



A Comparative Survey of

*DEMOCRACY, GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT*

Working Paper Series: No. 84

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Understanding of Democracy in East Asian  
Societies

Yun-Han Chu

Distinguished Research Fellow, Institute  
of Political Science, Academia Sinica  
Professor, Department of Political  
Science, National Taiwan University  
yunhan@gate.sinica.edu.tw

&

Min-Hua Huang

Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Arts  
and Humanities, Shanghai Jiao-Tong  
University, China  
neds5103@gmail.com

&

Jie Lu

Department of Government, American  
University, USA  
jlu@american.edu

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A Comparative Survey of Democracy, Governance and Development

# **Working Paper Series**

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### ***Contact Information***

***Asian Barometer Project Office***

***Department of Political Science***

***National Taiwan University***

***No.1, Sec.4, Roosevelt Road, Taipei,  
10617, Taiwan, R.O.C.***

***Tel: 886 2-3366 8456***

***Fax: 886-2-2365 7179***

***E-mail: [asianbarometer@ntu.edu.tw](mailto:asianbarometer@ntu.edu.tw)***

***Website: [www.asianbarometer.org](http://www.asianbarometer.org)***

## Understanding of Democracy in East Asian Societies

*Yun-Han Chu*

Institute of Political Science, Academia Sinica

*Min-Hua Huang*

Institute of Arts and Humanities, Shanghai Jiao Tong University

*Jie Lu*

Department of Government, American University

**Abstract:** Using a new survey battery of democratic conceptions from the third wave of the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS III), this paper explores the possible origins of democratic conceptions in the sampled East Asian societies. There are three major findings. First, the substance-based democratic conception has won the hearts and minds of a majority of the East Asians. Second, the East Asians' assessment of government performance, as well as their appreciation of the intrinsic value of democracy, plays a significant role in shaping how they understand democracy. Third, the sharp distinction between economic prosperity in Asian authoritarian or emerging democratic countries as opposed to the long-term recession in Asian liberal democracies has already changed value orientation toward instrumental conception of democracy. Nevertheless, the impact of government performance is conditional upon its surrounding political context. Different interpretations should be developed to explain the same phenomenon since the reason behind could be very different.

Paper prepared for delivery at conference on "Citizen Politics and Democracy in East Asia," co-organized by Program for East Asia Democratic Studies, IAS-NTU, Institute of Political Science, Academia Sinica, and Taiwan Foundation for Democracy. June 17-18, 2013, Taipei

## **Democracy: A Universal but Contested Value**

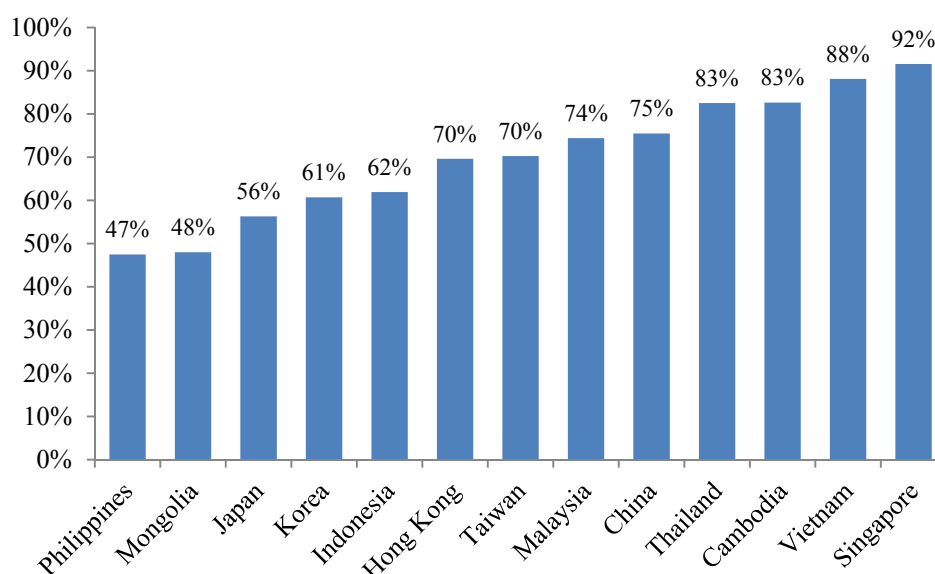
Living in a free and democratic society is a widely shared goal in today's world. Thanks to the people who have risked their lives in pursuit of political democratization, democracy has become the only game in town in many societies. Even some authoritarian regimes that had luckily dodged the Third Wave were later transformed into democracies by the Color Revolutions or more recently the Arab Spring. Democracy has also successfully consolidated its status as the only game in contemporary political discourse: even many authoritarian leaders publicly acknowledge that "democracy is a good thing" (Yu 2009) and claim their regimes to be some sort of a democracy.

Nevertheless, it is also well known that democracy is a contested concept having numerous connotations. The various meanings attached to democracy not only complicate civil and academic debates on how to assess and improve democratic practice, but also generate considerable leeway for possible concept stretching that authoritarian leaders are keen on exploiting to camouflage and facilitate their authoritarian rule (Zakaria (1994). Moreover, many of the empirical puzzles identified by students of comparative public opinion cannot be effectively addressed, without systematically incorporating the various meanings that people associate with the D-word. For instance, in the third wave of the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS III), people in thirteen East Asian societies were asked to evaluate the practice of democracy in their respective societies. The weighted percentages of respondents reporting "Very satisfied" or "Fairly satisfied" are plotted in Figure 1, ranked in ascending order. Contrary to most scholars' expectations, a large majority of people, i.e., more than 65 percent, in authoritarian societies like China, Malaysia, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Singapore are quite satisfied with the practice of democracy in their countries. Some of these authoritarian societies even outrank mature democracies like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan in this regard.

