

Understanding of Democracy and Regime Legitimacy in Asia*

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Abstract

This paper uses the latest Asian Barometer survey data in eleven countries to explain how popular understanding of democracy affects regime legitimacy in Asia. Our findings indicate the weak negative relationship between procedural understanding of democracy and regime legitimacy is a composite result of two countervailing crossover effects between macro and micro factors. When a country achieves a stable democracy but always struggles with its economy, such as Mongolia and Philippines, the societal level of procedural understanding of democracy will quickly increase and that results in a positive relationship between the cognitive understanding of democracy and regime legitimacy. However, such a positive relationship is largely offset by another concurrent effect through the crossover negative effect of societal-level perception bias. If a country manages to achieve a stable democracy and a mature economy, such as Japan, Taiwan and South Korea, the perception bias will quickly sway to pessimistic criticalness and that causes the decrease of procedural understanding of democracy. Both effects again are countervailing to each other and consequently obscure the relationship between understanding of democracy and regime legitimacy.

*Paper prepared for delivery at the international conference on “New Perspective in East Asian Studies”, hosted by Institute for the Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences of National Taiwan University, June 1-2, 2012, Taipei, Taiwan.

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Introduction

A well-known puzzle in Asian countries is that people express stronger support for the idea of democracy in one-party authoritarian (China, Vietnam, Cambodia) or electoral authoritarian (Malaysia) countries than in liberal democracies, such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.¹ This result raises a serious concern about the measurement validity of “democratic legitimacy”, particularly when the survey instrument involves with the “D” word.² Some contend that this counter-intuitive finding is likely an artifact of measurement errors.³ Because if we anchor the idea of democracy to the western tradition of liberal democracy, people in non-democracies cannot exactly know what democracy is given the fact that they never live in a real democracy. Therefore, their idea of democracy could embrace many other things that do not belong to liberal democracy. The measurement of democratic legitimacy in these non-democracies is rather closer to the concept of “regime legitimacy”⁴ and their understanding of the “D” word is very different from what people have in a true democracy.

This account might explain away the counter-intuitive finding, but the whole explanation heavily relies on a strong assumption that only people in democracy can correctly understand the idea of democracy, and meanwhile, their cognitive understanding is all the same with the western tradition of liberal democracy. While this “anchoring” assumption does make a point—only those who have experiences can really understand, it is dubious according to previous survey findings. For example, people in East Asian democracies tend to emphasize the importance of

¹ Yun-han Chu and Min-hua Huang, “Solving an Asian Puzzle,” *Journal of Democracy* **21** (October, 2010): 114-122.

² Michael Bratton, “Misunderstanding Democracy? Challenges of Cross-Cultural Comparison,” a paper presented at a Global Barometer Surveys Conference on “How People View and Value Democracy”, hosted by the Institute of Political Science of Academia Sinica in Taipei on October 15-16, 2010.

³ A typical example is what Gary King claims that traditional methods in cross-national public opinion surveys often suffer from the validity problem. Gary King, Christopher J. L. Murray, Joshua A. Salomon, and Ajay Tandon, “Enhancing the Validity and Cross-Cultural Comparability of Measurement in Survey Research,” *American Political Science Review* **98** (February 2004): 191-207.

⁴ Andrew J. Nathan, “Political Culture and Diffuse Regime Support in Asia,” Asian Barometer Working Paper Series No.43, (National Taiwan University and Academia Sinica, 2007). Regarding the concept of regime legitimacy or “diffuse regime support”, see David Eastern, “A Re-Assessment of the Concept of Political Support,” *British Journal of Political Science* **5** (October 1975): 435-457.

economic well-beings when democracy is referred.⁵ Furthermore, previous findings also show that people living in the same society could have very different understandings about what democracy is.⁶ Unless we have strong evidence to validate the anchoring assumption, the measurement-error explanation is still unproven.

A possible alternative is to accept a plural theory of democracy and acknowledge that people could have different understandings of democracy even if they live in the same society and share the same political experience.⁷ No anchoring assumption is needed under this scenario, and the idea of democracy is subjectively defined on an individual basis. Then, the measurement of the “D” word can be interpreted as how strong people support the version of democracy they have in mind. Along this line of thoughts, a great debate about the meaning of democracy quickly rises between two different models of democracy: “procedure vs. substance”.⁸ Procedural democracy refers to the idea of Western liberal democracy that democracy is about establishing a political system in which the change of government is carried out through free and fair elections and the principle of “rule of law” is deeply rooted. Substantial democracy refers to a shared belief that democracy is not just about the procedure but should be about the government outputs that satisfy people’s need. This point of view prioritizes the importance of the substance of democracy and believes that each country has the right to apply its own procedural arrangements that could be equally democratic as those being applied in western liberal democracies.

We can easily differentiate the two models from how the idea of regime legitimacy applies in each case. Suppose that regime legitimacy is a concept about the mutual consent between the rulers and the ruled regarding the design of the political system, including political institutions, the legal system, basic rights, and the way power is exercised.⁹ In a democracy, people can change the government regularly via a free and fair election. Hence, the mutual consent of the rulers and the ruled will be renewed periodically and this method guarantees that every government has enough popular support, at least in the moment when the election is carried out. In a non-democracy, people do not have this regular channel to change the government,

⁵ Yun-han Chu, Larry Diamond, Andrew J. Nathan, and Doh Chull Shin. *How East Asians View Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

⁶ Doh Chull Shin and Youngho Cho, “How East Asians Understand Democracy: From a Comparative Perspective,” *ASIEN* **116** (July 2010): 21-40.

⁷ For example, Shi and Lu proposes a Chinese understanding of Democracy, which originates from Confucian thoughts and the idea of “Minben”. See Tianjian Shi and Jie Lu, “The Shadow of Confucianism,” *Journal of Democracy* **21** (October, 2010):123-130.

⁸ Yun-han Chu, "Sources of Regime Legitimacy and the Debate over the Chinese Model," paper presented at the conference on “The Chinese Models of Development: Domestic and Global Aspects,” Co-Organized by Institute of Political Science, Academia Sinica and Department of Politics, University of Virginia and Co-sponsored by East Asian Center, University of Virginia and Office of Research, Center for International Studies, University of Virginia, November 4-5, 2011. Taipei.

⁹ John Horton, "Political Legitimacy, Justice, and Consent," *Critical review of International Social and Political Philosophy* **15** (March 2012):129-148.

and the mutual consent is very likely not existed. Given the fact that the ruled cannot but accept the incumbent power, we don't know whether people truly support the regime, or they are forced to support it.

However, even if people have a regular channel to decide the government, this fact cannot guarantee that the mutual consent always exists. While democracy should have certain institutional means to alter a government (e.g. recall) once such a mutual consent is broken, most of time it is too costly to be effective. Therefore, people do not have that much power as they thought when the incumbent government fails to meet their expectations. The case could be even worse since sometimes no candidate can make a real difference to satisfy people's need. Under this situation, a political system can be highly evaluated by the criterion of procedural democracy, but definitely poorly rated according to the idea of substantial democracy. Likewise, if a government can highly respond to people's need but sometime abuses its power to compromise the procedural integrity, such a political system can be highly evaluated in view of substantial democracy but poorly rated by the standard of procedural democracy.

