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# Public Support for Democracy in Transitional Regimes[†]

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## Introduction

Despite the enthusiasm surrounding the Colour Revolutions and the Arab Spring, the world's share of democracies has stagnated over the past 15 years. The steady rise of China, Russia, and Iran has also led to warnings of a resurgence of "authoritarian great powers", especially in light of the financial crisis centred in the USA and Western Europe (Gat, 2007; Plattner, 2011). On the positive side, however, democracy remains remarkably popular as an ideal. In the Global barometer's most recent survey, two out of three respondents say democracy is their most favoured political system, including a majority in 49 of the 55 countries. Yet there is evidence, much expanded upon in this issue, that commitments to liberal democracy in practice are not as strong (Carlson & Turner, 2009; Krastev, 2007; Shin & Wells, 2005). Nominally pro-democratic citizens frequently favour limitations on electoral accountability and individual rights in the service of improved governance or economic growth. Further, there are rising concerns that many citizens, especially across the developing world, are turning away from democracy out of frustration with democratic performance (Chang et al., 2007; Kurlantzick, 2013).

A particular challenge to democracy has been the spread and resilience of dictatorships that adopt traditionally democratic institutions, such as legislatures, independent courts, and elections (Diamond, 2002; Gandhi, 2008; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Magaloni, 2006). China, Russia, and Iran, for instance, all feature legislatures (albeit of varying strength) and contested elections (although for China only at the local level). The image of these countries as transitional countries steadily moving towards democracy has long faded

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(Carothers, 2002), producing a large literature on the sources of stability within these transitional regimes (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009; Magaloni, 2006). For the most part, scholars have focused on the use of quasi-democratic institutions to maintain elite coalitions (Brownlee, 2007; Gandhi, 2008; Magaloni, 2006) and to generate popular support through clientelistic linkages (Blaydes, 2011; Lust-Okar, 2006).

In contrast to many transitional regimes, the more established democracies appear to be losing support among their highly educated citizens. In *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited*, Norris (2011) observes the existence of a "democratic deficit" that arises from a combination of growing public expectations, negative news, and failing government performance. Citizens may have unwavering support for democratic principles, but they may at the same time be highly critical of how democracy works in practice. The "critical citizen" is certainly becoming more vocal in new and established liberal democracies. However, in transitional regimes, citizens may have democratic values but at the same time support an authoritarian political regime that provides political authority, social stability, and security. This is in part, because as Norris finds in her study, many citizens with democratic values in authoritarian countries need to consider the dangers and uncertainties that may flow from transitioning to a full liberal democracy.

While we know a great deal about citizen values and democratic orientations in the Western democracies, a question that is often overlooked is how citizens view democracy in transitional regimes, particularly in Eastern Europe and across East Asia. In many of these countries citizens favour democracy in the abstract but are less confident about whether democracy will deliver good governance in practice. In terms of how citizens view their regime, past work has investigated the clientelistic relationships that can become central to citizens' political outlooks (Blaydes, 2011; Lust-Okar, 2006; Magaloni, 2006), rising disengagement from electoral politics (Ekman, 2009), and the links between cultural/religious histories and toleration for authoritarianism (Bauer & Bell, 1999).

What is missing, however, is a clear understanding of how normative values and political attitudes about democracy operate within these regimes. This special issue looks closely at how democracy is understood and experienced in transitioning regimes. A central goal of the issue is to look at the underlying cultural and political orientations and indicate how such orientations stem from and reinforce political systems. The articles focus is on unconsolidated democracies in Eastern Europe and East Asia with comparisons also made to the regions' liberal democracies. Below we provide an overview of some of the key elements of citizen orientations towards democracy. We then describe the value of looking specifically at Eastern Europe and East Asia, summarize the key findings of the individual papers, and finally indicate some avenues for future research.

## Electoral Competition and Citizen Orientations Towards Democracy

In this special issue, we focus on the role of citizen orientations in the democratic process. According to Dalton (2013), the success of democracy is largely dependent

on public support for democratic values and practices, and the responsiveness of the system to these demands. It is also generally assumed that electoral competition is an essential component of democracy. In light of this one should expect citizens in multiparty systems to have stronger democratic values than those where one party dominates the political landscape.

