Emergent political remittances during the pandemic: Evidence from a survey of overseas Filipino workers

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Abstract
This article examines the experiences and assessments of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) on the Philippine government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study is part of the growing migration literature exploring the formation of political remittances, defined as political principles, norms and practices migrants acquire during the migration process and what these imply for democratization, particularly in migrants’ home countries. Data for the study came from an online survey of OFWs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results from the ordered logistic regression suggest that overseas Filipinos’ experiences of successful pandemic management and aid distribution in host countries may influence OFWs to expect and demand similar measures in the Philippines.

Keywords
overseas Filipino workers, political remittance, Philippines, pandemic management survey

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Introduction

Overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) are hailed as active development agents by the Philippine government (Calzado, 2007). Their economic contributions are well-recognized. In 2019, OFWs remitted USD 33.5 billion to the Philippines, which accounted 9.3 percent of the country’s gross domestic product and 7.8 percent of gross national income (Rivas, 2020). Economic remittances boost the economic conditions of Filipino families (Ducanes and Abella, 2008), and have spillovers that enhance governance and human development in OFWs’ home provinces (Tusalem, 2018). Beyond economic remittances, migrants can also be sources of political remittances which are defined as “the act of transferring political principles, vocabulary and practices between two or more places, which migrants and their descendants share a connection with” (Krawatzek and Müller-Funk 2019: 1004). Political remittances, while less easily acknowledged, can play an important role in social change. Studies have shown how political remittances influence the political awareness of migrant workers’ relatives at home as well as their community’s level of political participation and governance in local provinces (Duquette-Rury, 2016; Duquette-Rury et al., 2018; Tusalem, 2018). Nevertheless, there is a need to examine how political remittances are formed in host countries as a necessary first step to better understand the mechanisms in how political remittances shape political action in migrants’ home countries. This study aims to examine the formation of political remittances based on how OFWs evaluate the responses of home and host country governments to the global health crisis.

In this article, OFWs refer to Filipino citizens who migrate abroad for work. OFWs remit money that sustains the livelihood of relatives in the Philippines. Since their employment and stay abroad is temporary, many hope to return home after accumulating enough savings (Chowthi, 2008; Caguio and Lomboy, 2014; McKay, 2016). The paper’s definition of OFWs is in line with the operational framework by the Philippine Statistics Authority (2017) that classifies overseas Filipinos who work and stay abroad temporarily as OFWs. The phenomenon of temporary labor migration stemmed from the systematic labor export policy of the Philippine state since the 1970s (Solomon, 2009). Apart from sending remittances, OFWs have engaged in social and political activities in the Philippines including voting in elections, partnering with local governments for development, and organizing networks that lobby in support of fellow migrant workers (Tusalem, 2018; Rother, 2022).

Despite the important role of OFWs in Philippine society, the Philippine government’s weak social protection and ambiguous empowerment policies often result in OFWs being “seen but not heard” (Wozniak, 2015: 106). Since the implementation of the Overseas Absentee Voting Act in 2004, voter turnout among OFWs has consistently declined with 25 host countries reporting zero votes in 2013 (Wozniak, 2015). Along with prevailing glitches in the Overseas
Absentee Voting Act, Alarcon (2010) notes that some of the reasons behind low voter turnout include the diminished credibility of overseas elections, the limited accessibility of government institutions and even apathy and cynicism among OFWs themselves.

Nevertheless, the 2016 presidential elections and the 2019 midterm elections seem to have changed this trend. Table 1 shows a steep increase in overseas Filipino voter turnout compared to previous elections. Indeed, OFWs formed a significant part of political support for the Duterte administration (Curato, 2016). In the run-up to the 2016 elections, over 600,000 OFWs formed “charters” in support of then presidential candidate Rodrigo Duterte. Each member monitored online engagement and influenced at least five family members in the home country to vote for Duterte (Ranada, 2016a). Remarkably, President Duterte won 72 percent of the overseas vote as he promised to improve the lives of migrant workers and make their concerns among the top priorities of his administration (Ranada, 2016b).