The first, and also quite natural, response from most readers may be that the survey results from non-democracies cannot be trusted, i.e., the respondents simply lied, given their repressive authoritarian governments. Theoretically, the impacts of preference falsification or coerced silence on public opinion surveys can never be ruled out (Kuran 1995; Noelle-Neumann 1984). This is not only the case in authoritarian societies for obvious reasons, but also in democratic societies due to social pressure or other concerns (Glynn 1997; Krosnick 2002; Tourangeau et al. 2000). Nevertheless, a significant percentage of the same respondents did report negative assessment of their authoritarian governments on issues like the rule of law, freedom of speech, or corruption, which suggests that political wariness cannot be the key factor that drives

the findings in Figure 1. Meanwhile, existing empirical research using data from the ABS, as well as other comparative survey projects like the World Values Survey, shows that the effect of political wariness on public opinion surveys from authoritarian societies usually is not substantively significant, in most cases even statistically insignificant (Ren 2009; Shi 2001; Shi and Lou 2010).

**Figure 1 Satisfaction with the Practice of Democracy**



Source: ABS III (N=18307)

Another equally plausible explanation lies in the varying meanings that people may have associated with the D-word. When popular conceptions of democracy vary and do not necessarily follow the liberalism-based criteria that emphasize, *inter alia*, institutionalized protection of rights and liberty, checks and balances, and election-centered party politics, it is very likely that popular assessment of the practice of democracy in different societies may diverge from most scholars' expectations. And the growing literature of popular understandings of democracy has effectively documented the existence of different democratic conceptions and explicated the salience of the varying democratic conceptions for democratic transition and consolidation (Bratton and Mattes 2001; Canache 2012; Carnaghan 2011; Dalton, Shin, and Jou 2007; Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer, 1998; Shin 2011; Crow 2010). To enrich our understanding of democratic conceptions and provide systematic evidence from East Asia to inform and extend related comparative research, this paper uses a new survey battery from the ABS III to explore the situation of democratic conceptions, as well as their possible origins, in thirteenth East Asian societies with varying political contexts.

## **Critical Citizenship**

Political scientists recently found a phenomenon: while democracy has become the most desirable political system around the world, people living in a democratic context tend to question its soundness (Chu and Huang 2010). According to the Asian Barometer Survey, 78.5 percent respondents in Asian liberal democracy want their democracy to be democratic, and this number is even higher in Asian electoral democracy and non-democracy, reaching 84.4 percent and 82.5 percent, respectively. However, the number drops significantly to 55.2 percent, 61.8 percent, and 59.9 percent when the respondents are asked whether they prefer democracy than any other kind of government. Both statistics show that citizens in liberal democracy have lower support for democracy than their counterparts in electoral democracy and non-democracy. This illustrates the phenomenon of “critical citizenship” (Inglehart 2000; Norris 1999).

It is not hard to understand why democratic citizens tend to be more critical toward their government because they have more freedom to question and challenge the authority under legal protection. In this situation, popular discontent is easily transformed into the criticism of democracy. Greater doubt on the democratic system, therefore, is more likely to show up in public opinion polls in liberal democracies than others (Huang 2011). On the contrary, governments of electoral democracy or non-democracy usually impose more restriction on political freedom and civil liberty. People living in those societies tend not to think of the downside of liberal democracy since they have not fully experienced democracy yet.

For instance, Asian liberal democracies, such as Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, all went through a long period of unpopular top leadership. In Japan, except for Junichiro Koizumi and recently Shinzo Abe, all the prime ministers have very low number in the polls for the past decade. Korea also suffered political gridlock and partisan polarization during the presidency of Roh Moo-hyun and Lee Myung-bak. Both approval ratings often fell below 20 percent. President Chen Shui-bian and Ma Ying-jeou of Taiwan, while both managed to win the reelection, constantly suffered the problem of unpopularity, and their approval ratings even plummeted to a single digit at multiple times. Longstanding popular discontent is associated with the emergence of Asian critical citizenship.

## **Cognition beyond Boundary Restriction**

A serious doubt has been cast on the validity of public opinion polls on

democratic attitudes in a country where the political system is not fully democratic (Bratton 2010). The main argument dwells on the rationale that people cannot possibly have the cognitive ability to evaluate something they never experienced before (King et al. 2004). Conducting a survey about democratic attitudes in a non-democratic country is therefore meaningless, because people do not know what democracy actually is and let alone evaluate it.

This account sounds very legitimate, but it makes little sense if we consider two important facts. First, liberal democracy is a multi-dimensional concept that requires a composite evaluation of many indicators that have a continuous scale in nature. Second, contemporary telecommunication and internet technology has already made human cognition possibly beyond the restriction of physical boundary. The key elements of liberal democracy, such as freedom of speech, free and fair elections, political liberty, in fact should be defined as a matter of degree instead of all-or-nothing. Even if some features of democracy are lacking in a non-democratic country, people could still understand these features via various information channels and related personal experiences in the globalization era.

In reality, we can hardly find a society completely democratic or completely autocratic. Furthermore, the cognitive result of each citizen is subjective and transcendental beyond the boundary restriction. People could perceive both democratic and non-democratic features in democracies or non-democracies. People could also have very different conceptions of democracy in the same society. We have to recognize the subjective and transcendental nature of how people perceive and understand the concept of democracy. Therefore, people in non-democracies might understand the meaning of democracy in accord with the notion of liberal democracy. Likewise, people in democracies might also understand the meaning of democracy in the way closer to authoritarian values.

### **Understandings of Democracy in Asia**

In order to find out what people think of democracy without giving any hints, Asian Barometer in the second wave designed an opened question to ask the respondents up to the three answers about the meaning of democracy. We list the top three answers for the thirteenth countries in Table 1. As can be seen, the answer that shows up most frequently is freedom in various terms. All the thirteen countries have freedom as one of the top answers for the meaning of democracy. The second frequent answer is equality in various terms, appearing in six countries, including Japan, Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, Mongolia, and Vietnam. The next comprises two answers: one is democratic process and it emerges in Korea and Indonesia; the other is responsive

government and it shows up in Taiwan and Singapore.