We examined this question across a variety of different political systems using data from the last two waves of the World Values Surveys. These surveys include a standard battery of questions designed to measure authoritarian values.[1] We combined the items to form an additive index where positive values represent authoritarian values and negative values represent democratic values. The mean values for each country are displayed in Figure 1 along with the largest party's seat share in the election preceding the survey. The results are grouped into four quadrants representing one party dominant vs. multiparty systems on the *x*-axis and authoritarian and democratic values on the *y*-axis. If competition is associated with stronger democratic values

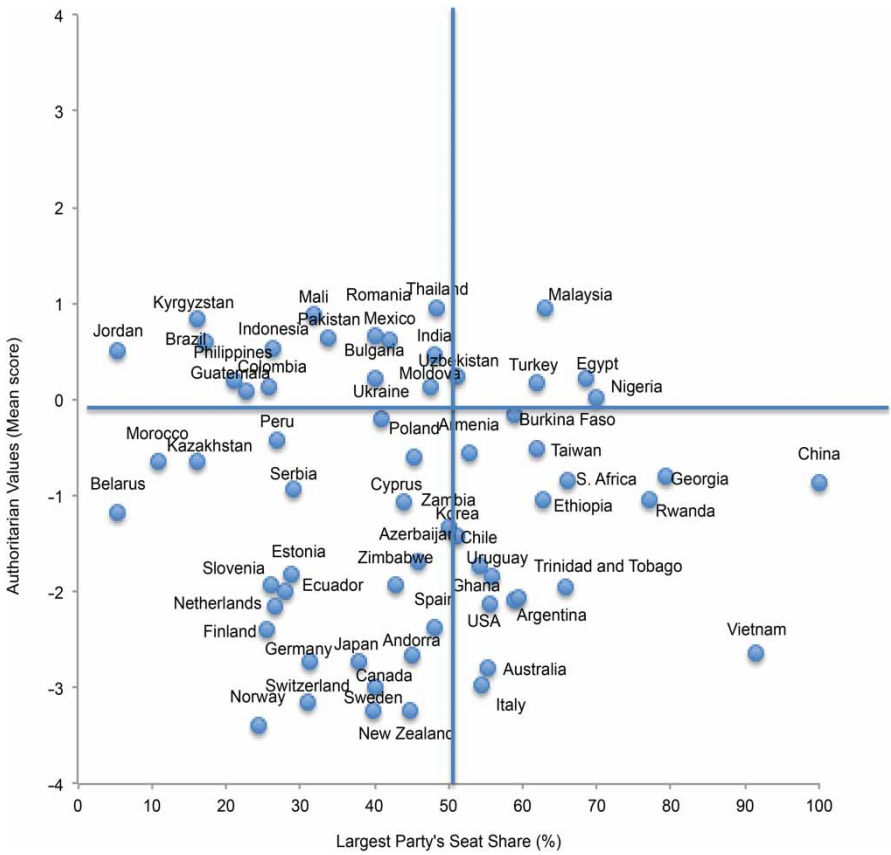


**Figure 1.** Authoritarian values by extent of party dominance in political system.

we should expect to see most countries falling in Quadrants 2 and 3. This, however, is not the case, indicating that there is little relationship between party competition and support for democratic values. In some cases, such as in Vietnam and China, we found strong "democratic values" within single-party dominant systems (Quadrant 4). Conversely, in multiparty systems such as Indonesia and the Philippines, we observe a significant proportion of the population who are sympathetic of authoritarian values (Quadrant 1). Other democracies in Asia with multiparty systems such as Thailand and India rank relatively high in terms of authoritarian values. Such conflicting patterns in citizen orientations lead us to re-think whether the adoption of competitive elections will eventually lead to a liberal democracy or something else that falls well short of democratic ideals.

What could help explain these results? We are certainly not the first to point to citizens supporting democracy in single-party authoritarian regimes, while at the same time accepting significant limitations to it in practice (see Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). However, there remains a lack of clarity on what forms of government such individuals do support and how these conflicting values coexist. Political beliefs that look like mere inconsistency from the perspective of a liberal democratic ideal may have their own internal logic.

