

**Democratic Aspirations and Democratic Ideals:  
Citizen Orientations toward Democracy in East Asia**

Russell J. Dalton  
Center for the Study of Democracy  
University of California, Irvine

Doh Chull Shin  
Department of Political Science  
University of Missouri

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## **Executive Overview:** **The Political Implications of Public Support for Democracy in East Asia**

East Asia has only partially shared in the Third Wave of democratization that spread around the globe in the 1990s. Indeed, the severe economic problems of the late 1990s raised concerns about the increasing trends of public protest and dissatisfaction in some of the consolidated democracies of East Asia, such as Japan and Korea. In other nations, democracy regressed or made only little progress during this decade. The newest findings from the 2000-02 World Values Survey enable us to assess how people across East Asia now think about democracy and the value of a democratic regime. Has democracy lost some of its appeal in the consolidated democracies as these nations struggle with their policy problems, is the democratic ideal appealing in those nations where democracy has not been achieved?

A striking finding from the World Values Survey is the breadth of public support for a democratic form of government—and beliefs that democracies can be effective. These “democratic aspirations” now transcend national boundaries and regime forms in East Asia. For example, large majorities of the public in Japan, Korea and Taiwan support the Churchillian position that democracy may have its faults, but it is better than other forms of government. At the same time, the majority of the public in China, Singapore, Indonesia and Vietnam also endorse this position. Despite differences in regime form that currently exist in East Asia—there is a broad public consensus in democracy as the preferred form of government.

These democratic sentiments have different implications for the nations of East Asia. For the consolidated democracies of Japan, Korea and Taiwan, support for democracy occurs along with spreading public criticism of politicians, parties and political institutions in recent years. Indeed, the World Values Survey also finds decreasing public trust of the political process and declining confidence in political institutions.

Many citizens in Seoul and Tokyo—like those in other OECD nations—are “dissatisfied democrats” who expect more of democracy and want to see the process improved to better reach its own ideals, even if they remain unsure how that can be accomplished. Thus disaffection with the current government does not represent a challenge to democracy (and democratic values have not been eroded by the economic difficulties of the late-1990s). Furthermore, support for the democratic ideal is stronger among the young and better educated, which is a positive signal for the future. Thus, current public criticism of these governments speaks to their performance and rising citizen expectations, not to public doubts about democracy’s basic ideals.

In contrast, many other nations in East Asia function with the presumption that citizens accept the current non-democratic regime, and the political culture of the nation is not ready for democracy. The citizens of these nations do not fit this model—they express democratic ideals and aspirations. Even if they are inevitably unsure about how democracy actually functions, they see it as preferable to the non-democratic alternatives with which they are familiar. Democratization is a complex process, but political culture does not appear to be a major impediment to democratization in East Asia. This presumably represents a markedly different pattern than would have been found a generation ago, and provides a basis for further democratic development in the region.

In both cases, this research offers a positive message. In the consolidated democracies of East Asia, citizens want the democratic process to work better—and further education and democratic experience can deepen democratic values. Dissatisfied democrats are now common in most OECD nations, and other democracies also struggle to address the public’s new expectations. In the other nations of East Asia, democratic aspirations provide a new foundation, much as in East Europe in the 1990s, to develop a more democratic system and ultimately to learn the benefits and limits of the democratic process, and their role as democratic citizens. Beginning this process with democratic aspirations increases the potential for further democratization in East Asia.

## **Democratic Aspirations and Democratic Ideals**

Democratization has transformed the world in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Where once democracy seemed like a small island in a sea of authoritarian states, with an uncertain future, it now is proclaimed as the inevitable endpoint of human political evolution. Data from the Freedom House illustrate this development. In 1950, only 14.3 percent of the countries (and colonial units) in the world were democracies, which included 31 percent of the world's population. In 1990, the Freedom House considered 46.1 percent of the nations in the world as democracies, and by 2000 democracies governed in 62.5 percent of the world's nations with 58.2 percent of the world's population (Freedom House 2000).

