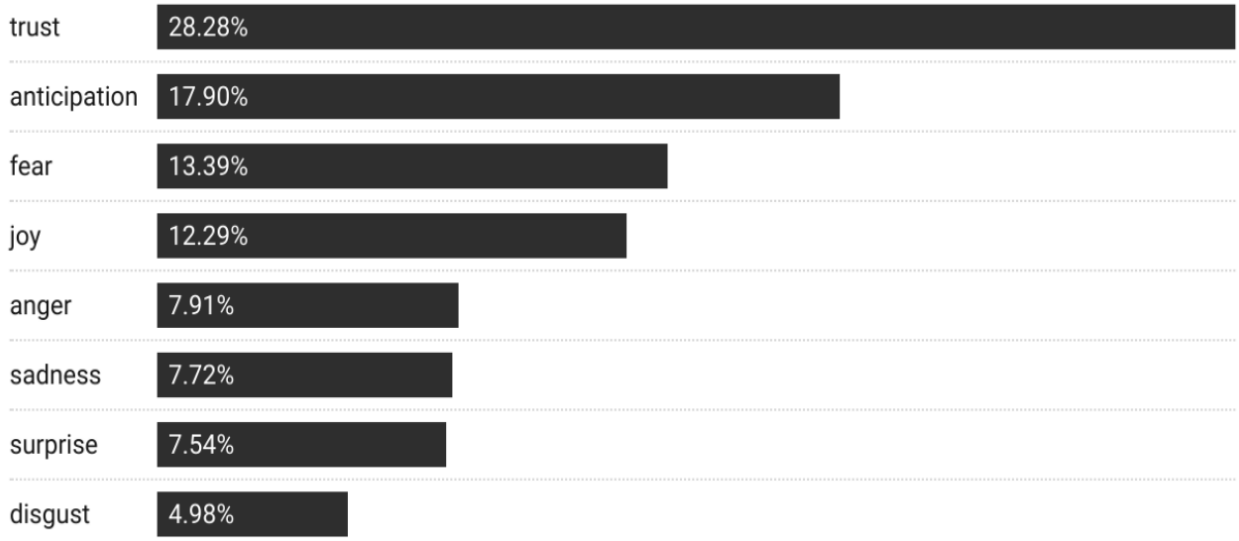
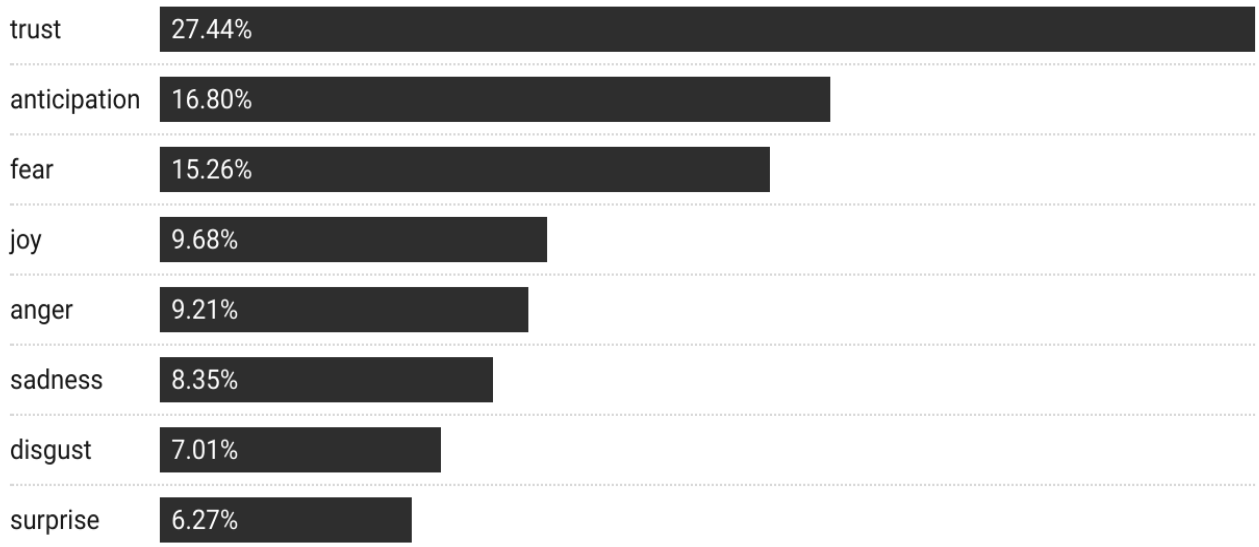


Figure 9. NRC Proportional Labels for Greenpeace corpus



From the NRC labelling we can see that the two groups are relatively similar when it comes to the more specified emotions they are associated with. The positive feeling that is most closely associated is trust and the negative feeling most closely associated is fear. To determine whether the two ENGOs differ significantly from each other I conduct a series of t-tests on their word emotion counts. I find that the Greenpeace corpus tended to have significantly higher levels of negative emotions such as anger, fear, disgust, and sadness ($p<0.001$), while WWF corpus had significantly higher levels of positive emotions such as joy and surprise ($p<0.001$). There are no significant differences in terms of trust and anticipation between the two organizations. Results of these tests can be found in the Appendix (Table 3).

In addition, I determine the breakdown of the NRC labelled emotions by newspaper source to see if there are significant differences between sources in their depictions of each ENGO. I conduct t-tests to determine whether the emotional labels between WWF and Greenpeace differ significantly between sources. Across all the news sources there are significant differences with how the organizations are emotionally labelled (Appendix, Table 4). The general indication is that across all the news sources, except for the New Straits Times (Malaysia) where anger was not significant, Greenpeace articles are associated with the emotions disgust and anger significantly more than articles on the WWF. While the other news sources had high levels of trust generally for the two organizations, the Manila Times, Straits Times and Bangkok Post had significantly lower levels of trust associated with Greenpeace compared to the WWF. That being said, levels of trust are still positively associated with both organizations but there are significant differences between how the news sources associate trust between the two groups.

This confirms prior work from Chapman et al. (2021) who found that there has not been a global drop in trustworthiness in NGOs. Using the Edelman Trust Barometer, they find that there has been a small increase in trust in NGOs, particularly amongst respondents who are more educated and with higher incomes. Therefore, the fact that trust is still associated with ENGOs is not as surprising given the goodwill and legitimacy that these organizations still hold. However, the most prominent negative feeling is fear. Due to the nature of the NRC approach, it is up to the researcher to interpret what the categories substantively indicate. In this label, fear could be associated with the topics of the articles themselves, even if they are primarily about the ENGOs and the events and campaigns associated with them. The NRC emotional associations are connecting with general topics in these articles such as climate change, haze pollution, and deforestation. The sentiment of fear is often associated with climate change and feelings of hopelessness over the lack of progress in the situation, a concept termed as climate pessimism (Higgins, 2022).

