



A Comparative Survey of  
***DEMOCRACY, GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT***

Working Paper Series: No. 121

Jointly Published by

**GLOBALBAROMETER™**

**Quality of Governance and Political Legitimacy:  
Governance-Based Legitimacy in East Asia**

Hsin-hsin Pan

Postdoctoral Fellow, National Taiwan University  
panhsinh@msu.edu

Wen-Chin Wu

Assistant Research Fellow, Institute of Political Science at Academia Sinica  
wenchinwu@sinica.edu.tw

## **Asian Barometer**

A Comparative Survey of Democracy, Governance and Development

# **Working Paper Series**

Jointly Published by

**Globalbarometer**

The Asian Barometer (ABS) is an applied research program on public opinion on political values, democracy, and governance around the region. The regional network encompasses research teams from thirteen East Asian political systems (Japan, Mongolia, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia), and five South Asian countries (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal). Together, this regional survey network covers virtually all major political systems in the region, systems that have experienced different trajectories of regime evolution and are currently at different stages of political transition.

The ABS Working Paper Series is intended to make research result within the ABS network available to the academic community and other interested readers in preliminary form to encourage discussion and suggestions for revision before final publication. Scholars in the ABS network also devote their work to the Series with the hope that a timely dissemination of the findings of their surveys to the general public as well as the policy makers would help illuminate the public discourse on democratic reform and good governance.

The topics covered in the Series range from country-specific assessment of values change and democratic development, region-wide comparative analysis of citizen participation, popular orientation toward democracy and evaluation of quality of governance, and discussion of survey methodology and data analysis strategies.

The ABS Working Paper Series supercedes the existing East Asia Barometer Working Paper Series as the network is expanding to cover more countries in East and South Asia. Maintaining the same high standard of research methodology, the new series both incorporates the existing papers in the old series and offers newly written papers with a broader scope and more penetrating analyses.

The ABS Working Paper Series is issued by the Asian Barometer Project Office, which is jointly sponsored by the Institute for Advanced Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences of National Taiwan University and the Institute of Political Science of Academia Sinica.

### ***Contact Information***

***Asian Barometer Project Office***

***Department of Political Science***

***National Taiwan University***

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

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

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

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

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

# Quality of Governance and Political Legitimacy: Governance-Based Legitimacy in East Asia

Hsin-Hsin Pan, National Taiwan University  
Wen-Chin Wu, Academia Sinica

## ABSTRACT

Scholars and policy makers of democracy have been puzzled the case of East Asia where not so much democratization has taken place after the third wave of democratization, but the perceived political legitimacy has been on the rise for non-democracies. Although the “critical citizen thesis” explains why people in democracies are meager in their political support for democracy, it does not fully account for why people in non-democracies are in fact equally, if not more, critical of their countries’ level of democracy. In this paper, we argue that perceived quality of governance is the key to explain why non-democracies in East Asia have garnered greater political legitimacy than the democracies in terms of general public’s support. Based on the data collected by the fourth-wave Asian Barometer Surveys conducted in 14 East Asian countries during 2015 and 2016, the authors present empirical evidence to corroborate the argument that East Asians develop governance-based legitimacy by the quality of governance which non-democracies outperform democracies. The findings call for East Asian democracies to bring governance back in when sheer democratic institutions are not satisfying for their people.

**KEYWORD:** quality of governance, political legitimacy, regime support, support for democracy, meaning of democracy, East Asia, Asian Barometer Survey

## 1. The Puzzle of Democratization and Regime Support in East Asia

Democratic development in East Asia has been a bitter and sweet story. Since the collapse of Portuguese dictatorship in 1974 ushered in the third wave of democratization worldwide,<sup>1</sup> the progress of democratization in East Asia has been limited to a few countries afterwards. Although Japan, South Korea and Taiwan have weathered through democratization and democratic consolidation without much bloodsheds and have experienced the economic prosperity at the early onset of democratization, democratization does not further spread out to all other non-democracies in East Asia. Meanwhile, Singapore, Hong Kong and China have delivered impressive economic growth without democratization at all. Throughout East Asia, democracies and non-democracies have been in rivalry for which regime brings more welfare to its people over the course of global fad for democracy.

Not only the non-democracies in East Asian show no prospects of democratization, but also they become resilient against the tide of democratization by acquiring their people's support, particularly in the cases of China and Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> As illustrated in Figure 1, the data of the fourth-wave Asian Barometer Survey (hereafter ABS IV) in 14 countries during 2015 and 2016 suggest that the perceived political legitimacy is higher for non-democracies than for democracies. In particular, the ABS IV asks about respondents' political support with the following two questions: "*A system like ours, even if it runs into problems, deserves the people's support*" and "*I would like rather live under our system of government than any other that I can think of.*" Each question is rated in

---

<sup>1</sup> Huntington, Samuel P. 1991. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. p.15.

<sup>2</sup> Nathan, Andrew J. 2003. "Authoritarian Resilience." *Journal of Democracy* 14 (1): 6-17. Abrami, Regina Edmund Malesky and Yu Zheng. 2013. "Vietnam through Chinese eyes: Divergent Accountability in Single-Party Regimes" In Martin K. Dimitrov eds. *Why Communism Did Not Collapse: Understanding Authoritarian Regime Resilience in Asia and Europe*. Cambridge University Press. p.237-275.

four-point scale from “strongly agree”, “somewhat agree”, “somewhat disagree”, and “strongly disagree.” Figure 1 illustrates the percentages of respondents choosing “strongly agree” and “somewhat agree” for each country, suggesting that many non-democracies in East Asia rank top with overwhelming percentages of regime support in the questions with regard to the support for the current system and willingness to live under the current system. Meanwhile, established democracies such as Taiwan, Japan and South Korea rank the bottom in terms of their political support and willingness to stay in their countries’ current system.