East Asia, however, has been an uncertain participant in these global trends. On the one hand, the people power movement that forced Ferdinand Marcos from power in 1986 was the beginning of the third wave of democratization in East Asia, which was quickly followed in 1987 by the end of military rule in South Korea and the lifting of martial law in Taiwan. South Korea and Taiwan might now be considered consolidated democracies, along with Japan. On the other hand, progress in the rest of East Asia is more varied. China and Vietnam represent two of the small handful of communist regimes left after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Singapore and Malaysia have had a mixed political record over the past decade, and the Freedom House rated both as only partly free in 2000. Thailand and Indonesia also struggled through a difficult decade of political contention, ending as more strongly democratic. Cambodia remained an authoritarian state throughout the decade of the 1990s, and its democratic development emerged after 2000. In 2000, the Freedom House (2000) rated 44 percent of the nations in East Asia as democracies, and 33 percent were authoritarian or totalitarian states. Indeed, there are few areas in the world where the diversity of political regimes is as great—and the overall prospects for further democratization as uncertain.

In part, these differences reflect the unique historical trajectory of the nations of East Asia. Fitting them to the template of democratic transitions in Eastern Europe may be no more appropriate than applying the East European pattern to Latin America. In addition, there has been a persisting claim that cultural and historical forces lead to a different developmental pattern in East Asia. Several analysts have questioned whether Confucian traditions are compatible with established western forms of democracy. Others point to the limited economic development of many nations in the region, and argue that the forces of social modernization that

are suggested as prerequisites for democratization have not reached many of the poorer nations in this region. Indeed, many explanations for the political status quo abound.

This paper focuses on the citizenry and describes the values, traditions and culture foundations that might support democratic development across the East Asian nations included in the World Values Survey. As a first step, we describe the democratic experience of the nations included in our project. Then, we use a variety of measures from the World Values Survey to map citizen orientations toward democracy across these same nations. Until now, the debate about political culture in the region has largely occurred among elites and political analysts. Our analyses give voice to the actual opinions of the public, and whether democratic values exist across the political regimes of the region.

By concentrating on democratic orientations, this paper intentionally looks beyond evaluations of the incumbent government or images of the current institutions of government in each nation.<sup>1</sup> Trust in government and evaluations of government policies are important elements of the political culture—but they are not the central theme of our analyses here. Indeed, other research suggests that the cross-national patterns of governmental performance evaluations may be driven by much different processes than the democratic values studied here (Norris 1999; Pharr and Putnam 2000). But the foundation of the democratic process is a public commitment to democratic values and principles, and the extent of such orientations is essential for judging the potential for democratization in the region.

### **The Extent of Democracy**

How broadly has the third wave of democratization affected the nations of East Asia? We want to briefly describe the political context in the nations included in our project. This first requires that we define what we mean by democracy. Indeed, one of the complications of the democratization literature is the disagreement on the definition and measurement of this concept. One approach has focused on elections as a linchpin of the democratic process (Schumpeter 1942; Vanhanen 1990; Przeworski et al. 2000). The holding of competitive, free and fair elections is essential to the meaning of democracy. This includes acceptance of the rule of law so there is legal administration of elections and procedures for resolving electoral disputes. Unless different political views can compete in the electoral arena, and the electoral outcomes structure government policy to a substantial degree, a political system cannot claim to be a democracy.

But electoral democracy represents a minimal threshold for defining democracy. Most political theorists and practitioners have a more expansive definition. Robert Dahl's writings are illustrative of this literature. For example, in discussing the conditions necessary for a liberal democracy, Dahl (1971) held that beyond the functioning of the electoral process, democracy required social structures that enabled citizens to independently form their preferences, and to collectively express and mobilize these preferences. Similarly, Huntington (1991: 174-192) discussed how viable opposition groups and independent social interests are important in assuring that governments will actually tolerate electoral opposition and run fair elections. Thus freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and freedom of association are essential elements of democracy. These rights are especially important for political minorities and other groups that are vulnerable to oppression by the state. In addition, although the term "civil society" was not yet in common usage when Dahl was developing his theoretical framework, the principles of civil society were very much present in Dahl's writings. In fact, Dahl often wrote that autonomous organizations were an essential part of the democratic process (e.g., Dahl 1982: 31-40).