Time Series Sentiment Analysis: Trust

While there are eight emotions in the corpora, the emotion of trust is highly relevant for NGOs. Reputations are important for NGO authority, collaboration, legitimacy, and efficacy (Mitchell and Stroup, 2017; Barnett and Finnemore, 2004; Hurd, 1999; Balboa, 2015; Mitchell, 2014). Public visibility is a core aspect of establishing a trustworthy reputation for NGOs, and newspaper coverage is a primary way NGOs can communicate with their public and direct their image. Ron and Crow (2015) found that the more familiar an organization was in a community, the higher levels of public trust were in that group. Emotional association is a time sensitive phenomenon. Trust builds over time and often repeated direct or indirect reputational building needs to occur for publics to trust institutions (Bohnet and Huck, 2004). Furthermore, when

international organizations, like most large ENGOs, enter a new institutional setting they need to engage in "sensemaking" to establish trust in new environments where norms differ (Mollering and Stache, 2010). Therefore, focusing on trust and how articles use trust related language when referring to ENGOs can help determine how their reputations are built over time and the public portrayal of these organizations.

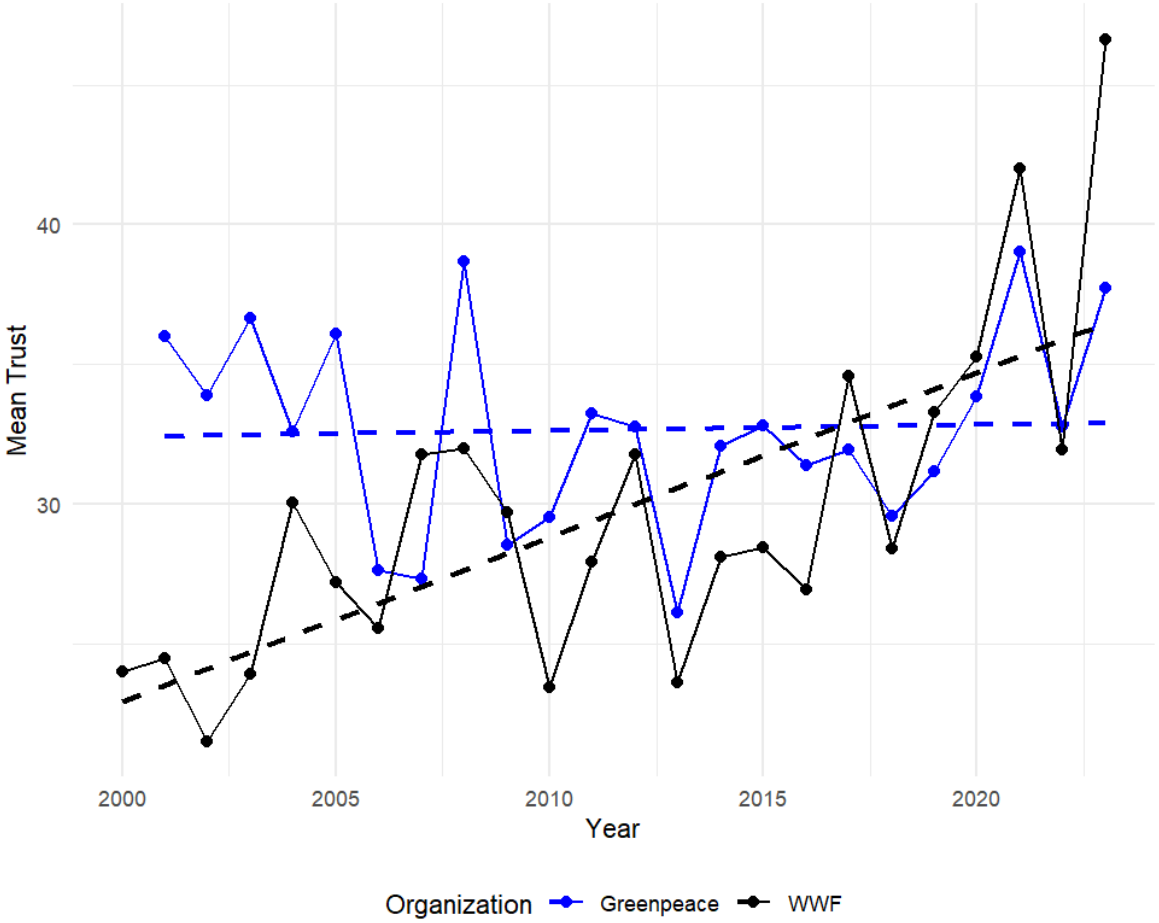
Organizations like WWF and Greenpeace grew in their level of influence in the region and took time to establish reputations through their campaigns and public statements. Therefore, a snapshot of the corpora might not be the best way to determine the true distribution of emotions. Since the articles are time stamped with their publication dates, I use the sentiment of trust over time to determine whether there are significant differences within each organization and between them. I utilize linear mixed effects models with lagged years (t – 1) and random effects (Table 4). Two models are used to determine whether trust is affected by time for each organization (Greenpeace, M1 and WWF, M2).

M1 demonstrates that trust scores for Greenpeace articles do not significantly increase over time ($p = 0.336$) whereas WWF trust scores have trended upwards, and significantly over time (M2, $p < 0.01$). Therefore, each individual organization is distinct in their trust scores across time and while there is a relative trend upwards for Greenpeace, it is not significant. Figure 10 plots these trends visually. This suggests that trust scores on WWF have been increasing over time, with WWF starting at a lower trust position, while Greenpeace has maintained a stable level of trust scores.

Table 4. Linear mixed effects models (M1 and M2*). p < 0.05*, < 0.01**, < 0.001****

	Trust: GP			**Trust: WWF**		
Predictors	*Estimates*	*CI*	*p*	*Estimates*	*CI*	*p*
(Intercept)	-244.70	-807.85 – 318.45	0.394	-922.79	-1577.20 – -268.38	**0.006****
year	0.14	-0.14 – 0.42	0.336	0.47	0.15 – 0.80	**0.004****
Random Effects						
σ^2	392.60			632.02		
τ_{00}	3.79 $_{\text{lagged\_year}}$			9.02 $_{\text{lagged\_year}}$		
ICC	0.01			0.01		
N	23 $_{\text{lagged\_year}}$			24 $_{\text{lagged\_year}}$		
Observations	1054			1054		
Marginal R^2/Conditional R^2	0.001 / 0.011			0.011 / 0.025		

Figure 10. Mean trust of Greenpeace and WWF Trust Sentiment with trend lines



Robustness Checks

Trust could be cumulative in its nature and not just a lagged effect. Perhaps trust scores for articles build over time and on each other. If an NGO is being depicted in a trustworthy light consistently, then perhaps this cumulates over the years. I conduct a robustness check and undertake the same analysis for M1 and M2 but using autoregressive models (AR) which take prior levels of trust scores into account (Table 5, Appendix). The AR results are substantively similar to the linear mixed model findings. However, although trust can be cumulated, the specific trust score from a newspaper cumulating is unlikely given that newspapers can establish reputations for organizations, but they can also damage these reputations if events are unsavory.

Therefore, even if an organization establishes a high trust score in a year, it does not mean that scores necessarily build on the prior year but rather are affected by newsworthy events.

The inverse of the trust dyad is the emotion of disgust. How does disgust affect the sentiment of trust with regards to the two ENGOs? As noted earlier, in the general analysis there were significant differences between WWF and Greenpeace articles when it came to the sentiment of disgust, with Greenpeace articles generating higher levels of disgust. But like trust, disgust could be an emotion that builds overtime. Therefore, I conducted the same analysis with disgust and found that disgust scores for Greenpeace have not significantly increased over time ($p = 0.856$). However, there is a slight increase in disgust scores for WWF ($p < 0.05$). The full results of these tests can be found in the Appendix (Table 6).

