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Do East Asians View Democracy as a Lesser Evil? Testing the Churchill's Notion of Democracy in East Asia

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Do East Asians View Democracy as a Lesser Evil?
Testing the Churchill's Notion of Democracy in East Asia

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Why do ordinary citizens prefer to live in a democracy? Why do these citizens continue to support their democratic political systems even when they fail to function to their satisfaction? Why do these "critical citizens" remain supportive for democracy? For the past decade, political scientists have proposed and tested a variety of theoretical models to address these and other related questions regarding citizen orientations to democracy (Bratton and Mattes 2001, 2002; Camp 2001; Colton 2000; Haerpfer 2001; Klingemann and Fuchs 1995; Linz and Stepan 1996; McDonough, Barnes, and Lopez Pina 1998; Norris 1999; Pharr and Putnam 2000; Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998; Shin 1999; Dalton 2004). The most eloquent and unassuming of these models is derived from Winston Churchill, who asserted in 1947 that "democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

To Churchill, democracy is a form of government that performs badly, but not as badly as undemocratic forms of government. In this conceptualization, democracy no longer represents the ideal political life of freedom, equality and justice, as it does in the works of political philosophers and theorists from John Locke through Thomas Jefferson to Robert Dahl (for a review of this literature, see Mueller 1999 and Powell Jr. 1982). Nor does it even represent a "kinder and gentler" form of government that many ordinary citizens of new democratic states and their political leaders have sought to establish since the current wave of global democratization began three decades ago (Lijphart 1999). Democracy is viewed merely as a lesser evil, a view that directly challenges an idealistic or positive notion that has long been

accepted in the theoretical literature on democracy and widely endorsed by the mass citizenry (Camp 2001; Bratton and Mattes 2001; Miller, Hesli and Reisinger 1994; Shin 1999).

Moreover, the Churchillian notion that democracy constitutes a lesser evil directly challenges a growing body of literature on democratic consolidation. For the consolidation of nascent democratic rule, the existing literature emphasizes the critical role of the mass public's support (Alexander 2002; Diamond 1999; Linz and Stepan 1996). Implicitly, this literature assumes that when citizens affirm democracy as "the only game in town," they also view it as the best form of government. Rejecting this prevailing wisdom that democracy becomes "the only game in town" only when most people accept it as the best form of government, the Churchillian notion of democracy offers an alternative approach to the study of democratic consolidation.

According to Churchill's epigram about democracy, citizens must compare their own experiences of political life under democratic and undemocratic systems. The recent surge in democratic transitions in the various regions of the world, therefore, has made it possible to assess empirically this notion of democracy. To date, however, this proposition has been tested exclusively within the context of post-Communist countries in Eastern and Central Europe (Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998; Shin and Wells 2001). As a result, little is known about the validity of this lesser-evil notion for distinguishing popular perceptions of democracy in other new democracies or about how much such perceptions of democracy shape support for democracy.

In an effort to fill this gap in the literature, this study examines the 2001-2003 East Asia Barometer survey data collected in the region's five new democracies: Korea, Mongolia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Thailand.[1] We use this data to ask, and answer, a series of empirical questions about democracy as a lesser evil. First, we ask how much of the mass public in each of

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[1]   Detailed information about the first wave of East Asia Barometer surveys is available from http://www.asianbarometer.org

the East Asian countries perceive their newly formed democratic systems to be lesser-evil, more-evil or equally evil than the regime they knew prior to their recent transitions to democracy. After answering this question, we ask if those who do perceive the current political system to be a lesser evil remain to embrace democracy as the preferred from of government. Finally, we ask how much influence these conceptions of democracy as a lesser evil have on individual citizens' support for democracy.

This paper is organized into five sections. First, we review the previous scholarly endeavors to test the Churchillian notion of democracy. Second, we explicate the notion of a lesser evil as a concept and distinguish it from other forms of so-called "evil" governance. Third, we discuss the measurement of evil and good conceptions of democracy used to test empirically the Churchillian conceptualization of democracy. Fourth, we present the results of various empirical analyses. The final section summarizes the key findings of our research and discusses their implications for the study of democratic regime change.

Previous Research

Over the past decade a great deal of survey research has investigated the sources and consequences of divergent perceptions and understandings of democracy. In Europe, Richard Rose and Christian Haerpfer conducted New Democracies Barometer Surveys, Russia Barometer Surveys, and Baltic Barometer Surveys on a regular basis. In Southern Europe, Jose Montero and Leonardo Morlino conducted several waves of national sample surveys in Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Greece. In Latin America, Marta Lagos has conducted the Latino Barometer surveys in 15 Latin American countries and Spain on an annual basis. In Africa, Michael Bratton and Robert Mattes have launched the Afrobarometer surveys. In addition, James Gibson and many other scholars in Asia, Europe, and the United States have conducted numerous surveys on new

democracies. As effective as these pervious studies are in evaluating support for democracy in these contexts, their usefulness in explicating and testing the Churchillian notion of a lesser evil is limited in two key ways.