The COVID-19 pandemic poses a severe challenge to fulfilling this promise. An October 2020 report by the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) revealed that more than half a million OFWs have been displaced by the pandemic, while around 1.1 million are still unable to resume work (Pazzibugan, 2020). Because most of them are employed in the services sector (Santos, 2014), over 9,000 OFWs were reported to have contracted COVID-19 at least once during the period from January 2020 to October 2020. By the end of 2020, the Department of Foreign Affairs (2020) reported 12,350 COVID-19 cases and 861 deaths among overseas Filipinos. These circumstances are reflected in Table 1.

### Table 1. Overseas absentee voting trends.

| Year | Election   | Registered voters | Votes cast | Percentage of voter turnout |
|------|------------|-------------------|------------|----------------------------|
| 2019 | Midterm    | 1,822,173         | 334,928    | 18                         |
| 2016 | Presidential | 1,376,067        | 432,706    | 31                         |
| 2013 | Midterm    | 710,951           | 118,823    | 17                         |
| 2010 | Presidential | 568,733           | 153,323    | 27                         |
| 2007 | Midterm    | 485,720           | 81,732     | 17                         |
| 2004 | Presidential | 359,296           | 233,137    | 65                         |

Source: Cook and Salazar (2016) and Department of Foreign Affairs (2019).

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1In the Philippines, midterm elections occur every three years for 12 seats in the Senate, all seats in the House of Representatives, and local seats, namely governors, vice governors and provincial council members for each province and mayors, vice mayors and city council members for each city or municipality.
the first dip in OFW remittances recorded in two decades during 2020. This
decline, while much lower than the 20 percent decline projected early into the
pandemic, was reported at 0.8 percent but, when adjusted for exchange rate
movements, annual remittances fell by almost 5 percent (Noble, 2021).
Meanwhile, many migrants continue to face travel restrictions and an uncertain
job market whether at home or overseas (Robles, 2021).

Unlike other national crises where OFWs are relatively insulated from
negative effects in the Philippines, the adverse impacts of the COVID-19
pandemic render most OFWs in need of assistance from the Philippine gov-
ernment. OFWs who live in host countries that have good governance and well-
running social services may develop similar expectations from the Philippine
government. In light of the OFWs’ growing voter turnout and interest in
Philippine elections, it would then be interesting to examine how OFWs
evaluate and hold the Philippine government accountable based on their
unique experience of reliance on both home and host countries. We therefore
ask, “What are the determinants of OFWs’ satisfaction with the Philippine
government’s response to the COVID-19 crisis?”

In what follows, first, we briefly review the COVID-19 response programs
of the Duterte administration for OFWs. The next sections consist of a review of
the related literature; methodology, data and hypotheses; key findings and the
concluding section. The conclusion discusses policy implications, notably in the
greater context of the Duterte administration’s strategy of social transfers (or
what is referred to in the Philippines as ayuda, the local term for aid which
became a byword during the pandemic).

The Philippine government’s COVID-19 response for OFWs

In May 2020, the World Bank Group emphasized the vulnerability of migrant
workers to COVID-19, urging governments to enact measures that will control
the transmission of the virus, ensure employment retention and assist migrants
in distress (Moroz et al., 2020). The Philippine government launched several
programs to address these problems. Under the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act,
PHP 2.5 billion (around USD 47 million) was earmarked for a one-time cash
assistance of PHP 10,000 (around USD 189) through the Abot Kamay ang
Pagtulong2 (AKAP) Program as well as for provisional aid for those awaiting
repatriation (Fernandez et al., 2020). These efforts were extended by the
Bayanihan to Recover as One Act which allotted PHP 820 million (around USD
15 million) for the repatriation of OFWs, medical assistance and shipment of
human remains of OFWs who died of COVID-19 (Fernandez et al., 2020).
Government agencies also provided emergency educational funds, food and

2From Filipino, help within reach.
livelihood assistance to displaced OFWs (Fernandez et al., 2020). Perhaps most crucial is facilitating the safe and speedy repatriation of OFWs.