Discussion

Service focused organizations and advocacy groups are distinct in several ways. Often, the boundary is blurred given that most groups provide services and advocate for causes through campaigns. However, reputations can develop depending on the associations that the public and news media make. Distinctions between service and advocacy groups can be determined in several ways and text analysis tools provide us with an efficient way to determine public sentiment. Topic modelling of the respective corpora demonstrates that there are substantive differences between the campaigns and events associated with each group. Greenpeace had more advocacy and activist oriented topics when compared to the service focused WWF. Sentiment analysis also determined that while both organizations have generally positive sentiments associated with them, they are also significantly different with the WWF being associated with more positive emotions compared to Greenpeace. Furthermore, time series analysis demonstrates

that trust scores for Greenpeace have remained the same throughout the years, whereas WWF has been steadily growing in their trust scores.

Furthermore, the results from the sentiment analysis demonstrate that the country of origin of the newspaper is important in the sentiment generated. In Manila Times, Straits Times and Bangkok Post, there were significantly higher proportions of negative sentiments expressed on Greenpeace compared to the WWF. Looking into the emotions expressed, the three news sources also had higher levels of anger and disgust, and lower levels of trust associated with Greenpeace. Greenpeace has had a contentious relationship with governments and corporations in these countries, particularly due to their direct-action initiatives (Alvarez, 2010). In the Philippines, Greenpeace has drawn ire for a long-standing campaign and litigation which led to the banning of genetically modified rice (Golden Rice) from being cultivated and distributed for malnutrition alleviation (Enserink, 2008). In contrast, the WWF's focus on conservation and sustainability projects, often implemented in collaboration with governments and private stakeholders, has earned it a more favorable reception across these countries. The organization's less confrontational approach may have contributed to the more positive sentiment observed in media coverage.

However, despite these differences, the findings on Greenpeace and WWF reflect prior literature, that sentiments on NGOs tend to be positive and that newspapers use positive frames when reporting on them (De Souza, 2010; Marberg et al., 2016; Jacobs and Glass, 2002; Martens, 1996). One explanation for why ENGOs are not generating substantive negative sentiments could be the growing environmentalism in the region. Forsyth (2016, 71) states that “environmentalism has been a visible and influential form of political expression in various countries of Southeast Asia. In countries such as Thailand and the Philippines, environmentalism

has allowed people to criticize authoritarian regimes or the lack of environmental regulation". The environmental movement has been present in the region since the 1960s and has been associated with pro-democracy advocacy. Furthermore, Kim et al. (2020) find that education is corelated with opposition to environmentally damaging energy sources and pollution. Consequently, amongst more educated individuals in the region there appears to be a growing preference for environmentalism (Shin and Chen, 2024). In turn, ENGOs are organizations that have positive connotations and trust associations, and the newspaper media reflect this.

Overall, the findings highlight the inherent tensions between service delivery and advocacy-oriented strategies. This tension becomes particularly pronounced when NGOs attempt to maintain legitimacy with both local governments and international donors (Henderson, 2021). The pressure to demonstrate concrete, measurable outcomes often pushes organizations toward service delivery, collaboration with local governments and only associating with formally registered groups rather than grassroots organizations (Noakes and Teets, 2020). The operational context in Southeast Asia presents additional challenges, particularly regarding increasingly restrictive regulatory environments that constrain NGO activities. In extreme cases, such as Cambodia's comprehensive NGO crackdown in 2021-2022, organizations face existential threats to their continued operation (Springman et al., 2022). These pressures have led many organizations to strategically adapt their missions, often pivoting from politically sensitive advocacy work toward more palatable service-oriented programs (Beer et al., 2012). Civil society organizations change their tactics to engage in less collective action because of fear of state reprisal. For example, in Singapore a combination of a lack of public support and lack of interest in reform has led to a poor collaborative equilibrium (Ong and Rahmad, 2024). While this adaptive strategy may ensure organizational survival in restrictive environments, it raises

important questions about the long-term implications for civil society development and systemic change. Tactical shifts, while pragmatic, may inadvertently reinforce authoritarian governance by reducing pressure for structural reforms (Heiss, 2019; Cooley, 2015).

Conclusion

Machine learning analysis techniques, while valuable, present notable methodological limitations when examining environmental discourse. A fundamental challenge lies in disentangling ENGO sentiment from the broader emotional context of climate change and environmental degradation. These issues are inherently emotionally charged, characterized by dramatic events and protest activities. Therefore, even when ENGOs are the primary subject of analysis, the emotional valence of climate change may contaminate measurements. Media coverage patterns further complicate sentiment analysis. News outlets typically prioritize newsworthy events over routine positive developments. The "if it bleeds, it leads" principle creates a selection bias that may skew sentiment analysis results toward negative coverage. The WWF corpus presents a partial exception to this pattern, as its coverage predominantly focuses on service activities and conservation achievements, potentially offering a more balanced representation of ENGO activities.

Additionally, Piltchuk's eight emotions commonly used in sentiment analysis methods, while insightful, impose constraints on capturing the complexity of environmental discourse. Environmental narratives involve subtler, context dependent emotional states that go beyond predefined categories. Emotions like "frustration" over policy stagnation, "cautious optimism" about emerging technologies, or "pride" in grassroots environmental successes may not fit neatly within the existing framework. These limitations raise concerns about the representativeness of

emotional insights gleaned from machine learning models. This limitation also connects with an assumption made in the study which is that language remains consistent over time. The analysis relies on the consistency of language, but there is an evolving aspect to climate change discourse. Terminology, framing and emotional expressions over climate are likely to change as new scientific findings come to light and public attitudes and social movements around the environment emerge. This temporal dimension is not captured in the current study, which may limit the generalizability of the findings.

Furthermore, it remains difficult to comprehensively determine mass sentiment toward these environmental organizations based solely on newspaper content. Media portrayals often reflect the interests of their owners or align with prevailing political and corporate narratives, rather than providing an unbiased reflection of public attitudes (Kedia and Kim, 2024; Goldman et al., 2024). Instead, social media has become an increasingly relevant platform for assessing public sentiment. It allows for more diverse and unfiltered expressions of opinions toward environmental issues and organizations. However, social media posts come with their own biases, such as the amplification of polarizing voices and "influencer" type figures who are a form of a media elite. Further research utilizing survey data and social media analysis could provide a more comprehensive picture of how these environmental organizations are perceived by the public in Southeast Asia.

Despite their limitations, text analysis tools provide important methods for studying media. This is particularly evident in Southeast Asia, where extensive newspaper corpora have remained largely unexamined. By applying these computational approaches to regional media coverage, this study makes contributions to understanding environmental civil society in Southeast Asia. I analyze ENGO coverage in highly circulated Southeast Asian newspapers, a

region understudied in terms of media discourse. Furthermore, the methodological approach demonstrates how topic modeling and sentiment analysis can process large media corpora effectively.

The inter-country nuances between countries are also an important aspect to consider and the study has demonstrated that news sources from the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand are strongly associating more negative emotions like disgust and anger, and lower levels of trust, with Greenpeace when compared to the WWF. While this study did not specifically determine the subnational differences in depictions of these ENGOs, the results demonstrate that future research should focus on specifics within states and the nuances of environmental communication in differing media environments. This underscores the need for ENGOs to adapt their communication strategies to effectively engage with media audiences within these specific national contexts. As environmental challenges intensify, ENGOs' ability to navigate media representation will become increasingly important for effective public engagement.

