Popular Understandings of Democracy and Regime Legitimacy: Comparing India and East Asia

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Popular Democratic Conception: Comparing India and East Asia

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Min-hua Huang
Yu-tzung Chang

November 7, 2013
Democracy: A Universal but Contested Value

- Democracy has successfully consolidated its status as the only game in contemporary political discourse.
- Democracy is also a contested concept having numerous connotations.
- Some authoritarian societies outrank mature democracies in support and satisfaction of democracy.
- Results like this raise certain doubts that maybe the survey results from non-democracies cannot be trusted,
- Another explanation lies in the varying meanings that people may have associated with the D-word.
Satisfaction with the Practice of Democracy (2010-2012)

Data source: ABS 3 and SDSA 2013 India
Satisfaction with the Practice of Democracy (2005-2008)

Data source: ABS 2 and SDSA 2005 India
Critical Citizenship in East Asia

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.

According to the Asian Barometer Surveys, 69% respondents in Asian liberal democracy (JP, KR, TW) want their democracy to be democratic, and this number is even higher in Asian electoral democracy (MN, PH, TH, ID, MA) and non-democracy (HK, CH, SG, VN, KM), reaching 81% and 84%, respectively.

However, the number drops significantly to 59%, 61%, and 53% when the respondents are asked whether they prefer democracy than any other kind of government.

Greater doubts on the democratic system could show up in public opinion polls in liberal democracies, such as Taiwan (47% in 2004 and 50% in 2010).
Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government (2010-2012)

Data source: ABS 3 and SDSA 2013 India
Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government (2005-2008)

Data source: ABS 2 and SDSA 2005 India
How about India?

- Become less satisfied with democracy from 2005 (79%) to 2013 (55%).
- Democratic legitimacy also slightly decreases from 2005 (70%) to 2013 (63%).
- But comparing to other Asian liberal democracy, India has higher rates of democratic support, despite the fact that people seem to become tough customers as those in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan.
- 92% Indian citizens (2005) thought democracy suitable for their country.
- However, only 46% Indian citizens (2013) placed India as democratic under the current government. There were 50% Indian citizens rating India as democratic in ten years ago.
- When it comes to the expectation, 68% Indian citizens expect that India will be democratic ten years from now.
- India also shows some signs of 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.
- This argument dwells on the rationale that people cannot possibly have the cognitive ability to evaluate something they never experienced before.
- However, liberal democracy is a multi-dimensional concept that requires a composite evaluation of many continuous indicators.
- Contemporary telecommunication and internet technology has already made human cognition possibly beyond 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.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Answers Related to Freedom</th>
<th>Other Answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>● Freedom in general&lt;br&gt;● Freedom of speech</td>
<td>● Social equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>● Freedom in general</td>
<td>● Equality before the law&lt;br&gt;● Election, popular vote or electoral choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>● Freedom in general&lt;br&gt;● Freedom of speech</td>
<td>● Responsive government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>● Freedom in general&lt;br&gt;● Freedom of speech&lt;br&gt;● Freedom of individual choice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>● Freedom in general&lt;br&gt;● Political liberty</td>
<td>● Political equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>● Freedom of speech&lt;br&gt;● Freedom and civil liberty&lt;br&gt;● Power of the people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>● Freedom of speech</td>
<td>● Equality, justice or fraternity&lt;br&gt;● Democratic institutions and process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mongolia</td>
<td>● Freedom in general&lt;br&gt;● Freedom and civil liberty</td>
<td>● Equality, justice or fraternity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>● Freedom of speech&lt;br&gt;● People as their own master</td>
<td>● Democratic centralism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>● Freedom in general&lt;br&gt;● Freedom of speech</td>
<td>● Responsive government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>● Freedom in general&lt;br&gt;● People as their own master;&lt;br&gt;● People as their own master</td>
<td>● Social equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>● Freedom in general&lt;br&gt;● Freedom of speech&lt;br&gt;● Freedom of individual choice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Understandings of Democracy in India (open-ended)

- In 2005 (exact coding term)

Answer #1: Equality, Justice or Fraternity
Answer #2: Government of the people
Answer #3: Taking care of people's economic well-being
Answer #4: Freedom of speech/press/expression
Answer #5: Election, popular vote or electoral choice
Answer #6: Voting
Answer #7: Freedom and civil liberty
Answer #8: Solve unemployment
Answer #9: Power of the people
Answer #10: World peace
Popular Conception of Democracy

