The Liability of Tribe in Corporate Political Activity: Ethical Implications for Political Contestability

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Abstract

Political contestability is an important issue in the ethical analysis of corporate political activity (hereafter CPA). Though previous studies have proposed analytical frameworks for creating contestable political systems, these studies conceive firm-level factors such as size and wealth as the main (and perhaps, only) determinants of contestability. This relegates the influences of informal managerial-level attributes such as tribalism, especially in ethnically diverse contexts where politics and tribe are inseparable. In this article, I explore the linkages between managers' tribal identity and political contestability among firms in Ghana. I found that contestability is affected by *tribal consonance* (similarity) and *tribal dissonance* (difference) between corporate executives and policymakers. I also found that dissonance creates *liability of tribe*, which causes contestability problems in all four stages of the CPA process—i.e., *political planning*, *political access*, *political voice*, and *political influence*. Overall, this article extends the micro–macro link of political connections from performance to the ethics of political competition and contestability. It offers important contributions to the literature, advances insightful implications for practice, and outlines useful future research directions.

Keywords Tribe · Tribalism · Corporate political activity · Political contestability · Business ethics · Informal institutions · Ghana

Introduction

Politics and public policy significantly affect, alter or shape business environments, and consequently affect firm survival and performance (Lux, Crook, & Woehr, 2011; Mathur & Singh, 2011; Rajwani & Liedong, 2015). To manage their exposure to, and dependency on governments and political actors, some firms actively indulge in corporate political activity (hereafter CPA) to influence public policies and regulations in ways that favor them (Getz, 1997; Hillman & Hitt, 1999; Hillman, Keim, & Schuler, 2004). Firms use CPA to manage or defend their business domains (Baysinger, 1984) by advocating for or against policies that have positive or negative implications for their operations (Lawton, Rajwani, & Doh, 2013b; McKay & Yackee, 2007), thus becoming actively involved in public policy processes rather

than being inactive spectators (Brown, 2016; Weidenbaum, 1980).

Since CPA emerged as a burgeoning domain of nonmarket strategy research about four decades ago (Baron, 1995a, 1995b; Baysinger, 1984; Weidenbaum, 1980), studies have explored varied facets of firms' political strategies, ranging from their antecedents (Barron, 2011; Hillman & Wan, 2005; Liedong & Frynas, 2018) and nature (Liedong, Aghanya, & Rajwani, 2020a; Liedong, Rajwani, and Lawton, 2020c) to their outcomes (Carney, Child, & Li, 2020; Hadani & Schuler, 2013; Liedong, Rajwani, & Mellahi, 2017; Liu, Yang, & Augustine, 2018; Sharma, Cheng, & Leung, 2020; Yan & Chang, 2018). In recent times, scholars are increasingly paying attention to the ethicality of CPA. The negative externalities of CPA (Hadani, Doh, & Schneider, 2016; Mantere, Pajunen, & Lamberg, 2009) have created an “an urgent need for study of the ethics of engaging in corporate political activity” (Christensen, 1997, p. 88).

In response to calls, the burgeoning literature about the ethicality of CPA has posited prescriptions for responsible and equitable CPA, most of which revolve around the goals, means and outcomes of political activity (Alzola, 2013;

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Barker, 2008; Grimaldi, 1998; Hamilton & Hoch, 1997; Keffer & Hill, 1997; Leong, Hazelton, & Townley, 2013; Liedong, 2020a, b, c; Neron, 2016; Ostas, 2007; Weber, 1996, 1997). Notable among the requirements for ethical CPA is the issue of political contestability—i.e., the need for firms to have equal access to the polity and be adequately represented in policy making processes (Gao, 2008; Oberman, 2004).

Using illustrations such as “elephants versus chickens”, proponents of political contestability have alluded to firm-level factors such as firm size and wealth as the main determinants of political contestability, arguing that large firms can crowd out small firms in political markets (Liedong, 2020a, b, c; e.g., Mitnick, 1991; Oberman, 2004; Tian, Gao, & Cone, 2008). Though true, the literature has, so far, overlooked other informal and managerial-level attributes that can also affect political contestability, such as the tribal or ethnic differences between politicians and corporate executives. Tribalism—i.e., the tendency of individuals to favor other individuals from their tribe (Beugré & Offodile, 2001)—has consequences for firms’ influence in political markets, because the tribal identity of executives could affect the favors that firms receive from tribalistic politicians. In this sense, the current focus on firm-level determinants of political contestability while relegating informal influences such as tribe is concerning, especially in ethnically diverse contexts like Africa and the Middle East where politics and tribe are inseparable (Abbink, 2011; Baram, 1997; Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2015). It is therefore imperative to explore the micro–macro link of CPA (Peng & Luo, 2000) to understand how corporate executives’ tribal identities affect their firms’ political competitiveness and the wider contestability of political systems.

Moreover, previous CPA studies that have examined political contestability have focused on the intentions, means and outcomes of the political action itself (e.g., Tian et al., 2008). Others (e.g., Oberman, 2004) have explored political competition using a process model of political resource development (Oberman, 2002) comprising four components: access (connecting with politicians), legitimization (alignment with public interests), influence (being effective) and exploitation (gaining competitive advantage). These previous works have limitations. First, though Oberman’s process model is based on insights from the literature (e.g., Mahon & McGowan, 1998; Shaffer & Hillman, 2000), it focuses on formally institutionalized political strategies, political communication tactics and policy outcomes that are commonly used and observed in developed countries, and hence does not reflect the informal and unregulated nature of, or capture the informal influences on CPA in developing contexts, such as African countries (Liedong & Frynas, 2018; Liedong et al., 2020a). Also, it depicts that the CPA process starts when firms seek political access, which is not always

true. For instance, tribal affiliations that differ from those of policymakers may discourage some executives from even making attempts for political access (due to feelings of hopelessness), suggesting that there are other pertinent issues in the CPA process that precede political access.

Second, even though there are various types of political contestability, the existing ethics literature does not differentiate between them. My review of the corpus reveals four variants: government contestability—i.e., the competition between opposition parties and incumbent governments for political power (Trantidis, 2016); policy process contestability—i.e., the competition between civil servants and political advisors for policy power (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2008; Ohberg, Munk Christiansen, & Niklasson, 2017); political accountability contestability—i.e., the competition between politicians and citizens for government transparency (Weder & Grubel, 2012); and policy influence contestability—i.e., competition between different interest groups for policy influence. The latter variant is the focus of the current literature (Oberman, 2004; Tian et al., 2008), but the analysis is highly encapsulating because it pitches firms against other organized (e.g., firms, charities) and unorganized (e.g., citizens) interests. It has therefore become necessary to disaggregate and conduct like-for-like analyses of the competition in political markets to further highlight the disparities and contestability issues existing within categorized interest groups. Further, the existing contestability frameworks are prescriptive and may not reflect the lived realities of corporate executives who experience and manage political contestability issues.

To address the above gaps and problems, this article explores the question: *how do corporate executives’ tribal identities affect their firms’ political competitiveness and the wider contestability of political systems?* Following previous works (Liedong, 2020a, b, c; Oberman, 2004), I leverage the three traditional approaches to ethics—i.e., utilitarianism, justice and rights (Bentham, 1789; Cavanaugh et al., 1981; Rawls, 1971)—to investigate how tribalism affects the political behavior of corporate executives and their firms in Ghana. I place emphasis on understanding the micro–macro link (Peng & Luo, 2000) between tribal identity (a micro-construct) and firms’ political contestability (a macro-construct).

Following previous studies (e.g., Zoogah, Peng, & Woldu, 2015), I conceive tribe as an informal institution due to its connections to culture and traditions (Bates, 1974; George et al., 2016), and hence treat tribal identity as an informal managerial-level attribute. Also, while the concepts of tribe and tribalism have been disputed as colonial fabrications (e.g., Mafeje, 1971), I focus on tribe instead of ethnicity because it is argued to be the primary social category of identification in Ghana and other African countries (Awedoba, 2005; Zoogah, 2016). As Darley and Blankson

(2020, p. 75) note, “in the traditional Ghanaian view and, for that matter, the traditional African view, a person’s community, his or her tribe, defines the person”. Consequently, in some African countries, tribal identification can be stronger than ethnic identification (Herbst, 2000; Zoogah, 2016).