Appendix for Chapter 3

Figure 1. Diagnostic plot for topics, WWF

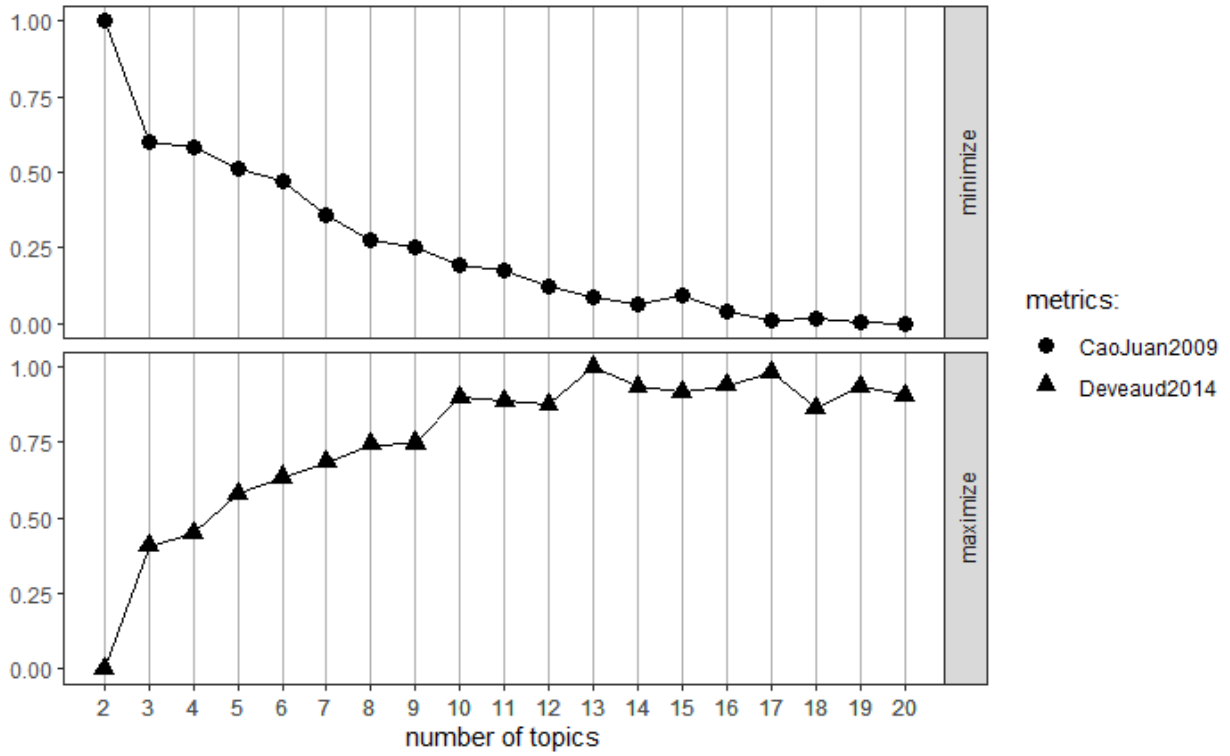


Figure 2. Diagnostic plot for topics, Greenpeace

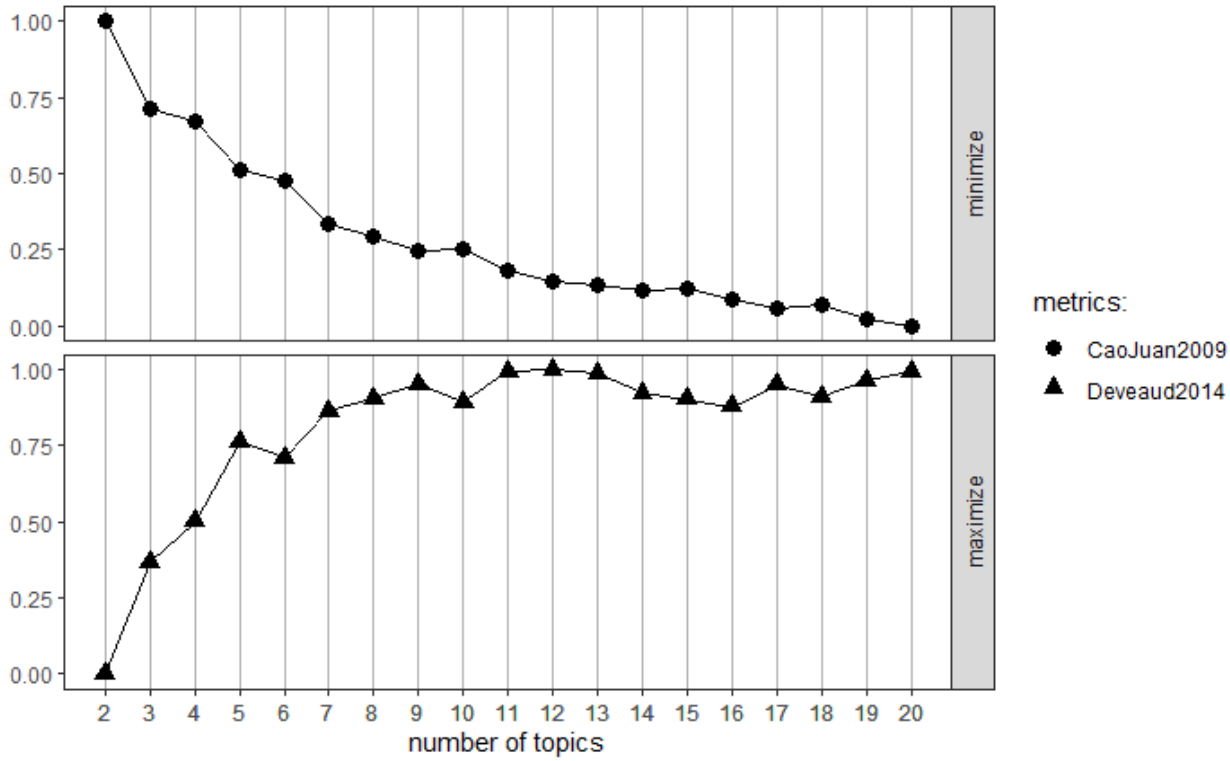


Figure 3. Topic coherence and prevalence, WWF

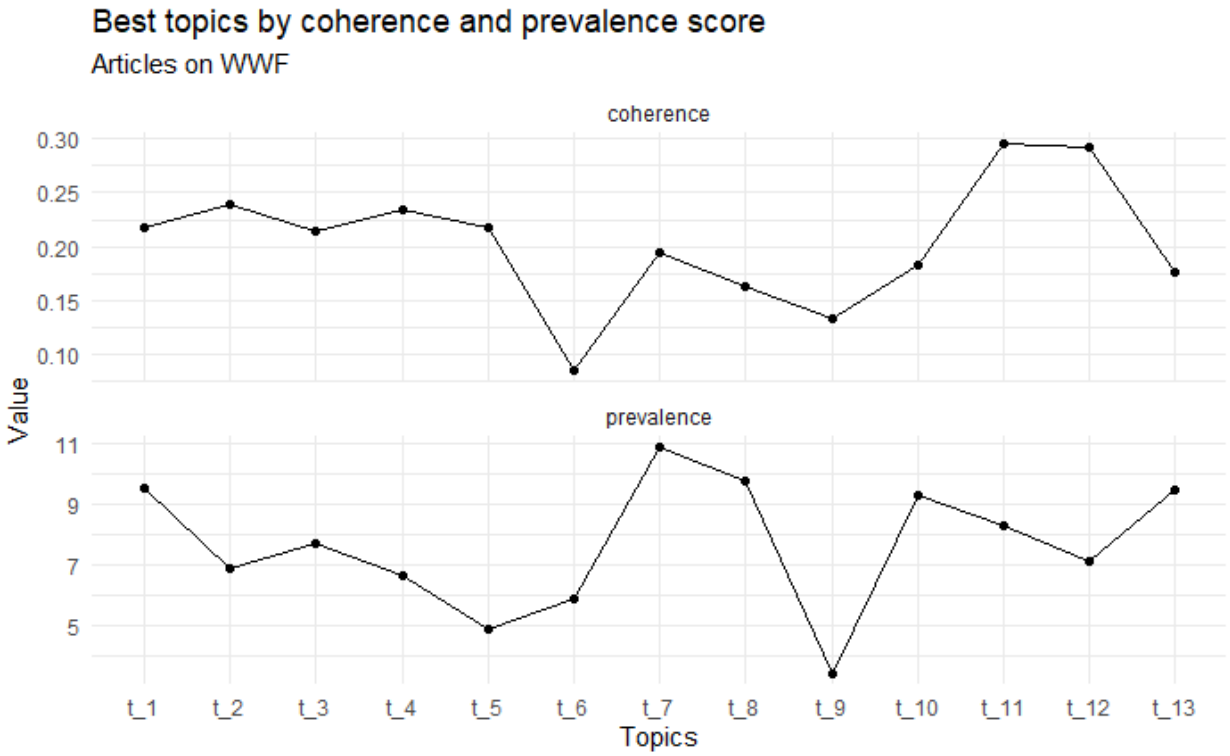


Figure 4. Topic coherence and prevalence, Greenpeace

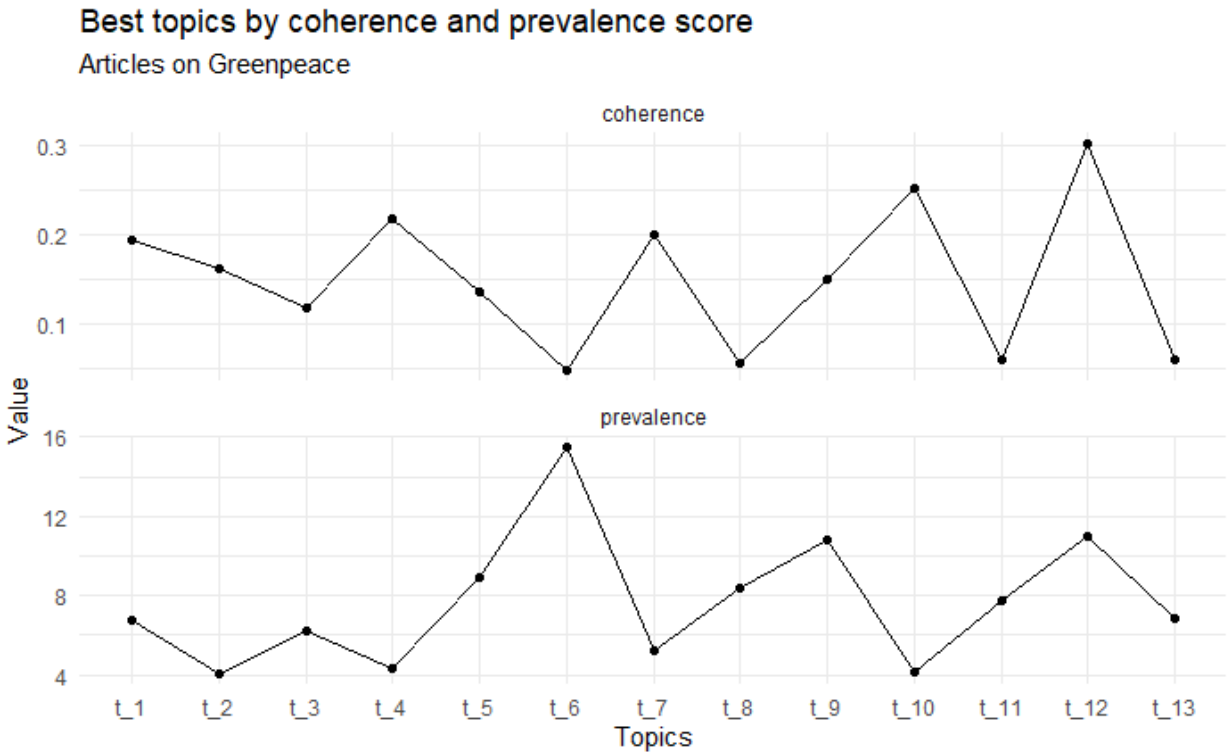


Figure 5. Dendogram, WWF

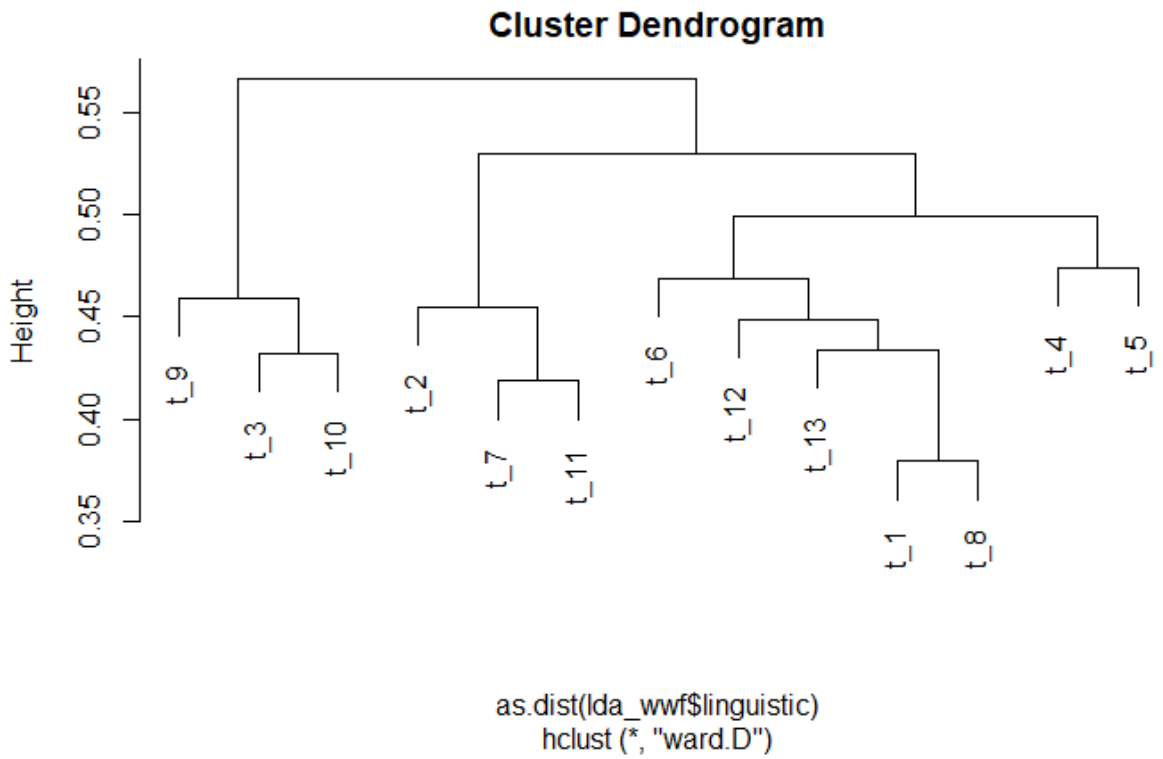


Figure 6. Dendogram, Greenpeace

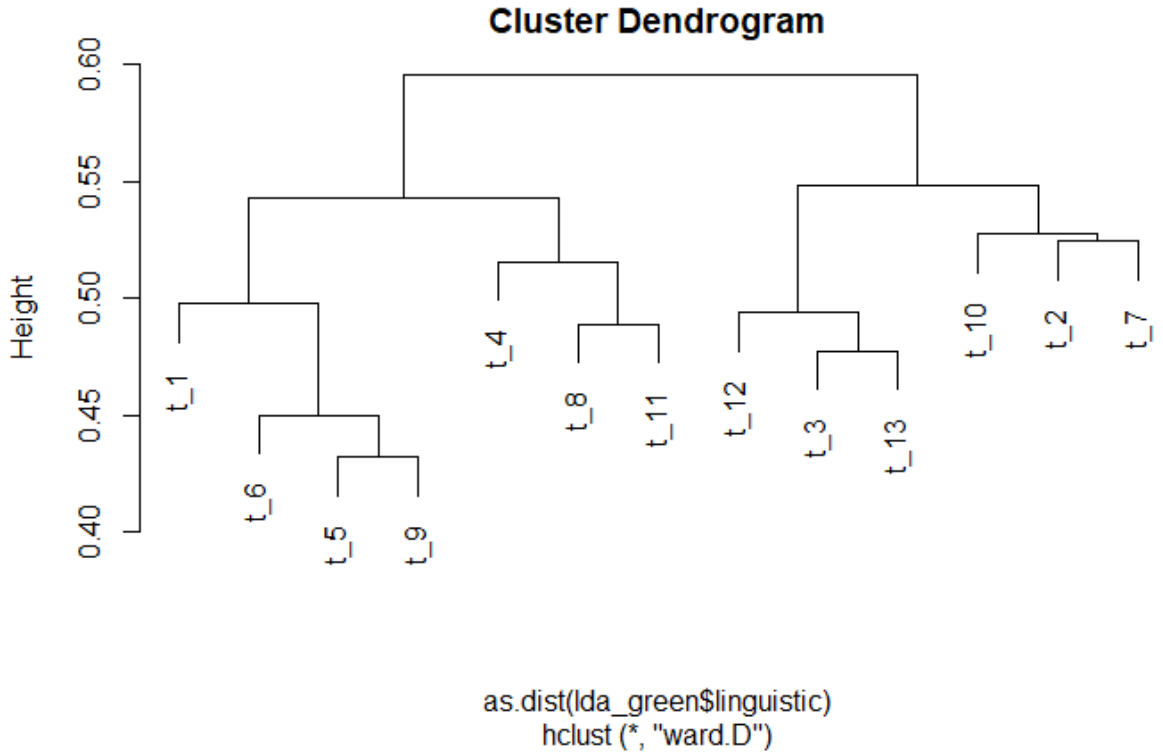


Table 1. Pairwise Chi Square tests for newspapers sentiment (VADER)

Source	Chi2	P_value
Bangkok Post (Thailand)	20.52621	3.49E-05
The Jakarta Post (Indonesia)	4.045049	1.32E-01
Manila Times (Philippines)	15.28702	9.23E-05
New Straits Times (Malaysia)	4.585083	1.01E-01
Phnom Phen Post (Cambodia)	0.305443	5.80E-01
The Straits Times (Singapore)	16.89224	2.15E-04

Table 2. Sentiment Chi Squared tests for VADER

Source	Sentiment	Chi2	P_value
Bangkok Post (Thailand)	positive	3.891892	4.85E-02
Bangkok Post (Thailand)	negative	18.27027	1.92E-05
Manila Times (Philippines)	positive	0.266667	6.06E-01
Manila Times (Philippines)	negative	20.57143	5.74E-06
The Straits Times (Singapore)	positive	4.608219	3.18E-02
The Straits Times (Singapore)	negative	11.01356	9.04E-04

Table 3. T tests for NRC differences

	emotion	t_stat	p_value