First, most of these studies assume that democracy is the noblest form of government; they have been designed to uncover popular conceptions of democracy as a series of political ideals rather than a political reality (Gibson, Duch and Tedin 1992; Miller Hesli and Reisinger 1997; Shin 1999; Simon 1997). Instead of examining the reactions citizens in new democracies had to divergent real regimes, these studies mostly tapped the values citizens attached to the idea of democracy. From such idealistic conceptions, it is difficult to infer realistic assessments of democratic regimes in action. In sum, there is always a wide gulf between what people aspire to and what they experience in their daily lives (Mueller 1999; Shin 1999).

Second, the bulk of the existing survey research has been conducted from an absolute perspective that does not involve any comparisons with alternative forms of government (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Cusack 1999; Fuchs, Guidorossi and Svensson 1995; Klingemann 1999). The satisfying or unsatisfying experiences with the current democratic system, for example, offer no basis to infer whether it performs better or worse than its undemocratic predecessors.

To date, only a very limited number of surveys have asked respondents to compare their perceptions of the democratic and undemocratic regimes they have experienced (Bratton and Mattes 2002; Rose and Haerpfer 1996; Shin 1999). While it is possible for any analysis using these surveys to determine which political system, democratic or undemocratic, is seen as performing better, it is not possible to use these surveys to determine whether the current democratic system is preferable to its undemocratic predecessor in a positive sense or in a negative sense. These surveys merely allow researchers to indicate the extent to which the

former is more or less preferable to the latter without specifying the exact nature of such preference, i.e., positive or negative.

Instead, to test the notion that people support a malfunctioning democratic regime so long as its alternative is worse, we should ask individual citizens to assess each of the regimes that they have personally experienced on a separate basis. In their New Democracies Barometer surveys, Richard Rose, William Mishler, and Christian Haerpfer (1998) did exactly this type of pioneering survey work by asking their respondents to make separate assessments of both the Communist and post-Communist systems. Individual respondents' separate ratings of each system were compared to estimate the proportion of the people who chose the post-Communist regime over the Communist regime. More than half the mass public in Central and Eastern Europe were found to prefer the former to the latter (Rose and Mishler 1996: 36). This finding was interpreted to support the Churchillian notion of democracy as a lesser evil.

In testing this notion, however, Rose and his associates mistakenly equated being a lesser evil with being relatively preferable. Only when a regime is judged to perform badly or negatively, can it be called an evil regime. For a current regime to be called "a lesser evil," therefore, it must be viewed first as "evil" and then it must be viewed as less undesirable than any alternatives. Clearly, Rose and his associates stretched the notion of a lesser evil to the extent that any current regime is termed a lesser evil as long as it is perceived to be preferable to the old one. As a result, even a positively or attractively functioning current regime is considered as a lesser evil when it performs better or more positively than the old Communist regime. Obviously, this constitutes a classic example of what is known as the stretching of a concept (cf. Collier and Levitsky 1997). Therefore, *Democracy and its Alternatives* cannot be accepted as a robust test of Churchill's original notion of a lesser evil, as the authors claim (Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998: 85).

Conceptualizing Democracy as a Lesser Evil

As this review of the existing literature has suggested, the Churchillian notion of democracy as a lesser evil is a complex concept that involves much more than a mere description of a single political entity. It requires the evaluation and comparison of divergent political systems. In making a comparative evaluation of those systems, it emphasizes the frequent failures of those systems to satisfy the citizenry and prescribes a negative perspective to such an evaluation. Conceptually, therefore, the Churchillan notion constitutes a framework for evaluating the failings of democratic and undemocratic political systems from a comparative perspective.

Empirically, the notion rejects the popular view that democracy is the best form of government. Instead, it holds first that democracy, like its undemocratic alternatives, is a bad or undesirable form of political system. Second, it holds further that democracy is merely less undesirable as a political system than its undemocratic alternatives. Referring to a system of government that does not dissatisfy its people as much as did a previous undemocratic system of government, democracy is appraised as a lesser evil. Accordingly, the notion of democracy as a lesser evil becomes valid only when the assessments of the democratic and undemocratic systems by individual citizens are both negative and the assessments of the former are less negative that those of the latter.

Theoretically, the Churchillian notion offers a hypothesis linking the negative perceptions of a new democratic political system to support for democracy. This notion implies that people would remain supportive of the current democratic political system as long as they view the system as a lesser evil. It also implies that those who perceive the system as a lesser evil are likely to be dissatisfied "critical" democrats. To determine whether the perceptions of a lesser evil really

matter in shaping support for democracy, negative perceptions should first be distinguished into three different categories: greater evil, equal evil, and lesser evil.

A current democratic regime becomes a greater evil when it is viewed more undesirable than the old system, and it becomes a lesser evil when it is viewed less undesirable. The current regime becomes an equal evil when it is viewed as undesirable as the preceding regime. Across these three categories, levels of democratic support need be compared. Only when the category of a lesser evil registers more support for than opposition to democracy and it also registers a significantly higher level of democratic support than the other two categories, can it be argued that the perception of a lesser evil matters in shaping democratic support.