**Table 1 Understandings of Democracy in Asia (Open-ended Questions)**

Country	Answers Related to Freedom	Other Answers
Japan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Freedom in general</i></li> <li>● <i>Freedom of speech</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Social equality</i></li> </ul>
Korea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Freedom in general</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Equality before the law</i></li> <li>● <i>Election, popular vote or electoral choice</i></li> </ul>
Taiwan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Freedom in general</i></li> <li>● <i>Freedom of speech</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Responsive government</i></li> </ul>
Philippines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Freedom in general</i></li> <li>● <i>Freedom of speech</i></li> <li>● <i>Freedom of individual choice</i></li> </ul>	
Thailand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Freedom in general</i></li> <li>● <i>Political liberty</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Political equality</i></li> </ul>
Cambodia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Freedom of speech</i></li> <li>● <i>Freedom and civil liberty</i></li> <li>● <i>Power of the people</i></li> </ul>	
Indonesia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Freedom of speech</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Equality, justice or fraternity</i></li> <li>● <i>Democratic institutions and process</i></li> </ul>
Mongolia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Freedom in general</i></li> <li>● <i>Freedom and civil liberty</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Equality, justice or fraternity</i></li> </ul>
China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Freedom of speech</i></li> <li>● <i>People as their own master</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Democratic centralism</i></li> </ul>
Singapore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Freedom in general</i></li> <li>● <i>Freedom of speech</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Responsive government</i></li> </ul>
Vietnam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Freedom in general</i></li> <li>● <i>People as their own master</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Social equality</i></li> </ul>
Malaysia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Freedom in general</i></li> <li>● <i>Freedom of speech</i></li> <li>● <i>Freedom of individual choice</i></li> </ul>	

Source: ABS II (N=19798)

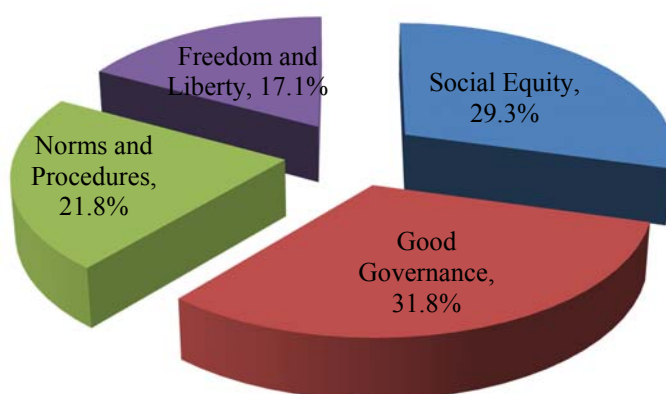
Notice that we found democratic centralism, a peculiar concept used in communist states that refers to communist autocracy, also chosen in China as one of the top-three answers to define meanings of democracy. This vindicates the apprehension that people living in a non-democracy might think of democracy in the way totally against what democracy should mean. However, the other two answers that most frequently show up are “freedom of speech” and “people as their own master”. Both are related to the notion of freedom and they do fit the mainstream understanding of democracy in the West. The case of China nicely illustrates how divergent the concept of democracy could be understood in the same political context. One the one hand, we should not discredit the validity of survey research of



democratic attitudes in a non-democracy simply because the respondents did not experience democracy. On the other hand, we do need to pay careful attention about how deviant democracy could be understood from its original meaning under various contexts.

We can summarize the most common answers for the meaning of democracy in Asia into four major concepts: freedom and liberty, social equality, norms and procedures, and good governance. Freedom and liberty refers to the notion of political freedom and civil liberty, such as freedom of expression, association and religion. Social equity refers to the protection of the disadvantaged and the quarantine of a minimum living standard. Norms and procedures refers to the establishment of democratic norms and institutions, such as free and fair elections, open political contestation, popular accountability and separation of power. Good governance refers to the well-performance of government outputs, including provision of economic and political goods.

**Figure 2 Meanings of Democracy in Asia**



Source: ABS III (N=17627)

Based on the above finding, Asian Barometer Survey adopts a different strategy to measure Asian people's understanding of democracy in the third wave. Instead of using the open-ended form, four questions are designed as repetitive measures and each answer set includes four competitive choices corresponding to freedom and liberty, social equality, norms and procedures, and good governance, respectively. The result can be summarized into a percentage measure for the appearance of each major concept. As Figure 2 shows, Asians are more likely to think of democracy in terms of good governance (31.8 percent), followed by social equality (29.3 percent), norms and procedures (21.8 percent), and freedom and liberty (17.1 percent).

This result demonstrates that Asians do have very different understandings of

democracy from the people in the western world. If we make the four major concepts as competitive answers, freedom and liberty is the least chosen one, suggesting people tend not to prioritize freedom and liberty but rather to emphasize other concepts. Apparently, freedom and liberty is the easiest concept to be recognized as an essential characteristic of democracy, but meanwhile, it is the least important concepts when it juxtaposes with the other three concepts.

**Table 2 Understandings of Democracy in 13 Asian Countries**

Country	Social Equity	Good Governance	Norms and Procedures	Freedom and Liberty
Japan	27.9%	<b>42.3%</b>	16.7%	13.1%
Korea	21.4%	<b>38.0%</b>	22.2%	18.4%
Taiwan	<b>33.9%</b>	30.9%	22.3%	13.0%
Philippines	28.8%	21.1%	22.4%	27.8%
Thailand	<b>36.4%</b>	32.8%	17.3%	13.4%
Cambodia	27.3%	24.0%	26.7%	22.0%
Indonesia	25.8%	<b>34.2%</b>	23.0%	17.0%
Mongolia	22.5%	<b>30.5%</b>	23.0%	24.0%
China	<b>34.9%</b>	29.7%	25.3%	10.2%
Hong Kong	<b>32.5%</b>	25.5%	21.6%	20.4%
Singapore	29.5%	<b>36.4%</b>	18.2%	16.0%
Malaysia	24.7%	<b>34.9%</b>	26.2%	14.2%
Vietnam	<b>42.4%</b>	34.9%	16.6%	6.1%

Source: ABS III (N=17627)

It is interesting to know whether this conclusion also applies to the individual Asian countries. As Table 2 makes evidence, except in Philippines and Mongolia, freedom and liberty ranks as the least choice among the four conceptions of democracy. The most common choice is either social equality or good governance, suggesting that Asians tend to pay greater attention to what the government delivers when they think of the meaning of democracy. Asian view of democracy focus more on how government can improve their substantial interest in daily life instead of consolidating democratic institutions or protecting ideological values.