1	anger	-6.03798	1.85E-09
2	fear	-6.45055	1.38E-10
3	trust	-1.67439	9.42E-02
4	joy	3.774037	1.66E-04
5	anticipation	-0.64721	5.18E-01
6	disgust	-8.68753	8.01E-18
7	surprise	2.415049	1.58E-02
8	sadness	-4.53154	6.18E-06

Table 4. T Tests for source - NRC

	Source	Emotion	Comparison	T_statistic	P_value
t	Bangkok Post (Thailand)	anger	Higher	16.0932645	4.18E-58
t1	The Jakarta Post (Indonesia)	anger	Higher	54.5732074	0.00E+00
t2	Manila Times (Philippines)	anger	Higher	14.506471	2.57E-46
t3	New Straits Times (Malaysia)	anger	Higher	88.1815942	0.00E+00
t4	Phnom Phen Post (Cambodia)	anger	Higher	43.5989891	0.00E+00
t5	The Straits Times (Singapore)	anger	Higher	25.0711954	1.25E-138
t6	Bangkok Post (Thailand)	fear	Higher	5.9160951	3.32E-09
t7	The Jakarta Post (Indonesia)	fear	Higher	56.8966879	0.00E+00
t8	Manila Times (Philippines)	fear	Higher	12.893857	3.33E-37
t9	New Straits Times (Malaysia)	fear	Higher	70.200951	0.00E+00
t10	Phnom Phen Post (Cambodia)	fear	Higher	27.4382064	5.24E-157
t11	The Straits Times (Singapore)	fear	Higher	44.910404	0.00E+00
t12	Bangkok Post (Thailand)	trust	Lower	-24.039988	9.03E-127
t13	The Jakarta Post (Indonesia)	trust	Higher	38.0779477	5.686937e-315
t14	Manila Times (Philippines)	trust	Lower	-2.230561	2.58E-02
t15	New Straits Times (Malaysia)	trust	Higher	46.3499731	0.00E+00
t16	Phnom Phen Post (Cambodia)	trust	Higher	3.1298322	1.76E-03