In short, the notion of democracy as a lesser evil embodies two new noteworthy ideas, which contrast sharply with those underlying the prevailing paradigm that emphasizes positive conceptions of democracy among the mass public as a cultural foundation for the consolidation of nascent democracies. Conceptually, this notion offers a tool for empirical observation by focusing on democracy-in-action rather than democracy-in-principle. Specifically, it offers a realistic perspective that would allow for accurately determining how individual citizens of newly democratizing countries perceive and understand their regimes even when they have no knowledge of democratic theory and little experience in democratic politics. Theoretically, this vantage point offers an alternative explanation of why those "critical" citizens continue to support a new democratic system, even when it fails to perform to their satisfaction.

Measurement

Do East Asians actually perceive their political systems as a lesser evil, consistent with Churchill's characterization more than half a century ago? To address this question accurately, the perception of democracy as a lesser evil should be differentiated from the perception that the

current system is generally better than the old system. The perception must be that the former is better than the latter, though both are viewed in a negative light. Precisely, it refers to a particular state of mind that an existing system is less than a desirable situation, but it is a less undesirable situation than the preceding system. To make a comparison of the current and old systems in terms of their undesirability, we develop two measures of perceived democratic performance. One is used to capture the extent to which the current system is perceived in a negative light while the other the extent to which the current system is perceived as better than the old system.

In surveys, a general sense of satisfaction with democracy is widely used to evaluate the overall quality of democracy-in-action (Klingemann 1999; Norris 1999; Fuchs, Guidorossi and Svensson 1995; Rose, Shin and Munro 1999; Evans and Whitefield 1995; Bratton and Mattes 2001; Weil 1989; Anderson and Guillory 1997). We used this survey question in order to determine whether or not the current system is perceived in a negative light. The East Asia Barometer survey asked respondents to indicate on a 4-point verbal scale the extent to which they are satisfied or dissatisfied with the working of democracy. Responses to this survey question are collapsed into two categories, positive ('very satisfied' and 'fairly satisfied') and negative ('not very satisfied' and 'not at all satisfied'). Positive responses were grouped into the category of "goods," while negative ones, that of "evils." It is supposed that those expressing satisfaction with democratic performance have positive perspectives on the current democratic system while those expressing dissatisfaction, negative ones.

In order to determine the extent to which the current system is perceived as better than the old system, we chose a set of questions that allowed respondents to compare the performance of the current democratic system with that of the old undemocratic system. The East Asia Barometer survey asked respondents to rate relative democratic performance on each of nine life domains

on a 5-point verbal scale allowing for comparing its current status with what it was under the old authoritarian rule. The life domains evaluated here include freedom of speech, equal treatment by government, popular influence on government, freedom of association, political corruption, economic inequality, law and order, economic development and an independent judiciary.

Responses to this set of questions were collapsed into three categories, positive ('much better than before' and 'somewhat better'), neutral ('much the same') and negative ('somewhat worse' and 'much worse'). Then, we constructed a 10-point index of positive democratic performance by counting the number of positive responses (non-responses to more than three items were treated as missing data in calculating the index). This measure indicates the number of domains on which the current democratic system is perceived as performing better than the old authoritarian system. Similarly, we also constructed a 10-point index of negative democratic performance by counting the number of negative responses (non-responses to more than three questions were treated as missing data). This measure indicates the number of domains on which the current democratic system is perceived as performing worse than the old authoritarian regime. Next we combine scores of these two dimensional indexes into a single 19-point net democratic performance index (ranging from -9 to +9) by subtracting scores of the negative democratic performance index from those of the positive democratic performance index. Scores of the net democratic performance index are further grouped into three categories, positive (1 to 9), neutral (0) and negative (–9 to –1). Negative scores indicate the perception that the current system performs worse than the old system while positive scores indicate the perception that the current system performs better than the old system. A neutral score of 0 indicates the perception that the current system performs neither better nor worse than the old system.

Finally, we consider together the two measures tapping, respectively, general satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the way a new democracy performs and improvements or declines in the

overall quality of its performances in the aftermath of democratic regime change. By this consideration, we identified six different types of perceptions of a new democratic regime: (1) greater dissatisfaction, (2) equal dissatisfaction, (3) lesser dissatisfaction, (4) lesser satisfaction, (5) equal satisfaction, and (6) greater satisfaction. In Table 1, these types are labeled greater, equal, and lesser evil or good.