### **Substantive vs. Procedural Democracy**

Past studies on the meaning of democracy in Latin American, African, and East European societies identified a critical differentiation between substance-based versus procedure-based conceptions of democracy (Bratton and Mattes 2001; Canache 2012;

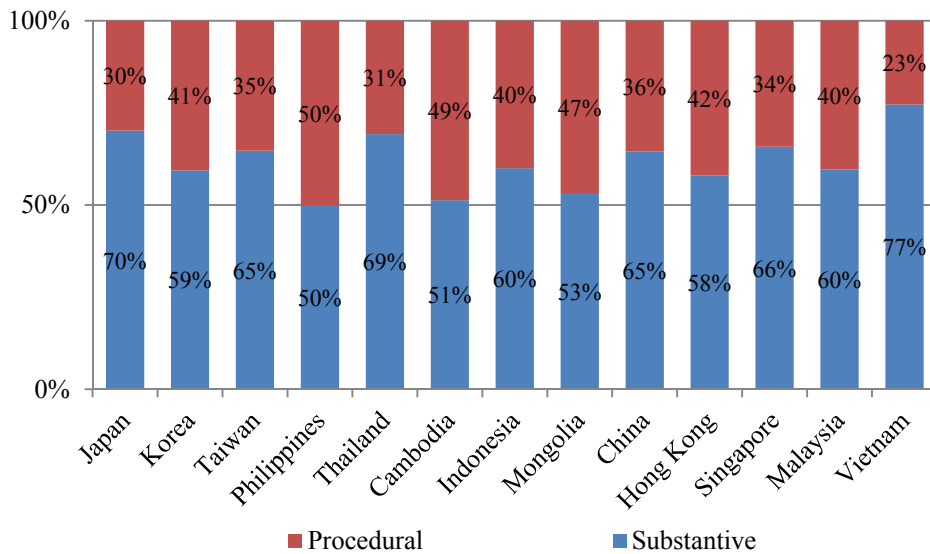
Carnaghan 2011; Dalton et al. 2007; Rose et al. 1998). Theoretically, the concepts of social equity and good governance capture the substance-based conceptions of democracy that prioritizes the government performance in various aspects, stressing the instrumental value of democracy. As long as this substance-based understanding of democracy is widely shared, even those living in a mature democracy like Japan may hold quite negative views of the practice of democracy in their society once the government's performance deteriorates or stagnates at an unsatisfying level. Meanwhile, if most citizens of an authoritarian regime like China have internalized this substance-based conception of democracy, their government's continuous and stunning performance in delivering good governance may result in prevailing positive views of the practice of democracy in their society, despite the obvious lack of some fundamental democratic institutions or frequent infringement of the citizens' basic rights.

On the contrary, the concepts of norms and procedures and freedom and liberty directly tap the gist of liberal democracy, which emphasizes the indispensability of institutions and procedures for running a society, making decisions, and ensuring the dignity and some unalienable rights of individuals. Though this conception of democracy does not speak directly to the substantive outputs of a political system, there is a hidden assumption that some decent life can be secured for most people once such institutions and procedures are in place and followed. Moreover, besides the instrumental value of democracy as a means toward good governance, this procedure-based understanding of democracy also emphasizes the intrinsic value of freedom and liberty, which should be protected and defended for their own sake through democratic institutions and procedures. Once this procedure-based understanding of democracy is widely shared, even those living in an authoritarian regime with a stunning record of delivering quality governance are unlikely to view the practice of democracy in their society positively, simply due to the lack of some indispensable institutions and procedures that can protect their rights and ensure their dignity. Similarly, even confronted with some short-term turbulence or a down-turn in their government's performance, the citizens of a mature democracy who have internalized the procedure-based conception of democracy may still approve the practice of democracy in their society, as long as the key institutions and procedures are well-maintained and their rights are effectively protected against possible infringement.

As Figure 3 makes clear, substantive-based understanding of democracy is the predominant mode of democratic conception in Asia. Except in Philippines where substantive-based and procedural-based are both 50 percent, people are more likely to conceive democracy in terms of its instrumental value, particularly in Japan (70

percent), Taiwan (65 percent), Thailand (69 percent), China (65 percent), Singapore (66 percent), and Vietnam (77 percent). This result resonates past findings that shows people in East Asia tend to prioritize economic interest rather democracy, which significantly deviate from the mainstream procedural-based understanding of democracy. We can conclude that a significant gap does exist between Asian and advanced industrial societies in the conception of democracy.