**Figure 1: Percentage of Support for Regime in 14 East Asian Countries**

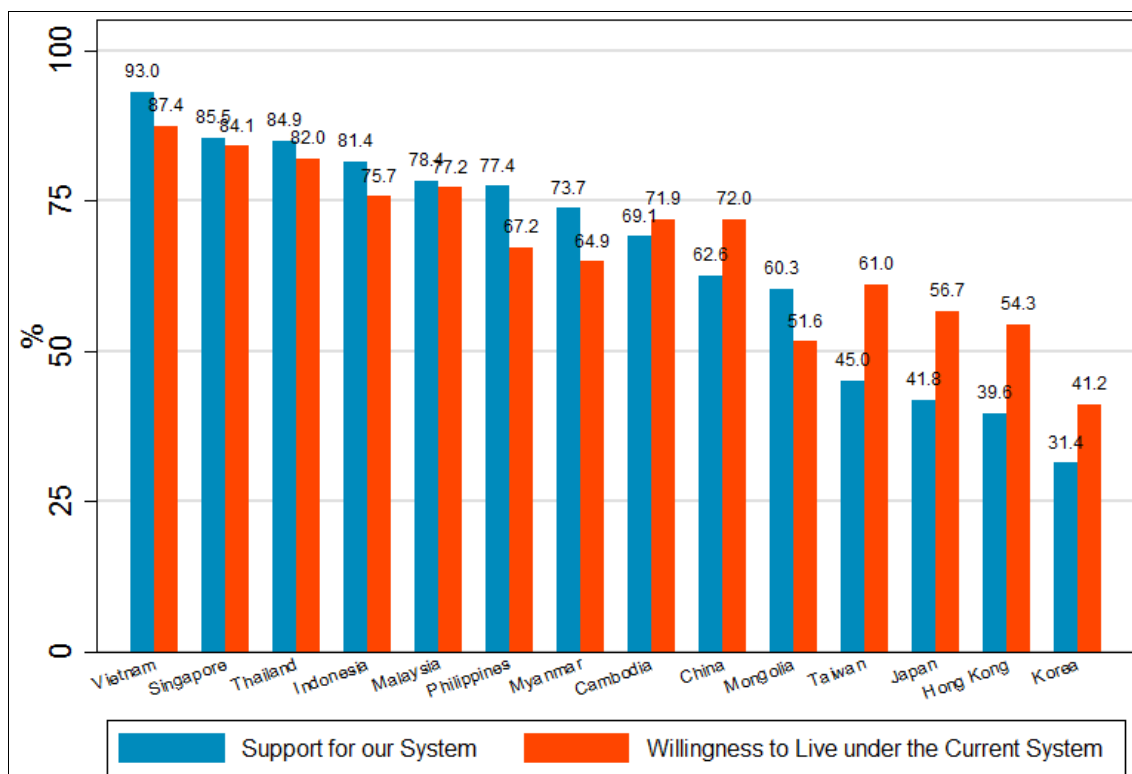
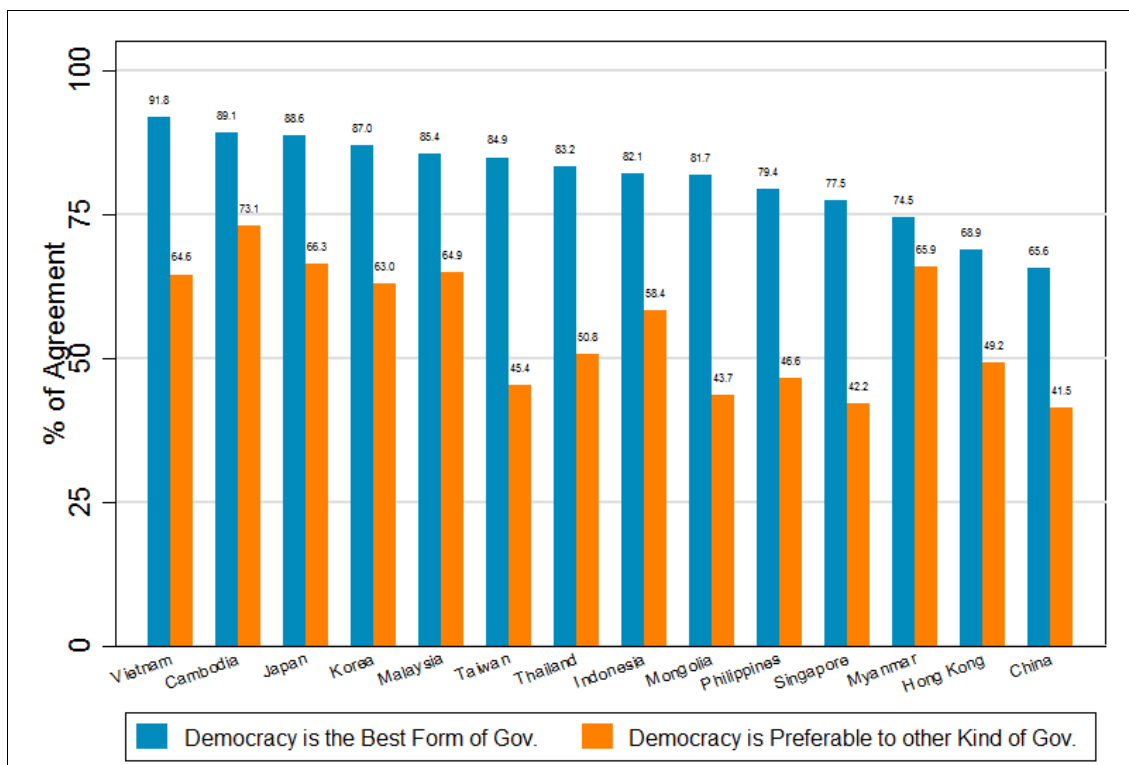


Figure 1 raises a puzzle regarding regime types and political support East Asia. In particular, why do citizens in non-democracies in East Asia are more willing to support their regimes than their counterparts in democracies. This puzzle is further complicated by respondents’ answers to other questions on support for democracy in the ABS IV. Specifically, respondents are presented with two questions. The first one is

“Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Democracy may have its problems, but it is still the best form of government.” Respondents are asked to rate this question on a four-point scale from “strongly agree”, “somewhat agree”, “somewhat disagree”, and “strongly disagree.” The other question asks respondents to choose one of the following three statements: (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 government or non-democratic government.”* For each question, we calculate the percentages of respondents who strongly agree and agree that democracy is the best form of government and the percentages of those who always prefer democracy than any other kind of government.

