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Potential Power and Actual Policy Influance: Elite Rescource Conversion Across Indonesia's Covid-19 Policy Cycle

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines how the resources of strategic actors are converted into policy influence throughout Indonesia's COVID-19 policy cycle. It distinguishes actors' potential power from their actual influence on public policy.

Research Method: The study uses a qualitative case study design and document analysis of regulations, official government documents, and peer-reviewed academic literature published during 2020–2021. It examines major policy episodes, including large-scale social restrictions, the establishment of the COVID-19 Handling and National Economic Recovery Committee, and Emergency Community Activity Restrictions. Elite Theory serves as the primary analytical perspective.

Results and Discussion: The political value of actors' resources varies across policy stages. Formal authority is most prominent in decision-making; information and expertise are particularly relevant to problem definition and agenda setting; and administrative and territorial capacities become more important during implementation. Access to policy arenas does not necessarily indicate actual influence. Influence depends on how resources are used within specific institutional contexts, networks, elite competition, and policy stages.

Implications: The findings suggest that analyses of policy influence should examine the mechanisms through which actors use their resources, rather than infer influence from formal positions or access alone. This approach can help researchers and policymakers better understand how influence operates across the policy cycle.

Originality: This study contributes to the operationalization of Elite Theory by treating the conversion of actors' resources into policy influence as an empirical process to be traced, rather than assumed.

Introduction

Public policy is formed within a distribution of power that is not entirely equal. The actors involved possess different levels of authority, information, expertise, economic resources, organizational capacity, and networks. These differences result in unequal capacities to define problems, place issues on the agenda, shape alternatives, and influence decisions. Therefore, policy analysis is not sufficient if it only explains what the government decides; it must also trace who possesses resources, how those resources are used, and the extent to which their use is related to policy processes and outcomes (Lukes, 2005; Dye, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia provides a relevant context for analyzing the relationship between resources and policy influence. This crisis required the government to respond to public health needs while simultaneously considering economic impacts, social protection, public service capacity, and governmental coordination. Ayuningtyas et al. (2021) identify conflicts of interest and coordination problems in the formulation and implementation of government responses during the period from January to July 2020. These findings demonstrate that pandemic policies were not formed through a simple technical process but involved various actors, interests, and different capacities. Under such conditions, the ability to influence policy depended not only on formal authority but also on control over information, expertise, administrative capacity, and access to decision-making arenas.

The Indonesian COVID-19 response constitutes a particularly important empirical setting for examining the relationship between political resources, institutional authority, and policy influence because crisis governance simultaneously intensified executive decision-making and exposed competing interpretations of public health priorities. Schäfer & Syam (2024) examine how the pandemic intersected with democratic erosion and the reconfiguration of political authority in Indonesia, highlighting the broader implications of emergency governance for accountability and institutional power. More recently, Santoso & Mintrom (2025) demonstrate that the adoption of evidence-based pandemic policies was shaped not merely by the availability of scientific information but also by competing narratives, institutional venues, and the political receptiveness of authoritative actors. These findings suggest that policy influence during a crisis cannot be adequately explained by resource possession alone. Instead, the conversion of political, administrative, and epistemic resources into policy influence must be understood within a contested institutional environment in which actors differ in their capacity to define policy problems, secure access to decision-making arenas, and translate their preferences into authoritative policy responses.

The analytical problem is that the possession of resources does not in itself prove the existence of policy influence. Formal positions, wealth, expertise, organizational capacity, or networks only indicate a potential capacity to influence the process. In this study, this condition is understood as potential power. Influence can only be treated as actual policy influence when there is evidence showing that resources provide access to policy arenas, are used through certain mechanisms, and are associated with changes in the agenda, formulation, decisions, or implementation. This distinction is important because an approach that merely identifies elite positions risks equating political capacity with influence that actually occurs.

To explain this inequality, this study uses Elite Theory as its main perspective. The tradition of elite theory emphasizes that power is not distributed equally because some actors possess organizational advantages, institutional positions, information, or resources compared with other actors (Mosca, 1939; Paul, 1915; Mills, 1956). In public policy studies, Dye (2017) developed the policy as elite preference model, which explains the possibility that strategic groups possess greater capacity to incorporate their preferences into the policy process. However, the possession of office, wealth, expertise, or networks cannot yet be treated as evidence of influence. These elements only indicate

potential power until there is evidence that the resources are used and are associated with changes in policy processes or decisions. Therefore, this study clearly distinguishes between the resources possessed by actors and actual policy influence.

The literature on policy influence supports the importance of this distinction. Fooks et al. (2011) show that organizational resources can be used to gain access to policymakers, while Binderkrantz & Pedersen (2019) distinguish success in obtaining political attention from success in influencing decisions. (Junk, 2020) demonstrates that cooperation within coalitions can strengthen lobbying success. García-Montoya & Manzi (2023) through their study of economic elites in crisis responses in Chile, Mexico, and Peru, show that economic and organizational resources can increase access to decision-makers, but influence remains dependent on the form of relationships and the institutional context. This literature demonstrates that the relationship between resources and influence needs to be analyzed as a process rather than assumed to be an automatic relationship.