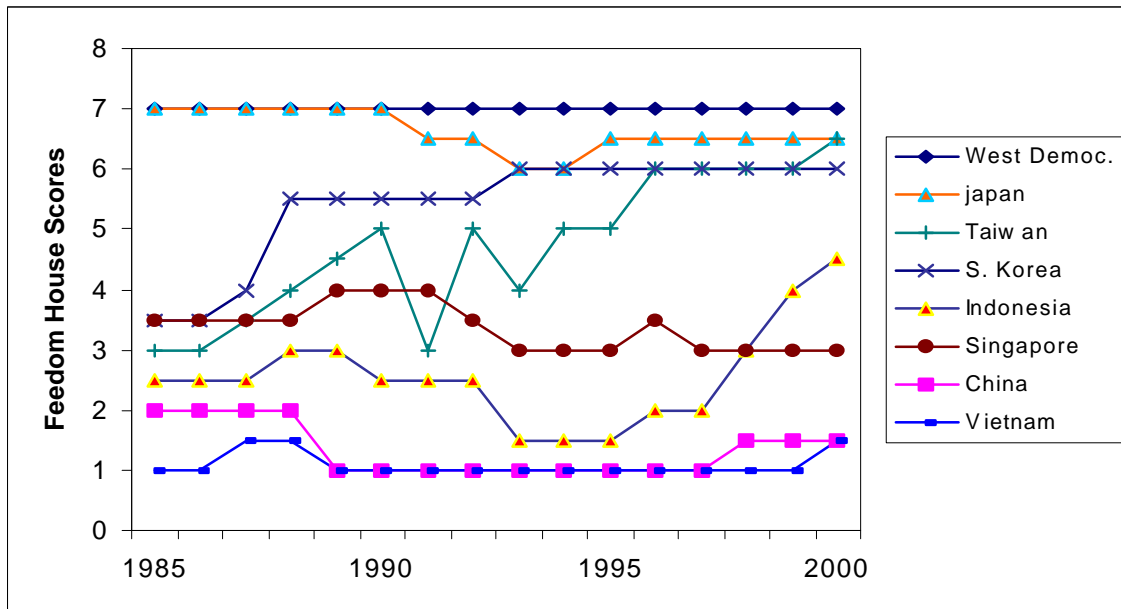
Democracy thus requires a set of political conditions and civil liberties that extend beyond the electoral arena. These conditions are necessary first to ensure the meaningfulness of elections, and second to ensure that democracy includes more than just elections. If an election is free, but the society is not, then the election is unlikely to have informed voters who openly cast their preferences for future government policy. Thus a free election presumes a free press, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and other political and civil liberties.

This dual framework of elections and civil society has led to numerous attempts to measure democracy and track its development.<sup>2</sup> Because it is the most widely used data source, and because it taps a range of civic and political rights, we rely on the Freedom House data to describe the democratic development of the nations in the region. The Freedom House uses national experts to score nations on two scales. The *political rights scale* measures the extent to which people can participate freely in the political process to choose policy makers who make government policy. This is largely equivalent with the electoral dimension of democracy in which citizens are eligible to vote and compete for public office, and the elected representatives have a decisive role in making public policies. The *civil liberties scale* evaluates the freedoms to develop views, organizations, and personal autonomy apart from the state. This involves characteristics such as the right to organize and freedom of assembly, an independent judiciary

and respect for the rule of law, personal autonomy (such as freedom of movement and freedom to travel), and economic rights. We combined both the political rights and civil liberties scale to create a ‘democracy score’ for each nation.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1 displays the democracy score of each nation in our project for the 1985-2000 period that brackets the public opinion data collected by the World Values Survey. Even if many citizens question the workings of the democratic process in the West, the four Western democracies in our study consistently score at the highest level on both scales across this entire decade. In fact, we include these nations in the project because they provide a baseline of established democracies to compare to the nations in East Asia.