**Figure 2: Percentage of Democracy Support in 14 East Asian Countries**



According to Figure 2, a great number of East Asians have a strong consensus on recognizing democracy as the best form of government regardless of the regime they live in. However, fewer of them agree that democracy is always preferable to other kinds of governments. Among the 14 East Asian countries, people in established democracies

like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan are not particularly supportive of democracy than those in non-democracies in either recognizing democracy as the best form of government or admitting that democracy is preferable to other alternatives of rule. Some of the non-democracies such as Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar appear to have more people holding positive views of democracy in either indicator of support for democracy.

In sum, the perceived political legitimacy is generally higher for non-democracies than for democracies in terms of support for regime and democracy. The puzzle is why people in East Asian non-democracies confer greater political legitimacy to their regime than those in the democracies? Why do people in non-democracies give higher ratings for the level of democracy for their regimes than people in democracies give for theirs? Exactly what kind of government is of greater legitimacy in the eyes of East Asians? In this article, we intend to tackle these questions by presenting the micro-level evidence based on the data of ABS IV.

## **2. Previous Studies**

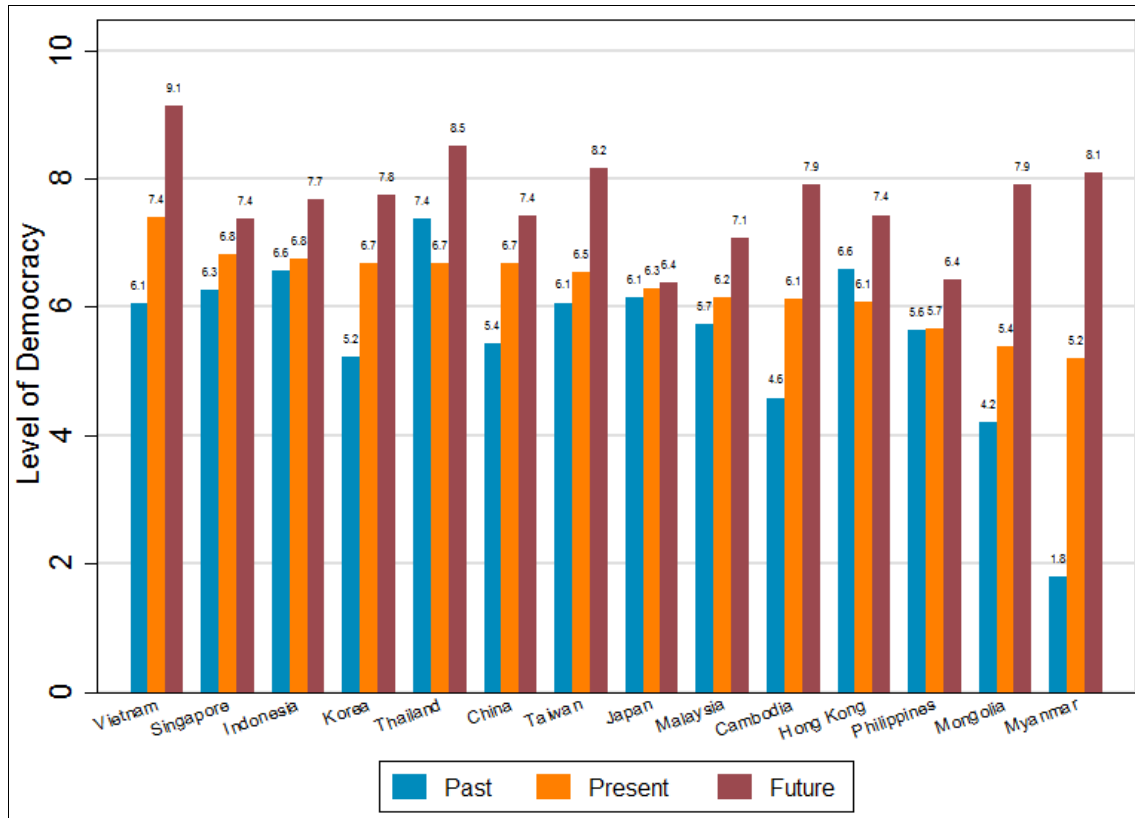
The literature of comparative democratization offers two arguments to address the puzzle discussed in the previous section: one focus on the notion of critical citizen and the other on different perceptions and dimensions of democracy. First, Pippa Norris argues that “the emergence of more ‘critical citizens’, or ‘dissatisfied democrats’, who adhere strongly to democratic values but who find the existing structures of representative government, invented in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to be wanting as we approach the end of the millennium.”<sup>3</sup> In the hope of having better

---

<sup>3</sup> Norris, Pippa. 1999. “Introduction: The Growth of Critical Citizens?” In Pippa Norris ed. *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p.4.

political system, citizens in established democracies are critical of the government so that on average they give lower ratings to the current democratic system.

**Figure 3: Evaluation for the Level of Democracy in the Past, Present and Future**



While the thesis of critical citizen has been widely applied to account for the low democratic support in democracies, it cannot explain why the support for the regime and democracy in non-democracies is still high in Figure 1 and Figure 2. More importantly, the critical citizen thesis implicitly assumes that citizens in non-democracies are less critical than their counterparts in democracies. However, this assumption may be too simplistic to reflect the reality. In the ABS IV, respondents are asked to evaluate the level of democracy of their countries in the past, present, and future on a 1 to 10 scale where 0 means completely undemocratic and 10 means completely democratic. As Figure 2 shows, the rating for democracy is higher for non-democracies than for democracies. Besides, people in democracies and



non-democracies share the rising rating for the level of democracy in the past, present and future except those in Thailand and Hong Kong where the former experienced military coup and the latter encountered China's overshadow on its local election in 2014. Note that Myanmar has the greatest gap in the perceived level of democracy in the past, present and future in comparison with all other countries. The gaps echo the fact that people had high expectations for the incoming first national election after the survey.

In general, people systematically show critical attitudes towards the improvement of democracy in the past, present and future despite of living under different regime systems. With greater gaps in the evaluation of democracy in the past, present and future, people in non-democracies are equally if not more critical of democracy than those in democracies. Thus, critical attitudes do not fully explain why non-democracies fare better than democracies in gaining people's support.