The abovementioned efforts, however, were insufficient in addressing the concerns of 1.1 million affected OFWs at the time. News about the slow disbursement of aid spread. Reports of OFWs resorting to selling blood to make ends meet went viral in social media (GMA News, 2020; DOLE, 2020). There were also several bottlenecks in the repatriation of OFWs, such as poor testing capacity, the suspension of local travel and even local governments barring the readmission of returning migrants and stranded individuals (Asis, 2020). In the initial months, the government’s repatriation efforts were heavily criticized for the large number of repatriates stranded in Metro Manila and local governments blamed the spikes in COVID-19 cases on returning citizens (Fernandez et al., 2020).

The country’s COVID-19 response lagged behind that of other nations. The Lowy Institute (2021) released their evaluation report of the control of the spread of COVID among 98 countries. The Philippines ranked 79th, trailing behind other Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand (4th), Singapore (13th) and Myanmar (24th) but scoring higher than Indonesia (85th). Meanwhile, The Lancet evaluated 91 countries based on effective reproduction rates, daily cases, mortality rates and testing capacity (Ornedo, 2020). Again, the Philippines ranked low compared to Southeast Asian counterparts — ranking at 66th globally — which was attributed to Duterte’s downplaying of the health crisis (Ornedo, 2020).

Review of relevant literature

The pandemic has thrust OFWs in a situation where they depend for assistance on both their home country, the Philippines, and the host country where they are currently employed. This position may make them sensitive to the performance of both countries in handling the pandemic. The novel experiences that migrant workers are exposed to in their host countries may shape their own identities and beliefs (Rother, 2009). Exposure to practices of responsiveness, transparency and democratic governance in the host country can shape the policy expectations of migrant workers when evaluating the government of their home countries (Levitz and Pop-Eleches, 2009). These expectations can be “diffused” to the home country through networks of influence within migrant workers’ families and local communities (Tarrow, 2011). Because of this, migrant workers may be potential agents of change (Levitt, 1998). Aside from economic remittances, migrants transmit political remittances that can be defined as “the act of transferring political principles, vocabulary and practices between two or more places, which migrants and their descendants share a connection with” (Krawatzek and Müller-Funk, 2020: 1004).
Conventionally, political remittances have been studied as a mechanism for migrant workers to influence democratic attitudes in the home country. Because most of the countries that export labor have weaker political institutions, migrant workers based in democratic host countries may inspire democratic development (Rapoport, 2016). Pérez-Armendáriz and Crow (2010) outline three possible channels of transmission: (1) returnee migrants can push for change in local communities themselves, (2) migrants abroad can influence family members at home through cross-border communication and (3) social networks formed by migrants can disseminate democratic practices at home. This is evidenced by several single country case studies. In Mexico, returning migrant workers partnered with local governments in the provision of public goods (Duquette-Rury, 2016), raised the incentives for reform against corruption (Tyburski, 2012) and inspired competitive elections by making relatives less reliant on patronage from incumbents (Pfutze, 2012). In another case, returning migrant workers from the United States of America (USA) transmitted a culture of political participation in their hometowns in Mali (Chauvet and Mercier, 2014). Tusalem’s (2018) analysis of 77 provinces in the Philippines found that the number of OFWs and the number of remittances improve governance and public goods provision in their home provinces. The study also found that Filipino migrants push for higher standards of accountability and performance which they have witnessed in their host countries and motivate their families to demand for this in their own communities.

Political remittances have also been studied as identities, demands and practices acquired by migrants as a result of their transnational experience (Goldring, 2004). Political remittances, by linking together experiences in the host country and the home country, influence the norms, narratives of belonging and political practices that migrants uphold (Krawatzek and Müller-Funk, 2020). Following the 2011 Egyptian revolution, second-generation Egyptian youth associations in Vienna were heavily politicized and formed distinct ideas on what democracy in Egypt entails (Krawatzek and Müller-Funk, 2020). In the case of OFWs, Kessler and Rother (2016) have shown how migrants’ immersion in a foreign country, regardless of its political system, can inspire democratic principles due to their own personal experiences of labor rights and political freedoms. They observed how OFWs in Hong Kong were exposed to organizations and protests which carried over to their own democratic values. They also found that migration can lead to more critical evaluations of the home country’s political system.