In Indonesia, studies on COVID-19 have discussed government responses, policy narratives, coordination, institutional capacity, and relationships among levels of government. However, based on the corpus of literature used in this study, there has not yet been an integrated analysis tracing how actors' resources are converted into access, used through particular mechanisms, and produce influence at different stages of the policy process. This gap is important because actors who are strong in agenda formation may not necessarily possess the same influence in formulation, decision-making, or implementation. Howlett et al. (2020) show that the policy cycle can be used as an analytical device to distinguish stages of the policy process without assuming that the process always occurs linearly. Meanwhile, Dahl (1961) pluralism provides a comparative perspective for examining whether influence is genuinely concentrated or distributed among several centers of power.

Recent scholarship provides important grounds for refining the theoretical contribution of this study. García-Montoya & Manzi (2023) drawing on evidence from Latin American countries, demonstrate that economic resources and organizational advantages may facilitate elite access to policymakers, although the translation of such access into policy outcomes varies across political and institutional contexts. In Indonesia, Santoso & Mintrom (2025) identify narrative framing, institutional venue shifts, and elite perceptions of urgency as important mechanisms through which evidence-based recommendations become politically actionable. Nevertheless, these contributions leave room for a more explicitly stage-sensitive examination of how different categories of resources are activated, constrained, or rendered ineffective across successive policy episodes. Accordingly, the present study positions its analytical contribution not in the general observation that resources and influence are distinct, but in examining the conditions under which resource-based capacities become observable forms of policy influence across agenda setting, policy formulation, authoritative decision-making, and implementation. This approach also recognizes unsuccessful resource conversion as an analytically significant possibility rather than assuming that access necessarily produces influence.

Based on this gap, this study poses the following question: how are the resources possessed by strategic actors converted into policy influence throughout the COVID-19 policy cycle in Indonesia? To answer this question, the study traces the relationships among actors, positions and resources, access and networks, mechanisms of influence, policy stages, and policy decisions or outcomes. The policy cycle is used to map the location of influence at different stages of the policy process. Howlett et al. (2020) explain the policy process through several stages that can be used as an analytical device to understand the development of problems, the formulation of alternatives, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation, without assuming that the policy process always proceeds in a linear manner.

The broader theoretical significance of this investigation extends beyond the Indonesian pandemic response to debates concerning the conditional exercise of elite power in politically complex governance systems. Muallidin (2026) argues that public policymaking in Indonesia must be examined

through the interaction of political elites, administrative structures, and institutional practices rather than through exclusively technocratic explanations. Building on this perspective, the present study treats resource conversion as an intermediary analytical process connecting unequal distributions of political capacity with potentially observable policy consequences. Its distinctive emphasis lies in differentiating resource availability, institutional access, mechanism activation, and policy outcomes while examining how these relationships vary across policy stages. Such differentiation offers a way to assess the explanatory boundaries of Elite Theory without presupposing either uniform elite domination or the equal distribution of influence among competing actors. The resulting analytical perspective is potentially relevant to the comparative study of crisis governance and public policymaking in other institutional contexts where authority, expertise, and implementation capacity are distributed unevenly.

Literature Review

Elite Theory and the Distribution of Policy Resources

Elite Theory explains how unequal distributions of authority, organizational capacity, expertise, and economic resources create differentiated opportunities for political influence. Classical contributions by Mosca (1939) Mills (1956); and Paul (1915) emphasize the concentration of power among strategically positioned actors, while Dye (2017) links elite preferences to public policy formation. However, structural advantages do not necessarily establish that elite actors determine policy outcomes. García-Montoya & Manzi (2023) demonstrate that economic and organizational resources can facilitate access to policymakers, although their translation into influence depends on institutional relationships and political circumstances. Accordingly, elite resources should be understood as potential power rather than direct evidence of actual policy influence.

Resource Conversion and Policy Influence

The distinction between resource possession and policy influence requires attention to the mechanisms through which actors participate in policymaking. Henriksen & Seabrooke (2021) emphasize the importance of institutional positions and relationships within policy networks, while García-Montoya & Manzi (2023) highlight the conditional relationship between elite resources, political access, and policy outcomes. In Indonesia, Santoso & Mintrom (2025) identify narrative framing, institutional venues, and political receptiveness as important conditions shaping the adoption of evidence-based COVID-19 policies. These contributions suggest that influence must be examined through observable connections between resources, institutional access, mechanisms of intervention, and policy decisions. Access alone is insufficient to demonstrate consequential influence.