**Figure 3 Substantive vs. Procedural Understanding of Democracy**



Source: ABS III (N=17627)

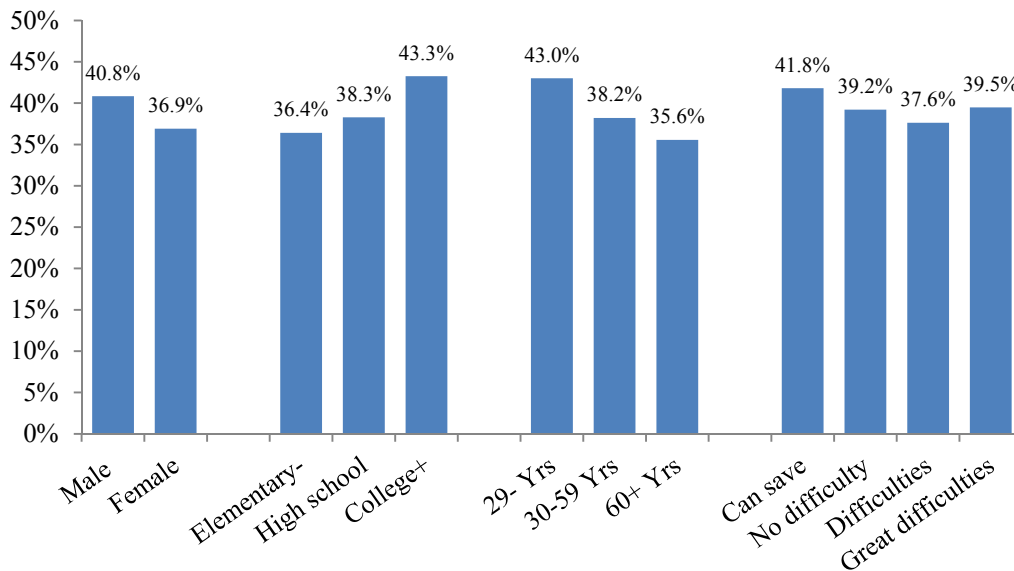
### Explaining Procedural Understanding of Democracy

Most political scientists define democracy in procedural terms. Our previous finding, however, has shown that more than 50 percent Asian people do not think this way, regardless of actual contexts. It would be insightful to discover who is more likely to perceive democracy in procedural terms, given the vast majority thinking otherwise.

The modernization theory is a famous theory to explain how political attitudes are shaped and evolved. Its main argument contends that the factors associated with the industrialization development would change people’s view in consonance with the procedural understanding of democracy. Specifically, the modernization theory expects to see male respondents to have greater possibility to recognize the intrinsic meaning of democracy. The same expectation also applies to those who are higher educated because school education should increase their knowledge of democracy. On the hand, given the fact that the concept of procedural democracy is more ideological, younger people are believed to be more supportive of this conception. At last, the

modernization theory also predicts that those who have better socioeconomic condition tend to uphold the procedural conceptions of democracy since their interest has transcend the material benefits into the fulfillment of ideological goals .

**Figure 4 Explaining Procedural Understanding of Democracy**



Source: ABS III

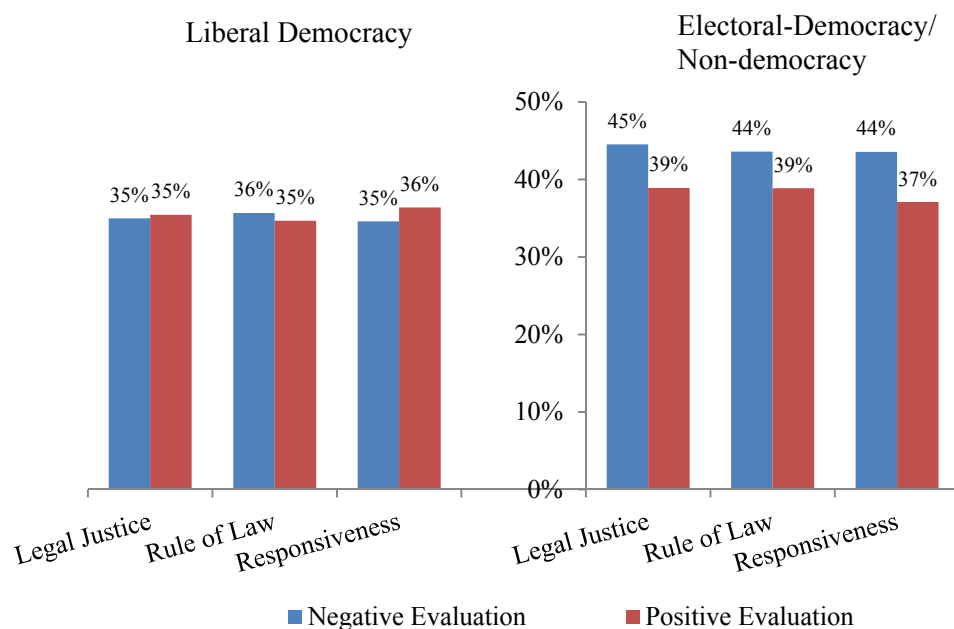
With the data from Asian Barometer Survey, we can evaluate whether these demographic variables can explain the level of procedural understanding of democracy. As Figure 4 makes evident, male respondents (40.8 percent) do have about 4 percent higher probability to conceive democracy in procedural terms than female respondents (36.9 percent). College educated respondents (43.3 percent) also have greater probability to have procedural understanding of democracy than those who are high-school (38.3 percent) or elementary-school (36.4 percent) educated. Younger cohorts indeed are more likely to identify democracy in procedure-based conception, and the probability amounts to 43.0 percent, higher than the adult (38.2 percent) and the senior (35.6%). Finally, people who expressed that their income cover their needs well and they can save have greater chance (41.8%) to think of democracy in procedural terms than those who not that satisfied with their income. All the above evidence corroborates with our previous expectation. This result once again demonstrates the strong explanatory power of the modernization theory as when political scientists apply it to explain the advanced industrial society five decades ago.

**Procedural Understanding as the Minority View of Democracy**

Our previous finding suggests that factors associated with modernization do explain the greater level of procedural understanding of democracy for some people in Asian societies. If so, we should be to observe a high percentage of procedural understanding in the country that has long achieved modernization, such as Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. However, the result shows otherwise. Regardless of the modernization level, the polls show that substantive understanding all surpass (or at least) 50 percent in all of the thirteenth Asian countries. In other words, the substance-based conception is the mainstream view of democracy in Asia.

To fully explain why procedural understanding is the minority view of democracy in all of the Asian society, we have to examine two sets of questions that correspond to the debate of substantive vs. procedural democracy. The first set is about evaluation of government performance. We expect that people tend to possess procedural understanding of democracy if they thought the government doing a bad job. This is because people have greater motive to challenge the institutional legitimacy in pursuit of improving government output. By the same logic, people are more likely to possess substantive understanding of democracy if the government performance can keep them satisfied. In this case, excellent output has already justified the governing legitimacy, irrespective of regime types.