In this study, we examine the political evaluations formed by OFWs in light of their experience of vulnerability towards the public health and aid policies of both host and home countries during the pandemic. Similar to migrant youth from Egypt (Krawatzek and Müller-Funk, 2020), OFWs may form their own expectations of good governance due to experiences of having lived outside the
Philippines. Their views on the COVID-19 response of their host countries may serve as the standard for evaluating the Philippine government’s response to the pandemic. More specifically, we posit that the support received by OFWs in the host country, through pandemic management and aid, may influence their satisfaction with the Philippine government. The formation of these political evaluations is not done in isolation but is instead cultivated as a result of the OFWs’ transnational experience. Thus, we use political remittance as a concept to explicitly connect their lived experiences in the host country to attitudes and expectations towards the Philippines.

Given the global concerns raised by the pandemic, it seems like presidential approval is driven less by economic considerations but by the administration’s management of the public health crisis. A national survey of Americans in July 2020 found that presidential approval is lower for those who have been or know someone who has been infected by the virus. Contrary to the continued influence of the economy on presidential approval in ordinary times, there was no evidence of economic voting during this period. Despite experiencing grave personal economic setbacks, respondents did not attribute blame towards the president. Rather, they held the president accountable based on the most salient national issue of the country (Edwards et al., 1995; Druckman and Holmes, 2004; Caveri, 2019). The COVID Performance Index created by the Lowy Institute (2021) assessed the pandemic response of 98 countries from the 43rd week after the 100th confirmed COVID-19 case was reported up to January 2021. These countries were ranked based on six indicators: total confirmed cases, total confirmed deaths, confirmed cases per million, confirmed deaths per million, confirmed cases as a proportion of COVID tests conducted and the number of tests done per thousand people. An average of these rankings was then normalized to a “score” that ranges from 0 to 100. The Philippines ranked 79th out of the 98 countries (Lowy Institute, 2021). For Filipino migrant workers, the evaluation of the Philippine government’s crisis management may be influenced by their host country’s management of the pandemic. We hypothesize that:

**H1:** Satisfaction with the Philippine government’s COVID-19 response among OFWs increases as the Philippines’ Covid Performance Index becomes higher than the COVID Performance Index of the host country.

Another crucial aspect of disaster response is aid distribution or *ayuda* to affected citizens. Citizens are critical of presidents for things beyond their control but also reward presidents for perceived responsiveness or aid delivery in times of disasters (Gasper and Reeves, 2011). Because of this, presidents have to be strategic in aid distribution. Studies show how presidents take advantage of their influence over particularistic policies by directing aid to core constituencies (Kriner and Reeves, 2015). Presidents are also more likely to respond to
crisis situations in electorally volatile areas (Kriner and Reeves, 2015) and during election years (Gasper, 2015).

As a country with weak political institutions and a personalistic political system, the distribution of aid in the Philippines is politicized to gain public favor. This culture of patronage is heightened in times of crisis. A case study in the wake of Typhoon Haiyan by Eadie et al. (2016) illustrates how affected communities that received aid are hesitant to criticize their “patrons.” Indeed, aid as a public relations strategy proves to be effective given that accountability mechanisms in the Philippines are described as “clientelistic.” The relationship between politicians and the people “represents a transaction, the direct exchange of a citizen’s vote for direct payments or continuing access to employment, goods, and services” (Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007: 2). When politicians provide material benefits, their supporters are pressured to hold up their end of the bargain and express unconditional support. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H2: OFWs who received aid from the home country (Philippines) are more likely to be satisfied with the Philippine government’s COVID response.

Filipino migrants also receive assistance from host country governments. It is likely that assistance from the host country raises expectations among OFWs that the Philippine government will do the same. When the host country provides aid that the Philippine government could not, it could lead to more critical assessment of the Philippine COVID response. Moreover, aid from the host country may make OFWs less dependent on the Philippine government. It has been shown that having an alternative source of emergency funds that does not belong to the government is linked with more candid evaluations of the president in the Philippines (Canare et al., 2021). With assistance from the host country potentially lessening the legitimacy-building effect of ayuda from the Philippines, we hypothesize that:

H3: OFWs who received aid from the host country (destination of work) are less likely to be satisfied with the Philippine government’s COVID response.