By juxtaposing the models of procedural democracy and substantial democracy, we argue that the source of regime legitimacy can originate from procedural as well substantial dimensions. Of course, we are aware that non-democracy by definition is at odds with the idea of procedural democracy. However, this does not prevent the case that people possess a cognitive understanding of procedural democracy in a non-democracy. In this paper, we will use the latest Asian Barometer survey data in eleven countries to explain how popular understanding of democracy affects regime legitimacy. Our findings indicate the weak negative relationship between procedural understanding of democracy and regime legitimacy is a composite result of two countervailing crossover effects between macro and micro factors. When a country achieves a stable democracy but always struggles with its economy, such as Mongolia and Philippines, the societal level of procedural understanding of democracy will quickly increase and that results in a positive relationship between the cognitive understanding of democracy and regime legitimacy. However, such a positive relationship is largely offset by another concurrent effect through the crossover negative effect of societal-level perception bias. If a country manages to achieve a stable democracy and a mature economy, such as Japan, Taiwan and South Korea, the perception bias will quickly sway to pessimistic criticalness and that causes the decrease of procedural understanding of democracy. Both effects again are countervailing to each other and consequently obscure the relationship between understanding of democracy and regime legitimacy.

A Brief Literature Review

Previous studies on regime legitimacy, especially from the empirical point of view, can be summarized into four theoretical perspectives. The first is a rationalist argument that people is likely to generate an anti-systematic view toward the incumbent regime if the undergoing economic hardship is too painful to bear.¹⁰ Regime legitimacy to large extent is associated with the incumbent government's economic performance. Typical examples can found in the post-communist states, where political instability is closely related to devastating economic problems.¹¹ In fact, Asian authoritarian regimes like Singapore often criticize Taiwan's democracy with such a perspective. This reflects the belief that maintaining economic prosperity could win people's support even at the cost of sacrificing civil liberty and political freedom.

The second school of thoughts is also a rationalist perspective, but it focuses on the political aspect and believes that whether people are supportive of the regime is related to their satisfaction toward the provision of political goods.¹² Unlike the materialist concept of economic goods, political goods refer to those goals associated with good governance, and most of the time these goals are political or ideational, such as rule of law, control of corruption, political competition, accountability, responsiveness, equality, freedom, and political participation.¹³ While the actual performance of governance can be evaluated through certain objective criteria, previous findings found that it is what people perceive rather than those objective indicators that matters to regime legitimacy.¹⁴

Culturalists argue that regime legitimacy is built on the foundation that is more ideological and intangible such as value system or culture.¹⁵ They argue that these

¹⁰ Leonardo Morlino and Jose Montero, "Legitimacy and Democracy in Southern Europe," in N. Diamond, H.J. Puhle and R. Gunther (eds.), *The Politics of Democratic Consolidation: Southern Europe in Comparative Perspective*, pp. 231-260. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Larry Diamond, "Economic Development and Democracy Reconsidered," *American Behavioral Scientist* **35**(March 1992): 450-499; Frederick D. Weil, "The Sources and Structure of Legitimation in Western Democracies: A Consolidated Model Tested with Time-Series Data in Six Countries Since World War II," *American Sociological Review* **54** (October 1989): 682-706.

¹¹ Fatos Tarifa and Bas de Gaay Fortman, "Vulnerable Democracies: The Challenge of Legitimacy in Post-Communist Systems," *Journal of Social Science* **2** (April/July 1998): 211-219.

¹² Yun-han Chu, Min-hua Huang, and Yu-tzung Chang, "Quality of Democracy and Regime Legitimacy in East Asia," paper presented at the conference on "The State of Democratic Governance in Asia," organized by Program for East Asia Democratic Studies of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences, National Taiwan University, and co-sponsored by The Asia Foundation and Institute of Political Science at Academia Sinica, June 20-21, 2008, Taipei, Taiwan.

¹³ Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino, *Assessing the Quality of Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), pp. x-xi.

¹⁴ Min-hua Huang, "Popular Discontent, Divided Perceptions, and Political Polarization in Taiwan," *International Review of Sociology* **21** (July, 2011): 413-432.

¹⁵ Andrew J. Nathan, "Political Culture and Diffuse Regime Support in Asia".

cultural factors are established through a long period of time and they continue exerting great influence on regime legitimacy. For example, in the Muslim society, the Koran provides an overarching source of political legitimacy to traditional as well as modern Islamic polities. In East Asian countries, Confucianism provides the bedrock of the value system that supports various types of regimes, ranging from one-party authoritarian China, electoral authoritarian Singapore, to liberal democratic Taiwan and South Korea. These cultural factors differ from psychological factors in two aspects. First, they possess certain idiosyncrasy that bounded within specific spatial-temporal domains, such as Confucianism in the East Asian society. Second, those factors are always identified with the societal-level characteristics and rarely defined by individual behaviors or attitudes. For instance, honoring filial piety is a typical characteristic of Confucianism, but simply having this characteristic does not make a society Confucian-like.

Scholars believe that cognitive factors have a great impact on regime legitimacy belong to the last theoretical school.¹⁶ As just explained, a cognitive factor is usually defined with a psychological feature, such as psychological involvement in politics, cognitive understanding of democracy, and perception bias of government performance. And more importantly, these factors can be defined on the individual basis without binding with a particular value system or historical context. For example, political scientists find that psychological involvement in politics reflects how people care about politics and whether they think they can make a difference in politics (political efficacy). This psychological feature can greatly influence regime legitimacy since people tend to participate in something they support but show an apathetic attitude if they do not agree with.

Except for the above perspectives, previous research also finds that the “D” word as a social desirable concept is often associated with regime legitimacy. In fact, the “D” word has already become a superficial term, and thus, the satisfaction toward “democracy” might actually mean a positive response toward the political authority. Such a superficial response can be easily found not just in the “D” word item, but also appears in background variables such as education.¹⁷ Therefore, it is important to add the “D” word variable as well as other background variables as the control predictors when we conduct a multiple-regression analysis.

In the following sections, we use the label of economic, political, cultural, and

¹⁶ Harrell R. Rodgers, Jr., “Toward Explanation of the Political Efficacy and Political Cynicism of Black Adolescents: An Exploratory Study,” *American Journal of Political Science*, **18**(May, 1974): 257-282. Steven E. Finkel, “Reciprocal Effects of Participation and Political Efficacy: A Panel Analysis,” *American Journal of Political Science* **29**(November 1985) :891-913.

¹⁷ Yun-han Chu and Min-Hua Huang. “Typological Analysis of Democratic Legitimacy.” In Zhenglai Deng and Sujian Guo (Eds.), *Reviving Legitimacy: Lessons for and from China*. (Lanham: Lexington: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011): 1-14.

cognitive factors when discussing the variables for the four theoretical perspectives. The previous two can be further merged into a rationalist category, and the latter two are combined into an ideationalist category.