In addition to the critical citizen thesis, the other line of argument takes a step back to investigate what East Asian mean by democracy in the first place. Scholars have found that East Asians have different understandings in the meaning of democracy.<sup>4</sup> The different meaning of democracy generates various levels of political support for regimes. In David Easton's analytical framework of political system where political legitimacy is derived from input and output as the former refers to the procedural justice and the latter focuses on the policy performance.<sup>5</sup> Based on this notion, the ABS IV designs four questions to investigate what democracy means for East Asians. For each of the four question, respondents are required to pick one of the four items respectively

---

<sup>4</sup> Chu, Yun-han, Larry Diamond, Andrew Nathan and Doh Chull Shin. 2008. "Introduction" In Yun-han Chu et. al. eds., *How East Asians View Democracy*. Columbia University Press. pp. 1-34.

<sup>5</sup> Easton, David. 1963. *The Political System: An Inquiry into the State of Political Science*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

representing norms and procedure, freedom and liberty, good governance, and social equity. While the former two refers to input, the latter two belong to output. The question items are categorized as input and output as Table 1 shows.

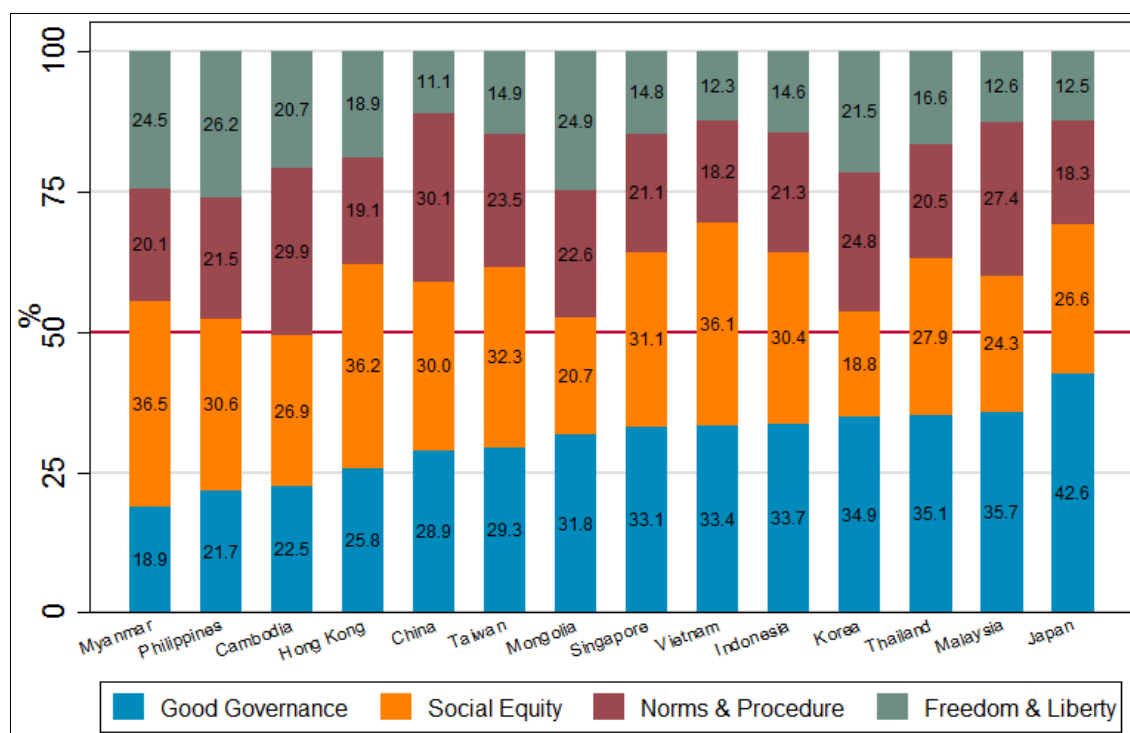
**Table 1: Question Items Categorized as Input and Output in Political System**

<b>Input</b>	<b>Items</b>
Norms and Procedure	People choose the government leaders in free and fair election.
	The legislature has oversight over the government.
	Multiple parties compete fairly in the election.
	The court protects the ordinary people from the abuse of government power.
Freedom and Liberty	People are free to express their political views openly.
	People are free to organize political groups.
	Media is free to criticize the things government does.
	People have the freedom to take part in protests and demonstrations.
<b>Output</b>	<b>Items</b>
Good Governance	Government does not waste any public money.
	Government provides people with quality public services.
	Politics is clean and free of corruption.
	Government ensures law and order.
Social Equity	Government narrows the gap between the rich and the poor.
	Basic necessities, like food, clothes and shelter, are provided for all.
	Government ensures job opportunities for all.
	People receive state aid if they are unemployed.

As Figure 4 suggests, East Asians emphasize more on the output rather than the input of their political systems when they envision the meanings of democracy in the ABS IV. In addition, good governance is widely recognized as an important feature of democracy. For 12 out of 14 East Asian countries, over 25% of respondents identify good governance as the distinct feature of democracy. In 8 out of 14 Asian countries, good governance even acquires the highest percentage of people among all other three

features of democracy. In established democracies, Japan in particular, good governance stands out as defining feature of democracy with higher percentage of people’s support rather than those of norms and procedure and freedom and liberty. This trend coincides with Bo Rothstein’s research that political legitimacy for democracy takes not only elections, but also good governance.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 4: Meaning of Democracy in East Asia**



### 3. Governance-Based Legitimacy in East Asia

In this paper, we argue that perceived quality of governance is the foundation for the support for political legitimacy in East Asia. Utilizing the data of ABS IV, we further dissect the dimensions of good governance and evaluate how they influence East Asians’ perception of political legitimacy. In particular, we contend that political

<sup>6</sup> Rothstein, Bo. 2009. “Creating Political Legitimacy: Electoral Democracy versus Quality of Government” *American Behavioral Scientist* 53(3): 311-330.

legitimacy is deeply rooted in the general public's consent of rule, which has been overlooked in the previous literature heavily reliant on expert evaluation. Accordingly, we identify six dimensions of good governance on the basis of the ABS IV and demonstrate that non-democracies win the heart of their people because they are perceived of delivering better governance than their democratic counterparts.