(Table 1 here)

The first three view democracy in a negative light while the latter three view democracy in a positive light. The first reflects the views of a greater evil, the perceptions that the existing system is in a more undesirable state than the preceding one. The second reflects the views of an equal evil, the perceptions that the existing and preceding systems constitute an equally undesirable state. The third reflects the views of a lesser evil, the perceptions that the existing system is in a less undesirable state than the preceding one. In contrast, the fourth reflects the views of a lesser good, the perceptions that the existing system is in a less desirable state than the preceding one. The fifth reflects the views of an equal good, the perceptions that the existing and preceding systems constitute an equally desirable state. Finally, the sixth reflects the views of a greater good, the perceptions that the existing system is in a more desirable state than the preceding one. By distinguishing perceptions of lesser evils from those of other evils and non-evils (or goods), this scheme of classification allows for estimating accurately the proportions of ordinary people in East Asia who subscribe to the Churchillian notion of democracy.

Findings

Absolute and Relative Regime Assessments

Winston Churchill has led politicians and scholars alike to tout democracy as a lesser evil. According to this notion, individual citizens of new democracies in East Asia are expected to

perceive the current political system negatively, but to judge it to perform better or less undesirably than the old authoritarian system. What proportion of the mass citizenry in each East Asian new democracy subscribes to the lesser-evil perception? Which countries have the highest and lowest levels of this perception? Who perceives the current democratic regime as a lesser evil? Before answering these questions, let us briefly examine how satisfied or dissatisfied new democratic citizens in East Asia are with the current democratic system and how they evaluate the overall performance of the current democratic system as compared to the old authoritarian system.

As the first panel in Table 2 shows, the percentages of respondents expressing dissatisfaction with democracy vary to a significant degree: from nearly one-half in Taiwan (49%) and the Philippines (47%), one-third in Korea (38%) and Mongolia (30%) to only one-tenth in Thailand (10%). Those expressing satisfaction vary considerably from large majorities in Thailand (91%), Mongolia (70%) and Korea (62%) to bare majorities in the Philippines (53%) and Taiwan (51%). When these negative and positive ratings are compared, it is evident that East Asians tend to see their current democratic systems in a positive light.

(Table 2 here)

The second panel in Table 2 shows that the percentages reporting that the current democratic regime performs better than in the authoritarian past vary considerably across the countries: from an overwhelming majority in Thailand (91%), large majorities in Mongolia (66%), Taiwan (66%) and the Philippines (60%) to a bare majority in Korea (52%). Those perceiving that the democratic system performs worse than the old authoritarian system, on the other hand, constitute minorities in all the countries. The size of these minorities, however, varies considerably from a very tiny minority in Thailand (5%) to sizeable minorities in Mongolia (23%), Taiwan (24%) and the Philippines (28%) and a large minority in Korea (39%). Overall,

in all five East Asian new democracies, more people evaluate the newly installed democracy to perform better than the old authoritarian system.

Another notable feature of the data presented in Table 2 concerns a lack of close relationship between the absolute assessments of the current democratic regime and relative, inter-regime comparisons of its performance quality. Specifically, being satisfied with the current regime does not say much about the changed quality of political performance and vice versa. In four of the five countries with the exception of Thailand, the percentages expressing satisfaction are different from those reporting improvements in the major domains of regime performances. In Korea and Mongolia, for example, those satisfied with the current democratic regime are more numerous than those experiencing such improvements. In contrast, in the Philippines and Taiwan, the latter are more numerous than the former. It appears that East Asians make absolute and relative evaluations of their new democratic system according to different criteria.

The Notion of a Lesser Evil as a Political Phenomenon

Do ordinary citizens of the five new democracies in East Asia tend to perceive their current regime as a lesser evil? As discussed before, the present analysis identified six types of regime perceptions by jointly considering two separate assessments—absolute and relative—of its quality. These types include: (1) greater evil, (3) equal evil, (3) lesser evil, (4) lesser good, (5) equal good, and (6) greater good. Figure 1 displays the percentages of respondents in each country who fall into each of these six types. According to these percentages, perceptions of lesser evils, which correspond to Churchill's notion of democracy, are neither the most popular nor the least popular ones among East Asians.

As reported in Figure 1, majorities of East Asian do not perceive their current regime as a lesser evil. In all the five countries, lesser-evil perceivers constitute substantial or tiny minorities. In Taiwan (26%) and the Philippines (23%), nearly one-fourth of their respective adult population

perceives the current regime as a lesser evil. In Korea (15%) and Mongolia (15%), about one-seventh of the population does so. In Thailand (8%), lesser evil perceivers are much less than one-tenth of the population. In all five East Asian countries, large majorities of their citizens do not perceive their current democratic regime as a lesser evil, contrary to what Churchill's notion implies. Nonetheless, Figure 1 makes it clear that such perceptions are one of the two most popular ones in four of these five countries—Mongolia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Thailand.

Which type of regime perceptions is the most popular among East Asians? A careful scrutiny of the data in Figure 1 reveals that the most popular type is the perception of greater good that the current democratic system not only performs to the satisfaction of its citizens but also functions better than the old authoritarian system. In two countries—Thailand (83%) and Mongolia (51%), majorities subscribe to this type of the most positive perceptions. In the other three countries—Korea (37%), Taiwan (41%) and the Philippines (36%), on the other hand, pluralities subscribe to the type.