Macro-level Findings and Possible Explanations

We first investigate the macro-level relationship between regime legitimacy and understanding of democracy. In the latest Asian Barometer Surveys, two newly-designed batteries are added to capture both concepts, respectively. For regime legitimacy, ABS designs five questions to measure *Diffuse Regime Support* as follows:

- q80. Over the long run, our system of government is capable of solving the problems our country faces.
- q81. Thinking in general, I am proud of our system of government.
- q82. A system like ours, even if it runs into problems, deserves the people's support.
- q83. I would rather live under our system of government than any other that I can think of.
- q84. Compared with other systems in the world, would you say our system of government works fine as it is, needs minor change, needs major change, or should be replaced?

The answer to each of the questions is a four-point scale and we recode the answers in a way that “4” means the strongest positive response and “1” means the least. We conduct an IRT factor analysis and extract a factor score by Mplus 6. The same method is applied to other variables that involve with multiple indicators. Regarding the instruments that apply to *Procedural Understanding of Democracy*, ABS designs four questions and each contains four statements that specifically link to the ideas of “social equity”, “good government”, “norms and procedures”, and “freedom and liberty”. Respondents are asked to pick only one of them in each question to show what they think as the most essential characteristic of a democracy. To simplify the measurement, we combine the dimensions of “social equity” and “good government” to indicate “substantial understanding of democracy”, and the dimensions of “norms and procedures” and “freedom and liberty” are merged to mark “procedural understanding of democracy”. The specific statements for each question are listed below:

- q85. (1) Government narrows the gap between the rich and the poor. (social equity)
- (2) People choose the government leaders in free and fair election. (norms and procedures)
- (3) Government does not waste any public money. (good government)
- (4) People are free to express their political views openly. (freedom and liberty)

- q86. (1) The legislature has oversight over the government. (norms and procedures)
 (2) Basic necessities, like food, clothes and shelter, are provided for all. (social equity)
 (3) People are free to organize political groups. (freedom and liberty)
 (4) Government provides people with quality public services. (good government)
- q87. (1) Government ensures law and order. (good government)
 (2) Media is free to criticize the things government does. (freedom and liberty)
 (3) Government ensures job opportunities for all. (social equity)
 (4) Multiple parties compete fairly in the election. (norms and procedures)
- q88. (1) People have the freedom to take part in protests and demonstrations. (freedom and liberty)
 (2) Politics is clean and free of corruption. (good government)
 (3) The court protects the ordinary people from the abuse of government power. (norms and procedures)
 (4) People receive state aid if they are unemployed. (social equity)

Each answer after being recoded becomes a dichotomized response: “1” for procedural understanding and “0” for substantial understanding. We also apply an IRT factor analysis to form a factor scale and complete the measurement.

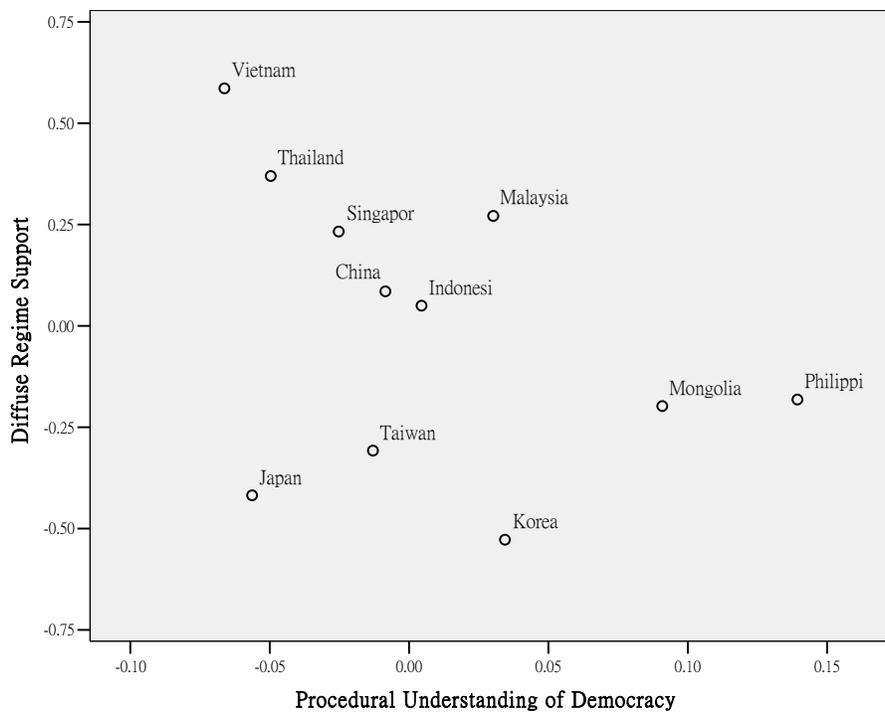
Table 1 Macro Data Related to Diffuse Regime Support

	<i>Diffuse Regime Support</i>	<i>Procedural Understanding of Democracy</i>	<i>Latest Democracy Established at (Polity IV)</i>	<i>Perceived Household Evaluation</i>
Japan	-.464	-.061	1952	3.10
Taiwan	-.307	-.018	1992	3.07
Korea	-.524	.033	1988	2.49
Mongolia	-.222	.099	1992	2.07
Philippines	-.182	.126	1987	2.40
Thailand	.386	-.049	1992-2005	2.80
Indonesia	.042	.023	1999	2.65
Singapore	.236	-.026	Never	3.05
Malaysia	.265	.032	2008	2.82
China	.073	-.009	Never	3.08
Vietnam	.586	-.066	Never	2.75

Note: Entries are weighted country means for *Diffuse Regime Support*, *Procedural Understanding of Democracy*, and *Perceived Household Evaluation*. The former two are factor scores, and the latter one is a four-point scale. We use the Polity IV dataset measure the status of democracy. If the polity score is equal or above 6, we code the status as a democracy. Otherwise, it is coded as a non-democracy.

To conduct a macro-level analysis, we aggregate the two factor scores by countries as presented in the left two columns of Table 1. At first glance, we find that democracies tend to have lower diffuse regime support. This finding coincides with the previous counter-intuitive one that people in democracies have lower support for the idea of democracy than in non-democracies. However, our measurement of diffuse

regime support does not contain the “D” word, and hence, the account of measurement error cannot explain away our finding this time. On the other hand, we see that most of Asian countries tend to have a substantial understanding of democracy except Mongolia and Philippines. This finding is somewhat different from our expectation since understanding of democracy in Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea is leaning toward substantial rather than procedural. This empirical evidence greatly reduces the plausibility of the anchoring assumption since people’s understanding of democracy may not be in accord with the regime type under which they live.