Previous studies define the quality of governance in various perspectives, such as economic performance,<sup>7</sup> impartiality of government,<sup>8</sup> and bureaucratic autonomy.<sup>9</sup> The different perspectives suggest that the quality of government is a multi-faced concept, which researcher need to measure it through different angles.<sup>10</sup> The well-known *Worldwide Governance Indicator* (WGI) is dedicated to fulfill this task.<sup>11</sup> Under the auspice of the World Bank, WGI is one of the pioneering dataset dedicated to the quality of governance.<sup>12</sup> Through expert surveys, the WGI dataset investigate six dimension of governance, including (1) Voice and Accountability, (2) Political Stability and Absence of Violence, (3) Government Effectiveness, (4) Regulatory Quality, Rule of Law, and (5) Control of Corruption.

The WGI provides excellent tolls for evaluating the quality of governance across different countries. Nevertheless, it does not provide a convincing answer to solve the puzzle with regard to the relationship between quality of governance and political

---

<sup>7</sup> La Porta, Rafael, Florencio Lopez-de-Silanes, Andrei Shleifer, and Robert Vishny. 1999. "The Quality of Government." *Journal of Law, Economics, and organization* 15(1): 222–279.

<sup>8</sup> Rothstein, Bo, and Jan Teorell. 2008. "What Is Quality of Government? A Theory of Impartial Government Institutions." *Governance* 21(2): 165–90.

<sup>9</sup> Fukuyama, Francis. 2013. "What Is Governance?" *Governance* 26(3): 347–68.

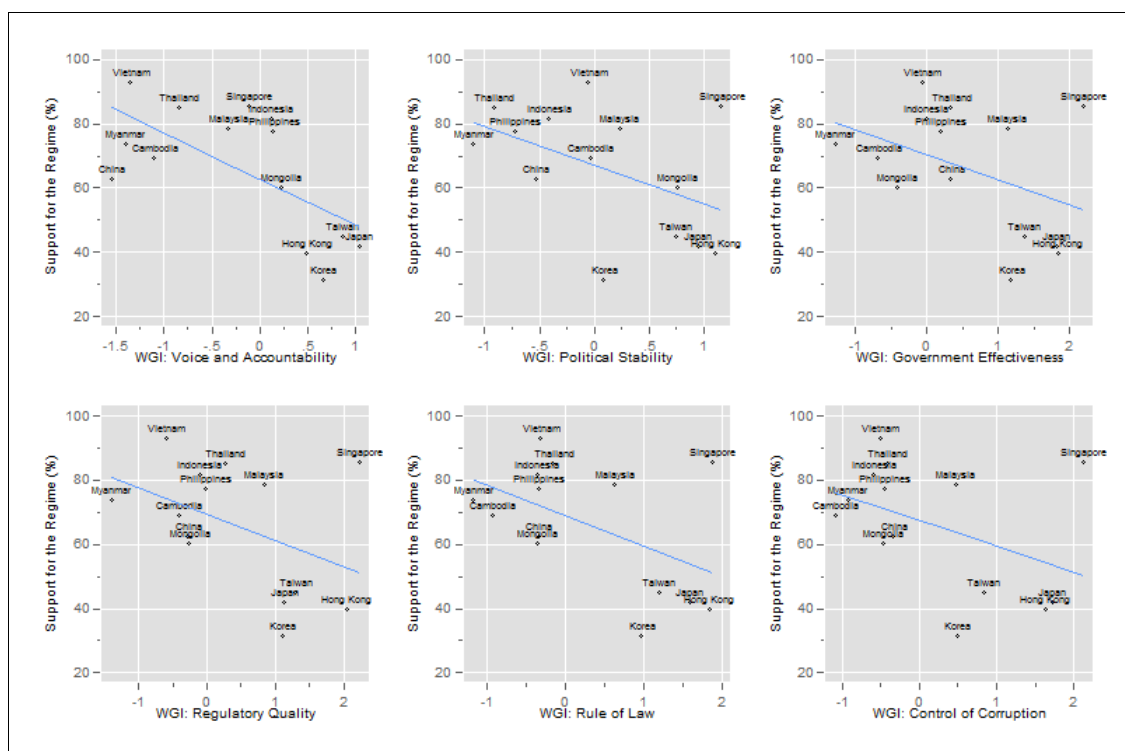
<sup>10</sup> Andrews, Matt. 2010. "Good Government Means Different Things in Different Countries." *Governance* 23(1): 7–35.

<sup>11</sup> Kaufmann, Daniel, Aart Kraay and Massimo Mastruzzi. 2007. "The Worldwide Governance Indicators: Answering the Critics". *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper* No 4149.

<sup>12</sup> See the WGI website: <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.aspx#home>.

legitimacy in East Asia. According to WGI, democracies in East Asia systematically outperform non-democracies in governance. As a result, we should expect that their people presumably grant more support to their political regimes and recognized them as better democracy than do their counterparts of non-democracies. However, the relationships between indicators of good governance in WGI and political legitimacy in ABS do not go together. As demonstrated in Figure 5, higher ratings for the quality of governance are associated with lower level of regime support in all of six dimensions of quality of governance in WGI. These results are problematic because it is unreasonable to expect that citizens will not support political regimes that have rule of law and good control of corruption

**Figure 5: Quality of Governance and Regime Support in East Asia**



The reason why the WGI falls short to address people’s political legitimacy lies in the discrepancies in how experts and the mass public perceive of the quality of governance. Nevertheless, it is the public’s perceived quality of governance that matters

to the political legitimacy of a regime rather than the experts' because political legitimacy is built upon the consent of the ruled rather than that of the rulers. Although expert surveys like WGI might be valid in terms of higher accuracy and less unbiasedness, public surveys are strong in directly connecting the perceived quality of governance and political legitimacy.