Which type of regime perception is the least popular among East Asians? In four of the five countries—Korea, Mongolia, the Philippines and Taiwan, perceptions of equal evils and equal goods are the two least popular ones. In Thailand, greater evils and equal evils are the two least popular perceptions. All these five countries, however, are alike in that those falling into each of these two least popular types constitute very tiny minorities of less than one-tenth and they are also much less numerous than those in the type of lesser evil.

When ordinary citizens of East Asian new democracies are considered as a whole, a substantial minority actually perceives democracy as a lesser evil. This finding makes it evident that Churchill's notion of democracy as a lesser evil is not a political myth but a concept referring to a phenomenon that can be observed in the real world of new democracies. At the same time, the finding also makes it clear that this notion of democracy is not the only conceptual device East

Asians employ to assess the quality of new democratic rule; nor is it the device they use most often.

Demographic Profiles of Lesser-Evil Perceivers

Which segments of East Asians are the most and least likely to perceive democracy as a lesser evil? To address this question, we examine the relationships between four demographic characteristics—gender, age, education, and income—and lesser-evil perceptions. Table 3 shows that the gender characteristic matters very little in shaping such perceptions in all five countries. In one of these countries, Mongolia, all four characteristics do not matter much at all.

(Table 3 here)

In four countries—Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Thailand, the higher the level of socio-economic resources including education and income, the greater the proportion of lesser evil perceivers. In three of these four countries—Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan, the lower the age level, the higher the proportion of lesser evil perceivers. In most of East Asian new democracies, it appears that young people with a college education and high incomes are the most likely to subscribe to the Churchillian notion of democracy. And their cognitively unsophisticated counterparts, i.e., old people with little education and incomes, are the least like to do so. Nonetheless, it should be noted that, regardless of their socio-economic resources or age level, large majorities in East Asian new democracies do not appraise their current regimes as lesser evils.

The Notion of a Lesser Evil as a Hypothesis

Having determined the extent to which citizens view democracy as a lesser evil, we can now ask how various perceptions of the current democratic system affect support for democracy. The Churchillian notion of democracy as a hypothesis holds that a new regime can remain preferable to its citizens as long as it is viewed as a lesser evil when compared to the other forms of

government they have experienced before. Specifically, this hypothesis suggests that the people tend to support the new political system more strongly when they see it as a lesser evil than when they view it as an equal, or greater, evil.

In order to test the Churchillian notion of democracy as a hypothesis, we first constructed three measures of regime orientations—attachment to democracy, detachment from authoritarian alternatives, and commitment to democracy. We used two pairs of survey questions for measuring democratic attachment and authoritarian detachment.

The first pair concerns the extent to which respondents embrace democracy as the preferred political system. One question in this pair asked respondents to indicate on a 10-point dictatorship-democracy scale where they want their country to be. A score of 1 means "complete dictatorship" while a score of 10 indicates "complete democracy." The other question asked respondents which of the following three statements they most agree: (1) "Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government"; (2) "Under some circumstances, an authoritarian government can be preferable to a democratic one"; and (3) "For people like me, it does not matter whether we have a democratic or a non-democratic regime." To measure the overall level of democratic attachment, we counted pro-democratic responses to these two questions[2] and combined them into a 3-point index, on which a score of 0 means no attachment, and a score of 2 means full attachment.

The second pair focuses on the extent to which East Asians are detached from authoritarian alternatives, including the one in which they lived prior to democratic regime change. This pair is needed because even respondents who show full attachment to democracy are likely to remain attached to authoritarian rule. Respondents were asked whether they would favor a return to

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[2] Responses choosing numbers higher than 5 on the 10-point dictatorship-democracy scale were considered pro-democratic responses.

authoritarian rule, offering two alternatives: civilian autocracy, and military dictatorship. To estimate the overall level of authoritarian detachment, we counted antiauthoritarian responses to these two questions and combined them into a 3-point index, on which a score of 0 represents no detachment and a score of 2 represents full detachment.

To estimate the overall level of democratic commitment, we combined scores of these two 3-point dimensional indexes into a single 5-point index, on which a score of 0 means no commitment, and a score of 4 means full commitment. Only those who show full commitment are considered authentic or true supporters of democracy,[3] who embrace democracy as "the only game in town."

In order to explore whether perceptions of democracy as a lesser evil drive East Asians toward democracy and away from its alternatives, we calculated the percentages displaying full attachment to democracy, full detachment from authoritarianism, and full commitment to democracy. These percentages were compared across the most popular four types of regime perceptions, including those of lesser evils, greater evils, lesser goods, and greater goods.[4] This allows us to explore if the people in East Asia tend to support democracy when they see the current democratic regime as a lesser evil and if people who view democracy as a lesser evil are more supportive of democracy than those who view it as a greater evil or non-evil. The present analysis of East Asians, accordingly, will allow for determining how far the Churchillian notion of democracy travels outside the post-Communist Europe as a theoretical model of popular commitment to democratic rule.