Methodology

Data for this study was gathered through an online survey of OFWs. Respondents were recruited by distributing a link to the questionnaire through the Ateneo OF-LIFE program (Overseas Filipinos’ Leadership, Innovation, Financial Literacy and Social Entrepreneurship), Facebook posts by the Ateneo

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3The Ateneo OF-LIFE program is a consortium that aims to empower overseas Filipinos worldwide. It is composed of the Ateneo School of Government, Overseas Filipinos Society for the Promotion of Economic Security, Social Enterprise Development Partnerships Inc., and Ugnayan at Tulong para sa Maralitang Pamilya Foundation (UGAT Foundation).
School of Government, and over 20 OFW-related non-governmental organizations.\(^4\) The instrument was also distributed over email through OF-LIFE from 1 November 2020 to 7 December 2020. Eligible respondents must satisfy the following criteria: they must be Filipino citizens and they were temporary migrants (i.e., those without permanent residency or citizenship in their host countries) who were employed during or immediately before the pandemic; and they regularly remit money back to the Philippines. With this our sample size was reduced from 248 respondents to 129 valid respondents. The sample does not represent the OFW population. Hence, the results of the study cannot be generalized to the OFW population. The variables of interest to the study and their operational definitions are presented in Table 2.

### Findings

Table 3 shows the summary statistics of variables used in the study. The respondents’ ages range from 21 to 68 with a mean age of 40 years old. Host countries were distributed across regions with 48 percent of respondents based in the Middle East, 39 percent in Asia and 13 percent in Europe.

More than half (56 percent) of the respondents’ employment were affected negatively by the pandemic through job loss, shorter working hours, a pay cut and the like. Some 18 percent received aid from their host countries in the form of salary, basic goods, and tax subsidies, free testing and medical assistance and stimulus packages. Meanwhile, only 6.2 percent received aid from the Philippine government. Financial assistance and information were provided by the DOLE AKAP Program and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), respectively (DOLE, 2020). Some of the returnees mentioned free swab testing and hotel accommodations for the required 14-days quarantine upon arrival as well as relief goods in the form of face masks and food. Among the respondents, only 15 percent were able to return to the Philippines, 11 percent were scheduled to return and 31 percent were still stranded or had no schedule set for repatriation. However, almost half (44 percent) of the respondents chose to remain in their host countries. Despite government programs available from DOLE (Patinio, 2020), of those still overseas who wish to return to the Philippines, 42 percent or 23 respondents plan to finance their own repatriation while 33 percent (18 respondents) will be funded by their employer.

Nearly half (49 percent) of our respondents were generally satisfied with the Philippines’ pandemic response. Moreover, we note that a significant portion of respondents (15 percent) were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Meanwhile, the relative COVID performance index refers to the Philippine government’s

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\(^4\)The study and the survey instrument were approved by the University Research Ethics Office of the Ateneo de Manila University with code 20-003.
### Table 2. Variables in the study and their operation definition.

| Variable                                      | Operational definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Dependent variable**                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Satisfaction with the Philippine government's COVID response | This was a categorical variable with values ranging from −2 (very dissatisfied), −1 (dissatisfied), 0 (neutral), 1 (satisfied) and 2 (very satisfied)                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| **Independent variables**                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Relative COVID response                       | This variable is a comparison of how the respondent assessed the management of the COVID-19 crisis by the Philippine government and the government of his/her host country. This was a continuous variable constructed by subtracting the COVID Performance Index of the respondent's host country from the COVID Performance Index of the Philippines. A positive value means the Philippines is doing better while a negative value means it is worse off compared to the host country |
| Received aid from the Philippine government  | Coded as 1 if yes, 0 if no                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Received aid from the host country            | Coded as 1 if yes, 0 if no                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Did COVID-19 affect employment? (job loss, pay cut, hours of work, etc.) | Coded as 1 if yes, 0 if no                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Freedom House score of host country           | Refers to the total score on 10 political rights indicators and 15 civil liberties indicators. Each indicator’s score ranges from 0 to 4; the total score ranges from 0 to 100. The higher the score, the higher the level of democracy (Freedom House, 2020)                                                                                                      |
| **Control variables**                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Age                                           | Age of respondent at time of the survey                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Home Region                                   | Home region of respondent; the categories are the National Capital Region or NCR, Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. Luzon is the base category                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Gender                                        | Coded as 1 if the respondent is male, 2 if female. Male is the base category                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Educational attainment                        | Coded as 1 if the respondent had completed college, 0 otherwise                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
management of COVID-19 vis-a-vis the host country. The Philippines scored 30.6 out of 100 while host countries ranged from 17.3 (USA) to 84.2 (Thailand) (Lowy Institute, 2021). Since the mean relative COVID performance index is −26.92, the Philippine government is doing comparatively worse on average to the respondents’ host countries.