Elite Influence Across the Policy Cycle

The political relevance of elite resources may vary across different stages of policymaking. Howlett, Ramesh, and Perl (2020) conceptualize the policy cycle as an analytical framework encompassing agenda setting, formulation, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation without assuming a strictly linear process. Research on Indonesia's COVID-19 response demonstrates the importance of competing policy narratives, institutional coordination, and changing governmental priorities (Ayuningtyas et al., 2021; Apriliyanti et al., 2022; Santoso & Mintrom, 2025) . Nevertheless, these studies leave room for a more integrated, stage-sensitive examination of how different resources become politically consequential. This study addresses that analytical gap by tracing the conversion of elite resources into potential and observable policy influence across Indonesia's COVID-19 policy cycle. By distinguishing resource possession, access, mechanisms of influence, and policy outcomes, it develops a more empirically cautious operationalization of Elite Theory.

Research Design and Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to analyze the process of resource conversion into policy influence in Indonesia's COVID-19 response. This approach was selected because the study does not merely identify actors occupying strategic positions, but also traces how resources are used, how they provide access to policy arenas, and how they are related to policy processes or decisions. The research focuses on the 2020-2021 period because this period covers the major phases of policy formation, adjustment, and implementation in response to the pandemic.

The three policy episodes examined in this study provide analytically differentiated contexts for investigating the relationship between resource configurations and policy processes. The introduction of Large-Scale Social Restrictions represents an episode in which public health emergency recognition and the allocation of regulatory authority became central concerns. The establishment of the COVID-19 Handling and National Economic Recovery Committee represents an episode of institutional reorganization involving the coordination of health and economic priorities. The introduction of Emergency Community Activity Restrictions represents an episode of policy adjustment under intensified epidemiological pressure and changing institutional demands. These episodes are treated as embedded units within a broader national case rather than as statistically representative observations. Their analytical value lies in enabling a structured comparison of how different types of resources, institutional access, and potential influence mechanisms become relevant under changing policy conditions. This comparison remains attentive to the possibility that institutional restructuring and observable policy change may occur without sufficient evidence to attribute those developments to particular elite interventions.

The research data consist of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include regulations, policy documents, official government statements, and institutional documents related to COVID-19 management. Secondary sources consist of peer-reviewed academic articles discussing Indonesia's COVID-19 policy response as well as literature on Elite Theory, policy influence, access, lobbying, and policy networks. Documents were selected purposively based on their relevance to actors, resources, access, mechanisms of influence, policy stages, and decisions.

A rigorous document-based investigation requires distinguishing the evidentiary functions of different source categories. Regulations and presidential decisions provide authoritative evidence of institutional arrangements and formal policy outcomes, whereas official governmental statements provide evidence of publicly communicated justifications, consultations, and policy priorities. Peer-reviewed academic studies contribute independent empirical interpretations and may identify relationships that are not directly observable through formal legal instruments. However, these sources differ in their capacity to establish the mechanisms connecting elite interventions to particular decisions. Official statements may confirm that consultations occurred without identifying the relative influence of participants, while academic interpretations require careful consideration of their underlying methods and evidentiary bases. Recent research by Santoso and Mintrom (2025), which integrates policy documents, media materials, and elite interviews, illustrates the analytical benefits of combining different forms of evidence when examining contested pandemic policymaking. In the present document-based design, the distinction between documented institutional facts, reported actor interventions, and inferred relationships is therefore essential for maintaining transparency in claims about policy influence.

The unit of analysis in this study is the process connecting actors' resources with policy influence. Actors are not directly categorized as influential based on their positions, wealth, expertise, or institutional standing. The possession of resources is treated as potential power, whereas actual policy influence requires evidence showing that resources are used through particular forms of access or mechanisms and are associated with changes in policy processes or decisions. This distinction is consistent with the initial framework of the study, which emphasizes that positions and resources are

insufficient to demonstrate influence without mechanisms connecting them to policy outcomes. The operationalization of Elite Theory is conducted through six analytical elements.

Table 1. Operationalization of Elite Theory: Analytical Dimensions and Indicators of Policy Influence

Analytical Element	Focus of Analysis
Actors	Individuals, groups, or institutions involved in the policy process
Positions and resources	Formal authority, information, expertise, economic resources, organizational capacity, and legitimacy
Access and networks	The ability of actors to enter policy arenas and establish relationships with other actors
Mechanisms of influence	Recommendations, negotiation, coalitions, information provision, framing, and the use of authority
Policy stages	Problem definition, agenda setting, policy formulation, decision making, implementation, evaluation, and policy change
Decisions and outcomes	Changes in the agenda, alternatives, policy design, formal decisions, or implementation that can be traced

Source: Authors' analytical synthesis based on Mosca (1939), Mills (1956), Dahl (1961), Dye (2017), Hoffmann-Lange (2018), Henriksen and Seabrooke (2021), and García-Montoya and Manzi (2023).

This framework represents an analytical synthesis for operationalizing Elite Theory rather than a standardized set of indicators derived from a single theorist. The framework is used to examine the relationship between positions, resources, access, mechanisms, and policy consequences, while also assessing the possibility of elite competition, public participation, countervailing power, and institutional checks.