Moreover, an ethnic group is a broad social category that is sometimes superficially defined without regard for in-group traditional differences (e.g., black African ethnic group) and may thus comprise several tribes or subgroups (Bates, 1974). For instance, in Ghana where this study is set, Mole-Dagbani is an officially defined ethnic group (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013) but it is made up of different tribes including Mamprusi, Dagomba, and Nanumba (Pellow, 2011). Similarly, Ga-Dangme is an ethnic group made up of tribes such as Ga, Krobo, Ada and Ningo. Furthermore, the Gurma ethnic group has different tribes including Konkomba, Basaari, and Bimoba. Despite being classed as one ethnic group, the Konkombas and Bimobas have been involved in several inter-tribal conflicts since 1984 (Yelyang, 2016). Essentially, the extent of cultural and traditional heterogeneity and related tensions or conflicts within officially defined ethnic groups in Ghana makes the focus of this study on tribe, not ethnicity, appropriate. The theoretical justification for setting this research in Ghana is explained in the methodology section, but it is important to mention here that Ghana is a beacon of democracy in Africa and is popularly referred to as the “gateway to West Africa” (Debrah, 2002). Understanding political contestability in Ghana could therefore be critical for ethical CPA in the Africa region.

This article makes significant contributions to the literature. First, it shows how informal institutional influences, such as tribe, affect political contestability, and thus extends previous works that have implicitly or explicitly explored formal determinants of political contestability (Alzola, 2013; Oberman, 2004). In doing so, it presents a new concept—*liability of tribe*—and not only show how it manifests in CPA, but also how it affects contestability. I found two tribal identities that affect political contestability, namely tribal consonance (i.e., when the incumbent government is dominated by a tribe, or the policymaker belongs to a tribe of which executives are members) and tribal dissonance (i.e., when the incumbent government is dominated by a tribe, or the policymaker belongs to a tribe of which executives are non-members). Liability of tribe refers to the disadvantages associated with the latter identity. My findings show that relationships between politicians and executives are shaped by tribalism, which creates out-groups and in-groups among executives and limits the former group’s participation in policy making processes. The findings also reflect the reality that political party formation and political mobilization are influenced by tribalism (Abbink, 2011; Brown, 1999; Ishiyama, 2010; Koev, 2019), especially in Africa—the most ethnically diverse region in the world (Alesina et al., 2003).

More importantly, this article shows that the individual and cultural attributes of corporate executives, manifested in their tribal identities, impact the contestability of political markets as well as the success of CPA. This marks a departure from the frequent and dominant treatment of only firm-level characteristics such as firm size and wealth as the main drivers of contestability (Mitnick, 1991; Oberman, 2004; Tian et al., 2008), but is consistent with upper echelons research regarding the impact of top management characteristics on organizational outcomes (Carpenter, Geletkanycz, & Sanders, 2004; Hambrick & Mason, 1984). This article further extends the micro–macro link of political connections (Acquaah, 2007; Peng & Luo, 2000) from the common focus on firm performance to the under-researched ethicality of CPA by showing how corporate executives’ tribal identities affect their firms’ political competitiveness and the wider contestability of political systems.

Second, this article presents a finer-grained disaggregation of political contestability by identifying and situating its loci. I found that the liability of tribe affects four distinct stages of corporate political influence, namely *political planning* (designing political action), *political access* (reaching politicians and policymakers), *political voice* (being heard by politicians and policymakers), and *political influence* (views, preferences and opinions accounted for in final policy decisions). Leveraging the findings and drawing from the works of Oberman (2002, 2004), I present a political influence process model that shows where and how contestability issues emerge in the orchestration of CPA. Peering into tribalism, this article shows that political contestability occurs in four interdependent stages. Obstacles or tribal liabilities at any stage prevent firms from progressing to the next stage. This is an important addition to the literature because while we have a good understanding of what political contestability means, we lack a clear picture of its processual manifestation in CPA. I also present a framework for analyzing tribal impacts on political contestability using the three traditional approaches to ethics—i.e., the consequentialist (teleological), non-consequentialist (deontological, including Kantian and rights-based), and justice approaches.

Overall, this article contributes to the ongoing conversation about the ethics of CPA in general (Alzola, 2013; Barker, 2008; Grimaldi, 1998; Hamilton & Hoch, 1997; Keffer & Hill, 1997; Leong et al., 2013; Neron, 2016; Ostas, 2007; Weber, 1997) and of political contestability in particular (Liedong, 2020a, b, c; Oberman, 2004; Tian et al., 2008). Focusing on how tribalism affects CPA in Ghana, this article heeds to calls for more research on the impact of informal institutions and phenomena on business management and strategy in Africa (George et al., 2016; Nkomo, Zoogah, & Acquaah, 2015; Zoogah et al., 2015). In doing so, it extends the theory of CPA ethicality and generates practical insights for managers and policymakers.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Next, I discuss CPA with an emphasis on its ethicality and the concept of political contestability. After, I explore tribalism and its implications for firm-level management, national-level politics, and CPA. Subsequently, I describe the empirical methodology of my study, present the findings, and discuss their implications for theory, practice, and future research.

Ethics of Corporate Political Activity: Political Contestability in Focus

When firms do CPA, their main aim is to influence public policy in their favor (Getz, 1997; Liedong et al., 2015; Mellahi et al., 2016; Rajwani & Liedong, 2015). This usually entails ensuring that final policy decisions reflect the interests of the firm (Marsh, 1998). CPA is also done to reduce uncertainty and information asymmetry between firms and policymakers (Hillman et al., 2004; Liedong & Frynas, 2018; White, Boddewyn, & Galang, 2015), mitigate regulatory burden on firms (Correia, 2014; Hadani et al., 2016), avail commercial opportunities and critical resources (Guo, Xu, & Jacobs, 2014; Liedong et al., 2020a; Peng & Luo, 2000; Schuler, Schnietz, & Baggett, 2002) and overcome institutional weaknesses and political risks (Keillor, Wilkinson, & Owens, 2005; Luo, 2001, 2004). Achieving these aims culminates in superior firm performance and competitive advantage, as most CPA studies have recorded (see these reviews: Hillman et al., 2004; Lux et al., 2011; Mathur & Singh, 2011; Mellahi et al., 2016; Rajwani & Liedong, 2015).

CPA occurs in political markets where demanders and suppliers of public policy interact and engage in politico-economic exchange (Bonardi, Hillman, & Keim, 2005; Jia and Zhang, 2018; Kingsley, Vanden Bergh, & Bonardi, 2012; Liedong et al., 2020c). In these markets, firms and other interest groups exist on the demand side, and they advocate and compete for their respective policy preferences to be considered in final policy outcomes. On the supply side are politicians and regulators who determine what interests to consider in their policy decisions. There is a price for public policy, in the sense that firms and other interest groups have to offer incentives and rewards to policymakers in exchange for policy favors (Hillman & Hitt, 1999). These incentives include money, information and other non-financial benefits valued by politicians, such as logistics and support services that could bolster their re-election chances (Liedong et al., 2020a, c; Liedong, 2020a, b, c).

The incentives and rewards offered by demanders of policy favors underpin the political tactics and strategies that firms deploy in political markets. Some of these strategies include information and financial strategies (Hillman & Hitt, 1999) as well as pseudo-attribution, kinship, logistics and

affective strategies (Liedong et al., 2020a; Liedong, 2020a, b, c). Information strategy, which many simply refer to as lobbying, involves gathering and using information to persuade policymakers toward preferred policy positions (Evans & Sherlund, 2011; Lee & Baik, 2010; Lenway, Jacobson, and Goldstein, 1990; Marsh, 1998; McKay & Yackee, 2007). In the financial strategy, firms use monetary inducements such as paid speakerships, personal service, financial donations and campaign contributions to achieve favorable policies or politically motivated benefits (Claessens, Feijen, & Laeven, 2008; Gill & Lipsmeyer, 2005; Hillman, Zardkoohi, & Bierman, 1999; Steagall & Jennings, 1996; Witko, 2011). In pseudo-attribution, firms do CSR in target politicians' constituencies and allow the politicians to take credit for the programs to boost their re-election chances (Liedong et al., 2020a). In the same vein, the kinship strategy is used to boost politicians' re-election chances by providing employment to the politicians' constituents—an achievement often highlighted on campaign trails in developing countries (Liedong et al., 2020a). Finally, the affective strategy is used to satisfy politicians' emotional needs by employing their spouses, partners, or mistresses (Liedong et al., 2020a).