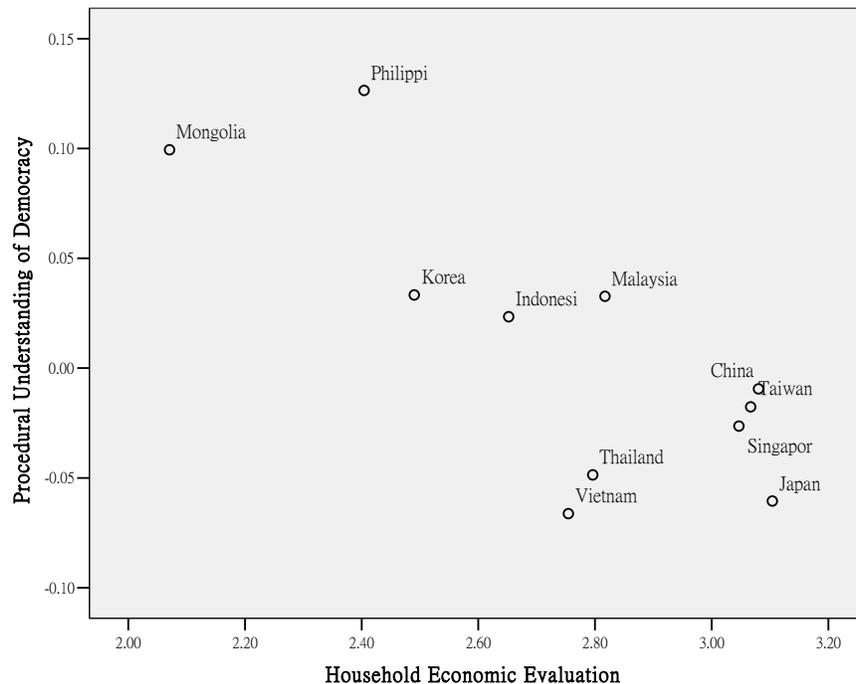
Correlation: -.451
P-Value: .137

The scatter plot of the two macro variables reveals an interesting relationship between understanding of democracy and regime legitimacy. In terms of the bivariate correlation, while the magnitude -.451 is quite salient, the sample size is too small to make the result significant. In fact, if this negative relationship is significant, it suggests that procedural understanding of democracy is associated with less regime legitimacy. This finding is completely contrary to the conventional wisdom that the advantage of democracy is to gain political legitimacy through people’s participation in elections. Furthermore, if we exclude Mongolia and Philippines, this negative

relationship will further diminish and the two variables seem mutually independent.

We explore other macro-level variables and find that Figure 1 might be easier to explain if we cluster the cases into three groups: (1) non-democracy or emerging democracy in which the democratic regime is younger than twenty years, such as China for the former and Indonesia for the latter (2) stable democracy with a struggling economy, such as Mongolia and Philippines (3) stable democracy with an mature economy, such as Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. As Table 1 make evident, we define stable democracy if the latest democratic regime has lasted for two decades or longer, and the five stable countries all score lower in regime legitimacy.¹⁸ Such a coincidence also happens when we correlate *Procedural Understanding of Democracy* with *Perceived Household Evaluation*. Mongolia and Philippines are the two countries where people have the worst perceived household economic rating and meanwhile have the highest measures of procedural democracy than other countries.

Figure 2 Scatter Plot of Household Economic Evaluation and Procedural Understanding of Democracy



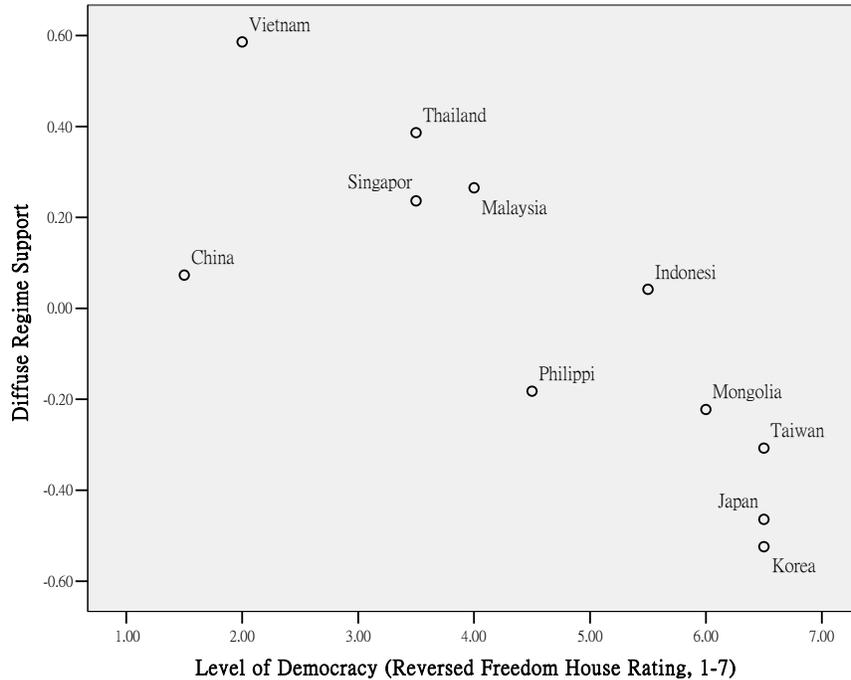
Correlation: -.781
P-Value: .002

We would like to emphasize both relationships by presenting the two scatter plots in Figure 2 and 3. In Figure 2, the bivariate correlation is -.781 with a very significant p-value .002. This suggests that the cognitive understanding of democracy will move to the substantial end if people are generally content with their economic

¹⁸ We define a democracy if its polity score (in Polity IV dataset) is equal or larger than 6.

situation. Meanwhile, Figure 3 shows that the negative correlation between *Level of Democracy* (reversed Freedom House Rating) and *Diffuse Regime Support* is even stronger given that the result is $-.880$ with a p-value $.000$.

Figure 3 Scatter Plot of Level of Democracy and Diffuse Regime Support



Correlation: $-.880$
P-Value: $.000$

With the findings as Figure 2 and 3 show, we can conclude Figure 1 with a possible explanation that the force of democratization reduces regime legitimacy and the force of failed economic modernization paradoxically drives stronger procedural understanding of democracy. The trajectory of evolution can be explicated from a non-democracy or an emerging democracy in the first cluster. When a country is still non-democratic or its democratic experience is fairly young, regime legitimacy can hardly originate from the success of running a procedural democratic system. Instead, the usual case is that the incumbent government pursues economic performance to legitimize their governing power. All of countries in the first cluster show this characteristic and most of them are witnessing a booming economy in recent years. As democratization proceeds and becomes stable, the success or failure of the economic modernization will determine whether people will incline to have a procedural or substantial understanding of democracy. For those countries which succeed in economic modernization, since democracy and economy both reach a mature level,

people are no longer satisfied with having a stable democracy or established economy. They will become more and more critical in political as well as economic affairs, particularly when the government for a long time fails to handle many protracted socio-economic or political issues such as income inequality, unemployment, and political gridlock. These problems gradually wear down people’s trust in political institutions, and therefore, regime legitimacy can hardly bounce back to the level when the country was still under the authoritarian rule, where the high regime legitimacy is very likely a man-made result given the lack of political freedom. On the other hand, if the democracy successfully remains stable but economic modernization fails to achieve a mature level, people tend to divert their cognitive dissonance by adjusting their understanding of democracy to the procedural end. In this sense, the reason that explains why people tend to possess a substantial understanding in a non-democracy or emerging democracy is the same as the one that explains why people tend to have a procedural understanding in a stable democracy with a troubled economy. Instead of being more critical, they become more lenient and choose to adjust their understanding of democracy in accord to what the incumbent regime can provide.