Table 4 shows the distribution of those expressing full attachment to democracy across the four types of democratic regime perceptions. Contrary to what is expected from the Churchillan

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[3] Only those who scored 4 on this commitment to democracy index were considered true or authentic supporters of democracy.

[4] Respondents falling into the categories of equal evils and equal goods were excluded from this analysis because their numbers were small in the five countries surveyed.

notion, perceivers of a lesser evil are not always more fully attached to democracy than those of a greater evil. Only in three countries—Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan, the former are significantly more attached to it than the latter. In Mongolia and Thailand, the former are slightly less attached to it than the latter. In the three countries—Korea, Mongolia, and Taiwan—where lesser evil perceives are more supportive of democracy than greater evil perceivers, moreover, majorities do not fully embrace democracy even when they judge the current democratic regime to perform less undesirably than the previous authoritarian regime. Only when they judge it to perform more desirably than in the authoritarian past, majorities remain fully attached to democracy as the most preferred political system.

(Table 4 here)

Table 5 shows the relationships between the four types of regime perceptions and full detachment from authoritarian rule. As in the case of full attachment to democracy, perceivers of a lesser evil are not always more fully detached from authoritarianism than those of a greater evil. In all five countries, majorities, large or near, of lesser evil perceivers are fully detached from authoritarian rule. Only in two countries—Taiwan, and Thailand, however, they are significantly more fully detached from it than those who see the current democratic regime as a greater evil. These findings suggest that perceptions of the new democratic regime as a lesser evil are not much influential in driving East Asians away from authoritarian rule.

(Table 5 here)

Table 6 shows how authentic or true supporters of democracy, who not only embrace democracy as a political system but also reject its alternatives to the fullest extent, are distributed across the four types of democratic regime perceptions. These true democrats in the lesser evil type may be known in the literature as "critical citizens" who are not satisfied with their current democratic regime and yet remain supportive of it (Norris 1999; Dalton 2004). In this regard, Table 6 shows

that of five East Asian new democracies, Thailand is the only country where a majority of lesser evil perceivers are true democrats. In the other four countries, minorities of these perceivers, which range from 30 percent in Mongolia to 46 percent in Korea, are fully committed to democracy. Obviously, critical democrats cannot be equated with authentic democrats because only some of them support democracy unconditionally. This finding indicates that the notion of critical citizens is misunderstood in the existing literature.

(Table 6 here)

In all five East Asian countries, ordinary citizens appear to be more fully committed to democracy when they see it as a lesser evil than as a greater evil. Only in three of the five countries—Korea, Taiwan and Thailand, however, lesser evil perceivers are significantly more fully committed to it than greater evil perceivers. In two of these three countries—Korea and Taiwan, moreover, lesser evil perceivers are more fully committed to democracy than those who perceive it as a lesser good. Notable is that their democratic commitment is nearly as much as that of those who perceive it as a greater good.

These findings, when considered together, indicate that the mass publics of East Asian new democracies, like their European peers, orient themselves toward democracy and away from authoritarianism when they see their current democracy regime as a lesser evil. At the same time, the same findings suggest that the impact of lesser evil perceptions on democratic commitment is not invariant, as implied in the Churchillean notion; such impact varies considerably from country to country.

Another notable feature of the data reported in Table 6 is that in four of five countries—Korea, Mongolia, Taiwan, and Thailand, perceivers of the current democratic regime as a greater good are the most fully committed to democracy. Evidently, in most of East Asian new democracies, people are not the most supportive of democracy when they see the current system as a lesser

evil, a democratic system that performs badly but performs better than its authoritarian predecessor. They become the most supportive of it when they see the existing system that performs not only well but also much better than the old authoritarian system.

 This finding suggests that a new democratic system would become fully legitimized only when its citizenry perceives its qualitative change from an evil or malfunctioning system into a well-functioning system. The Churchillian notion of democracy is not conceived to address such a full-scale qualitative transformation of systemic performance. It is merely intended to deal with the system's negative performance—failures to satisfy the citizenry—and changes in such performance in the wake of regime change. Substantively, therefore, the Churchillian lesser-evil notion of democracy is not capable of unraveling the cultural dynamics of democratization fully.

Summary and Conclusions

What does democracy mean to ordinary people with little experience in democratic politics and no knowledge of democratic theory? When do they decide to embrace it as the most preferred system of governance and why? Do dissatisfied "critical citizens" remain supportive of democratic principles and ideals? These questions need to be addressed adequately in order to unravel the process of democratization taking place among individual citizens of new democracies.

To provide a realistic account of this process, Winston Churchill offered the notion of a lesser evil: "… democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." In emphasizing that a new democratic regime does not have to be positively attractive to become the only political game in town, the Churchill notion constitutes a clear and meaningful alternative to the idealistic or positively-oriented paradigm that has guided the study of third-wave democracies for the past two decades. Nonetheless, his notion of

democracy as a lesser evil has not been explicated fully. Nor has it been tested outside post-Communist Europe.