#### **4. Micro-Level Evidence from East Asia**

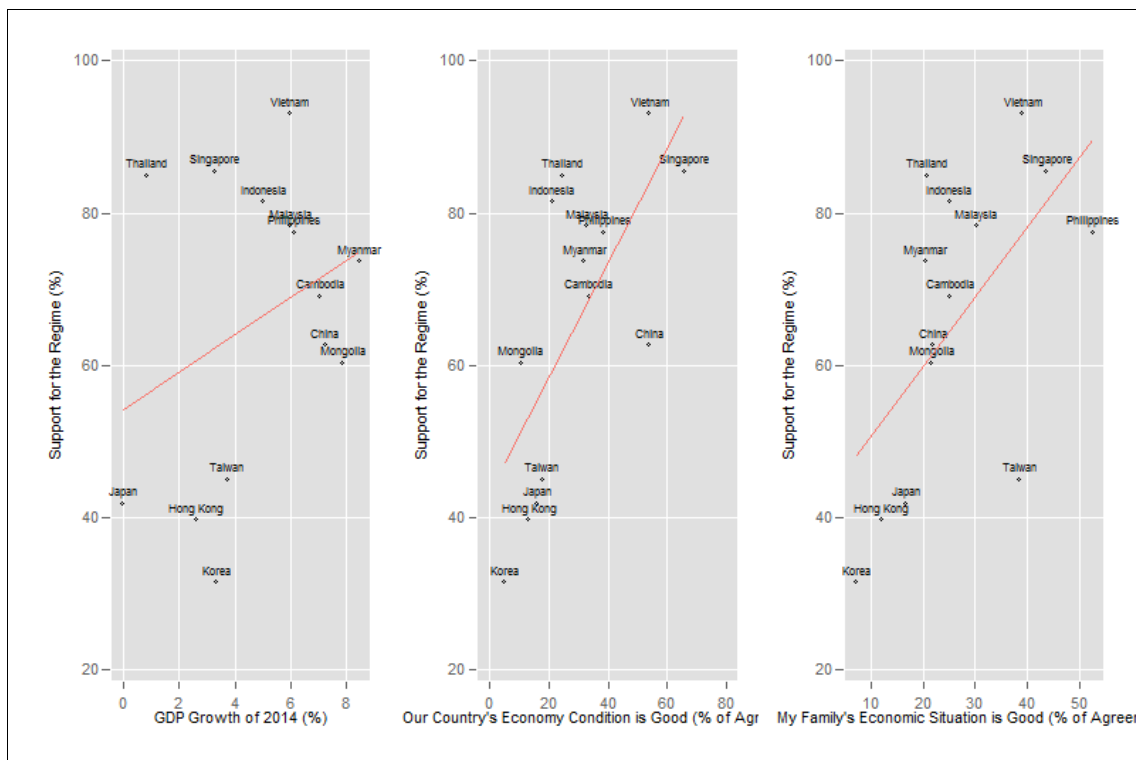
In this section, we utilize questions of the ABS IV that measure the perceived quality of governance in 14 East Asian countries. First, we examine the relationship between political legitimacy and the quality of governance in traditional definition, economic performance by objective and subjective measures. We use a country's annual GDP growth as an object measure of economic performance. On the other hand, we use respondents' answer to the questions of ABS IV regarding the perceived economic condition of their countries and economic situation of their families. The two questions on respondents' evaluation on their countries' and families' economic situation are stated as follows. "How would you rate the overall economic condition of our country today?" and "As for your own family, how do you rate the economic situation of your family today? Respondents can choose one of the following five descriptions for both questions: (1) very good; (2) good; (3) so so (not good nor bad); (4) bad; (5) very bad.

In Figure 6, we calculate the percentages of respondents answering "very good" and "good" for each question, and we plot the numbers against the measures of economic performance. The red lines are fitted values indicative of a positive relationship between regime support and different measures of economic performance. The predicted lines are steeper in subjective measure than in objective one of economic performance. Thus, there are two implications of Figure 6: (1) people are more supportive for the current regime if economic performance is more satisfactory; (2) Their regime support is more

sensitive to the subjectively perceived economic performance than the objectively measured indicator of economic growth.

We further investigate the relationships between different dimensions of quality of government and political legitimacy on the basis of the ABS IV data. In the “quality of government” section, the ABS IV use several questions that investigate six dimensions of quality of governance, including impartiality, political freedom, rule of law, accountability, responsiveness, pervasiveness of corruption. In Table 3, we describe each question of these dimensions and introduce our coding scheme. In particular, we categorize respondents’ answers to each question into new binary variables, with 0s indicative of lower and 1s of higher governance, respectively.

**Figure 6: Economic Growth and Regime Support in East Asia**



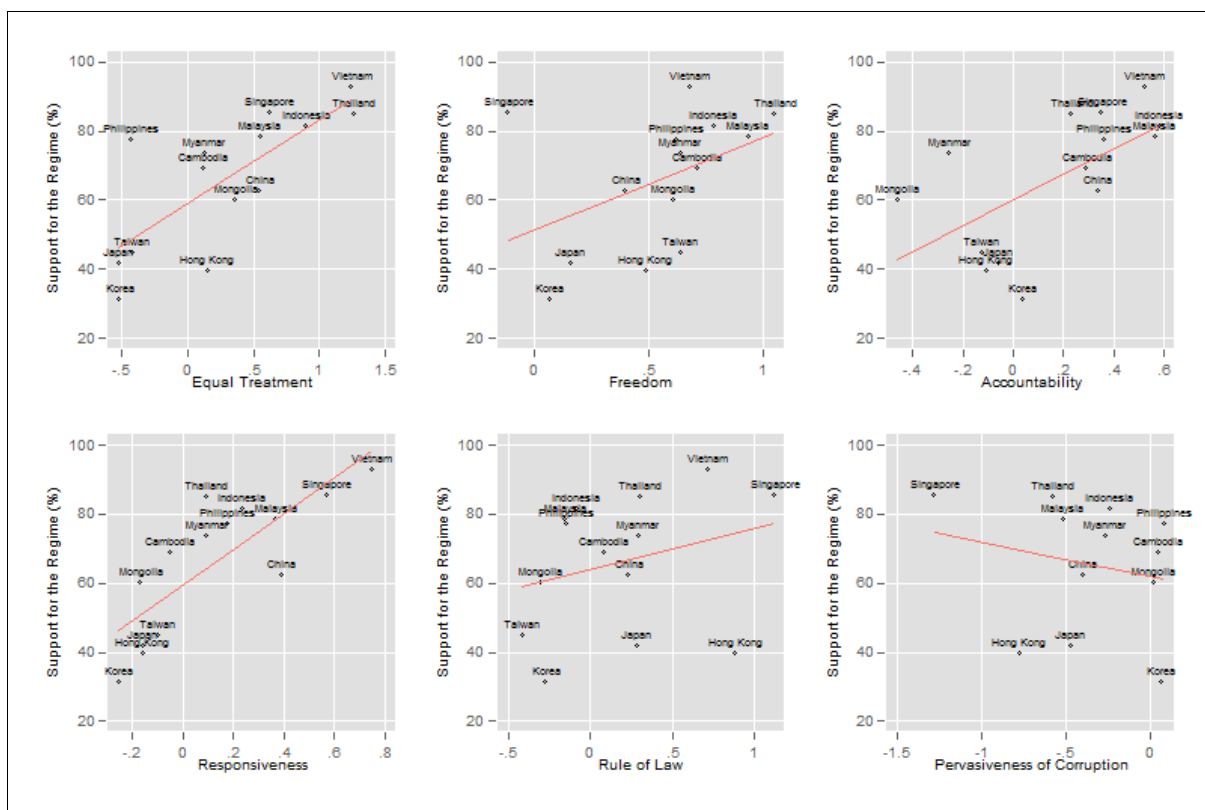
**Table 3: Operationalization of Subjective Quality of Governance in the ABS IV**