t17	The Straits Times (Singapore)	trust	Lower	-13.3559563	1.11E-40
t18	Bangkok Post (Thailand)	joy	Lower	-34.3280989	8.61E-255
t19	The Jakarta Post (Indonesia)	joy	Higher	12.5274354	5.63E-36
t20	Manila Times (Philippines)	joy	Lower	-9.9965755	3.65E-23
t21	New Straits Times (Malaysia)	joy	Higher	40.7437678	0.00E+00
t22	Phnom Phen Post (Cambodia)	joy	Lower	-13.8819282	8.58E-43
t23	The Straits Times (Singapore)	joy	Lower	-114.7166454	0.00E+00
t24	Bangkok Post (Thailand)	anticipation	Lower	-21.4281147	2.51E-101
t25	The Jakarta Post (Indonesia)	anticipation	Higher	18.0884379	5.14E-73
t26	Manila Times (Philippines)	anticipation	Lower	-7.1865461	8.25E-13
t27	New Straits Times (Malaysia)	anticipation	Higher	53.3900199	0.00E+00
t28	Phnom Phen Post (Cambodia)	anticipation	Higher	30.2636855	1.57E-183
t29	The Straits Times (Singapore)	anticipation	Lower	-60.9393021	0.00E+00
t30	Bangkok Post (Thailand)	disgust	Higher	41.9862106	0.00E+00
t31	The Jakarta Post (Indonesia)	disgust	Higher	56.3419642	0.00E+00
t32	Manila Times (Philippines)	disgust	Higher	17.2460461	1.89E-63
t33	New Straits Times (Malaysia)	disgust	Higher	116.524701	0.00E+00
t34	Phnom Phen Post (Cambodia)	disgust	Higher	28.5921025	1.94E-167
t35	The Straits Times (Singapore)	disgust	Higher	74.5960269	0.00E+00
t36	Bangkok Post (Thailand)	surprise	Lower	-37.8617764	0.00E+00