**Figure 1. Freedom House Summary Scores, 1985-2000**



Source: Freedom House; mean of political rights and civil liberties scales: 1) low, and 7) high.

The East Asian nations in the World Values Survey display tremendous political variation. The most interesting cases are at the other end of the Freedom House scale: China and Vietnam. China appeared to be making progress on both dimensions during the 1980s, but then the Tiananmen protests in 1989 led the regime to reassert its control. Similarly, Vietnam began a process of economic liberalization (*doi moi*) in the mid-1980s, but this has not led to significant changes in the communist governance structure. There have been small democratizing experiments in both nations during the 1990s (e.g., Thurston 1998; Turley and Selden 1992), but

both nations remain controlled by a dominant communist party that prohibits true electoral democracy. According to Freedom House, only limited progress has been made in providing civil liberties as well. Thus over this decade, both China and Vietnam have changed only slightly on their summary democracy scores according to Freedom House.

Singapore and Indonesia present more complex patterns. The dominance of the People's Action Party continues to provide a vehicle for the party elites to control the Singapore government, and to use the powers of the government to curb potential political opposition. The institutions of government and constraints on the press limit the conditions necessary for elections to be meaningful. In addition, while social life enjoys relative freedom from state interference, there are significant constraints on free expression, assembly and other rights when they have a potential political content. Since the financial shock of 1997 and the subsequent recession in the Singapore economy, the government's use of its authority has strengthened. Thus, the Freedom House documents a general erosion of political rights and civil liberties over the decade of the 1990s.

Indonesia moved in the opposite direction during the 1990s. Suharto had ruled Indonesia since the 1960s, and the regime oversaw the long-term development of the nation under an authoritarian state. Still, for most of the 1980s, Indonesia earned a "partly free" rating from the Freedom House because of the dominance of the regime. But in the 1990s pressures mounted against Suharto and his continued authoritarian rule, and the government's response was to suppress its political opponents. Ethnic conflict in East Timor, Aceh and other regions put further strains on the government. Opposition protests mounted in the later half of the decade, partly in reaction to deteriorating economic conditions. This is seen in Figure 1 in the significant drop in the summary democracy score in the mid-1990s. In 1998 Suharto's 32 year military rule came to an end. This ushered in a tumultuous period in which national elections were introduced, there was a rapid turnover in the executive, and parliament began to assert itself as a democratic body. By the end of the 1990s, Indonesia had made dramatic gains both in the extent of political rights and in the protection of civil liberties (an overall increase of 3.0 points between 1995 and 2001), although these are recently achieved gains and politics remains contentious.

Since the end of military rule in 1987, South Korea has made relatively steady progress in developing its democratic system and ensuring the civil liberties of its citizens. And as a consequence of the financial crisis of 1997, power shifted to the political opposition—a key indicator in the development of democracy. Indeed, many political challenges continue to face

Korean democracy, and the public remains critical of the progress of democracy-building and the actions of political elites, but the political base of democracy is gradually broadening.

The end of military law in 1987 began the democratization process in Taiwan (Chu 1992), signaled by Lee Teng-hui's election as president, and then the victory by the opposition Chen Shui-bian in the 2000 presidential elections. Thus, over this fifteen year period, evaluations of Taiwanese democracy have made dramatic gains. South Korea and Taiwan illustrate the East Asian examples of democratization during the Third Wave, and have joined Japan as examples of consolidated democracies that ensure the basic political rights and civil liberties of their citizens.<sup>4</sup>

Japan, of course, has the longest democratic history and this is reflected in its positive scores on the summary democracy scale over this period, with only a slight decline in the 1990s. In overall terms, however, Japan ranks as highly on the Freedom House scale as many established European democracies.

In summary, the political context in our nations varies widely—representing as large a gap as is possible with the Freedom House measures. There has been a general movement toward democracy among the East Asian nations over the past decade, but this progress has been uneven, and Singapore has experienced a significant regression. Thus, the extent of democracy remains mixed, and low levels of democratization in several nations means that the potential for further democratization is substantial.