We analyzed the 2001-2003 East Asia Barometer surveys to determine whether ordinary people of five East Asian new democracies actually perceive their new democracy as a lesser evil and whether lesser evil perceptions render them supportive of it to a greater extent than other regime perceptions. It is found that sizeable minorities in four of these five countries do actually perceive their current democratic system as a lesser evil, indicating that the notion of a lesser evil can serve as a device capable of differentiating the negative sentiments ordinary people experience with the newly installed democratic rule. Moreover, in three of the five countries, lesser evil perceptions of the existing democratic system were found to lead to significantly greater support for democracy than greater evil perceptions. These findings seem to validate the lesser evil notion as a concept as well as a hypothesis.

However, it should be noted that, of the five East Asian new democracies surveyed, Korea and Taiwan are the only two countries where a substantial minority of the mass citizenry does perceive the current democratic regime as a lesser evil and these lesser-evil perceivers fully support democracy to a significantly greater extent than those who perceive it as a greater evil. The lesser-evil notion of democracy, therefore, is not applicable to large majorities in most East Asian new democracies. This very fact that large majorities of East Asians do not endorse this notion suggests that it is predicated on highly unrealistic assumptions about individual citizens and their newly installed democratic political systems.

Contrary to what was originally assumed by Churchill about ordinary citizens, majorities of the people in the East Asian countries do not see a democratic political system in a negative light or as an evil. Instead, they see it in a positive light or as a good. When these non-evil perceivers see the system to perform more desirably than in the authoritarian past, moreover,

they support it more strongly than lesser evil perceivers. Evidently ordinary East Asians become unqualified supporters of democracy only when they see their current political system as being fully transformed so as to perform well and better than in the authoritarian past. Contrary to what was assumed in Churchill's notion, these citizens tend to believe that democratic regime change is capable of transforming a malfunctioning system into a well-function system. In view of the survey findings that run counter to these assumptions, we conclude that the Churchillian notion of democracy as a lesser evil is of limited utility as an alternative paradigm for the study of democratization, especially from the perspective of ordinary citizens in the midst of such political experience.

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Table 1 A Typology of Democratic Regime Perceptions

Absolute Assessments	Relative Assessments	Regime Perceptions
Dissatisfied	Worse	Greater evil
Dissatisfied	Neutral	Equal evil
Dissatisfied	Better	Lesser evil
Satisfied	Worse	Lesser good
Satisfied	Neutral	Equal good
Satisfied	Better	Greater good

Table 2 Absolute and Relative Assessments of the Current Democratic Regime

Assessment Types	Korea	Mongolia	Philippines	Taiwan	Thailand
Absolute assessments					
Dissatisfied	38.2	30.0	46.6	49.4	9.5
Satisfied	61.8	70.0	53.4	50.6	90.5
(N)	(1,490)	(1,142)	(1,200)	(1,288)	(1,518)
Relative assessments					
Worse	39.1	22.6	27.7	24.4	4.8
Neutral	8.6	11.2	12.6	9.6	4.5
Better	52.3	66.2	59.6	66.0	90.7
(N)	(1,500)	(1,136)	(1,197)	(1,277)	(1,500)

Figure 1 Distribution of Democratic Regime Perceptions
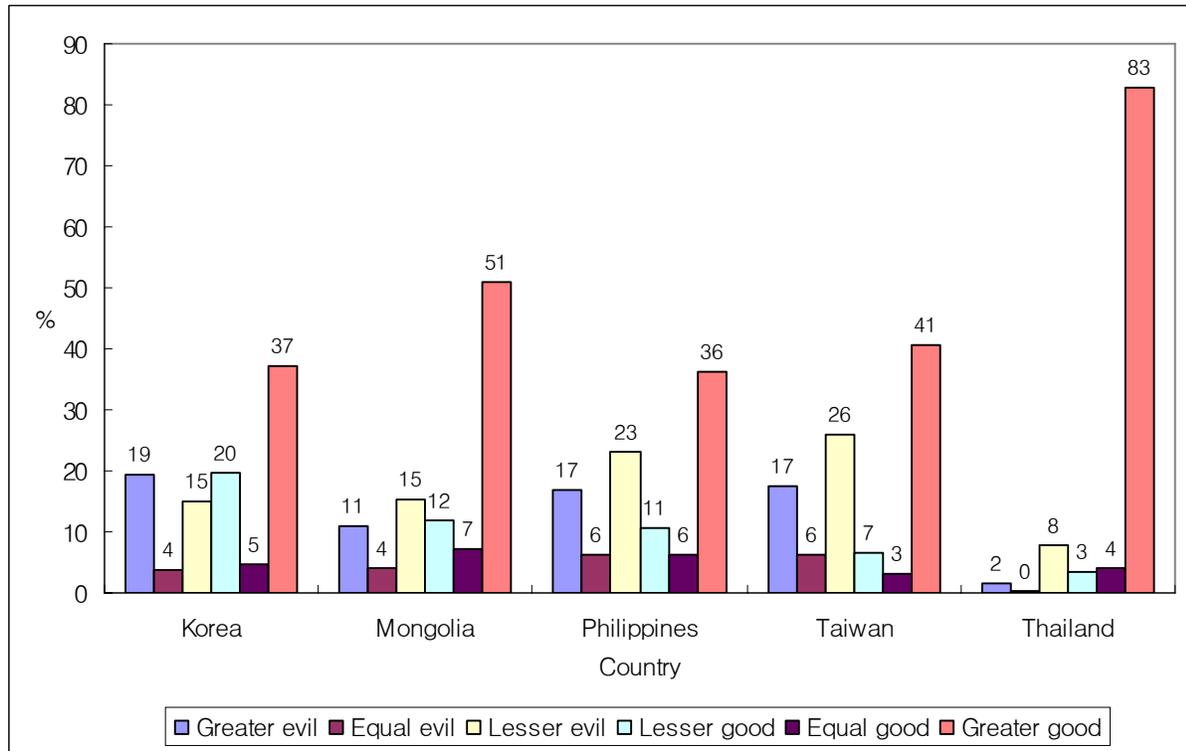
Table 3 Demographic Differences in Lesser Evil Perceptions