Indeed, several of this issue's papers suggest that many citizens within Eastern Europe and East Asia have mixed orientations that combine democratic or authoritarian values. Although citizens may hold mixed orientations, we can nevertheless identify some common patterns across countries and regions. Note that this is not meant to describe a set of beliefs that is universal, or even necessarily dominant, within these countries. Rather, it describes a significant subset of citizens, who may think about democracy in very practical terms rather than as an abstract ideal and may help to explain why democratic government may succeed in some contexts and not others.

First, citizens support democracy as an ideal, but interpret the meaning of democracy as a flexible and culturally specific concept. In particular, many citizens in transitional regimes conceive of democracy as more about good governance than individual freedoms and elections. By extension, these citizens often describe their own countries as democratic despite limited electoral contestation and civil liberties. For instance, using data from the Asian Barometer Survey, Pietsch (2015) finds that more than 90% of respondents in Singapore and Vietnam consider their own political systems to be democratic. This is puzzling given that Vietnam does not even allow multiparty competition, but less so if we take into account the distinct interpretation of democracy adopted by the Vietnamese.

Second, citizens often accept significant limitations on popular control, liberal democratic procedures, and freedoms in support of effective governance, political order, and economic necessity. There is a particular emphasis on strong and capable leaders, combined in many cases with limited personal engagement with the political process. This parallels the extensive debate over a unique brand of "Asian Values", often associated with Confucian traditions, that is held to be resistant to liberal democracy (Bauer & Bell, 1999; Emmerson, 1995; Park & Shin, 2006). The

articles in this issue suggest that many of these attitudes are not unique to either countries with Confucian cultures or East Asia as a whole.

Third, these orientations may be best understood in terms of support for a political system that emphasizes good governance, rather than weak or inconsistent support for democratic ideals. As Shin (2015) discusses, support for full authoritarianism is very low across East Asia. Citizens favour democratic institutions and a degree of popular responsiveness, but accept limitations to liberal democratic ideals if this can be traded for improved order or successful economic performance. Just as is the case with the political systems themselves, it is often more accurate to describe attitudes as favouring a mix of democratic and authoritarian governance practices, rather than half for democracy and half for authoritarianism. With this in mind, several contributions to this issue focus specifically on attitudes towards democracy where a significant proportion of the population have mixed democratic and authoritarian orientations (see Gill, 2015; Pietsch, 2015; Shin, 2015).

## Why Eastern Europe and East Asia?

Before introducing each of the contributions to this special issue, it is worth justifying the specific focus on Eastern Europe and East Asia and what links the two regions. First, both regions can be considered frontier areas for the spread and consolidation of democracy. They include a large number of relatively new democracies, nearly all having transitioned around the end of the Cold War, as well as electoral authoritarian political systems that may gradually become more competitive. Further, the regions have relatively high levels of economic development and linkage with the West, both of which predict democratic consolidation (Boix, 2011; Levitsky & Way, 2010). In other words, these are the most active regions for medium-term democratic development. This makes an understanding of these countries' political cultures all the more critical, particularly as they further shift towards consolidated democracy.

Second, both regions include a striking amount of internal variation in regime types. East Asia, for instance, includes single-party dominant political systems, electoral and competitive authoritarian systems, unconsolidated democracies, and liberal democracies. This provides a broad range of cases for sketching out the sources of their different trajectories, as well as some surprising commonalities.

Third, both regions share the common feature of being influenced by both liberal Western democracies and a large authoritarian regional player: Russia in the case of Eastern Europe and China in the case of East Asia. Both are rising global powers and are increasingly regarded as successful economic and political models. For instance, Basora (2008) and Jackson (2010) discuss the influence of Russia on Eastern Europe and Central Asia, respectively. China has been even more influential as a political model, partly by its own initiative (Ambrosio, 2010; Kurlantzick & Link, 2009), and has also extended military and economic support to bolster politically similar neighbours (Reilly, 2013). Thus, residents of Eastern Europe and East Asia are torn between successful models of democracy and authoritarianism. This may

contribute to many citizens' complex attitudes towards democracy and their embrace at the same time of authoritarian politics.