A core challenge in political markets is that not all interest groups on the demand side, including firms, have the capabilities to provide politico-economic incentives to the supply side (i.e., politicians and policymakers). In other words, not all firms can orchestrate the above political strategies. Indeed, extant research has shown that despite the importance of politics for business, not all firms are equally indulgent in CPA (Lawton & Rajwani, 2011; Liedong & Frynas, 2018). There is a plethora of research about the antecedents of political activity (see reviews by Hillman et al., 2004; Lux et al., 2011), with scholars identifying some firm-, industry- and national-level factors that determine the scope or intensity of firms' CPA (Blumentritt, 2003; Gray & Lowery, 1997; Hansen & Mitchell, 2000; Hillman & Keim, 1995; Hillman & Wan, 2005; Shirodkar & Mohr, 2015). Dominant among these determinants is firm size and resource endowment (Hillman et al., 2004).

Large and financially endowed firms are more politically active, because they have the resources to deploy a range of political strategies and tactics. For instance, they can afford to co-opt ex-politicians (Carretta et al., 2012; Hillman, 2005) or employ government officials and lobbyists coming through the "revolving door" (Blanes i Vidal, Draca, & Fons-Rosen, 2012; Etzion & Davis, 2008). They can also afford to establish public or government affairs departments to continually engage with politicians or commission research to provide position-supporting information to policymakers. Because the scale and intensity of CPA, which is largely dependent on resource endowment (Lux et al., 2011), is positively related to policy outcomes (Lenway et al., 1990; McKay & Yackee, 2007), some scholars have alluded that

public policy is often sold to the highest bidders (Evans & Sherlund, 2011; Grossman & Helpman, 1994). In other words, political markets can be exclusive (Alzola, 2013), mainly because most firms and interest groups stand higher chances of being marginalized in policymaking processes, thus leaving the playing field to a “privileged” few. This situation brings to the fore the concept of political contestability and its implications for the ethicality of CPA.

Political Contestability

In perfect democracies, there is a pluralist approach to political competition, public participation and political contestation (Trantidis, 2016). However, democracies are not perfect, neither are political markets (Tian et al., 2008). Political systems are not inclusive and are thus not equally contestable by all interest groups and parties. In his seminal analysis of CPA, Mitnick (1993) introduced *political contestability* to capture the uneven playing field for interest group participation in policymaking. Political contestability “characterizes the possibility for agents in an economy or society to enter the political system” (Weder & Grubel, 2012, p. 413). Using the metaphor of “elephants versus chickens”, Mitnick (1993) illustrates the advantages that large and endowed firms have relative to other interest groups. While there cannot be perfect representation in political markets, a contestable democratic system should “permit a contest for influence and control” (Mitnick, 1993, p. 22). Such a system can be established by policymakers allowing broad representation of interests, respecting the popular will, following due process, and being open and unbiased to ideas and change (Mitnick, 1993; Oberman, 2004; Tian et al., 2008).

Through a review of the literature, I identified four types of political contestability, namely government contestability, policy process contestability, political accountability contestability and policy influence contestability. Government contestability refers to the ability of opposition political parties and civil society organizations to challenge the political power of incumbent governments. In low government contestability situations, “despite the presence of elections open to all parties, a single political force stays in power over a long period of time facing no serious challenge by other political forces with no foreseeable prospect of losing power” (Trantidis, 2016, p. 68). Policy process contestability exists between civil servants and political advisors when they compete to be “close to the centre of policy making” (Ohberg et al., 2017, p. 273). This contestability is observable in cases of administrative politicization whereby political advisors and appointees “fight” for access to the Ministers or Heads of government agencies and departments (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2008; Lewis, 2008; Light, 1995). Political accountability contestability is the competition between politicians and citizens for transparency. In this competition, politicians

“may form a cartel to exploit citizens and taxpayers” (Weder & Grubel, 2012, p. 413) but seek to evade responsibility and scrutiny. Finally, policy influence contestability is the competition between different interest groups to influence public policy. It is this type of contestability that has been explored in the CPA literature (Mitnick, 1993). It is also the focus of this article, but with an emphasis on inter-firm competition.

The above types of political contestability may be different in form, but they are somewhat interrelated. For instance, a dominant and unchallenged government (when there is low government and policy process accountability) may provide exclusive and ethically questionable policy favors and benefits to large crony firms (when there is low policy influence contestability) without regard to due process (when there is low political accountability contestability). Large firms can also use their huge endowments to support authoritative and unaccountable governments (i.e., create low government and policy accountability contestability), influence politicians to surround themselves with in-line political advisors that will serve the firms’ interests (i.e., create low policy process contestability), and drown out competing interest groups or smaller firms in the policy process (i.e., create low policy influence contestability). These situations have negative implications for political representation, rights, and political system justice. Overall, political contestability, regardless of type, is a crucial issue in the ethicality of CPA (Liedong, 2020a, b, c).

The Ethics of Political Contestability

Just as contestable economic markets yield greater welfare by lessening market entry barriers, increasing competition, reducing monopoly power, and forcing incumbent firms to match prices with average profits (Bailey, 1981; Baumol, 1982; Burke & Rhoades, 1987; Dai & Yu, 2019), so are contestable political markets also welfare enhancing. Research has shown and suggested that high political contestability, through diverse mechanisms, reduces bribery and corruption (Giannoccolo & Liscandra, 2019). It also reduces regulatory capture by large and advantaged organizations and interest groups (Laffont & Tirole, 1991; Lei, Huang, & He, 2017). Further, it mitigates inefficient allocation of public resources and prevents unfair distribution of the costs and benefits of public policy (Hong & Lim, 2016).

The foregoing has caused scholars to use political contestability as a basis for proposing prescriptive frameworks for ethical CPA, though most of them are less explicit about their use of the concept. Existing ethical guidelines for CPA mainly focus on three issues namely: (1) the goals or intentions of CPA; (2) the means or mechanisms used to achieve the goals; and (3) the consequences or outcomes of CPA (Liedong, 2020a, b, c). Studies overwhelmingly advance that CPA that pursues appropriate intentions, uses appropriate

means or processes, and results in appropriate consequences or outcomes is more likely to be ethical (Gao, 2008; Tian et al., 2008). A significant chunk of these guidelines implicitly invoke contestability, mainly as they require the policy process to be open to all, and considerate of all interested parties and not only the powerful, wealthy or rich (Alzola, 2013; Bauer, 2014; Gao, 2008; Keffer & Hill, 1997; Leong et al., 2013). As Weber (1997) noted, the major issue about CPA is the concern that some moneyed interests can hijack the process and wield undue influence on public policy. CPA is a “self-interest” activity that firms may pursue for parochial goals (Correia, 2014; Hadani et al., 2016), but it would be less harmful if all interest groups are allowed to argue their positions and decisions are made to maximize benefits while respecting rights (Hamilton & Hoch, 1997).

Only a few studies have explicitly explored the ethicality of CPA using the concept of political contestability. Drawing on Mitnick’s (1993), Oberman (2004) applied “political contestability” to propose that CPA should be evaluated using four criteria, namely access, legitimacy, influence, and exploitation. He argued that CPA is ethical if it does not violate or restrict the contestability of politics. Tian, Gao and Cone (2008) also leveraged political contestability to provide a framework for contestable political systems. Oberman (2004) and Tian et al. (2008), however, diverge in their focus. While the former focuses on the political influence process, the latter focuses on the components of political action. Nevertheless, both studies (as well as others) converge in their theoretical framing. They use the three traditional approaches to ethics: consequentialist (teleological), non-consequentialist (deontological, including Kantian and rights-based), and justice (Bentham, 1789; Cavanaugh et al., 1981; Rawls, 1971). These approaches are also used in this article.