<b>Questions</b>	<b>Coding</b>
<b>Equal Treatment</b>	
“All citizens from different ethnic communities are treated equally by the government”	0: strongly disagree or disagree; 1: strongly agree or agree.
“Rich and poor people are treated equally by the government.”	
<b>Political Freedom</b>	
“People are free to speak what they think without fear.”	0: strongly disagree or disagree; 1: strongly agree or agree.
“People can join any organization they like without fear.”	
<b>Rule of Law</b>	
“Do officials who commit crimes go unpunished?”	0: always or most of the time; 1: rarely or sometimes.
“How often do you think government leaders break the law or abuse their power?”	
<b>Accountability</b>	
“When government leaders break the laws, there is nothing the court can do.”	0: strongly disagree or disagree; 1: strongly agree or agree.
“How often do you think our elections offer the voters a real choice between different parties/candidates?”	
“To what extent is the legislature capable of keeping government leaders in check?”	0: not at all capable or not capable; 1: very capable or capable.
<b>Responsiveness</b>	
“How well do you think the government responds to what people want?”	0: not responsive at all or not very responsive; 1: very responsive or largely responsive.
“How much do you feel that having elections makes the government pay attention to what people think?”	0: not at all or not much; 1: a good deal or quite a lot.
<b>Pervasiveness of Corruption</b>	
“How widespread do you think corruption and bribe-taking are in the local/municipal government?”	0: hardly anyone is involved or not a lot of officials are corrupt. 1: almost everyone is corrupt or most officials are corrupt;
“How widespread do you think corruption and bribe-taking are in the national government [in capital city]?”	



With these new variables on quality of governance, we plot the bivariate relationship between the six dimensions of quality of governance and political legitimacy in Figure 7 and Figure 8, respectively. In Figure 7, a positive relationship exists between regime support and quality of governance in five dimensions including equal treatment, freedom, accountability, responsiveness, and rule of law. The correlation is negative between regime support and pervasiveness of corruption is negative because wider pervasiveness suggests lower quality of governance. All panels in Figure 7 suggest that good governance brings in more regime support in East Asia.

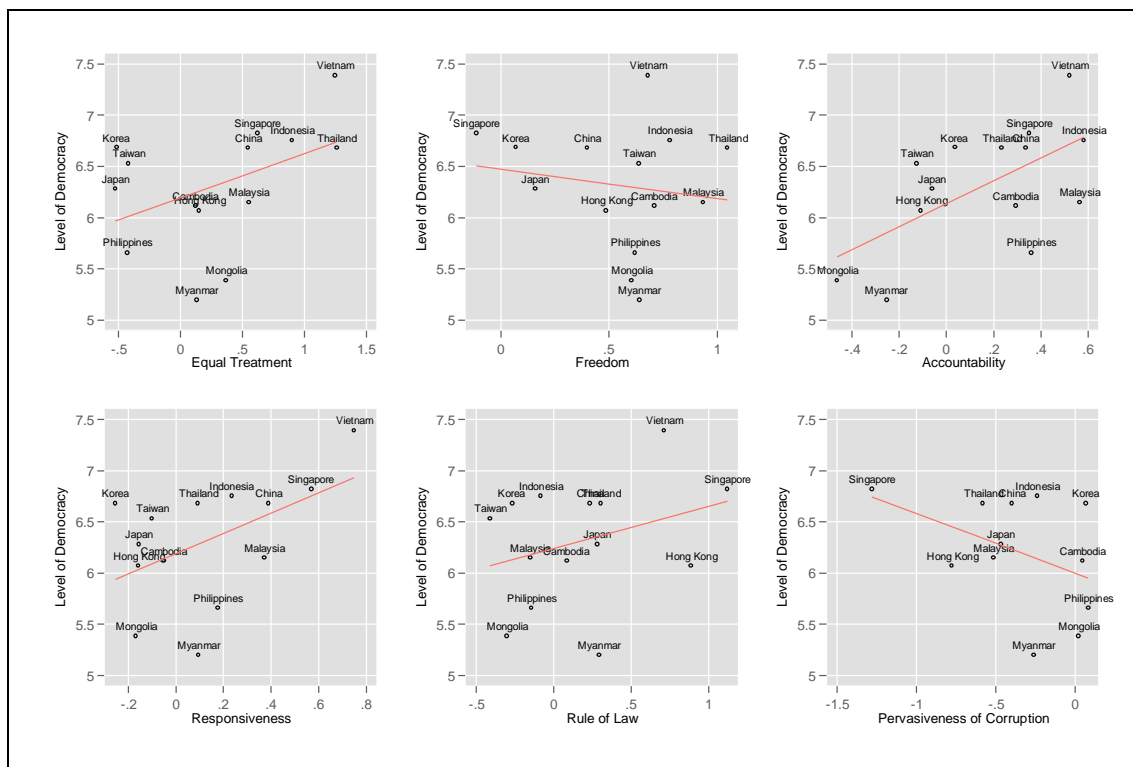
**Figure 7: Quality of Governance and Regime Support in East Asia**