- Popular conception of democracy could vary greatly from country to country.
- When people have different cognitive understanding of what democracy is, their expectation and evaluation of democracy will also be different.
- We assume 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.
- If we cannot unravel what this malleable part of democracy means, democratic citizenship is then undefined because we do not know what the word "democracy" actually means in a given context.
- Along this line of thoughts, a great debate about the meaning of democracy quickly rises between two different models of democracy: "procedural vs. substantive".
Meanings of Democracy

East Asia (2010-2012)
- Good Governance: 31.8%
- Social Equity: 29.3%
- Norms and Procedures: 21.8%
- Freedom and Liberty: 17.1%

India (2013)
- Social Equity: 31.8%
- Good Governance: 19.4%
- Norms and Procedures: 20.3%
- Freedom and Liberty: 28.6%
# Understandings of Democracy in East Asia and India

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Social Equity</th>
<th>Good Governance</th>
<th>Norms and Procedures</th>
<th>Freedom and Liberty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
<td>42.3%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td>38.0%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
<td>30.9%</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
<td>34.2%</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mongolia</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>34.9%</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>32.5%</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
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</tr>
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<td>16.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
<td>34.9%</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
<td>34.9%</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Procedural vs. Substantive Democracy

• 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.

• Substantive 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.

• In the third wave of Asian Barometer Survey, we develop a battery that contains four questions to measure people’s conception of democracy corresponding to four dimensions: social equity (SE), good governance (GG), norms and procedures (NP), and freedom and liberty (FL).
Understanding of Democracy Battery

Q85--1. Government narrows the gap between the rich and the poor. (SE)
   2. People choose the government leaders in free and fair election. (NP)
   3. Government does not waste any public money. (GG)
   4. People are free to express their political views openly. (FL)

Q86--1. The legislature has oversight over the government. (NP)
   2. Basic necessities, like food, clothes and shelter, are provided for all. (SE)
   3. People are free to organize political groups. (FL)
   4. Government provides people with quality public services. (GG)

Q87--1. Government ensures law and order. (GG)
   2. Media is free to criticize the things government does. (FL)
   3. Government ensures job opportunities for all. (SE)
   4. Multiple parties compete fairly in the election. (NP)

Q88--1. People have the freedom to take part in protests and demonstrations. (FL)
   2. Politics is clean and free of corruption. (GG)
   3. The court protects the ordinary people from the abuse of government power. (NP)
   4. People receive state aid if they are unemployed. (SE)
Substantive vs. Procedural Democracy (percentage of answers)
How Procedural Understanding of Democracy Affects Regime Legitimacy?

Correlation: -.09
P-value: .72

Correlation: -.45
P-value: .06
Explaining Procedural Understanding of Democracy in East Asia

- Gender
  - Male: 41%
  - Female: 37%

- Education
  - Elementary: 36%
  - High school: 38%
  - College+: 43%

- Age
  - 29-39 Yrs: 43%
  - 30-59 Yrs: 38%
  - 60+ Yrs: 36%

- Household Economic Condition
  - Can save: 42%
  - No difficulty: 39%
  - Difficulties: 38%
  - Great difficulties: 39%
Explaining Procedural Understanding of Democracy in India

Gender
- Male: 54%
- Female: 49%

Education
- Elementary-High school: 41%
- College+: 49%
- 29-39 yrs: 56%
- 40-49 yrs: 52%
- 50-59 yrs: 46%
- 60+ yrs: 48%

Age
- 29-39 yrs: 56%
- 40-49 yrs: 52%
- 50-59 yrs: 46%
- 60+ yrs: 48%

Household Economic Condition
- Very bad: 48%
- Bad: 50%
- So so: 48%
- Good: 60%
A Summary of Findings

- In East Asia, the society level of procedural understanding is around 40%, this number is higher in India, close to 50%.
- In East Asia and India, male respondents are more likely to conceive democracy in procedural sense.
- In East Asia in India, higher educated people tend to think democracy in procedural sense.
- In East Asia, no significant relationship can be concluded between personal economic satisfaction and procedural understanding of democracy, but in India we found a positive relationship. This finding suggest that people tend to think democracy in procedural sense if they are more satisfied with their economic situation.
- Indians’ conception fits the general pattern we found in East Asia.
Conclusion

- The substance-based democratic conception has won the hearts and minds of a majority of the East Asians. We need more data to see whether that would happen in India.
- Comparing to other liberal democracies in East Asia, regime legitimacy in India is much higher.
- Closely examining demographic factors, we found that socioeconomic factors works in the same direction in India to the conception of democracy than those in East Asian countries generally.
- We believe that the long term democratic tradition in India might be possibly shifted toward more substance-based understanding once the progress of the modernization level achieves a certain level.