From a consequentialist (teleological) viewpoint, these studies prescribe contestable political systems as systems that represent the interests of the majority, increase representation in policy processes, and produce the greatest good for the greatest number (Audi, 2007). From a non-consequentialist (deontological) viewpoint, they define a contestable political system as a system that respects the rights of other parties and adheres to democratic values. Finally, from a justice viewpoint, they argue that a contestable political system must be fair and impartial. It must uphold distributive justice whereby all interest groups are treated the same, or differently in proportion to their differences (Perelman, 1963) while also providing compensation for any harm or wrong done during the process (Cavanaugh et al., 1981).

A major limitation in the political contestability literature is that it overly focuses on formal or firm-level characteristics such as size, resource endowment or wealth as the major antecedents of contestability (e.g., Mitnick, 1993; Tian et al., 2008; Weder & Grubel, 2012), thus overlooking

other informal institutional determinants of political contestability. One of such determinants is tribalism—i.e., the tendency of individuals to favor other individuals from their tribe (Beugré & Offodile, 2001; Zoogah, 2016). A tribe is social category of people who identify with one another based on common traditions and shared culture, ancestry, religion, and language.

Tribe is often discussed conjunctively with ethnicity and both are usually used interchangeably (Ekeh, 1990; Nyambergera, 2002). For some scholars, “tribal affiliation is roughly equivalent to ethnicity” (Liebler, 2004, p. 311). However, tribe and ethnicity differ with respect to their binding ties and scope. While tribes are “bound by traditional political structures to which people are linked by the mechanisms of traditional political obligation...the ties that bind the members of ethnic groups are often material interests and not traditional obligations” (Bates, 1974, p. 459). Also, tribal groups are smaller than ethnic groups (Zoogah, 2016), and there may be several tribes within the same ethnic group. This is echoed by Bhopal and Rowley (2005, p. 559) who argue that an ethnic group “may form around issues of language, religion, custom, and so on, providing for the opportunity for innumerable sub-divisions.” In contemporary times, ethnicity is sometimes conceived so broadly that the commonalities among group members are often superficial. For instance, ethnic groups like “Black African”, “Asian British” or “Arab” are more about race than shared culture and traditions. In Africa, ancestral home to the black race, there are several tribal and ethnic groups. Putting them together under one broad social category ignores the finer detail of their differences. Therefore, even though the notion of tribe is disputed as a Western fabrication and a relic of colonialism (Mafeje, 1971), it remains the primary social category in several African societies (Lentz, 1995; Zoogah, 2016).

Tribalism is a product of tribe. Anthropologically, it is “understood as the attribute of tribes and of tribesmen who demonstrate loyalty and adherence to tribal ways of doing things” (Ekeh, 1990, p. 687). In postcolonial times, it is sociologically defined as the “abuse of common opportunities and public goods (that is, those owned in common by various ethnic groups) through manifestation of undue preferences for persons of one’s own ethnic grouping” (Ekeh, 1990, p. 688). Tribalism is an obstacle to nationhood (Posner, 2005), mainly because tribal identity can be stronger than national identity (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2015). This sometimes leads to political conflicts and government overthrows (Alcorta, Smits, & Swedlund, 2018; Besley & Reynal-Querol, 2014; Langer & Ukiwo, 2009). More importantly, national politics is tribalistic in some countries, with political parties formed and political appointments made along tribal lines (Abbink, 2011; Ishiyama, 2010; Koev, 2019). In other countries, the inability of governments to meet the

needs of citizens causes politicians to prioritize their tribal groups, subsequently making the citizens rely on tribalism in their electoral choices (Englebert, 2009; Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2013). The issue of tribalism in politics is more pronounced in Africa—the most ethnically diverse region in the world (Alesina et al., 2003)—as well as in other tribally heterogeneous regions such as the Middle East (e.g., Baram, 1997; Mohammadpour & Soleimani, 2019).

Against this backdrop, it is possible for political contestability to be affected by tribalism between corporate executives and politicians. It is also possible for politicians to exclude out-tribal executives from the policy process, which raises interesting questions about how tribalism manifests in contestable political systems and what ethical issues it raises. Hence, this article is positioned to explore the implications of tribalism for political contestability.

Methods

Research Context

This study is set in the Republic of Ghana for theoretical reasons. First, Ghana is a democratic country in West Africa. Since the promulgation of its 1992 constitution, the country has organized direct multi-party presidential and parliamentary elections every 4 years, with more than 50% of the vote required for winning the former and a simple majority required for winning the latter. Presidents are limited to a maximum of two 4-year terms, while Members of Parliament (MPs) are not term-bound (i.e., there are no caps on, or limits to how many 4-year terms they are elected to serve in parliament). According to Ghana's Electoral Commission, there are 27 political parties in the country.¹ However, since 1992 when multi-party democracy was re-ushered after 11 years of military rule, political power has alternated between two dominant parties: National Democratic Congress (NDC) and National Patriotic Party (NPP). This has created a de-facto two-party system in Ghana. As a democratic country, Ghana is governed by democratic values, which include having a contestable political system. While government contestability can be observed from the number of political parties that contest elections in the country, it is questionable as only two parties dominate national politics. Even more questionable is how contestable the largely invisible policymaking process is in Ghana, and whether interest groups are treated equally and fairly.

Second, there are several tribes in Ghana (Acedo-Carmona & Gomila, 2015; Oelbaum, 2004), including the Ashanti/Akan, Fante, Ga, Ewe, Guan, Hausa, Dagomba,

Konkomba, Mamprusi, Frafra/Grussi, Kussasi, Dagarti, Sissala, Gonja, and Waala tribes. While Ghana is generally a peaceful country devoid of nation-wide wars, there have been incidents of tribal conflicts in the country. The Mamprusi and Kussasi tribes, for example, have feuded over land in the past.² The Konkomba and Nanumba tribes have also done same.³ There are also cases of inter-tribal prejudices and discrimination (Bukari & Schareika, 2015). Further, there is anecdotal evidence of entitlement among some tribes, which causes dissent among others. For example, the Akans occupy territories from where Ghana's major foreign exchange earners—timber, gold, cocoa—are grown or extracted. This makes the tribe feel some entitlement to the control of national politics and affairs. Essentially, the tribes in Ghana are not entirely cordial. It is therefore plausible to expect tribal competition and frictions in Ghana to impact CPA.

More importantly, there is tribal politics in Ghana. Strong associations exist between tribal groups and political parties. For instance, Ghana's two dominant political parties—NDC and NPP—have had tribal leanings from when they were formed. The former is closely associated with the Ewe/northern tribes and the latter to the Akans. In Ghana, tribe and ethnicity determine voters' choices (Debrah, 2016; Nugent, 2001) and elected politicians are expected to return the favor to their tribe members. Therefore, access to the policy process or influence of public policy in Ghana, and thus political contestability, could be shaped by the tribes of corporate executives and politicians. The above institutional reasons, including evidence of public sector tribalization (Haruna, 2003) and how tribe influences the treatment Ghanaians expect to receive from politicians, governments and public agencies (Price, 1973), make Ghana a suitable context for exploring the role of tribe in political contestability.

Sample and Data

I used an inductive multiple case study design, implemented through semi-structured interviews, to collect the data. (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003). This method has been used in previous CPA studies in Ghana and other contexts (Liedong et al., 2020a; Liedong, 2020a, b, c; Mbalyohere & Lawton, 2018). It is particularly useful for exploring ethical issues because it probes participants' rationales, practices and lived experiences (Morse & Richards, 2002) and "offers a more

¹ <https://www.ec.gov.gh/>.

² See the following link for evidence of tribal conflict between the Mamprusi and Kussasi tribes of Ghana: <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2014/09/25/Bawku-Kusasis.pdf>.

³ See the following link for evidence of tribal conflict between the Konkomba and Nanumba tribes of Ghana: <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2014/09/25/Konkomba-Nanumba%20conflict.pdf>.