Table 2 Perception Bias in Economy

	<i>Current Economic Evaluation</i>	<i>Household Economic Evaluation</i>	Perception Bias
Japan	-1.04	0.41	-1.46
Taiwan	-0.53	0.37	-0.90
Korea	-0.70	-0.31	-0.39
Thailand	-0.16	0.05	-0.21
Indonesia	-0.07	-0.12	0.05
Singapore	0.58	0.35	0.23
Philippines	-0.05	-0.41	0.37
Malaysia	0.48	0.07	0.41
China	0.90	0.39	0.52
Mongolia	-0.27	-0.81	0.54
Vietnam	0.92	0.00	0.92

Note: Entries are normalized score of current economic evaluation and household economic evaluation. Perception Bias is defined as the difference of the two scores. Negative perception bias indicates “criticalness”, and positive perception bias indicates “leniency”.

If the above explanation is correct, we should be able to observe “criticalness” for the countries which achieve the status of stable democracy and mature economy. To measure the criticalness, we adopt the household economic evaluation as an indicator that reflects respondent’s impartial view of economy and the current economic evaluation (by referring the country as a whole) as an indicator that shows how people perceive the economy. By normalizing two indicators and subtracting the former from the latter, we can derive a measurement of perception bias. A positive

number indicates “criticalness” toward the economic evaluation, and a negative one indicates “leniency”. As Table 2 makes evidence, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea are far more critical than the rest of the Asian countries. This finding further reinforces our proposed explanation to the macro-level findings presented in Figure 1.

Micro-level Explanations

Our macro analysis suggests that various sources of factors can simultaneously affect regime legitimacy. They include cognitive factors such as procedural understanding of democracy and perception bias, political factors such as level of democracy, and economic factors such as household economic evaluation. These factors do not exhaust all the possible causes, and they do have corresponding counterparts in the micro level which might explain why people support the current regime. In this section, we intend to conduct a micro-level analysis and identify the micro foundation of regime legitimacy in eleven Asian countries where ABS conducted surveys between 2010 and 2012.

The dependent variable is *Diffuse Regime Support*, and we have explained the measurement issue in the last section. The major explanatory variables can be categorized into three general groups. The first group contains variables in the ideational category, such as the cognitive and cultural factors. Specifically, we include *Procedural Understanding of Democracy*, *Psychological Involvement in Politics*, and *Perception Bias (leniency)* for the cognitive factors and *Traditional Social Value* and *Democratic Orientation* for the cultural factors. The concept of *Procedural Understanding of Democracy* has been discussed earlier. *Psychological Involvement in Politics* intends to capture the degree that people are concerned and interested in political affairs. *Perception Bias (leniency)* measures how people overrate the national economic situation. A positive score indicates a lenient perception bias, and a negative one suggests a critical perception bias. *Traditional Social Value* intends to measure the traditional point of view regarding people’s value system. *Democratic Orientation* taps into the liberal democratic values without mentioning the “D” word.

The second group comprises the political and economic factors in the rationalist explanation. The political factor includes *Responsiveness* and *Current Regime Evaluation*. Both intend to capture how people evaluate the government performance in the political aspect. The economic factor includes *Overall Economic Evaluation* and *Household Economic Satisfaction*. The former asks the respondent to evaluate the overall economic condition of the country now, and the latter asks whether people are satisfied with their household income. While both are somewhat subjective, *Overall Economic Evaluation* is more subjective than *Household Economic Satisfaction* since

the referent in the former question is less clear than the latter.

The third group is about control variables, and we intend to control the “D” word measurement, background variables, and country dummies. Regarding the “D” word, *Satisfaction of Democracy* is a concept related to an overall assessment about the current regime. Background variables includes three basic demographic variables, *Education*, *Gender (Male)*, and *Age*. The addition of country dummies is to tease out country-level variations. Japan is set as the default category.

Given that the dependent variable is a continuous factor scale, we apply Mplus 6 to conduct multiple regression analysis and the missing-value problem is handled with its built-in function. In the latest ABS China survey, the data regarding *Current Regime Evaluation* is not available. To cope with this problem, we analyze the overall sample by removing *Current Regime Evaluation* on one hand, and re-analyze the full model by excluding the China sample and dropping the China dummy. If both models show similar findings, we can evaluate the explanatory power of *Current Regime Evaluation*.

The regression result is presented in Table 3. To compare the magnitude of explanatory power, we report the standardized beta coefficients, and thus, the intercept is not reported. Generally, both models show only minor differences and the explanatory power of the overall model is quite high. The R-squareds are .529 and .510, respectively. Among the four factors being tested, the cultural factors show the highest explanatory power. *Traditional Social Value* and *Democratic Orientation* are positively and negatively related to *Diffuse Regime Support*, respectively. Both findings are consistent with the culturalist’s expectation that those who are more traditional and less liberal tend to have stronger support toward the current regime.

The political factors also show strong explanatory power. The magnitude of the standardized beta for *Responsiveness* and *Current Regime Evaluation* is just slightly lower than *Democratic Orientation*. Both findings suggest that when people think that the government performs well in political sphere, their support toward the regime will increase. This is exactly the account that rationalists explain regime legitimacy. The same findings appear in the two economic variables, although the explanatory power is somewhat weaker than political factors. For *Overall Economic Evaluation* and *Household Economic Satisfaction*, the support of the current regime is higher if the rating of economic evaluation is more positive. At last, we found the cognitive factors are the weakest predictors to explain *Diffuse Regime Legitimacy*. Among the three variables, *Procedural Understanding of Democracy* and *Psychological Involvement in Politics* just barely pass the significant test. Although both findings are very weak, the results show that *Procedural Understanding of Democracy* is inversely related to *Diffuse Regime Support* and that the relationship is positive for *Psychological*

Involvement in Politics. It is noteworthy that *Perception Bias (leniency)* does have moderate explanatory power as predicted in the macro analysis. We found that if people are more lenient in terms of government performance, they are prone to have higher support toward the current regime. This finding largely strengthens the theory of critical citizen, which claims that people become more and more critical when a democracy becomes consolidated but people feel disappointed about the government for a substantial period of time and thus lose great institutional trust for the political system.

Table 3 The Factors Related to Diffuse Regime Support

	<i>Overall Sample</i>	<i>Without China</i>
Cognitive Factors		
Procedural Understanding of Democracy	-.018(.007)**	-.015(.007)*
Psychological Involvement in Politics	.021(.008)**	.018(.008)*
Perception Bias (leniency)	.075(.014)***	.070(.015)***
Cultural Factors		
Traditional Social Value	.178(.008)***	.171(.008)***
Democratic Orientation	-.122(.008)***	-.117(.009)***
Political Evaluations		
Responsiveness	.112(.007)***	.095(.008)***
Current Regime Evaluation	—	.104(.008)***
Economic Evaluations		
Overall Economic Evaluation	.076(.012)***	.077(.013)***
Household Economic Satisfaction	.040(.011)***	.035(.011)**
The “D” Word		
Satisfaction of Democracy	.177(.007)***	.156(.008)***
Background Variables		
Education	-.058(.008)***	-.061(.009)***
Male	-.018(.006)**	-.017(.007)**
Age	.059(.007)***	.061(.008)***
Country Dummies		
Korea	-.064(.009)***	-.070(.009)***
China	.097(.008)***	—
Mongolia	.009(.011)	.019(.011)
Philippines	.022(.010)*	.027(.010)**
Taiwan	.013(.008)	.008(.008)
Thailand	.227(.010)***	.235(.010)***
Indonesia	.114(.010)***	.117(.010)***
Singapore	.172(.009)***	.162(.010)***
Vietnam	.240(.010)***	.229(.011)***
Malaysia	.156(.010)***	.151(.011)***
R-squared	.529	.510
Sample Size	16969	13556

Note: Entry is standardized beta coefficients. The default category is Japan.
Level of Significance: * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$.