Table 4 presents the results of the study using ordered logistic regression analysis. This is because the dependent variable of the study, satisfaction with the Philippine government’s response to COVID, has a natural ordering of categories among survey responses ranging from “Very dissatisfied” to “Very satisfied.” Model 1 tests for Hypothesis 1 while Model 2 tests for Hypotheses 2 and 3. Model 3 tests for the impact of the controls on satisfaction with the Philippine government’s COVID response. Finally, Model 4 tests for the
Table 4. Ordered logistic regression of the determinants of OFW satisfaction with the COVID-19 response of the Philippine government.

|                          | (1) Satisfaction with COVID response | (2) Satisfaction with COVID response | (3) Satisfaction with COVID response | (4) Satisfaction with COVID response |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Relative COVID response  | 1.02** (1.00, 1.04)                   | 1.03** (1.01, 1.05)                   |                                      |                                      |
| Received aid from        | 6.21*** (4.85, 7.58)                 | 5.25** (3.79, 6.71)                  |                                      |                                      |
| Philippines?             |                                       |                                       |                                      |                                      |
| Received aid from        | 0.34** (−0.55, 1.23)                 | 0.32** (−0.63, 1.26)                 |                                      |                                      |
| host country?            |                                       |                                       |                                      |                                      |
| Employment affected?     | 1.08 (0.42, 1.74)                    | 0.85 (0.18, 1.53)                    |                                      |                                      |
| Freedom House score      | 1.00 (0.99, 1.01)                    | 1.00 (0.99, 1.01)                    |                                      |                                      |
| Visayas                  | 0.66 (−0.38, 1.70)                   | 0.60 (−0.47, 1.66)                   |                                      |                                      |
| Mindanao                 | 2.18 (0.91, 3.45)                    | 2.70 (1.31, 4.08)                    |                                      |                                      |
| NCR                      | 0.60 (−0.34, 1.53)                   | 0.64 (−0.32, 1.59)                   |                                      |                                      |
| Age                      | 1.02 (0.98, 1.06)                    | −1.00 (0.95, 1.05)                   |                                      |                                      |
| Female                   | 0.99 (0.31, 1.66)                    | 0.82 (0.13, 1.51)                    |                                      |                                      |
| College graduate or      | 0.43 (−0.62, 1.47)                   | 0.59 (−0.48, 1.66)                   |                                      |                                      |
| above                    |                                       |                                       |                                      |                                      |
| N                        | 129                                  | 129                                  | 129                                  | 129                                  |
| McFadden Pseudo $R^2$    | 0.112                                | 0.127                                | 0.119                                | 0.156                                |

Notes: Values in parentheses refer to confidence intervals. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$. 
strength of the main hypotheses when controls are added. The impact of COVID-19 on employment, the level of democracy in the host country as well as our controls, the age, gender, home region and educational attainment of the respondent were found to have no significant correlation with satisfaction with the Philippine government’s COVID response.

We find consistent support for H1: the odds of expressing satisfaction with the Philippine government increases by 0.03 for each point the COVID score of the Philippines is higher than that of the host country. We can expect that an OFW based in Thailand, which has the highest COVID Performance Index in our sample (84.2), would be more likely to express dissatisfaction with the Philippine government’s COVID response. Conversely, an OFW based in the USA (with a COVID Performance Index of 17.3) or in Indonesia (24.7) would be more satisfied. Thus, the OFWs’ evaluations of the Philippine COVID response are influenced by the standards of the host countries. Experiences of crisis management in host countries can frame demands for improvement in pandemic response at home, suggesting some evidence of political remittance formation.