**Figure 5 Governance Evaluation and Procedural Understanding**



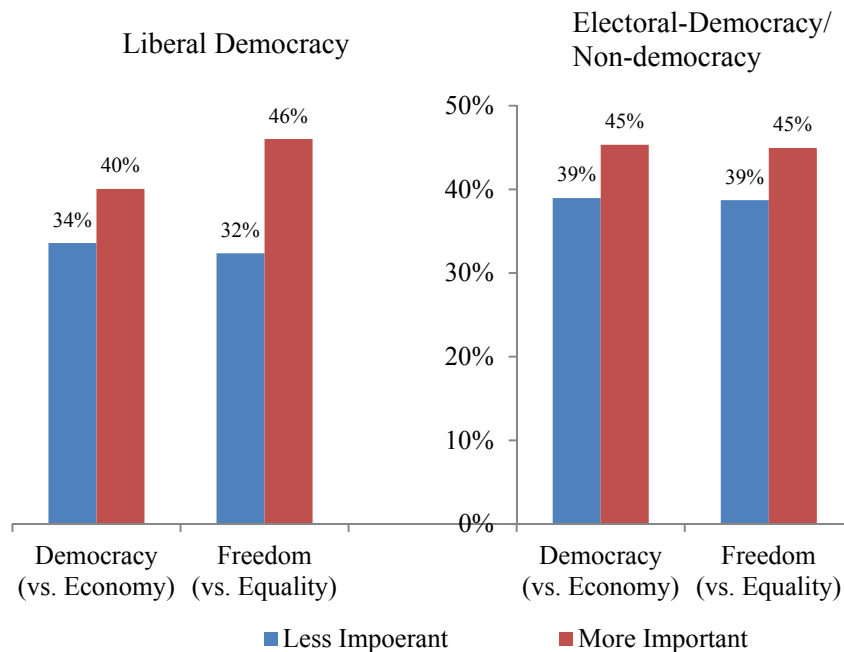
Source: ABS III

Three questions are included in the third-wave Asian Barometer that tap into the respondent's evaluation of government performance: 1) whether officials who commit

crimes get punished 2) whether leaders often break the law or abuse their power 3) whether government responds to what people want. As Figure 5 shows, only 35 percent or 36 percent of people possess procedural understanding of democracy in Asian liberal democracies, regardless whether their evaluation of government performance is positive or negative. On the other hand, for people who live in electoral democracies or non-democracies, we found a similar but slightly higher level of procedural understanding for those who give positive evaluations, and furthermore, a significantly higher number (44 percent or 45 percent) of procedural understanding appears among those who did not satisfied with government performance. This indicates that procedural understanding of democracy is consistently low regardless of governance evaluation, while the higher level of procedural understanding in electoral democracies or non-democracies is very likely associated with popular discontent of bad government performance.

The second set is about the intrinsic orientation of democratic attitudes. We expect that people tend to possess procedural understanding of democracy if they have stronger intrinsic orientation. This is a straightforward inference since people’s understanding of democracy reflects their top prioritized goal in their value system. Likewise, people are more likely to possess substantive understanding of democracy if they have stronger instrumental orientation, which puts substantial outputs ahead of ideological or normative goals.

**Figure 6 Intrinsic View and Procedural Understanding of Democracy**



Source: ABS III

There are two questions associated with the measure of intrinsic orientation of democratic attitudes: 1) whether democracy is more important than economic development or the other way around 2) whether protecting political freedom is more important than reducing economic inequality or the other way around. The intrinsic orientation will be reflected on the choice of democracy more important than economic development, or the choice of protecting political freedom than reducing economic inequality. As Figure 6 shows, regardless of regime types, Asian countries where people thought that democracy important than economic development, as well as protecting political freedom more important than reducing economic inequality, tend to have a greater level of procedural understanding of democracy. The intrinsic orientation does play a powerful predictor to explain why people perceive democracy in procedural terms. Moreover, we found that contexts matter, too. In Asian liberal democracies, those who show instrumental orientation (choosing economic development over democracy or reducing economic inequality over protecting political freedom) have even lower inclination to agree upon procedural understanding than their counterparts in electoral democracies or non-democracies (34 percent vs. 39 percent and 32 percent vs. 39 percent, respectively). We conclude that the instrumental orientation exert greater influence to drive substantive understanding of democracy in Asian liberal democracies than in other forms of government.

From the above discussions, we summarize the following findings:

1. Regardless of regime types and governance evaluation, the society level of procedural understanding is around 40%.
2. Governance evaluation no explanatory power in democracies.
3. In other forms of government, negative governance evaluation explains greater procedural understanding of democracy
4. Regardless of regime types and value orientation, the society level of procedural understanding is also around 40%.
5. Intrinsic orientation explains greater level of procedural understanding
6. The instrumental orientation exerts greater influence to drive substantive understanding of democracy in Asian liberal democracies than other forms of government.

The first three findings are related to the factor of governance evaluation. Particularly for the third findings, we expect to see greater contribution to boost the procedural understanding if we found greater numbers in electoral democracies and non-democracies. Nevertheless, as Table 3 shows, the number of positive evaluation is even slightly greater than the number of negative evaluation (63.5 percent, 50.9 percent, and 58.1 percent, respectively), and therefore, such a contribution is very limited. Overall, we see substance-based conception dominating procedural one in



Asia when considering the factor of governance evaluation.