Serving as a control variable, *Satisfaction of Democracy* shows very strong explanatory power. If people are satisfied with the way democracy works, their

support of the current regime will be stronger. The three background variables also have certain degree of explanatory power. The magnitude of standardized beta for *Education* and *Age* is moderate, while *Gender* is a much weaker predictor. Our findings indicate that lower educated, female, and older people tend to have stronger diffuse regime support. Finally, the wide variation of the countries dummies indicates that great variance remains unexplained in the country level. Except for South Korea, Mongolia and Taiwan, most of the countries have a far greater level of diffuse regime support than Japan. To unravel what explains such wide variance, we need to apply other statistical tools such as multi-level modeling.

Our micro-level analysis suggests that both ideational and rationalist theories explain the source of regime legitimacy. The strongest predictor is the cultural factor, and it follows by political and economic factors. The cognitive factor is weakest among all the major predictors. Specifically, we found that *Procedural Understanding of Democracy* has very marginal explanatory power. This implies that how people understand democracy seems not very relevant to regime legitimacy in the individual level. If this finding is true, then the debate of procedural vs. substantial democracy also becomes irrelevant since the cognitive factor plays little role to affect regime legitimacy. This conclusion is at odds with what we found in the macro-level analysis, that procedural understanding of democracy is negatively associated with diffuse regime support for the countries that either politically or economically has serious problems.

Bridging the Gap between the Macro- and Micro-level Findings

To bridge the gap between macro and micro-level findings, we first examine the correlation between procedural understanding of democracy and other explanatory variables. If we can find a strong correlation, it means that we can resort to structural equation modeling (SEM) to unravel the path effects and show how understanding of democracy affects regime legitimacy. Unfortunately, as Table 4 demonstrates, the magnitude of all correlations is smaller than .011, and only limited covariance is left for the SEM analysis. This finding also holds in the subgroup samples if we separate the countries into three groups as Figure 1 shows. Note that we do find significant heterogeneous relationships in *Perception Bias*, *Responsiveness*, and *Satisfaction o Democracy*, and they suggest that the countries with a stable democracy and mature economy tend to have different micro-level correlations as opposed to the other countries which do not possess either condition. However, these correlations are very marginal and we are not able to increase much explanatory power by specifying a structural equation model in the overall sample or the three sub-samples.

Table 4 Correlations of Procedural Understanding of Democracy

	Overall	JPN,TWN KOR	MOG,PHI	The Rest
Psychological Involvement in Politics	.067***	.065***	.022	.048***
Perception Bias	.008	.033*	-.039*	-.050***
Responsiveness	-.066***	.031*	-.019	-.065***
Overall Economic Evaluation	-.013	.054	-.011	-.023*
Household Economic Satisfaction	-.023*	.008	.041*	.044***
Traditional Social Value	-.010	-.018	-.015	-.031**
Democratic Orientation	.071***	.102***	.076***	.106***
Satisfaction of Democracy	-.089***	.030*	-.061***	-.095***
Education	.071***	.086***	.076***	.069***
Male	.057***	.097***	.008	.054***
Age	-.062***	-.032*	-.045*	-.039***

Note: Level of Significance: * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$. Sample size varies from 15842 to 16675 by the listwise method.

We notice that the wide variation of country dummies suggests that great variance exists across different countries. Thus, another strategy in data analysis is to apply a multi-level analysis to tease out individual- and country-level effects, as well as interaction between the two levels (crossover effect).¹⁹ The first step of the multi-level analysis is to test a fixed-effect model with random components. Two predictors are dropped for different reasons: the data availability of *Current Regime Evaluation* in China and the collinearity problem of *Household Economic Satisfaction*.²⁰ Our analytical purpose is to identify which variable has a significant random effect. As Table 5 reports, except for *Perception Bias*, the p-values of random component are all significant and therefore these variables will be specified a random-effect model for a further analysis. Regarding the individual-level regression coefficients, the cognitive factors again have the least explanatory power. Only *Psychological Involvement in Politics* shows a slightly positive effect. The predictors for the other three theories are very significant and all coefficient signs match with our previous individual analysis.

¹⁹ We apply the program of HLM 6.08 to conduct the multi-level analysis. The baseline profile is set to the groupmeans for the individual-level predictors and the grandmeans for the country-level predictors, except for *Male* which is fixed at male respondents.

²⁰ Since *Perception Bias* is defined as the difference of *Overall Economic Evaluation* and *Household Economic Satisfaction*, the magnitude of correlation for *Perception Bias* and two economic variables is very high around .669, and this causes a convergence problem when we conduct a multi-level analysis. Since our regression analysis shows that *Household Economic Satisfaction* has weaker explanatory power, we decide to drop it to solve the convergence problem.

Table 5 A Fixed-Effect Model of Diffuse Regime Support

	<i>Coefficient(SE)</i>	<i>P-value of Random Effect</i>
Cognitive Factors		
Procedural Understanding of Democracy	-.072(.057)	.000
Psychological Involvement in Politics	.031(.013)*	.000
Perception Bias (leniency)	.004(.006)	.187
Political Evaluations		
Responsiveness	.113(.016)***	.000
Economic Evaluations		
Overall Economic Evaluation	.074(.013)***	.000
Cultural Factors		
Traditional Social Value	.496(.086)***	.000
Democratic Orientation	-.192(.029)***	.000
The ‘D’ Word		
Satisfaction of Democracy	.194(.016)***	.000
Background Variables		
Education	-.010(.004)*	.000
Male	-.002(.014)	.005
Age	.002(.001)*	.000
Intercept	.013(.109)	.000
Deviance	17910.62	
Number of Estimated Parameters	79	

Note: Dependent Variable: Diffuse Regime Support.
Level of Significance: * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$.

The second step of multi-level analysis is to specify a contextual-effect model by adding four relevant macro predictors: country means of *Procedural Understanding of Democracy*, country means of *Household Economic Evaluation*, and country means of *Perception Bias*, and *Level of Democracy* (reversed freedom house rating). The specification of random effect is decided by the previous findings. As the first column of Table 6 shows, all the individual-level findings remain unchanged, but the contextual effects of *Procedural Understanding of Democracy* and *Perception Bias* are very significant. This indicates the regime legitimacy becomes higher when the societal-level understanding of democracy is leaning toward the procedural end, and also when perception bias is swaying to leniency. In addition, *Level of Democracy* is barely significant and the result suggests that regime legitimacy will be higher if a country becomes more democratic.