The six analytical elements can be further differentiated according to their evidentiary status. Actor identification establishes participation or institutional relevance; resource identification establishes available capacities; access and network information establishes opportunities for interaction; and evidence of mechanism activation identifies observable actions undertaken to shape the policy process. The final analytical element, policy decisions and outcomes, must be examined separately to determine whether the available evidence supports a plausible connection with prior actor interventions. Accordingly, a distinction is required between evidence of capacity, evidence of access, evidence of attempted influence, and evidence of consequential influence. This differentiation is informed by García-Montoya & Manzi (2023), whose analysis demonstrates that resource-based access and policy outcomes should not be treated as interchangeable dimensions, and by Santoso and Mintrom (2025), who illustrate the importance of examining how specific narrative and institutional mechanisms contribute to changing policy choices. The distinction also provides a basis for identifying cases in which the documentary record remains insufficient to support a conclusion about actual influence.

Data analysis was conducted through document analysis and limited process tracing. Each source was coded according to the actor involved, the resources possessed, the form of access or network, the mechanisms used, the relevant policy stage, and the associated decision or outcome. The analysis then compared whether resources merely provided potential capacity or could actually be traced as influencing policy processes. Claims regarding influence were used cautiously and only when evidence connected an actor's actions with developments in the policy process.

The interpretation of documentary evidence also requires consideration of alternative explanations for observed policy developments. Changes in pandemic restrictions, institutional

coordination, or governmental priorities may reflect epidemiological conditions, existing legal obligations, administrative feasibility, economic pressures, or political decisions that are not directly attributable to the intervention of a particular actor. Therefore, temporal proximity between an actor's recommendation and a subsequent policy decision should not, by itself, be interpreted as evidence of causation. Similarly, the correspondence between an actor's expressed preferences and an adopted policy may indicate compatibility without establishing that the actor exercised decisive influence. The analytical distinction developed in this study consequently requires attention to the sequence of documented events, the specificity of proposed mechanisms, the independence of supporting sources, and the plausibility of competing explanations. This cautious approach is particularly important in light of García-Montoya & Manzi (2023) demonstration that elite resources and preferred policy responses are related in ways that depend on political context, and Santoso and Mintrom's (2025) findings concerning the interaction of competing narratives, institutional venues, and crisis perceptions.

The validity of the analysis was strengthened through triangulation among regulations, official documents, and academic articles. Comparisons across sources were used to reduce dependence on a single interpretation and to distinguish institutional facts, findings from previous studies, and the analytical interpretation developed in this research. A major limitation of the document-based approach is that not all informal negotiations and personal relationships among elites can be observed. Therefore, the study limits its conclusions to mechanisms that can be traced through available sources and does not equate the existence of access with automatic evidence of influence.

Findings and Discussion

Actor Structure and Distribution of Policy Resources

The results show that resources in COVID-19 policymaking were distributed among several groups of actors with different characteristics. The central government possessed formal authority to determine the direction of national policy, while ministries and government agencies controlled sectoral resources in the form of administrative authority, data, expertise, and implementation capacity. Local governments possessed territorial and administrative resources that were important for policy implementation. Outside the formal governmental structure, health experts and the media possessed resources in the form of knowledge, information, and the capacity to shape policy narratives. These differences demonstrate that power in pandemic policymaking did not originate from a single type of resource.

Table 2. Distribution of Strategic Actors, Political Resources, and Institutional Roles in Indonesia's COVID-19 Policy Process

Actors	Main Resources	Position in the Policy Process
President and central government	Formal authority and coordination	Determination of strategic direction and decisions
Ministries/agencies	Sectoral authority, data, bureaucracy	Formulation and implementation
Health experts	Expertise and information	Technical input and risk definition
Local governments	Territorial authority and administrative capacity	Policy implementation and adjustment
Media	Information and narrative formation	Agenda setting and problem framing
Economic actors	Economic and organizational resources	Interests in policy design and adjustment

Source: Authors' analysis based on Presidential Decree No. 11 of 2020, Government Regulation No. 21 of 2020, Presidential Regulation No. 82 of 2020, Ayuningtyas et al. (2021), and Apriliyanti et al. (2022)

The distribution of resources does not yet demonstrate the level of influence exercised by each actor. Within the framework of this study, positions and resources indicate only potential power. Actual influence can only be assessed when there is evidence that resources provide access, are used in the policy process, and are related to specific decisions.

The differentiated distribution of resources among governmental and non-governmental actors suggests that pandemic policymaking should be examined as an interaction among several forms of institutional and political capacity rather than as an exclusively hierarchical process. Comparative research by García-Montoya & Manzi (2023) indicates that organizational and economic advantages may provide privileged opportunities for political access, but such advantages do not necessarily translate into uniform policy success. Within the Indonesian context, Muallidin (2026) similarly emphasizes that political authority operates through its interaction with bureaucratic structures, institutional incentives, and administrative practices. Read alongside the actor distribution identified in this study, these perspectives highlight the importance of differentiating formal authority from sectoral expertise, territorial implementation capacity, and the ability to shape public narratives. However, the existing actor-resource mapping establishes differentiated capacities rather than a comparative ranking of actual influence. Such a ranking would require further evidence regarding specific interventions and their observable consequences for policy decisions.