t37	The Jakarta Post (Indonesia)	surprise	Higher	31.5193676	6.59E-217
t38	Manila Times (Philippines)	surprise	Lower	-2.5814065	9.88E-03
t39	New Straits Times (Malaysia)	surprise	Higher	42.3397298	0.00E+00
t40	Phnom Phen Post (Cambodia)	surprise	Not significant	0.1450097	8.85E-01
t41	The Straits Times (Singapore)	surprise	Lower	-92.8746199	0.00E+00
t42	Bangkok Post (Thailand)	sadness	Higher	5.6806554	1.35E-08
t43	The Jakarta Post (Indonesia)	sadness	Higher	25.3178542	5.72E-141
t44	Manila Times (Philippines)	sadness	Higher	12.3655843	1.97E-34
t45	New Straits Times (Malaysia)	sadness	Higher	64.8344581	0.00E+00
t46	Phnom Phen Post (Cambodia)	sadness	Higher	40.5561079	2.239896e-319
t47	The Straits Times (Singapore)	sadness	Higher	10.6615523	1.55E-26

Table 5. AR models for M1 and M2

	Greenpeace AR (M1)	WWF AR (M2)
ar1	0.117	0.232
	(0.031)	(0.024)
intercept	31.642	29.561
	(0.689)	(0.744)
Num.Obs.	1055	1055
AIC	9295.6	15412.9
BIC	9310.4	15429.2
RMSE	19.76	23.47
r2.year		
r2.interaction		

Table 6. Linear Mixed Models for Disgust

	GP disgust			WWF disgust		
Predictors	*Estimates*	*CI*	*p*	*Estimates*	*CI*	*p*
(Intercept)	-29.53	-439.47 – 380.41	0.888	-146.46	-291.25 – -1.67	**0.047**
year	0.02	-0.18 – 0.22	0.856	0.08	0.00 – 0.15	**0.040***
Random Effects						
σ^2	78.36			35.31		
τ_{00}	6.32 $_{\text{lagged\_year}}$			0.72 $_{\text{lagged\_year}}$		
ICC	0.07			0.02		
N	23 $_{\text{lagged\_year}}$			24 $_{\text{lagged\_year}}$		
Observations	1054			1054		
Marginal R^2 / Conditional R^2	0.000 / 0.075			0.005 / 0.025		

Conclusion

Theoretical Contributions to NGO Literature

This project makes significant contributions to the literature on public support for NGOs and nonprofits in developing countries. By focusing on the Southeast Asian region, the dissertation advances an underrepresented case in the global civil society literature. Furthermore, the focus on authoritarian and competitive authoritarian regimes puts an emphasis on how civil society operates under restrictive but not entirely prohibitive circumstances.

The studies in the dissertation challenge conventional assumptions about trust in NGOs by demonstrating its dualistic nature in the region. While social media increases trust in NGOs by creating virtual civic spaces (Chapter 1), it simultaneously erodes confidence in governance institutions. This duality of trust demonstrates how social media platforms reconfigure legitimacy hierarchies and allow for the expression of distrust even in restrictive regime environments. Furthermore, Chapter 2 demonstrates how the willingness of individuals to support ENGOs is influenced by alignment with local priorities, challenging conventional assumptions that equate NGO effectiveness with Western funding. The findings show that donor preferences are guided by perceived responsiveness to domestic concerns. This contributes to the small but growing literature on donor markets in developing countries and the role of giving in these understudied contexts. The dissertation also reveals how elite media narratives polarize perceptions of ENGOs, privileging service-oriented organizations over advocacy groups (Chapter 3). The project contributes to theories of NGO legitimacy in contexts where media can act as a tool of both empowerment and repression.

The dissertation also contributes to the practical guidance for civil society organizations in restrictive regime environments who operate despite limitations and harassment. The first

chapter indicates that NGOs can leverage social media to build trust with the public and provide spaces for discourse and dissent in otherwise restrictive environments. Chapter 2 provides clear policy suggestions for organizations and suggests that they should prioritize regional partnerships, gender-inclusive leadership, and localized campaigns to attract donor support. Furthermore, media relations are very important for NGOs as they navigate scandals and growing discontent with large NGO campaigns. Advocacy focused organizations can counter negative media framing by emphasizing grassroots accountability and tangible outcomes they have contributed to.

Contributions to Comparative Politics and Regionalism Literature

This study challenges conventional frameworks on trust in hybrid regimes. Chapter 1 contributes to theories of political trust in hybrid and authoritarian systems by demonstrating that social media simultaneously enhances trust in NGOs while eroding trust in government institutions. Digital platforms provide a civic space where NGOs can engage directly with the public, forming connections that are otherwise constrained by restrictions on physical assembly and political expression. As states and political parties contend with the post-COVID backlash cycle, they must address declining popularity and the ways in which social media enables direct criticism. A growing issue is polarization, and this chapter highlights the emergence of a trust polarization, where governmental institutions at all levels experience declining trust compared to NGOs and civil society, including local communities and personal networks. In the Asian context, the dominant literature has emphasized the historically high levels of institutional trust that governments have enjoyed (Zhai, 2018; Nathan; 2020). However, Chapter 1 demonstrates that such trust is eroding, as exposure to relatively uninhibited dialogues on social media enables individuals to express their true preferences and align more closely with civil society. This shift

suggests that digital platforms are reshaping state-society relations by providing spaces for discourse that were previously constrained.

Chapter 2 demonstrates that donors favor NGOs with a regional focus, local partnerships, and gender-inclusive leadership. Donors favor partnerships with organizations like ASEAN. This finding suggests that while existing literature on the ASEAN Way rightly highlights the organization's limitations and lack of impact, it has overlooked the symbolic importance ASEAN holds in the region (Acharya, 1997; Goh, 2000). Despite its limited effectiveness, donor recognition of ASEAN underscores the role of symbolic signals in environmental policymaking. The study highlights how cultural proximity and grassroots accountability shape legitimacy in postcolonial contexts and regional environmental cooperation.