To tease out the interaction (crossover) effects between the micro and macro levels, we make a methodological decision for the full model. That is, since the two cognitive factors show strong contextual effects, we specify both macro predictors to interact with all micro predictors that have a significant variance component. As the second column of Table 6 makes evident, Level 2-*Procedural Understanding of Democracy* has a positive crossover effect on its individual-level variable, and the result countervails to its original weak negative relationship and might even make the

relationship become positive. Level 2-*Perception Bias*, however, has a negative crossover effect that strengthens the original negative relationship between Level 1-*Procedural Understanding of Democracy* and *Diffuse Regime Support*. Furthermore, we also find another two crossover effects that involves with Level 2-*Perception Bias*. One is the positive crossover effect on *Traditional Social Value*, which reinforces the micro-level positive effect. The other is negative crossover effect on *Age*, which countervails the micro-level positive effect.

Table 6 Multilevel Analyses of Diffuse Regime Support

	<i>Coefficient(SE)</i>	<i>Coefficient(SE)</i>
Cognitive Factors		
Procedural Understanding of Democracy	-.073(.057)	-.073(.032)*
Level 2- Procedural Understanding of Democracy	—	2.158(.555)**
Level 2- Perception Bias (leniency)	—	-.199(.054)**
Psychological Involvement in Politics	.031(.013)*	.027(.011)*
Perception Bias (leniency)	.005(.004)	.005(.004)
Political Evaluations		
Responsiveness	.113(.016)***	.115(.014)***
Economic Evaluations		
Overall Economic Evaluation	.073(.014)***	.071(.013)***
Cultural Factors		
Traditional Social Value	.491(.086)***	.486(.067)***
Level 2- Perception Bias (leniency)	—	.276(.111)*
Democratic Orientation	-.194(.029)***	-.193(.027)***
The “D” Word		
Satisfaction of Democracy	.193(.016)***	.195(.018)***
Background Variables		
Education	-.010(.004)*	-.009(.003)*
Male	-.003(.013)	-.004(.013)
Age	.002(.001)*	.002(.001)**
Level 2-Perception Bias (leniency)	—	-.003(.001)*
Intercept (Contextual Effects)		
Level 2-Procedural Understanding of Democracy	-3.962(.507)***	-3.733(.918)**
Level 2-Household Economic Evaluation	-.048(.128)	—
Level 2- Level of Democracy	.072(.030)*	—
Level 2-Perception Bias (leniency)	.376(.080)**	.440(.091)**
Deviance	17922.96	17956.12
Number of Estimated Parameters	67	67

Dependent Variable: Diffuse Regime Support.

Level of Significance: * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$.

To make sense the results of our multi-level analysis, we decompose the intercept and beta coefficients for Level 1-*Procedural Understanding of Democracy* and Level 1-*Traditional Social Value* into corresponding contributions from individual-level, contextual, and crossover effects. As Table 7 shows, the composite intercept of *Diffuse Regime Support* is the sum of the baseline intercept (the grandmean of diffuse

regime support by holding all the variables at the baseline level) and the contributions from Level 2-*Procedural Understanding of Democracy* and Level 2-*Perception Bias*. The overall results show that all the six Asian democracies have a negative national average on *Diffuse Regime Support*, and this result corrects the raw average of Indonesia's measure reported in Table 1.

We conduct the same analysis on the crossover effect on the beta coefficient of L1- *Procedural Understanding of Democracy*. As the middle section of Table 7 makes evident, the crossover effects from Level 2-*Procedural Understanding of Democracy* and Level 2-*Perception Bias* are cancelled out to each other in at least six countries. Specifically in the Mongolian and Philippine cases, while the high country-mean of Level 2-*Procedural Understanding of Democracy* has a great contribution to flip the beta coefficient of Level 1-*Procedural Understanding of Democracy* from negative to positive, the negative contribution from Level 2-*Perception Bias* significantly reduces its magnitude. As a result, most of the composite beta coefficients for Level 1-*Procedural Understanding of Democracy* can only explain 7% range of the dependent variable,²¹ except the Vietnamese case where 13.5% range is explained. It is noteworthy that all of the stable democracies have a positive beta coefficient for Level 1-*Procedural Understanding*. This result corrects our previous findings in the multiple regression analysis and now it fits the theoretical expectation of those who support the anchoring assumption, because people with a stronger procedural understanding of democracy incline to support the political system more.

In order to understand how great the explanatory power could be, we further decompose the crossover effect on the strongest individual-level predictor, *Traditional Social Value*. The result is reported at the bottom of Table 7. As can be seen, when all country's beta coefficients are adjusted, their composite results are all positive. This indicates that the relationships between *Traditional Social Value* and *Diffuse Regime Support* in all of the countries are consistently positive. The overall explanatory power for *Traditional Social Value* in most cases is between 20% and 30% range of the dependent variable. Apparently *Traditional Social Value* is a far more powerful micro predictor than Level 1-*Procedural Understanding of Democracy*.

At last, our previous macro-explanations claims the reason why people in stable democracies like Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea are prone to be very critical is related to their long-time disappointment about the government and the subsequent loss of institutional trust for the political system. To see whether this explanation is plausible, we conduct a bivariate analysis on *Trust in Political Institutions* and *Perception Bias (leniency)*. As Figure 4 makes evident, the correlation is positively

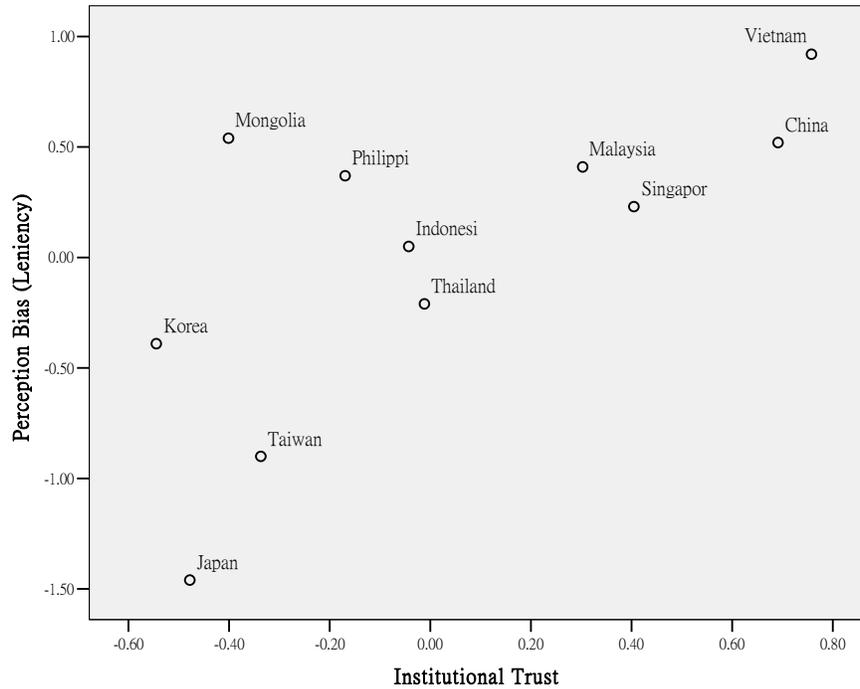
²¹ We evaluate the explanatory power of a predictor by estimating its maximum range of predicted values if holding other variables at the baseline profile.