Table 1 Sample

Firm	Industry	Firm size ^a	Respondent role	Respondent code
A	Banking	Medium	Managing Director	A1
B	Mining	Large	Chief Executive Officer	B1
C	Telecommunication	Large	Chief Executive Officer	C1
D	Oil and Gas	Large	Managing Director	D1
E	Pharmaceuticals	Small	Chief Executive Officer	E1
F	Banking	Large	Chief Executive Officer	F1
G	Textiles	Medium	Chief Executive Officer	G1
H	Insurance	Large	Managing Director	H1
I	Oil and Gas	Medium	Chief Executive Officer	I1
J	Logistics	Medium	Managing Director	J1
K	Real Estate	Large	Chief Executive Officer	K1
L	Pharmaceuticals	Medium	Managing Director	L1
M	Banking	Small	Managing Director	M1
N	Education	Large	Pro-Vice Chancellor	N1
O	Hospitality	Small	Managing Director	O1
P	Automobile	Small	Chief Executive Officer	P1
Q	Oil and Gas	Large	Chief Executive Officer	Q1
R	Retail (FMCG)	Small	Managing Director	R1
S	Lumbering	Medium	Chief Executive Officer	S1
T	Education	Medium	Pro-Vice Chancellor	T1
U	Logistics	Small	Deputy Managing Director	U1
V	Healthcare	Medium	Chief Executive Officer	V1
W	Oil and Gas	Medium	Chief Executive Officer	W1
X	Mining	Large	Chief Executive Officer	X1
Y	Banking	Large	Deputy Managing Director	Y1
Z	Food Processing	Medium	Chief Executive Officer	Z1
AA	Construction	Large	Chief Executive Officer	AA1
AB	Farming	Small	Chief Executive Officer	AB1

Firms and respondents are coded to preserve anonymity. Additional respondent information (e.g., years of professional experience and tribal identity) not reported to ensure anonymity due to the sensitivity of CPA in Ghana

^aFirm size based on OECD criteria. I defined small firms to have 10–49 employees, medium sized firms to have 50–249 employees and large firms to have 250 or more employees

contextual understanding of business ethics from the vantage point of the complex and pluralistic reality of the actors themselves...and views business ethics through the lens of the participants' perceptions of his or her experiences rather than through the lens of abstract categories and concepts imposed by researchers" (Reinecke, Arnold, and Palazzo, 2016, p. xiv). The interview questions were developed using insights from literature, professional reports, and anecdotal evidence, and were pilot tested.

The sampled firms were selected from the membership directory of Association of Ghana Industries (AGI) and BusinessGhana. To obtain a representative sample, I used

the OECD⁴ criteria to select 150 firms according to size. Because tribes are regionally distributed across Ghana's administrative regions, I also ensured regional inclusion. For instance, the Dagarti tribe is based in the Upper West Region, the Frafra tribe in the Upper East Region, and the Ga tribe in Greater Accra Region. My final sample, after several follow ups, comprised 28 CEOs and Managing Directors (and their deputies) of organizations operating in a diverse range of industries including banking, telecommunication, oil and gas, mining (see sample in Table 1). Their anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses were assured to protect them from any reprisals, particularly considering

⁴ Following OECD, I defined small firms to have 10–49 employees, medium sized firms to have 50–249 employees and large firms to have 250 or more employees.

Table 2 Data sources

Data source	Data type	Data usage
Formal interviews	28 Interviews with senior managers and executives	Collect data about the role of tribal identity in corporate political strategy development
Observation	Field notes (5 months spent on the field)	To establish rapport with participants, and facilitate interpretation of interview responses
Corporate documents	Reports and petitions sent to industry associations, trade unions and regulators	Triangulation of interview data
Press and news articles	News articles about tribalism in Ghana's democracy, politics and the public service. Retrieved from popular and widely read news sites such as Ghanaweb, Myjoyonline, and Graphic	Triangulation of interview data and to enhance validity of insights from the interview data. Also, to contextualize the issue of tribalism

that CPA is sensitive and opaque in Ghana (Liedong, 2020a, b, c). I triangulated the interview data with corporate documents and news articles about tribalism and tribal politics in Ghana (see data sources in Table 2).

Data Analysis

I employed grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) to analyze the data. This approach is used to explore under-research phenomena, allowing for theory to emerge from the data rather than fit data to preconceptions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In line with grounded theory's principle of "constant comparison" (Glaser, 1965; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), I followed Boeije's (2002) approach to iteratively collect and analyze the data by: (1) making comparisons within single cases to develop appropriate codes; (2) making comparisons between cases in the same tribal groups to produce code clusters; and (3) making comparisons between tribal groups to create a complete picture of tribal identity effects in CPA. Through constant comparison, I leveraged the preliminary codes and the emerging theoretical properties to deploy theoretical sampling for deciding additional respondents until I reached saturation whereby additional interviews provided little or no new information.

I followed three steps to code the data (see codes in Fig. 1). First, I did open-coding within and across the cases to derive the first-order concepts. In doing this, I engaged in data reduction to codify recurrent themes and expressions (e.g., *mobilizing resources for political action, being a tribal "out-group" member*). Second, I did axial coding by grouping similar first-order concepts together to derive the second-order themes (e.g., *tribal consonance, political planning*). I defined the second-order themes based on the theoretical links of the first-order concepts. In effect, the second-order themes are constructs whose meanings or measurements are underpinned by the first-order concepts. To address construct validity, I iteratively refined the first-order concepts by constantly contrasting them with emerging codes (Eisenhardt, 1989). I also compared the themes with

extant literature to check for accuracy (Aguinis & Solarino, 2019; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012). Finally, I classified the second-order themes to develop aggregate dimensions (e.g., *liability of tribe, tribal identity*). Evidently, this analytical approach was incrementally staged. While I aimed to develop new insights from the raw data, I also followed best practice by iterating the fractured data with theory in order to reach informed relationships between the concepts, themes and dimensions (Gioia et al., 2012). I shared the codes with colleagues for feedback (Plakoyiannaki, Wei, & Prashantham, 2019) and also presented the preliminary findings to respondents for accuracy checks and additional insights (Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010).

Results

Liability of Tribe in CPA

I interviewed CEOs and MDs (and deputies) who belonged to different tribal groups. Comparing their tribes with the dominant tribe of the incumbent political party enabled me to classify the respondents into out-groups and in-groups. Doing so, I derived two categories of tribal identity—*tribal consonance* and *tribal dissonance*. Tribal consonance occurs when corporate executives are *in-group* or belong to the dominant tribe of the ruling political party or the tribe of the policymaker, while tribal dissonance exists when corporate executives are *out-group* or do not belong to the dominant tribe(s) of the ruling political party or the tribe of the policymaker. To address doubts about tribal heterogeneity and diversity in top management teams and corporate boards, this categorization considers the tribal identity of the most senior executive of the firm—mostly the CEO or MD. Sometimes, these senior executives are also the chairpersons of corporate boards (in cases of CEO duality) or the owners of the firms (in cases of owner-managers).

I found that tribal dissonance causes politicians to ignore or reject attempts by dissonant executives to participate in

Fig. 1 Data structure and codes

the policy process. Due to the tribalization of politics and public administration in Ghana (Debrah, 2016; Haruna, 2003; Price, 1973), tribal dissonance may be threatening because politicians may perceive managers from other tribes to be associated with opposition political parties, making them underserving of any political favors. The politicians “do not feel they should be spending their time on an “outsider” (H1). Discerning tribal affiliation in Ghana is not difficult. Body marks, local languages, and particularly names are good signals of tribe. The names of corporate executives can be used to identify their tribe or ethnicity (Ahmed, 2010; Zhang, 2018), which makes it possible for politicians to decide what they want to do with signed official requests or petitions. One of the respondents noted this:

I used several formal and informal channels to request audience but failed. I did several follow ups, which

were also futile. It was an important issue..., but the Minister didn’t want to engage. I sensed tribal play due to my name (W1).