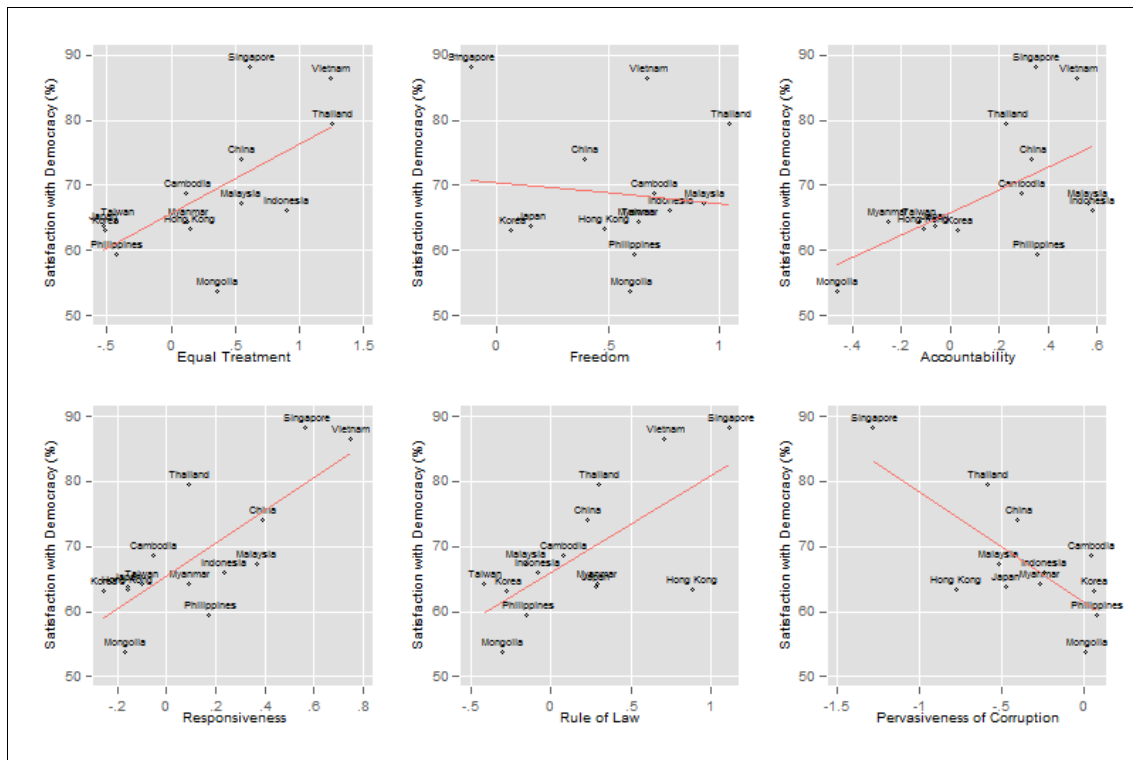
We further investigate whether citizens with a higher level of perceive quality of governance would give higher evaluation on their countries' democracy. Figure 8 suggests that a better perception on governance, except political freedom, is associated with higher evaluation and democracy. This pattern remains the same in Figure 9, where

we replace the evaluation on democracy as respondents' satisfaction with democracy, an alternative measurement of democratic support. In other words, when citizens perceived a higher level of perceived good governance, they tend to think their governments are more democratic and have a higher level of democratic satisfaction. Contrary to what previous studies have been advocating for the connection between political freedom and regime support, Figures 8 and 9 suggest that political freedom may not be only essence to good governance or democratic practices in the public's eyes. This result confirms that the quality of governance, or the output of the political system, a distinct feature that defines the popular understanding of democracy in East Asia as Figure 4 demonstrates.

**Figure 8: Quality of Governance and Perceived Level of Democracy in East Asia**



**Figure 9: Quality of Governance and Satisfaction with Democracy in East Asia**



### 5. Concluding Remarks and Policy Implications

Deviant from the classic definition of liberal democracy, East Asians re-define democracy by what a government delivers rather than how it represents. Democracy in East Asia is at a critical moment when most people in the region cast doubts on whether it improves general public’s well-being, for which the western world has long advocated. On the account of a drastic contrast between free, but incapable democracies and capable, but not free non-democracies, East Asians are trapped in the dilemma where good governance and freedom seem to be incompatible.

With the intensifying rivalry between democracies and non-democracies for what they can do for its people, the perceived good governance will be a decisive force to push for more democratic transitions, democratic recessions or even authoritarian turns in East Asia. Based on expert surveys, previous empirical studies do not explain the gap in the political legitimacy for democracies and non-democracies by overlooking the

distance between elite and public opinions in this regard.

Based on the empirical evidence provided by the ABS IV, the authors find that political legitimacy in the form of either regime support or the perceived level of democracy is rooted at the soil of good governance regardless of whether the regime fits in the definition of liberal democracy or not. As four decades pass by after the third wave of democratization, democracy has become the only game in East Asia as far as the name brand is widely recognized as a desirable ideal, but its governance is left questionable. The findings reconfirm Bruce Gilley's point that regimes lacking political legitimacy put resources to their political survival rather than to effective governance.<sup>13</sup>

In the end, we would like to note that we have not intention to downplay the importance of democratic procedures as procedural fairness is proven to be crucial to foster regime legitimacy.<sup>14</sup> What we would like to stress here is a wake-up call to bring governance back in democracies to answer the very purpose why governments are formed in the first place: to effectively govern so that the public's welfare is improved.

---

<sup>13</sup> Gilley, Bruce. 2006. "The Right to Rule: How States Win and Lose Legitimacy" New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>14</sup> Linde, Jonas. 2012. "Why Feed the Hand that Bites You? Perceptions of Procedural Fairness and System Support in Post-Communist Democracies." *European Journal of Political Research* 51: 410-434.