Table 7 Decomposing the Composite Intercept/Beta

	Baseline Intercept/Beta	L2- Procedural Understanding Contribution	L2-Perception Bias Contribution	Composite Intercept/Beta	DV Range Explained (%)
Contextual Effect on Diffuse Regime Support					
Japan	0.007	0.270	-0.669	-0.392	—
Korea	0.007	-0.066	-0.198	-0.257	—
China	0.007	0.083	0.202	0.292	—
Mongolia	0.007	-0.328	0.211	-0.109	—
Philippines	0.007	-0.440	0.136	-0.296	—
Taiwan	0.007	0.120	-0.422	-0.295	—
Thailand	0.007	0.232	-0.119	0.121	—
Indonesia	0.007	-0.029	-0.004	-0.026	—
Singapore	0.007	0.158	0.075	0.239	—
Vietnam	0.007	0.307	0.378	0.692	—
Malaysia	0.007	-0.066	0.154	0.095	—
Crossover Effect on the Beta Coefficient of L1- Procedural Understanding					
Japan	-0.073	-0.156	0.303	0.074	2.3
Korea	-0.073	0.038	0.090	0.055	1.8
China	-0.073	-0.048	-0.092	-0.213	6.8
Mongolia	-0.073	0.189	-0.095	0.021	0.7
Philippines	-0.073	0.254	-0.062	0.119	3.8
Taiwan	-0.073	-0.070	0.191	0.048	1.5
Thailand	-0.073	-0.134	0.054	-0.154	4.9
Indonesia	-0.073	0.017	0.002	-0.054	1.7
Singapore	-0.073	-0.091	-0.034	-0.198	6.3
Vietnam	-0.073	-0.177	-0.171	-0.422	13.5
Malaysia	-0.073	0.038	-0.070	-0.104	3.3
Crossover Effect on the Beta Coefficient of L1- Traditional Social Value					
Japan	0.486	—	-0.420	0.066	3.3
Korea	0.486	—	-0.124	0.362	18.0
China	0.486	—	0.127	0.613	30.4
Mongolia	0.486	—	0.132	0.618	30.7
Philippines	0.486	—	0.086	0.572	28.4
Taiwan	0.486	—	-0.265	0.221	11.0
Thailand	0.486	—	-0.075	0.411	20.4
Indonesia	0.486	—	-0.003	0.483	24.0
Singapore	0.486	—	0.047	0.533	26.5
Vietnam	0.486	—	0.237	0.723	35.9
Malaysia	0.486	—	0.097	0.583	28.9

Note: All the results are computed by holding the case at the baseline profile.

Figure 4 Scatter Plot of Institutional Trust and Perception Bias (Leniency)



Correlation: .652
P-Value: .020

significant by $r = .652$ with a p-value .020. The scatter shows that the criticalness of Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea is strongly associated with the lack of institutional trust for the political system. For the rest Asian countries, this problem is not serious and we found that their leniency in perception bias is clearly related to their higher trust in institution. This finding provides an alternative explanation other than the measurement-error theory to explain the puzzle why stable Asian democracies with a mature economy have less regime legitimacy than other less-democratic countries.

Conclusions

What do we know about regime legitimacy? How understanding of democracy can explain regime legitimacy? Our empirical analysis concludes at least six major findings. First, the cultural factors have the strongest explanatory power on regime legitimacy, and the cognitive factors have the least. The political and economic factors are in-between. Second, great variance of regime legitimacy is explained by the country dummies. This suggests that contextual and crossover effects are very significant. Third, our macro analysis indicates that procedural understanding of

democracy is inversely related to regime legitimacy. But this result could be spurious if we exclude the Mongolian and Philippine cases. Fourth, through the multi-level analysis, we found that the cognitive factors have strong contextual effects on regime legitimacy. Country-level procedural understanding of democracy is inversely related to regime legitimacy, but lenient country-level perception bias is positively related to regime legitimacy. Fifth, we also found that the weak individual-level relationship between procedural understanding of democracy and regime legitimacy can be explained by the countervailing crossover effects of two macro-level cognitive variables. Specifically, country-level procedural understanding of democracy has a positive contribution to its individual-level beta coefficient but this effect will be cancelled out by the negative contribution from country-level perception bias. Sixth, the obscurity of the findings between understanding of democracy and regime legitimacy is mainly associated with another cognitive factor, perception bias. This factor exerts great influence not just in the individual level, but also in the country level and via the interaction of both levels.

What is the nature of the perception bias? Our analysis indicates that perception bias will tend to emerge when a country becomes democratized. Perception bias in those countries which maintain a stable democracy and a mature economy will lean towards criticalness. On one hand, people in those countries will raise the standard when they evaluate government performance since both the political and economic systems have reached a mature level and citizens in such a context are acculturated into tough customers. On the other hand, empirical evidence shows that people in these countries for a long time are disappointed with the government and thus have significantly lost their trust in political institutions. Both phenomena drive people's understanding of democracy moving to the substantial end and simultaneously decrease diffuse regime support. Perception bias exerts its influence in the opposite direction when a country manages to maintain a stable democracy but fails to build a mature economy. In this situation, people realize that democracy by itself does not help solving their economic problem, but they need a reason to hold onto the belief in the current system. Therefore, they tend to become lenient towards government performance and adjust their understanding of democracy to the procedural end in resolving the cognitive dissonance. A similar explanation can be applied to those non-democracies that have great economic performance. People under such a context understand that economic development might not help the democratization process, and therefore they adjust their understanding of democracy to the substantial end and such an adjustment legitimizes their current system. In both cases, perception bias swings to the lenient end because the political system simply fails to provide either political freedom or economic prosperity.

Appendix

This appendix lists the information about measurement items, recoding scheme, type of scale, and descriptive statistics of each variable.

Variable	Measurement Items	Recoding Scheme	Type of Scale	Value Range
Diffuse Regime Support	q80-q84	Reversed coding	IRT factor score	(-1.74,1.32)
Procedural Understanding of Democracy	q85-q88	(1,3)→0; (2,4)→1 for q85 and q87 (1,3)→1; (2,4)→0 for q86 and q88	IRT factor score	(-.37,.61)
Psychological Involvement in Politics	q43, q44, q46	Reversed coding for q43, q44, q46	IRT factor score	(-1.39,1.37)
Perception Bias (leniency)	q1, se13a	Normalized q1 minus normalized q13a	Continuous	(-3.29,4.04)
Responsiveness	q113	Reversed coding	Ordinal	(1,4)
Current Regime Evaluation	q91	Original coding	Ordinal	(1,10)
Overall Economic Evaluation	q1	Reversed coding	Ordinal	(1,5)
Household Economic Satisfaction	se13a	Reversed coding	Ordinal	(1,4)
Traditional Social Value	q49-q63	Reversed coding	IRT factor score	(-.87,.65)
Democratic Orientation	q138-q148	Original coding	IRT factor score	(-1.35,1.28)
Satisfaction of Democracy	q89	Reversed coding	Ordinal	(1,4)
Education	se5	Original coding	Ordinal	(1,10)
Male	se2	1→1; 2→0	Binary	(0,1)
Age	se3a	Original coding	Continuous	(17,94)
Trust in Political Institutions	q7-q11	Reversed coding	IRT factor score	(-1.47,1.39)