In addition, the management of the pandemic matters much more than the personal economic circumstances of OFWs. We find no support for the association between the pandemic’s impact on employment and satisfaction with the government’s COVID response. While presidents are held accountable for the national economy in ordinary times, crisis periods reset the government’s policies which may also affect how citizens evaluate the president. During the pandemic, there is leeway for presidents to deflect blame on economic hardships to the impact of external economic shocks and travel restrictions. Our results lend support to Singer (2021) and Manipis et al. (2021) who argued that during COVID-19, health crisis management takes precedence over the national economy.

There is also some form of competition over legitimacy between the aid distribution policies of the home and host countries. The odds of being satisfied with the Philippine government’s COVID response increases by 4.25 when the OFW receives aid from the Philippines, providing empirical evidence that supports H2. Despite the tendency of OFWs to be disengaged with politics at home (Cook and Salazar, 2016), receiving social transfers (ayuda) from the Philippine government incline them to express satisfaction, resulting in clientelistic accountability. Conversely, we also find support for H3 with the odds of being satisfied with the Philippine government’s COVID response decreasing by 0.68 when OFWs receive aid from the host country. Receiving aid from the host country sets higher expectations among OFWs and makes them less dependent on the home country for support. OFWs, framed by government rhetoric as partners in national development and modern-day national heroes (Rocamora, 2018), can rightfully expect assistance from the Philippine government. Their first-hand experience of aid distribution in host countries can set expectations of aid which the Philippine government may be unable to fulfill. Moreover, receiving support from host countries can potentially free
them from dependence on the Philippine government for benefits and repatriation. Findings from the study of Canare et al. (2021) indicated that access to alternative sources of credit from sources aside from the government can decrease clientelistic ties from incumbent politicians among Filipinos and encourage critical presidential evaluations. When OFWs receive aid from host countries, they may be more likely to evaluate the Philippine government more objectively.

**Conclusion**

Recent trends in overseas voting behavior show that, through popular candidates and social media, OFWs are becoming more inclined to monitor politics at home. Their experience abroad, as findings from this study suggest, also informs their view of the corresponding policies in pandemic management at home. This study further confirms the growing interest among OFWs in Philippine politics. We find that OFWs, even if they are away from the Philippines, are still not insulated from Duterte’s populist rhetoric and clientelistic politics. Tangible benefits from the government are a very significant determinant of OFW satisfaction with the Philippine COVID response. But there is potential for improving their exercise of accountability through exposure in the host country and, more importantly, through tangible benefits OFWs receive from host governments. These provide concrete and comparable policy benchmarks that OFWs appreciate to better inform their assessments of Philippine government policies. Eventually, these governance demands take on the form of political remittances and can potentially be transmitted to their perspectives of the Philippine government.

How these political remittances translate to actual practices and mobilization among OFWs remains to be studied further. Nevertheless, recent trends in Philippine politics show increasing political awareness among OFWs, laying down the foundations of a potentially powerful political group. This group can only reach its full potential once OFWs break free from their “mutually enabling” (Wozniak, 2015) relationship with the government. This calls for stronger institutions that give OFWs the opportunity to transcend their geographic distance from each other, and a common goal that binds them together despite different political loyalties. Only when they are unified as a collective group can OFWs advance from merely receptors or “clients” of government patronage programs to negotiators and partners of national policy.

Several implications here could include creating venues for OFWs to share their views of host country policies vis-a-vis home country policies to promote comparative analyses of “what works best” to benefit OFWs and their families. The public sector and civil society groups can play a role in facilitating these types of discussions at home. OFWs bring with them useful experiences and powerful narratives that can be both compelling and authoritative. Because of
distance, OFWs rely heavily on social media for news, and this could expose them to risks of misinformation, disinformation and malinformation. Policies aimed at strengthening OFWs to become more resilient from information risks could also help OFWs better engage politically, and become less susceptible to manipulation.