We now provide an overview of the contributions of the five articles in this special issue. The contributions vary by country, outcomes, and approach, but all share a concern with citizen orientations and attitudes towards democracy:

Juliet Pietsch analyses attitudes towards democracy across seven Southeast Asian countries. Pietsch finds that views about democratic experience reveal differing expectations about democracy among the general public and the persistence of an authoritarian political culture among the citizenry. Pietsch's findings reveal that Southeast Asians have a very instrumental view of democracy, which may help to sustain the existence of authoritarianism within the region. When it comes to evaluation of government performance, contrary to expectations, Pietsch finds that economic performance is not as important as other measures of good governance such as freedom and equality, maintaining trust, accountability, and responsiveness.

Doh Chull Shin describes mixed attitudes towards democracy in terms of hybrid political attitudes. After critiquing current approaches to measuring support for democracy, he argues that many East Asians are best described in terms of a "hybridization" of political attitudes, usually marked by support for democracy in the abstract and limitations to democracy in practice. Looking at 11 East Asian countries surveyed by the Asian Barometer in 2010 and 2011, Shin finds widespread support for hybrid politics, which he poses as a challenge to expectations that democratic norms will inevitably continue to expand globally.

Using Russian survey data collected through 2012, Graeme Gill addresses a more specific question: How did Russian political attitudes shape reactions to the protests surrounding the contested legislative election of 2011? Surprisingly, he finds weak support for the protests, combined with a widespread feeling of low political efficacy. In part, this is driven by Russians' mixed political attitudes towards democracy and authoritarianism. Gill finds that most Russians support democracy in the abstract, but also embrace a Russian style of democracy and favour having a "strong hand" in power. His conclusion is that the protests therefore do not present an immediate threat to regime survival, but there may be longer-term weaknesses in Russia's political system. These are weaknesses that may well be shared by other electoral authoritarian regimes, suggesting an inherent instability that could ultimately tip them either further towards or further away from democratic norms and practices.

Jeffrey Karp and Caitlin Milazzo examine how attitudes about democracy influence voter turnout, using data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems. They find that citizens in Eastern Europe have much stronger authoritarian values than in Western Europe and that these values discourage voter participation. This challenges more common explanations for low voter turnout in post communist countries that have focused on perceptions of corruption or dissatisfaction with government performance.

Finally, Ian McAllister and Stephen White analyse what leads citizens in transitional regimes to view their countries' electoral procedures as fair. Looking at Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine, they find that views of electoral fairness are increased

by media exposure and lowered by perceived corruption and an attachment to democratic norms. Surprisingly, no influence is found from Western orientation or contact. The same factors, along with electoral integrity, are shown to have strong influences on satisfaction with democracy. Citizens in these countries thus appear to be aware of the links between election fairness and the quality of democracy.

## Conclusion

We believe this special issue provides a starting point for investigating how political attitudes about democracy are developing within the world's transitional regimes and unconsolidated democracies. Many questions and opportunities for further research remain to be explored. For example, how regimes should be classified when citizens embrace both democratic values and support authoritarian practices is an open question. Indeed, at our workshop, which formed the basis of ideas for this special issue, there were many contrasting viewpoints among leading experts on democracy in East Asia and Europe about how best to describe these regimes. Part of the difficulty related to the inherent conflict between regime type and citizen orientations.

As mentioned above, several of the papers suggest ways in which political attitudes help to stabilize regimes. Most clearly, it seems that authoritarian regimes are safeguarded when citizens are tolerant of single-party dominance, if it is perceived as providing good governance. In addition, many regimes seem to survive by generating popular disengagement from politics (see Gill, 2015; Karp & Milazzo, 2015; McAllister & White, 2015). There is a great deal of room to build on these results and further our understanding of how political culture may strengthen political systems that embrace democratic and authoritarian practices.

For a long time, it looked as if democracy was on a steady march to conquer the world. Although democracy has yet to recede in a major way, it has somewhat stalled over the past 15 years. Democracy does remain overwhelmingly popular as an ideal, but this issue shows that the practical content of these pro-democratic attitudes is complex. Dozens of emerging democracies successfully combine authoritarian and democratic elements, and are stabilized in large part by citizens that support an imperfect adherence to liberal democratic procedures. The future of democracy will be shaped by how ingrained these values are, and whether democratic norms, both in name and substance, can continue to spread.

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## Note

1. The measure for authoritarian values uses the question in the World Values Survey,

> I'm going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country?

"Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections", "Having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country", "Having the army rule".

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