Tribal dissonance creates *liability of tribe* (hereafter *LOT*), which refers to the disadvantages that corporate executives experience in policymaking processes due to their belongingness to tribes that are different from those of the policymakers. LOT is experienced when the executive of a firm that wants to do CPA identifies with a tribe that is different from the political target of the political action (e.g., Minister or Member of Parliament). The data revealed that it can also be experienced when (1) a significant majority of the top management team belong to a tribe that is different from the dominant tribe of the ruling political party or the tribe of the political action target; and (2) when the firm is located in a region that is outside of the home region

of the dominant tribe of the ruling political party or the tribe of the political action target. A respondent noted that:

the mere fact that your business is in a region that is not the home to the politicians' tribes can make you suffer politically (AA1).

LOT leads to a lack of broad representation in CPA, mainly as the interests of firms managed or owned by tribally dissonant executives are not recognized, accounted for, or served. This observation shows that LOT and political contestability are inextricably linked, and demonstrates how the informal or cultural characteristics of individual executives affect the policymaking process. Tribalism allows some vested interests to dominate policy issues while excluding others, as “politicians sideline, malign and discriminate against other tribes that are not their own” (O1). “Tribally consonant executives and their firms do not experience LOT and they receive favorable political treatment from politicians. This leaves tribally dissonant executives at a competitive disadvantage in political markets. A respondent remarked that:

I do not stand a chance against competitors that are managed by people tribally affiliated to the politicians of the day (K1).

It deserves mentioning that the current literature attends to political contestability from the view of firm size and wealth (Alzola, 2013), using metaphors like “elephants among chickens” to illustrate uneven competition in political markets (Gao, 2008; Liedong, 2020a, b, c; Mitnick, 1991; Oberman, 2004). This article, peering in from both a tribal and managerial-level viewpoint, is thus a significant addition to the political contestability corpus.

Manifestation of Political Contestability in CPA

The data revealed that CPA is sequential process. I leveraged this insight to develop a political influence process model, which has four stages: *political planning*, *political access*, *political voice*, and *political influence*. This process model reflects Oberman's (2002, 2004) political resource development model, but it differs both in content and conceptualization. Oberman's model considers political influence to start from gaining access to the polity, but my model conceives access to be function of political planning—i.e., firms plan political action first before seeking access (Baron, 1995b; Post et al., 1982). In this sense, contestability issues emerge earlier in the political influence process than Oberman envisaged. Second, Oberman's (2004) model is conceptual, normative, and prescriptive, while mine is empirically derived from the “voices” of corporate executives who experience contestability situations. My political influence process model, therefore, better reflects the real issues in political markets. I found that in each of the four influence stages, tribal identity and LOT play a crucial role in the contestability of political market (see Fig. 2).

Political Planning

LOT affects the decision of a firm to engage or not engage with the polity. Firms that experience tribal dissonance have little motivation to compete in political markets, and hence do not even attempt to plan political action. While executives may appreciate the implications of policy issues for their firms, they do not mobilize political resources, identify and evaluate political tactics, or organize political action. A

Fig. 2 Effects of tribal identity in the political influence process

respondent argued that “the very fact you do not belong to the same tribe as the politicians you want to speak to discourages you, because you are very likely to be shunned” (G1). The high chance of being ignored in the policymaking process makes it futile to “spend resources planning how to make politicians hear your side of things” (O1). Planning is crucial for political success (Lawton et al., 2014), as firms must systematically organize to manage political issues, rival interest groups, political institutions and political information (Baron, 1995b). Some executives do not plan because they perceive CPA as a far shot due to their LOT, highlighting the incontestability of the political market. These executives “do not see the need to fashion strategies or mobilize resources for shaping or influencing policy” (M1).

Interestingly, LOT emerged as a determinant of CPA, but this has not been captured in prior literature. While several studies have examined the antecedents of CPA (Grier, Munger, & Roberts, 1994; Hersch & McDougall, 2000; Hillman, 2003; Liedong & Frynas, 2018; Masters & Keim, 1985; Mezner & Nigh, 1995; Mitchell, Hansen, & Jepsen, 1997), they have not explored the impact of informal institutional factors such as tribalism and ethnicity on political action. The closest studies to this issue are those about the role of culture in CPA (Barron, 2010, 2011), but even these studies focus on national culture (Hofstede, 2001) and therefore miss the cultural heterogeneity that exists within countries.

Leveraging consequentialist, non-consequentialist, and justice ethical approaches (Bentham, 1789; Cavanaugh et al., 1981; Rawls, 1971), political contestability in the political planning stage makes executives feel they have no right to be concerned about policy issues. This weakens their audacity to plan toward representation, thus limiting their inclusion in the policy process.

Political Access

Firms develop access to politicians using political strategies such as financial, logistics, affective, pseudo-attribution, kinship, and relational strategies (Hadani & Schuler, 2013; Hillman & Hitt, 1999; Li, Poppo, and Zhou, 2008; Liedong, 2020a, b, c; Liedong et al., 2020a, c). These strategies are leveraged on resources including social capital, money and information, but these resources are not evenly distributed across firms (Amit & Schoemaker, 1993; Wernerfelt, 1984). Therefore, political access is not a given for all firms—some have more access than others. This has implications for contestability, as other scholars have opined (e.g. Oberman, 2004; Tian et al., 2008).

Social capital, a political resource, can be developed through kinship and ethnic affiliations (Liedong, 2020a, b, c). This makes tribe a crucial determinant of contestability. Indeed, I found that LOT affects political access by

diminishing the ability of tribally dissonant firms to gain access to the corridors of policy and political power. A respondent noted that “tribalistic politicians give a listening ear to those from within their own tribes, leaving others out” (L1). Limited access manifests in various ways. For instance, policymakers may refuse to acknowledge or even act on formal requests from dissonant executives. They can also outrightly reject or refuse to meet with dissonant executives, often using excuses that “they are busy or the issue to be discussed is out of their hands or has been concluded already” (E1).

From a consequentialist perspective, LOT reduces representation and participation in policy process. It prevents a sufficient representation of a broader array of interests, creates an incontestable political market, curtails viable viewpoints needed for balanced policy decisions, and reduces the broader welfare of policy stakeholders. From a non-consequentialist viewpoint, tribalism undermines the democratic right of corporations to participate in policy processes. The rights of executives that experience LOT are not upheld and respected by policymakers, which also leads to these executives being treated unfairly and unjustly by the political system. A respondent remarked:

tribal cabals in government do not think we exist, we are nobodies, we don’t matter, and our right to speak up is treated with scorn (A1).

Political Voice

It is one thing to gain political access, and another thing to have a voice. “Voice” refers to oral and written communications as well as the information that is shared between firms and policymakers. This is reflected in information strategies such as lobbying and petitioning (Lenway et al., 1990; McKay & Yackee, 2007). Other political strategies (e.g., financial donations, social capital) mainly get firms and business executives through the doors and corridors of policymaking power. Thereafter, executives must share or communicate their concerns, positions, and preferences to policymakers. This stage of the policy influence process is important because this is when the chain of influence starts. With political voice, executives speak to their firms’ interests, spelling out in persuasive ways what they think about policy consequences.

I found that while all executives who gain access to the polity have political voice in one way or the other, not all of them actually have voice. Voice, in this sense, “is not only about saying something or speaking up, but more about being heard when you speak” (Q1). The data revealed that there are instances when politicians and policymakers grant audience to business executives, but do not listen to them.

Table 3 Framework for evaluating the effect of tribalism on political contestability

Influence of Tribal Identity in the Contestability of Political Systems among Firms				
	Consequentialist (teleological/utilitarian) Approach		Non-consequentialist (deontological/rights) Approach	
	Effect of Tribalism	Ethicality Question	Effect of Tribalism	Ethicality Question
Political Planning	Reduces broad participation in policy process	Does tribalism reduce participation in political systems?	Diminishes belief in the right to political entry	Does tribalism discourage political participation?
↓				
Political Access				
↓				
Political Voice				
↓				
Political Influence ‡	Limits broad representation in policy process	Does tribalism exclude some firms from policy processes?	Denies the right of political participation	Does tribalism deny the right of political participation to other firms?
	Silences other firms	Does tribalism reduce the voice of some firms?	Encourages policymakers to shirk duty of listening to all firms	Does tribalism deny the right of free speech to some firms?
	Domination of majority interests by parochial interests	Does tribalism weaken the interests of the majority of firms?	Discriminates against some firms	Does tribalism ignore the rights of some firms in policy decisions?
			Denies equal entry to all firms	Does tribalism cause unfair access for some firms?
			Increases deception and manipulation of the concerns of some firms	Does tribalism lead to prejudicial treatment of some firms?
			Gives undue consideration to some firms in policy decisions	Does tribalism deny equitable consideration of the concerns of some firms?