The findings of this study also offer key insights into the government’s broader COVID strategy. First, aid delivery can build the legitimacy of home and host countries. Despite being far from the home country, a crisis such as COVID-19 can force migrant workers to be reliant on the Philippine government’s assistance for support. The economic loss resulting from COVID-19 is not just shouldered by OFWs but also by their immediate and extended family members. Around half of the remittances received by Filipino households are directed to everyday expenses, bills, and loan repayments. Around 20 percent of recipients even reported that they regularly ran out of money before the next date of remittance (Gamboa, 2020). Without social safety nets in place, economic shocks can shift OFWs back into clientelistic ties of accountability where material benefits from their patron is a prominent factor in their support.

The results also shed light on President Duterte’s insistence on ayuda as a key COVID response strategy. At the start of the pandemic in 2020, he had already pushed for what he called “the largest and widest social protection program in the country’s history” as a total of PHP 200 billion (USD 3.8 billion) worth of aid is distributed to vulnerable sectors (Nakpil, 2020). A year later, cash aid is still the centerpiece of the administration’s efforts despite widespread criticism of its distribution and effectiveness (Abad, 2021). Nevertheless, this particularistic policy benefits the president by creating conditions for clientelistic accountability during a national crisis. By personally announcing and setting the terms for the distribution of aid, President Duterte cultivates utang na loob or debt of gratitude among recipients. This political strategy may not be the most effective solution to the economic hardships posed by the pandemic and may even push the poor into further dependence on government support. Yet at the same time, this muffles criticism against the government and fosters favorable views towards the country’s chief patron.

Second, the Philippine government was not blamed for the personal economic loss of OFWs but was instead held accountable based on national pandemic management. Despite considerable pressure for the government to reopen the economy and ease lockdowns, Filipinos still prioritize their safety and are willing to bear socio-economic costs. The tendency for citizens to prioritize health concerns over economic concerns in times of an urgent pandemic has been exhibited in other democracies such as Australia (Maniapis et al., 2021) and the USA (Singer, 2021). Yet these results are limited to the context of 2020 to 2021 when there was great uncertainty about the virus and vaccines were hard to access for developing nations. In April 2022, at least 67 percent of the Philippine population had been vaccinated against COVID and
the average daily cases had fallen to only 1 percent of the country’s peak infections (Reuters, 2022). Moreover, the Philippine economy is expected to recover as consumption and employment rise in 2022 (Ríñoza, 2022). As the country veers away from crisis conditions, further studies are encouraged to evaluate how government legitimacy evaluations among OFWs have adjusted to new conditions.

Limitations and directions for future research

This study is an exploratory inquiry into the formation of political remittances among OFWs. The survey is limited by its small sample size and an encompassing definition of OFWs. Analyzing OFWs broadly fails to consider that various OFW sectors may face unique circumstances that warrant further investigation. Irregular migrant workers, for example, may be more hesitant to register and sign up for Philippine aid for fear of disclosing their status. Those in the marine sector also faced great mental toll on top of the economic and health risks of the pandemic (Abila and Acejo, 2021), which may affect their capability and motivations in forming political remittances. Survey respondents were recruited through migrant organizations, some of which have been vocal critics of the Duterte administration and this may have some influence on the respondents. Finally, the time period that the survey was deployed did not take into account the second wave of COVID-19 brought about by the Delta variant. The period of the survey captured the peak of uncertainty and immediate impact brought by the first wave of the pandemic. Further studies can therefore utilize a more nuanced operationalization of OFWs that considers diverse situations and examine a longer timeframe to observe how these evaluations evolve throughout a crisis.

Although based on limited and cross-sectional data, our findings show that different experiences of OFWs in host countries are associated with varied political evaluations of the home country. Thus, aside from country contexts and state influence, future studies may first focus on the individual evaluations of OFWs in the formation of political remittances. Moreover, future research can offer a more holistic narrative by evaluating the influence of transnational actors (Krawatzek and Müller-Funk, 2020). During the pandemic, non-governmental organizations stepped in to repatriate and aid OFWs in lieu of the state. By first focusing on the formation of political remittances, we can provide important steppingstones that could later on help evaluate the transmission of these remittances to the home country.

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**Supplemental Material**

The data and survey questionnaire used for this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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