	Korea	Mongolia	Philippines	Taiwan	Thailand
Gender					
Male	18.1	16.6	26.0	29.6	7.6
Female	14.9	17.7	27.2	27.6	8.6
Age					
18-29	21.1	20.1	29.7	29.7	8.7
30-39	17.3	17.9	26.1	29.8	8.6
40-49	14.0	13.8	23.9	28.3	7.6
50-59	16.1	15.3	28.6	30.7	7.7
60+	11.8	17.9	22.2	22.5	8.0
Education					
<High school	13.9	17.1	25.1	24.3	7.1
High school	13.5	17.9	23.1	29.3	13.8
Some college+	21.8	16.8	31.0	32.7	13.6
Income					
Lowest	11.4	15.6	27.2	24.3	3.6
Low	16.4	18.5	27.3	29.3	6.1
Middle	20.2	20.4	24.4	33.0	11.0
High	15.9	19.7	28.6	28.1	13.7
Highest	31.6	16.7	25.0	36.8	11.3

Figures are percentages subscribing the lesser evil views.

Table 4 Democratic Regime Perceptions and Full Attachment to Democracy

Regime Perceptions	Korea	Mongolia	Philippines	Taiwan	Thailand
Greater evil	35.1	44.2	45.6	31.6	70.0
Lesser evil	49.3	42.7	56.7	47.2	66.1
Lesser good	39.8	46.0	56.3	33.3	72.7
Greater good	60.3	61.0	67.1	54.9	85.8
(eta)	(.22)	(.19)	(.16)	(.21)	(.17)

Figures are percentages expressing full attachment to democracy.

Table 5 Democratic Regime Perceptions and Full Detachment from Authoritarianism

Regime Perceptions	Korea	Mongolia	Philippines	Taiwan	Thailand
Greater evil	82.2	54.5	58.8	72.3	42.9
Lesser evil	83.6	48.8	50.7	83.4	70.2
Lesser good	81.5	47.7	62.5	72.5	66.0
Greater good	75.9	56.9	40.8	82.2	68.7
(eta)	(.08)	(.09)	(.17)	(.11)	(.05)

Figures are percentages expressing full detachment from authoritarian alternatives.

Table 6 Democratic Regime Perceptions and Full Commitment to Democracy

Regime Perceptions	Korea	Mongolia	Philippines	Taiwan	Thailand
Greater evil	32.9	27.9	31.4	25.3	36.8
Lesser evil	45.8	30.4	33.9	42.0	52.3
Lesser good	37.0	24.0	37.5	23.8	56.8
Greater good	48.6	39.5	29.9	47.2	60.7
(eta)	(.11)	(.16)	(.05)	(.22)	(.10)

Figures are percentages expressing full commitment to democracy.

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The Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) grows out of the Comparative Survey of Democratization and Value Change in East Asia Project (also known as East Asia Barometer), which was launched in mid-2000 and funded by the Ministry of Education of Taiwan under the MOE-NSC Program for Promoting Academic Excellence of University. The headquarters of ABS is based in Taipei, and is jointly sponsored by the Department of Political Science at NTU and the Institute of Political Science of Academia Sinica. The East Asian component of the project is coordinated by Prof. Yun-han Chu, who also serves as the overall coordinator of the Asian Barometer. In organizing its first-wave survey (2001-2003), the East Asia Barometer (EABS) brought together eight country teams and more than thirty leading scholars from across the region and the United States. Since its founding, the EABS Project has been increasingly recognized as the region's first systematic and most careful comparative survey of attitudes and orientations toward political regime, democracy, governance, and economic reform.

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