Resource Conversion in Problem Definition and Agenda Setting

An early change occurred when COVID-19 shifted from being treated as a health issue to becoming a national policy problem. On 31 March 2020, the government declared COVID-19 a public health emergency through Presidential Decree No. 11 of 2020. On the same day, Government Regulation No. 21 of 2020 established the framework for Large-Scale Social Restrictions or PSBB. These two regulations demonstrate a change in problem definition, in which COVID-19 was recognized as an issue requiring government intervention through health measures and restrictions on activities.

At this stage, information and expertise became important resources because the government faced a problem that required interpretation of health risks. However, agenda formation did not take place exclusively through formal institutions. Apriliyanti et al. (2022) found that changes in media narratives were related to government responses and that the media became an influential platform in the agenda setting of COVID-19 policy. Their study also involved political advisers and health experts located within the inner environment of policymakers. These findings indicate that information and narratives can gain influence when they enter spaces connected to decision-makers.

Ayuningtyas et al. (2021) also found conflicts of interest, differences in priorities, and coordination problems during the early phase of the government's response. These findings indicate that the definition of the problem was not entirely shaped by a single perspective. Health considerations interacted with other considerations in the policy formulation process. However, these findings are insufficient to conclude that one particular group dominated the agenda without further tracing the mechanisms of its influence.

The distinction between information availability and political influence becomes particularly relevant when examining the emergence of COVID-19 as a national policy problem. Santoso & Mintrom (2025) demonstrate that Indonesia's pandemic response involved competing policy narratives and that the political significance of scientific evidence was shaped by how recommendations were framed, the authority of actors advancing them, and the institutional venues through which they were communicated. Their findings provide a useful comparative interpretation of the documentary evidence considered in this section. The recognition of COVID-19 as a public health emergency establishes an observable change in formal problem definition, but the policy instruments themselves do not identify the relative causal contributions of health experts, media actors, political officials, or other participants. Consequently, the relationship between information resources and agenda-setting influence should be interpreted through the distinction between observable policy recognition and the

separate evidentiary question of which actors contributed to that recognition. This distinction prevents the analysis from treating the eventual adoption of a public health framing as sufficient proof of successful influence by any single resource-holding group.

Resource Conversion in Policy Formulation and Decision Making

An important change occurred in July 2020 through Presidential Regulation No. 82 of 2020. This regulation integrated COVID-19 management and national economic recovery into a single institutional structure consisting of the Policy Committee, the COVID-19 Handling Task Force, and the National Economic Recovery and Transformation Task Force. Institutionally, this change broadened the arena of policy formulation from a focus on a public health emergency toward the simultaneous management of health and economic concerns.

This institutional development is important for the analysis of resources because institutional positions determine who gains formal access to policy coordination and formulation. However, the establishment of this structure does not in itself prove the dominance of either economic or health interests. The available evidence is stronger in demonstrating changes in the configuration of access among institutions than in establishing that one particular group determined policy outcomes.

A similar pattern can be observed in the introduction of Emergency PPKM in July 2021. The government stated that the decision was taken after receiving assessments and input from ministers, health experts, and regional heads. This statement provides evidence that health expertise, ministerial authority, and the territorial knowledge of local governments gained access to the decision-making arena. However, the official source does not explain the causal weight of each input in relation to the final decision and therefore cannot be used to identify a particular actor as the sole determinant of the policy.

The creation and reconfiguration of institutional coordination mechanisms can also be interpreted in relation to the changing political conditions under which actors seek to exercise policy influence. García-Montoya & Manzi (2023) emphasize that the form of elite access to policymaking institutions can shape opportunities to affect policy outcomes, while Santoso and Mintrom (2025) identify institutional venue changes as important features of Indonesia's evolving pandemic response. These contributions suggest that the institutional integration of public health management and national economic recovery should be examined not simply as an administrative restructuring, but also as a possible reconfiguration of opportunities for different actors to participate in policy formulation. Nevertheless, the establishment of a new decision-making venue remains analytically distinct from evidence that a particular actor's preferences determined its substantive decisions. To assess the latter, the analysis would require a more specific connection between documented actor interventions, the alternatives under consideration, and the content of the resulting policy instruments. The available institutional evidence therefore supports a stronger conclusion about the redistribution of formal access than about the causal predominance of particular elite interests.

Resource Conversion in Policy Implementation and Change

When policies entered the implementation stage, the configuration of resources changed. Government Regulation No. 21 of 2020 stipulated that the implementation of PSBB by local governments depended on approval from the minister responsible for health affairs. This arrangement demonstrates the relationship between central authority and local implementation capacity: local governments possessed territorial capacity, but its use remained within the framework of national decisions.