**Table 3 Evaluation of Government Performance and Intrinsic View of Democracy**

	<i>Political Contexts</i>	
	Liberal Democracy	Electoral Democracy/ Non-democracy
<i>Evaluation of Government Performance</i>		
●Officials who commit crimes get punished	48.5%	63.5%
●Government leaders seldom break the law or abuse their power	43.4%	50.9%
●Government responds to what people want	34.4%	58.1%
<i>Intrinsic View of Democracy</i>		
●Democracy is more important than economic development	27.0%	21.4%
●Protecting political freedom is more important than reducing economic inequality	21.7%	27.1%

Source: ABS III

For the latter three findings, while intrinsic orientation does increase procedural understanding of democracy, as Table 3 shows, only one-fourth of people have intrinsic orientation. This means that the majority of Asian people have instrumental orientation, and hence, according to the last findings, the high level of instrumental orientation drives greater substantive understanding of democracy, particularly in Asian liberal democracies.

### **Reasons behind the Rise of Substance-based Conception of Democracy**

Apprehension has sprung out among political scientists about how to interpret the rise of substance-based conception of democracy, or the minority status of procedural understanding of democracy. Some scholars insist that this conclusion is manufactured by the poor measurement of the “D” word. Otherwise, this phenomenon means that the western model of liberal democracy is losing its audience and legitimacy in Asia, which is contrary to the mainstream view among political scientists.

However, throughout rigorous investigation of comparative survey data as presented earlier, we believe that the minority status of procedural understanding in Asia is indisputable fact. More attention should be directed to how we can possible make sense of this phenomenon and what the implication should be for the future

Asian democratization.

In liberal democracies like Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea, democracy as a set of institutions and procedures has been well-established and gradually reinforced over the past decades. The protection of basic rights, freedom, and liberty has also become an integrated component of people's daily lives in these societies. Thus, it is very likely that most citizens of mature democracies might take such institutions and procedures for granted as they assess the salience of different aspects of democracy. Comparatively speaking, in mature democracies the space for significant institutional change or innovation is limited; and, most of the time for most of their citizens, replacing democracy with any feasible alternative is out of the question. Thus, when their citizens notice problems in governance, they are inclined to put more emphasis on a better enforcement of existing institutions and procedures for better governance. When these citizens (who are not satisfied with the performance of their mature democratic governments) are approached for their views on essential characteristics of democracy, *ceteris paribus*, they are more likely to emphasize the substantive aspects of democracy, and report a substance-based democratic conception.

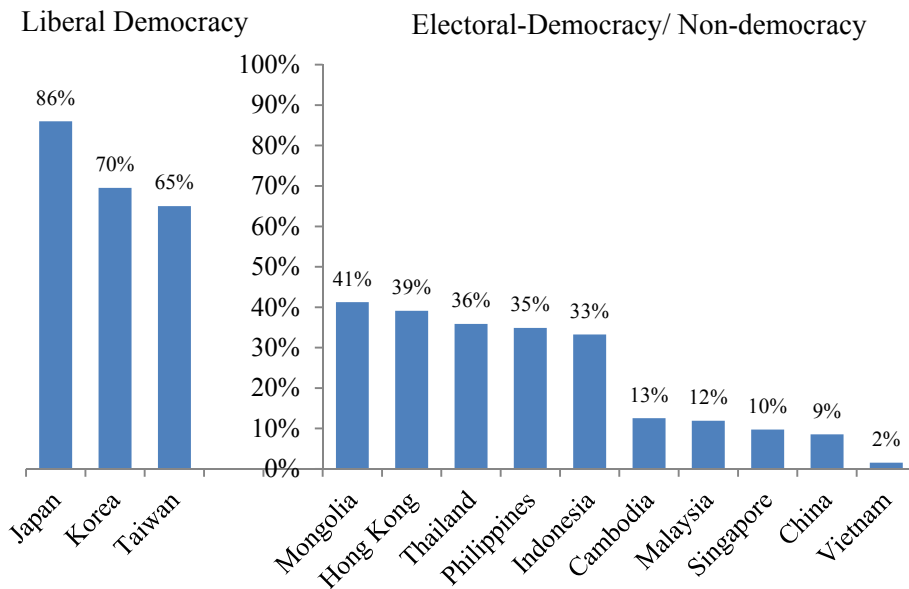
On the contrary, in new democracies or authoritarian societies, democracy is either not consolidated yet or is still a highly desirable political alternative. Comparatively speaking, there is much more that can be done with the institutions and procedures in new democracies, not to mention authoritarian societies. Thus, when their citizens perceive problems in governance, it is quite natural for them point the finger at existing flawed institutions or defective procedures and demand further institutional improvement or even replacement. When these citizens (who are not satisfied with the performance of their new democratic or authoritarian governments) are approached for their views on essential characteristics of democracy, *ceteris paribus*, they are more likely to emphasize the institutional/procedural aspects of democracy, and report a procedure-based democratic conception.

However, the above interpretation can hardly shake the intrinsic value of democracy. The almost unshakable status of democracy as the only game in contemporary political discourse is based on something much more than its instrumental value, i.e., generating good governance. Democracy is also created with the aim of securing and protecting people's dignity and "certain endowed unalienable rights" like life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. Democracy is designed and established with the fundamental assumption that people are created equal, and thus they should be treated as equal and with respect. Such normative connotations of democracy have significantly contributed to its moral superiority in contemporary political discourse. Thus, democracy, instead of simply being an effective means to good governance, is cherished by many people for its intrinsic value. It is not a

coincidence that many authoritarian leaders do acknowledge democracy as a universal value (i.e., recognizing its moral superiority). And, instead of challenging and denouncing democracy normatively, they are actively debating what kind of democracy is good for their society and stretching the concept to disguise their authoritarian nature.

If so, why do predominant Asian people choose instrumental values rather than intrinsic ones? We believe that a recent crisis of democratic governance, featuring in Asian liberal democracies like Japan, Korea, Taiwan, has greatly contributed to this fact. Meanwhile, the relative better governance performance in electoral democracies or non-democracies, paradoxically, further strengthens this account since being a democracy alone does not improve people’s life, which deeply runs counter to the Eastern view of democracy “Minben” (Shi and Lu, 2010). Under the current situation, the asymmetrical distribution of the intrinsic values (versus instrumental ones) reflects democratic institution lacking political capability to achieve what people expect as the minimal merit standard. The enlarging contrast between economic prosperity in Asian authoritarian or emerging democratic countries and economic stagnancy in Asian liberal democracies nicely explicate the shifting value orientation toward instrumental conception of democracy.