The thesis contributes to our understanding of how media narratives influence public perceptions and the legitimacy of NGOs, particularly in contexts where media freedom is constrained. Chapter 3 examines the media's portrayal of environmental NGOs, revealing a bias favoring service-oriented organizations over advocacy-focused ones. This negative bias towards advocacy organizations like Greenpeace demonstrates that news media can shape depictions of organizations and potentially limit their efforts to obtain public legitimacy. With growing discontent over climate advocacy actions, particularly direct-action protests, understanding how the public reacts to advocacy groups is important for climate advocacy generally. The portrayal of climate advocacy groups as elitists can undermine the inclusivity and effectiveness of environmental movements broadly. The increasing alienation of the public from environmental issues may continue to marginalize those who already feel excluded from mainstream environmental discourse. Social movements literature warns of elite-driven narratives about

activist work, where influential individuals or groups co-opt social justice causes, potentially sidelining grassroots efforts (Nisbet and Huge, 2006; Nisbet and Newman, 2015). This chapter contributes to our understanding of how news media can be biased in their depiction of organizations and how this might hurt growing efforts in the region to attract people to the movement.

The dissertation also advances the comparative politics literature on state-society relations in competitive authoritarian settings (Levitsky and Way, 2010). Building on Alagappa's (2004) work on civil society in Asia, the studies examine how NGOs are perceived and represented in repressive state environments and identify the conditions under which donors choose to support organizations operating within these constraints. This research underscores the importance of understanding both the external pressures from donors and the internal challenges within authoritarian contexts that NGOs navigate to maintain their operations and influence (Heiss, 2019).

Empirical Contributions

This project advances a mixed-methods framework for analyzing ENGOs in Southeast Asia. By integrating cross-national surveys, a conjoint experimental design, and machine learning text analysis, the chapters establish a replicable model for studying trust, donor behavior, and narratives on ENGOs at scale. The triangulation of methods addresses limitations in existing literature on the region, which often relies on isolated case studies and provides a template for future work.

Chapter 2 implements a conjoint experiment, and it is one of the first studies to investigate NGO donation preferences in the region. Increasingly conjoint experiments are being

utilized to understand donor and volunteer preferences and this study is part of a growing trend of using quasi-experimental methods to better assess donor behavior. Furthermore, determining the preferences of donors in restrictive political environments advances the study of nonprofit sustainability and the strategic positioning of NGOs. The machine learning analysis of media corpora (Chapter 3) demonstrates the utility of computational methods for studying civil society narratives at a large scale. This approach provides insight into how future work in NGO and nonprofit studies can utilize tools like text sentiment analyzers to better understand what emotionally salient narratives surround specific nonprofits and NGOs.

Research Limitations and Future Research

This dissertation, while offering insights into the perceptions of NGOs in Southeast Asia, faces several limitations. Some of the challenges methodologically are issues like the reliance on self-reported data from samples across the region, generalizability and scope. In Chapter 1, the Asian Barometer data, while comprehensive, may be reflecting social desirability on the part of respondents, especially around sensitive issues like trust in the government and NGOs. Furthermore, while the conjoint experiment in Chapter 2 is representative of Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, this excludes other Southeast Asian countries with distinct political and cultural contexts. This limits generalizability outside of these contexts. The forced choice design of the experiment, while useful for isolating preferences, does not account for real-world scenarios where donors might opt not to contribute at all. The media analysis in Chapter 3 focuses on English-language newspapers and this potentially overlooks narratives in vernacular language outlets that may reflect different biases. This limits the validity of the study since the results can only reflect the elite media of these countries and their depictions of ENGOs. Furthermore, the

study's focus on WWF and Greenpeace misses smaller, grassroots organizations that may face unique legitimacy challenges in the media space. This makes it difficult to generalize the findings to all ENGOs. Another limitation is the changing nature of Southeast Asia's media space. With increasing numbers of people, particularly younger populations, obtaining news from social media, the study does not account for this growing media space. In these digital environments, ENGOs may be able to cultivate higher levels of trust through direct engagement with the public, rather than being represented through traditional news outlets.

Future research on ENGOs should explore several issues raised by this project. While this dissertation highlights the dualistic nature of trust in the region, further studies could investigate the long-term effects of social media engagement on public trust in NGOs and governance institutions. Given that social media can simultaneously enhance credibility and expose organizations to heightened scrutiny, future research could examine how different types of online engagement affect trust over time. Furthermore, donor preferences and funding patterns in the region require more exploration. Future research could investigate how domestic donors perceive foreign-funded NGOs and whether there are strategic advantages to diversifying funding sources. Additionally, replicating the conjoint experiment across all ASEAN member states would provide a more comprehensive understanding of regional variations in donor preferences.

Comparative studies across different Southeast Asian countries could provide insights into how varying degrees of political restrictions shape donor behavior and perceptions of NGOs. With regards to elite media, future work could analyze how grassroots and independent media platforms shape public perceptions of environmental activism. The role of digital misinformation in undermining ENGOs, as well as the strategies organizations use to counteract negative

framing, is another promising area for study. Given the decline of traditional media sources and the rise of social media as a news source, other areas of study include analyzing social media trends on ENGOs and determining how ENGOs use their platforms to represent themselves to the public.

Toward a People-Powered Future: Environmental Civil Society and Local Agency

The challenges of our current times demand a reimagining of civil society as a locally rooted, self-sustaining force that prioritizes the needs and agency of the communities it serves. With growing concerns over climate catastrophe, authoritarian resurgence and polarization, civil society might be the one place for the revitalization of community-based democracy. This dissertation emphasizes that sustainable environmental governance in Southeast Asia hinges on civil society organizations that are funded by, accountable to, and reflective of the people themselves. Foreign aid and international partnerships, while historically vital, are increasingly fraught with tensions. The findings of this thesis indicate a broader shift toward a rejection of top-down, externally imposed agendas in favor of grassroots legitimacy and self-determination.

The urgency of this shift is made more certain by Southeast Asia's dual realities. On one hand, hybrid and authoritarian regimes are tightening restrictions on civic space, weaponizing laws to silence dissent and surveil digital activism. On the other hand, regional bodies like ASEAN are emerging as potential platforms for transnational collaboration. These spaces offer civil society groups opportunities to advocate for climate reforms at a supranational level. But, ASEAN's state-centric structure, sometimes called the ASEAN Way, risks replicating the same power imbalances that marginalize civil society to begin with. For civil society to thrive, it must leverage these regional frameworks while remaining anchored in the communities it represents.

These organizations must build trust through transparency, cultural understanding and tangible impacts on local issues.

Environmental crises, from sinking cities like Jakarta, to vanishing rainforests in Borneo, demand collective action. But not all environmental actors are perceived equally. Advocacy groups face skepticism and negativity in elite media, while service-oriented NGOs are trusted but only through their depoliticized pragmatism. This dichotomy underscores a paradox, civil society has to survive in restrictive environments and must deliver immediate and measurable benefits but also challenge inequalities that create harm. Bridging this divide requires a public that is not only environmentally conscious but also politically engaged. This is a public that views civil society not as charity, but as an extension of its own agency and voice. Therefore, the path forward for environmental governance is not simple. But the findings from the dissertation offer grounds for cautious optimism. Social media, despite polarization, empowers citizens to bypass state-controlled narratives and create civic spaces (Chapter 1). Donors are eager to support ENGOs that reflect their regional identities and values (Chapter 2). Trust is high for ENGOs in elite media depictions despite distinctive differences between organizations (Chapter 3). The environmental future of Southeast Asia will be written by those who build it. Civil society in the region has an opportunity to redefine environmental governance as not a technocratic project, but as a participatory, people-driven process.

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