In 2021, Micro PPKM expanded the implementation of control measures to the village, urban village, neighborhood association, and community association levels. This policy increased the role of governors, regents, mayors, and local government structures in implementation. Consequently,

administrative and territorial resources became increasingly important as policy moved from national decision-making toward control at the local level.

The shift toward Emergency PPKM in July 2021 again demonstrates that the configuration of influence was dynamic. Restrictions were tightened as infection rates increased and were subsequently adjusted according to developments in case numbers and healthcare capacity. A source from the Ministry of Health records that Emergency PPKM was implemented from 3 to 20 July 2021 and was subsequently continued through a level-based restriction system.

Implementation provides an additional analytical arena in which formal decision-making authority interacts with administrative capacity and changing institutional conditions. Muallidin (2026) argues that Indonesian public policymaking cannot be adequately understood without examining the relationship between elite-driven political priorities and bureaucratic adaptation. This perspective is relevant to the division of responsibilities between central and local government institutions during the implementation of pandemic restrictions. Although national regulations established the formal parameters of public health interventions, their practical application depended on organizational coordination and territorially distributed administrative structures. Such arrangements illustrate why the implementation stage requires attention to resources that differ from those involved in agenda setting or authoritative policy adoption. At the same time, the existence of an implementation mandate does not independently demonstrate that subnational actors successfully altered policy outcomes. Distinguishing the formal allocation of administrative responsibility from observable discretionary influence is therefore necessary for assessing how resource conversion may operate during implementation and subsequent policy adjustment.

Potential Power Toward Actual Policy Influence

The findings show that the possession of resources did not have the same influence value across all stages of the policy process. Formal authority was more prominent in decision-making, expertise and information became particularly relevant in problem definition and formulation, while administrative and territorial capacity became increasingly important during implementation. The media possessed the capacity to shape agendas and narratives but did not hold formal authority to establish policy. In contrast, local governments possessed implementation resources, but their room for action remained influenced by the policy design established by the central government.

The findings reveal three levels that need to be distinguished. First, the possession of resources indicates potential power. Second, access to decision-makers or positions within networks increases the capacity of actors to use their resources. Third, actual policy influence requires evidence that the actions, recommendations, information, or authority of actors are related to changes in the agenda, policy design, formal decisions, or implementation. This distinction is important because access is not identical to influence, and similarity between actors' preferences and government decisions does not automatically prove a causal relationship. The initial framework of this study also emphasizes the need to separate potential resources from influence that can actually be traced.

Overall, the findings show that the conversion of resources in Indonesia's COVID-19 policy occurred in ways that were specific to different stages of the policy process. There is insufficient evidence to characterize a single actor as holding uniform influence throughout the entire process. The configuration of influence changed according to the types of resources required, access to policy arenas, and the mechanisms available at each stage. These findings provide the basis for the Discussion section, particularly for assessing the extent to which Elite Theory can explain the process and where its explanation needs to be complemented by pluralism and policy network perspectives.

Considered together, the three policy episodes provide a basis for distinguishing changes in the institutional conditions of potential influence from evidence of influence that can be directly attributed to actor interventions. The PSBB episode demonstrates the formal recognition of a public health emergency and the establishment of regulatory arrangements. The creation of the COVID-19

Handling and National Economic Recovery Committee demonstrates the reorganization of institutional coordination and access. The development of Emergency PPKM demonstrates further changes in policy direction and the administrative demands associated with crisis management. These observations are consistent with the broader argument that the political relevance of resources varies across institutional settings and policy stages. However, they also demonstrate an important evidentiary boundary: observable policy changes and shifts in formal access do not automatically establish the extent to which particular actors exercised causal influence. The distinction is consistent with García-Montoya & Manzi (2023) and Santoso and Mintrom (2025), whose studies underscore the conditional relationship between resources, access, institutional mechanisms, and policy change. Consequently, the comparative contribution of these episodes is strongest when both the observed institutional transformations and the limitations of actor-specific influence attribution are explicitly recognized.

Discussion

Resources Do Not Automatically Become Policy Influence

The findings show that inequality in resources is a starting point, but not a final explanation of policy influence. Formal authority, expertise, information, organizational capacity, economic resources, and networks provide different opportunities for actors to enter the policy process. However, the possession of resources does not in itself indicate that actors' preferences are translated into decisions. This finding reinforces the need to distinguish potential power from actual policy influence. Influence can be assessed more strongly when resources provide access, are used through particular mechanisms, and can be linked to changes in agenda setting, formulation, decision-making, or implementation.

This distinction is consistent with García-Montoya & Manzi (2023), who show that wealth and organizational capacity can increase economic elites' access to policymakers, but the degree of correspondence between elite preferences and policy still depends on the form of relationships and the political context. Thus, access functions as an important mechanism linking resources to opportunities for influencing policy, but access is not identical to influence itself. In the context of this study, the presence of actors in strategic positions is more appropriately treated as an indicator of influence capacity until evidence becomes available that can trace its relationship with particular policy processes or decisions.