**Figure 7 Overall Economic Condition Today is Bad or Very Bad**



Source: ABS III (N=18793)

This explanation is greatly supported if we can examine the economic pessimism in Asian liberal democracies and economic optimism in Asian authoritarian or emerging democratic countries. As Figure 7 shows, there is startling difference for the

poll numbers for negative evaluation of the overall economic condition. In Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, there are 80 percent, 70 percent, and 65 percent people evaluating the overall economic condition negatively. This number drops to around or below 40 percent in Mongolia, Hong Kong, Thailand, Philippines, and Indonesia. For Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, China, and Vietnam, the negative evaluation further reduced to around 10 percent or below. Undoubtedly, this result conveys the severe societal frustration in Asian liberal democracies about the poor and deteriorating government performance for the past decade, and such a negative assessment toward the democratic government has already become the social consensus, which continues wearing down the intrinsic orientation of democracy and raising up the substance-based understanding of democracy.

## **Conclusion**

People have different understandings of democracy and the varying democratic conceptions have serious implications for people's political behavior and attitudes in both democracies and authoritarian societies. Despite the accumulated knowledge from existing research, our understanding of the varying democratic conceptions is still at a preliminary stage. More systematic empirical evidence and better refined theoretical frameworks are needed to further our knowledge in this field. To contribute some systematic evidence from East Asia and extend this line of research, this paper uses a new survey battery from the third wave of the ABS to examine democratic conceptions in thirteen East Asian societies and explore its possible origins under distinct political contexts.

Building upon the qualitative analysis of the public opinion data on popular understandings of democracy collected through the conventional open-ended question in its previous two waves of surveys, the ABS designed a new survey battery for its third wave with a close-ended format to gauge democratic conceptions in East Asian societies. This new survey instrument eases the implementation in the field, increases the quality of collected data, and enables more systematic and rigorous cross-regional comparative research, without compromising the flexibility of post-survey analysis in various theoretically meaningful ways. It also includes multiple indicators to decrease the possible influence of measurement errors on statistical inferences.

To facilitate the dialogue with existing research that uses survey data from other regions of the world, this paper follows a widely adopted theoretical framework that differentiates between substance-based and procedure-based democratic conceptions for analysis. This major finding reveals that the substance-based democratic conception has won the hearts and minds of a majority of the East Asians, including

those who have been the citizens of mature democracies, like Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea, for quite a while. Meanwhile, most of the variation in the East Asians' democratic conceptions comes from domestic sources, rather than cross-society differences.

Further analysis demonstrates that the East Asians' assessment of government performance, as well as their appreciation of the intrinsic value of democracy, plays a significant role in shaping how they understand democracy. And, the former's influence is highly conditional upon the political context under examination. More specifically, in mature democracies, bad governance pushes their citizens not to prioritize freedom and liberty and norms and procedures as essential characteristics of democracy, while in new democracies or authoritarian societies, bad governance pushes their citizens to internalize the procedure-based democratic conception. Distinct political contexts and varying experiences with democracy in practice seem to have significantly moderated the relationship between governance quality and democratic conceptions in the East Asian societies. Conversely, the East Asians' appreciation of the intrinsic value of democracy generally makes them more inclined to embrace the procedure-based conception of democracy (i.e., with more emphasis on norms, procedures, liberty, or freedom as defining features of democracy), regardless of their political contexts. However, only one-fourth of people have intrinsic orientation, which does not contribute much to the elevation of procedure-base understanding of democracy in Asian societies, regardless different forms of government.

We believe that a recent crisis of democratic governance, reflected in the economic pessimism in Asian liberal democracies, convincingly account for the predominant conception of democracy in substantive terms. The sharp distinction between economic prosperity in Asian authoritarian or emerging democratic countries as opposed to the long-term recession in Asian liberal democracies has already caused the dramatic change of value orientation toward instrumental concept of democracy.

This significant role of political contexts in moderating the relationship between governance quality and democratic conceptions in the East Asian societies actually raises a critical question for contemporary literature on popular understandings of democracy. Although we might be able to effectively conceptualize and measure various democratic conceptions using one coherent theoretical framework (e.g., like the substance-based versus procedure-based conceptions) under different political contexts, is it also possible to use one coherent framework to understand the *implications and consequences* of varying democratic conceptions in societies with distinct experiences of democracy in practice? For instance, in mature democracies like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, the substance-based democratic conception does

not necessarily suggest any rejection of the democratic system embodied in well-established institutions, procedures, and norms. The citizens who have embraced the substance-based democratic conception in these societies may simply want improved enforcement of existing institutions and procedures. For them, there is no essential conflict between securing good governance and sustaining a genuine democracy. However, the dynamics in new democracies or authoritarian societies could be very different, and the stakes involved could be much higher. For example, in authoritarian societies like China and Vietnam, the substance-based democratic conception may have serious implications for possible regime change. The authoritarian leaders have every incentive to avoid establishing a genuine democracy that features, *inter alia*, checks and balances, transparent and competitive party politics, and institutionalized protection of basic individual rights. Those citizens who have embraced the substance-based conception of democracy might be led astray and indoctrinated to believe that their authoritarian regime is democratic in nature as long as it continuously generates satisfying governance. Also, these governments might be significantly less responsive to the call for democratic reforms. In other words, these citizens could (though unconsciously) forsake the opportunity of establishing a genuine democracy, thanks to their substance-based conception of democracy. Therefore, future studies on popular understandings of democracy, particularly their implications for political attitudes and behavior, should pay special attention to the moderating role of political contexts. Some genuine comparative research that aims to establish generalizable theories, but without compromising its sensitivity to varying contexts and possible contingent effects, is seriously needed.

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