During verbal communication, this would manifest when the policymakers appear “disinterested in what you are saying to them” (T1). In written communication, the policymakers do not listen when “they fail to read the documents, proposals and petitions sent to them” (V1). In these situations, while the executives may speak up, they are not being heard. It appears policymakers invite “voice” merely as a tick-box exercise to show they are open to diverse views, but they are not.

Not having a political voice is a common political contestability phenomenon for corporate executives that experience LOT. Their tribal dissonance with the polity makes them susceptible to “voice-washing” whereby policymakers “pretend to hear all voices but only do so for their folks. Some voices are just noise to them” (R1). Consequently, tribally consonant executives have an advantage in the policy process while the representation or participation of tribally dissonant executives is diminished. The lack of political voice due to tribalism also undermines the rights of firms and executives to have a say in policymaking, which is not only unjust but also culminates in unfair policy consequences.

Political Influence

All firms that do CPA intend to wield political influence to ensure that policy outcomes are favorable to them (Hillman et al., 2004). In emerging and developing countries, the focus is mostly on uncertainty reduction (Liedong & Frynas, 2018; Puck, Rogers, & Mohr, 2013; White et al., 2015), overcoming institutional weaknesses (Liedong et al., 2017; Xin & Pearce, 1996) and gaining government business and protection (Guo et al., 2014; Liedong et al., 2020a). Political influence is the last stage of the political influence process. Here, firms may be heard, but their voices are not considered in final decisions. It is at this stage that firms use their CPA to gain competitive advantage or increase profitability.

The interviewed executives understood political influence in terms of “relaxing some of the restrictions that constrain business” (B1), “reducing the bureaucracy that we experience” (D1), “allowing flexibility in reporting and operational procedures” (C1) and “getting government contracts” (AA1). The latter dominated the responses, because government contracts are the popular conduit to extract rent from the government in Ghana. Unsurprisingly, these contracts are often fraught with corruption. One thing that resonated across the data is the ability of the polity to offer arbitrary relief—i.e., to not change public policy, but discriminate through ad hoc removal of barriers or imposition of favorable conditions for specific firms. This situation reflects the weak rule of law as well as poor checks and balances commonly seen in developing countries (Henisz & Zelner, 2010; Liedong et al., 2020b; Nwabuzor, 2005).

Granting arbitrary relief to firms is impacted by LOT. Politicians and policymakers “give preferential treatment to their tribal members, and they mostly consider their own kindred first in the allocation of the national cake” (W1). Among other reasons, doing so helps their re-election chances in Ghana’s tribalized political system. LOT affects political contestability in the political influence stage. The arbitrary relief and favorable treatment given to tribal members makes the benefits to be more likely limited to just a few firms whose tribally derived superiority and power curtail the rights and endanger the fair treatment of other firms.

Overall, low or no contestability at any of the four stages prevents firms from progressing to the next, at worst. At best, it affects the quality of the next stage. For instance, low contestability in the political planning stage may discourage a firm from seeking political access. In the same vein, low contestability in the access stage may deny executives their political voice, and even when executives can muster a voice, they are less likely to be heard. Finally, even when executives are heard, their voices may not be considered in policy outcomes. The political contestability issues and questions arising in the policy influence process due to LOT are used to develop an analytical framework, as presented in Table 3.

Discussion and Conclusion

Using consequentialist, non-consequentialist and justice ethical approaches (Audi, 2007; Cavanaugh et al., 1981; Rawls, 1971), this article explores how tribalism affects the contestability of political markets. In specific terms, it investigates how the tribal identities of politicians, policymakers and corporate executives affect the contestability of policy influence, an important issue that resonates in the CPA ethicality literature (Alzola, 2013; Gao, 2008; Oberman, 2004; Tian et al., 2008). This article is predicated on the limited explicit treatment of the ethical issues surrounding political contestability in CPA research, the dominant but short-sighted conceptualization of political contestability based on firm size or wealth, and the lack of research on the informal determinants of political contestability, such as ethnicity and tribe. I found two different tribal identities among executives, namely tribal consonance (belonging to the tribe of policymakers or to the dominant tribe of the ruling political party) and tribal dissonance (not belonging to the tribe of policymakers or to the dominant tribe of the ruling political party). The latter creates LOT—i.e., the disadvantages experienced in the policymaking process by “out-group” executives. LOT leads to low political contestability and raises ethical concerns in the political influence process. This domino effect is illustrated in Fig. 3.

A couple of issues from my findings are worth highlighting. First, this article revealed that CPA entails a process

Fig. 3 Ethical implications of managers' tribal identity and liability of tribe in CPA

fraught with contestability issues that weaken the rights of tribally dissonant firms. Previous studies conceived this process to start from “access” (e.g., Oberman, 2004), but this misses the fact that corporations plan CPA before they seek political access (Baron, 1995b; Vanden Bergh and Holburn, 2007). In fact, the planning stage is where the CPA process starts. Here, the audacity or courage of corporate executives, underpinned by their hope in the success of their impending political action, determines whether firms develop CPA plans. This hope, as I found, is a function of executives' tribal identities and the LOT they experience or anticipate. Essentially, tribally dissonant managers are more likely to give up on political entry, as they lack confidence in getting a fair shot in political markets. This indicates that the tribal identities of executives vis-à-vis those of policymakers drives CPA, yet the current literature does not capture this antecedent.

There are several studies about the antecedents and intensity of CPA (e.g., Hillman & Keim, 1995; Hillman et al., 2004; Liedong & Frynas, 2018; Lux et al., 2011; White et al., 2015), but they mainly focus on national-, industry-, and firm-level factors and rarely explore managerial-level drivers. Just a few studies have explored the role of national culture, arguing that the cultures within which managers are socialized affect the CPA choices they make (e.g., Barron, 2010, 2011). While laudable, this small corpus also focuses on national cultural homogeneity while overlooking cultural heterogeneity. It is true that citizens in a country may share some common values (Hofstede, 2001), but it is also true that there may be several subcultures within a country, especially in African nation-states. These subcultures exist within tribes. In countries where tribal identity can be stronger than national identity (e.g., Green, 2020), tribalism affects politics, the contestability of political markets, and the drive to do CPA.

Second, this article helps to disaggregate the bases of the social capital resource that firms leverage in political markets. Prior studies, using social capital and network theories (Granovetter, 1973; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), have examined managerial political ties as a strategy for political influence (Li et al., 2008, 2009; Liedong & Rajwani, 2018; Liedong et al., 2017; Peng & Luo, 2000). These studies, however, do not explore how political ties are developed or established. Recent works have moved closer to address the bases for relational political strategies, showing that managers develop social connections to politicians through family relations, alumni relations, and friendships (e.g., Liedong, 2020a, b, c). This article extends these previous works by revealing how tribalism offers opportunities for firms to connect with politicians and policymakers, but it further shows how tribalism and the attendant social capital that it avails can make political markets incontestable for tribally dissonant executives and their firms.

Leveraging the findings, this article makes important contributions to the literature. It shows how informal institutional influences, such as tribe, influence political contestability, and thus extends previous works that have implicitly or explicitly explored formal determinants of political contestability (Alzola, 2013; Oberman, 2004). It presents the concept of *liability of tribe*—and shows how it affects political contestability. It generates new insights into how relationships between politicians and executives are shaped by tribe, which creates out-groups and in-groups among executives and leads to low contestability for the former group. This is particularly common in contexts where political party formation and political mobilization are influenced by tribalism (Abbink, 2011; Brown, 1999; Ishiyama, 2010; Koev, 2019), especially in Africa—the most ethnically diverse region in the world (Alesina et al., 2003).