The distinction between potential power and actual policy influence can be further developed through the concept of conditional resource conversion. Under this interpretation, resources should not be understood as possessing a fixed capacity to generate policy change independently of their institutional environment. Rather, their political effectiveness depends on the relationship between available capacities, opportunities for access, mechanisms of intervention, and the receptiveness of relevant decision-making institutions. García-Montoya and Manzi (2023) demonstrate the importance of political and organizational conditions in explaining the relationship between economic elites and policy outcomes, while Santoso and Mintrom (2025) show how narrative framing and changes in institutional venues may influence the political reception of evidence-based recommendations. These studies support an understanding of resource conversion as contingent rather than automatic. The implication for Elite Theory is that structural resource inequality should be treated as a possible source of political advantage, while the realization of that advantage remains an empirical question requiring evidence about the processes through which policy decisions are shaped.

Influence is Specific to Policy Stages

The findings also show that the value of a resource changes according to policy stages. Information, expertise, and the ability to shape narratives are more relevant during problem definition and agenda setting, while formal authority and institutional position become more prominent during

formulation and decision-making. At the implementation stage, bureaucratic capacity and territorial authority acquire greater significance. This pattern shows that influence should not be treated as a fixed attribute possessed by an actor throughout the policy process. These findings can be interpreted through the policy cycle as developed by Howlett, Ramesh, and Perl (2020). The separation of policy stages enables an analysis of changes in actors, resources, and mechanisms operating from one stage to another. In this study, the policy cycle is not used to assume that the COVID-19 policy process proceeded linearly, but to identify variations in the configuration of influence throughout the policy process. Therefore, an actor's success in influencing one stage does not provide a basis for concluding that the same actor dominates the entire process.

The stage-specific nature of resource conversion also has implications for understanding continuity and discontinuity in elite influence. Santoso and Mintrom (2025) demonstrate that competing narratives, changes in institutional venues, and shifting perceptions of crisis urgency contributed to changes in the political reception of evidence during Indonesia's pandemic response. This suggests that variation in influence may emerge not only because different policy stages require different resources, but also because transformations in the institutional environment change which actors and forms of knowledge are considered politically relevant. Consequently, stage-specific influence should be understood as a relational process in which resource effectiveness depends on the interaction between institutional authority, the practical requirements of policy action, and prevailing interpretations of the policy problem. The analysis therefore moves beyond a static classification of resource types by emphasizing the possibility that resources gain or lose political significance as policy debates, organizational arrangements, and implementation demands evolve. This perspective extends the analytical usefulness of the policy cycle without assuming a predetermined sequence of elite influence.

This argument is consistent with Binderkrantz & Pedersen (2019) who distinguish success in influencing agenda setting from success in decision making. Their research shows that groups with different resources and strategies may succeed in different arenas of influence. The implication for Elite Theory is that the analytical question should not stop at "who are the elites," but should instead focus on the stages at which actors are able to influence policy and the resources that are relevant at those stages.

The use of the policy cycle in this study therefore serves an analytical function rather than depicting the policy process as a sequence that is always linear. The policy cycle helps separate arenas of influence so that changes in the configuration of power can be observed. This approach also reduces the tendency to conclude that an actor who is powerful at one stage automatically controls the entire process.

Elite Competition and The Role of Policy Networks

The findings do not provide sufficient evidence to understand COVID-19 policy merely as the result of the dominance of a single elite group. Instead, the policy process shows the existence of several centers of resources, including political authority, bureaucracy, expertise, local government capacity, information, and economic interests. This condition indicates that elites need to be understood as heterogeneous groups that may possess different priorities and resources.

These findings are consistent with Dahl's (1961) pluralist perspective, which emphasizes that power can be dispersed and specific to particular issues. From this perspective, actors who possess influence in one arena do not automatically control other arenas. Pluralism therefore functions as a test of Elite Theory: inequality in resources may generate political advantages, but the concentration of resources does not necessarily produce uniform domination when competition, balancing institutions, and other actors with different resources are present.

Policy networks help explain this condition. Henriksen & Seabrooke (2021) emphasize that the analysis of elites in policy networks needs to consider network positions, institutions, actors'

trajectories, and relationships among actors, rather than only the individual characteristics of elites. In the context of this study, networks determine how resources obtain channels through which they can be used. Expertise, for example, has a greater opportunity to influence the process when it is connected to decision-making arenas, while formal authority still depends on information and organizational capacity to be translated into implementation. Coalitions can also become mechanisms for converting resources. Junk (2020) shows that active cooperation among groups can increase lobbying success and mediate the relationship between economic resources and influence. This demonstrates that influence does not always result from the accumulation of individual resources but may be formed through actors' ability to combine information, networks, and strategies with other actors.

These findings simultaneously establish limits on deterministic explanations of Elite Theory. Inequality in resources can indeed provide structural advantages, but policy outcomes remain influenced by competition, inter-institutional relationships, networks, and the existence of countervailing forces. Therefore, pluralism and policy networks in this study are not used to replace Elite Theory, but to examine the extent to which the concentration of resources actually produces a concentration of influence. The interaction between elite competition and institutional power is particularly important for assessing the conditions under which resource advantages can be constrained. Schäfer & Syam (2024) situate Indonesia's pandemic governance within wider processes of democratic erosion and changing political authority, indicating the importance of examining institutiona power in relation to accountability and political contestation. Meanwhile, Muallidin (2026) highlights how elite agenda-setting and bureaucratic adaptation interact within Indonesia's policy system. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the presence of multiple resource-holding actors does not necessarily imply an equal distribution of decision-making power. Networks may enable information exchange, negotiation, and coalition formation while simultaneously reproducing unequal access to authoritative institutions. Accordingly, the relationship between Elite Theory and pluralism should be evaluated through observable differences in access, bargaining opportunities, institutional constraints, and policy consequences. Theoretically, this allows elite concentration and pluralistic contestation to be examined as potentially interacting features of the same policy process rather than as mutually exclusive explanations.

Operationalizing Elite Theory: Capacity Toward Actual Influence

The main contribution of this study lies in its attempt to operationalize Elite Theory by separating several elements that are often treated as a single unit. Strategic position identifies an actor's location within the structure of power; resources indicate the capacities available; access and networks explain opportunities to enter policy arenas; mechanisms of influence indicate how those capacities are used; while decisions and outcomes are used to assess whether influence can be traced. This framework represents an analytical synthesis rather than a model directly formulated by a single elite theorist.

This separation is important because elite research faces the risk of equating status with influence. Actors occupying high positions do not necessarily determine every decision, just as actors without formal authority may exercise influence through information, expertise, networks, or the ability to shape agendas. Therefore, the relationship between resources and decisions should be understood as a conversion process that requires intermediary mechanisms. This framework places evidence of process as the main basis for distinguishing potential capacity from actual influence.

This operationalization also broadens the use of Elite Theory in policy cycle analysis. Elite theory is not only used to identify groups that possess greater resources, but also to examine when these advantages become effective, through which channels, and at which policy stages their influence can be observed. Through this approach, inequality in power remains at the center of the analysis without assuming that all policies necessarily reflect elite preferences.

Implications and Limitations of The Analysis

Theoretically, this study shows that elite analysis needs to distinguish the possession of resources from success in influencing policy. Resources acquire political value when they can be used within an institutional context that provides access and mechanisms of influence. Positions within networks, policy stages, and the presence of competing actors also determine the effectiveness of resource utilization. Therefore, influence is more appropriately understood as a contextual and dynamic relationship rather than as a fixed attribute of actors.

Nevertheless, document-based research has limitations in identifying informal relationships, closed negotiations, and personal communication that are not documented. This limitation is important because García-Montoya & Manzi (2023) show that access to decision-makers can occur through both institutionalized and personal channels. Therefore, the absence of evidence of influence in documents cannot be equated with evidence that influence never occurred. The conclusions of this study are limited to relationships that can be traced through the available sources. Overall, this discussion shows that the relevance of Elite Theory lies in its ability to explain initial inequalities in the distribution of resources, while explaining how those inequalities generate influence requires attention to access, networks, mechanisms, policy stages, and competition among actors. Thus, the process of converting resources into policy influence becomes a link between the power structure explained by Elite Theory and the empirical dynamics occurring throughout Indonesia's COVID-19 policy cycle.

Conclusion

This study shows that the conversion of resources into policy influence does not occur automatically. Formal authority, information, expertise, organizational capacity, economic resources, and networks fundamentally constitute potential power. These resources become more relevant when they provide access to policy arenas, are used through particular mechanisms, and can be traced in relation to agenda setting, formulation, decision-making, implementation, or policy change. In Indonesia's COVID-19 policies, the value of a resource also differed according to policy stages, meaning that actors' capacity to influence policy was not fixed throughout the process.

The findings show that Elite Theory remains relevant for explaining inequalities in the distribution of resources and access, but its application needs to avoid the assumption that strategic positions always result in policy domination. Influence is more appropriately understood as a process that depends on the relationship among resources, access, networks, mechanisms of action, and institutional context. Competition among elites, inter-institutional relationships, policy networks, public participation, and countervailing forces may also limit or alter actors' ability to convert resources into actual policy influence. Therefore, the conceptual contribution of this study lies in the operationalization of Elite Theory by distinguishing potential capacity from influence that can actually be traced within the policy process.

This study has limitations because it relies primarily on official documents and academic literature, meaning that not all informal negotiations, personal relationships, and closed processes of influence can be observed. Therefore, the findings are not intended to establish one group as controlling the entirety of Indonesia's COVID-19 policy, but rather to demonstrate how influence can be tested more systematically. Future research can strengthen the analysis through interviews with policymakers and relevant actors, as well as by comparing resource conversion processes across other policy cases or sectors.

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