This article shows a micro–macro link in the contestability of political markets. The micro–macro link, which

denotes how managers' personal networks and social capital can affect firm-level outcomes (Acquaah, 2007; Gulati, Nohria, & Zaheer, 2000; Peng & Luo, 2000), has mostly focused on the impact of micro-managerial networking on organizational performance. This article extends the micro–macro link to the ethicality of CPA by showing how corporate executives' tribal identities (a micro-construct) affect their firms' political competitiveness and the contestability of political systems (a macro-construct). This marks a departure from the frequent and dominant treatment of only the macro–macro link whereby firm-level characteristics such as size and wealth are treated as the main drivers of political contestability (Mitnick, 1991; Oberman, 2004; Tian et al., 2008).

Critically, this article presents a finer-grained disaggregation of political contestability. It shows that the liability of tribe manifests in four distinct stages of corporate political influence, namely *political planning* (the boldness and courage to marshal political action), *political access* (reaching politicians and policymakers), *political voice* (being heard by politicians and policymakers), and *political influence* (views, preferences and opinions accounted for in final policy decisions). Leveraging the findings and drawing from the works of Oberman (2002, 2004), I present a process model that shows where and how contestability issues emerge in the orchestration of CPA. Obstacles or tribal liabilities at any stage prevent firms from progressing to the next stage, indicating a processual manifestation of political contestability in CPA. I also present a framework for analyzing tribal impacts on political contestability using the three traditional approaches to ethics—i.e., the consequentialist (teleological), non-consequentialist (deontological, including Kantian and rights-based), and justice approaches.

Practical Relevance

Insights from this article have practical implications for managers, policymakers, and other stakeholders on both the demand and supply sides of political markets. First, the findings herein show how tribalism affects the CPA of firms that are managed by tribally dissonant executives, thus drawing corporate executives' attention to how their own personal attributes matter for their firms' political contestability. It is important to mention that managers are highly likely to overlook their LOT in political markets. Hence, recognizing and appreciating the tribal micro–macro link and its repercussions is a starting point for managers to find useful remedies. To be politically competitive, firms must carefully examine the LOT of their top management teams and develop or institute appropriate measures to mitigate the effects. These measures could include ensuring tribal diversity in the upper echelons, which is an ethical issue on its own (Azmat & Rentschler, 2017; Parboteeah, Seriki,

& Hoegl, 2014; Upadhyay & Zeng, 2014). They could also entail collaborations with other interest groups to overcome contestability issues in all four stages of the political influence process. In weak institutional environments characterized by political overreach, collaborations will help overcome resource constraints as well political discrimination (Liedong, 2017; Liedong et al., 2020a).

Second, it is imperative for governments to ensure that the policymaking process is institutionalized and regulated so that interest groups have a fair chance to contest. While it may not be possible to consider the interests of all firms (Oberman, 2004), a contestable political system ensures that policy decisions are, at least, reflective of broader preferences rather parochial interests. In most countries, especially African countries, CPA is unregulated (Liedong et al., 2020a; Liedong, 2020a, b, c). This provides a fertile ground for discriminatory and ethnocentric CPA that gives undue advantage to some firms while undermining the rights of, or meting out unfair treatments to other firms. An ethnocentric political system is incontestable for “out-group” tribes, which leads to unbalanced policy outcomes. The onus is on development partners and civil service organizations to prioritize the ethics of business–government relations in the development agendas of developing countries, because these relations often underpin the rampant corruption that is recorded in these countries (Lawton, McGuire, & Rajwani, 2013a; Liedong, 2020a, b, c). Institutionalizing due processes for transparently managing interest group lobbying will impose scrutiny on policymaking processes, push for the protection of interest group rights and usher in an era of fair treatment for all policy stakeholders.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite using several techniques and following appropriate procedures and principles to ensure the robustness of the conclusions herein, this article suffers a few limitations that present opportunities for future research. First, its external validity is contestable due to the limited generalizability associated with inductive case studies and wider qualitative research. Nevertheless, the ability of case studies to generate new insights and help in theory development (Eisenhardt, 1989) suggests that the new knowledge presented in this article has analytical generalizability (Firestone, 1993) because the insights can be tested or applied to other contexts. This is evidenced by the conduct of replication studies in diverse management disciplines (Aichner et al., 2016; Child, 1972; Hubbard, Vetter, & Little, 1998). As ethnicity and tribalism are prevalent in other African and Middle Eastern countries (e.g., Baram, 1997; Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2015; Mohammadpour & Soleimani, 2019), this study could be replicated or extended “to aid efforts in synthesizing and aggregating available knowledge and will help to put the

academic discussion on a solid foundation of empirical evidence” (Block & Kuckertz, 2018, p. 355).

Second, in this article, I define tribal identity and LOT in CPA by comparing similarities and differences in tribal belongingness of top corporate executives (i.e., CEOs and MDs) on the one hand and policy makers on the other hand. In doing so, my conceptualization overlooks the tribal identities of entire management teams or even corporate board members. It is possible for politicians to consider the tribal identities of other upper echelon executives and not only the CEOs or MDs. For instance, the polity may give preferential treatment to a tribally dissonant CEO due to the tribal consonance of a functional manager, a non-executive board member or even a low-level employee. This is because “there are instances when the connections between firms and politicians are embedded in ordinary employees, not directors, senior managers or large shareholders” (Liedong et al., 2020a, p. 857). Therefore, future research could test and expand my definition of LOT in CPA by widening the scope to capture the tribal identities of whole management teams. Research could also explore organization-wide tribe distributions to check if the sizes of tribe representations matter in LOT.

Third, the views informing the conclusions in this article are from corporate executives only, and could thus be one-sided considering that CPA involves interactions between the demand and supply sides of policymaking (Bonardi et al., 2005; Jia and Zhang, 2018; Liedong, 2020a, b, c). Most studies about the ethics of CPA are conceptual and prescriptive (e.g., Oberman, 2004; Tian et al., 2008), and hence do not account for both sides of the dyadic firm–polity relationship. Also, other extant CPA studies have rarely used combined samples of executives and politicians due to difficulties in gaining access to the latter. I tried to interview politicians but was unsuccessful. Despite this access challenge, it is important for future works to attempt to incorporate the views of policymakers and politicians in the ethics debate. It is fair to argue that firms’ unethical CPA exists invariably due to the actions and inactions of policymakers. In other words, both parties could be cohorts in the creation and maintenance of incontestable political systems, which makes the politicians’ views invaluable in the CPA ethics discourse.

Beyond research opportunities tied to the specific limitations of this study, there are others related to the broader topics of CPA ethics and political contestability. First, future quantitative studies could test the impact of managerial tribal identity on the four stages of political influence presented in this article. Future works could also test the impact of tribal identity on outcomes related to the consequentialist (teleological), non-consequentialist (deontological, including Kantian and rights-based), and justice approaches to ethics (Bentham, 1789; Cavanaugh

et al., 1981; Rawls, 1971). For instance, research could examine the relationship between managerial tribal identity and perceptions of policy benefits (for utilitarianism) or fair treatment (for justice) or rights protection (for democratic rights) in the policy process. The findings could help establish a comparative view of the extent to which tribe affects political contestability.

Second, the current dominant focus on firm-level size and wealth (e.g., Alzola, 2013; Mitnick, 1993; Oberman, 2004; Tian et al., 2008) as if they are the only determinants of contestability is worrying. As shown herein, the tribal identities of corporate executives also have implications for contestability. It is therefore important for future research to take cue from this article to continue to explore informal institutional as well as managerial-level determinants of political contestability. This is crucial for places like Africa where scholars have called for more work to leverage the region’s unique institutional context and its large informal economy (Abid, 2016; Galdino et al., 2018; Musara & Nieuwenhuizen, 2020) to develop management theory (George et al., 2016; Zoogah et al., 2015). The interesting findings reported in this article should inspire future research to chart a course that investigates the linkages between informal managerial attributes and political contestability to conceptually and empirically substantiate the micro–macro link in the ethics of CPA.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the Ethical Standards of the Institutional and/or National Research Committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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