### **Measuring Attitudes toward Democracy**

The previous section described the levels of democratic development across the nations in this project. In this section we describe how citizens in these same nations view democracy, and judge whether these sentiments reflect the political context of their nation. We might first ask, however, what one should expect from these cross-national comparisons. Certainly, there is a clear expectation that the citizens in the established democracies should espouse strong commitment to democratic values and believe that democracy is preferred to other regime forms. This pattern is frequently found in studies of Western public opinion (Dalton 2004; Klingemann 1999).

Prior research is less clear on what might be expected across the range of nations we are studying in East Asia. At least until recently, numerous scholars questioned whether the cultural traditions of the region are compatible with democratic principles. Lucian Pye (1985), for

example, described a fundamental tension between Confucian traditions and the emphasis on community in East Asia versus the values presumably associated with Western democracy. Scalapino (1989) similarly stressed the limited potential for democratic development in East Asia because of cultural traditions that emphasized communalism with limited toleration for opposition groups. This theme of Asian values was also popularized by Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (Emmerson 1995); and Samuel Huntington (1996) also described this cultural syndrome in East Asia as a source of cultural clash with the West.

Even in the consolidated democracies of East Asia, there are reasons to ask whether public doubts about democracy have grown in recent years. Japan's seemingly unending recession has eroding public trust in politicians and political institutions, and this may eventually touch broader images of the democratic process. The severe economic impact of the 1997 economic crisis also may have tarnished the image of democracy in democratic nations such as Korea that have struggled to respond to these economic challenges.

It is also clear that national conditions vary widely across East Asia. Although most of the region is linked to Confucian cultural traditions, this is certainly not universal. Indonesians are overwhelmingly Islamic, and Filipinos are disproportionately Catholic. And even adherence to Confucian traditions varies greatly across the nations linked to this orientation. Thus, it is problematic to talk of a general East Asia political culture. For instance, Larry Diamond's (1988: 14-18) review of the political culture of the region emphasizes the variability of cultural traditions, and the richness of these cultures enables them to be selectively interpreted to encourage or discourage democracy. Friedman (1994) was even more direct in stressing the cultural diversity of East Asia, and the ability of democratic norms to take root in many different types of cultural traditions.

Indeed, if we look at the nations in our study, it is clear that national conditions now vary widely across East Asia. We should expect the greatest support for democracy among the more democratic nations of Japan, Korea and Taiwan. Based on an earlier wave of the World Values Survey, Klingemann described high levels of support for democracy in these three nations. Doh Chull Shin's analyses of Korean Barometer data also show strong support for democratic principles among the Korean public; and in several comparisons with other cross-national surveys, Korean support for democracy is relatively positive (1999; 2000a). But even in these nations, recent research suggests that trust in politicians and government performance is

decreasing (Tanaka 2001; Shin 2000b; Ahn and Kang 2003), and this cynicism may erode support for the democratic process as well.

These questions deepen as we move to the less democratic nations in our study. We would expect support for democratic principles and values to be less frequent—or at least to be less frequently expressed to strangers conducting a public opinion survey—in China and Vietnam, where the regime is based on the dominant role of the communist party. Recent surveys of Chinese public opinion, however, are more sanguine about democratic values in the People’s Republic. For instance, Chu and Chang (2001) found that democratic values of political equality, elite accountability, and pluralism are surprisingly common in China, although less widespread than in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Tianjin Shi (2000) similarly described relatively high levels of support for democratic values in China (also see Nathan and Shi 1999). But these studies were limited in the number of items they analyzed, and in the ability to compare responses to the benchmark of established democracies. Until the WVS, data on Vietnam was non-existent, although the prospects for democracy seem even more limited in this second communist regime.

Similarly, Singapore is widely cited as the archtypical case of where citizens accept a restriction of their political rights and liberties in exchange for the (past) economic progress of the regime. The commitment to democratic principles is equally uncertain in Indonesia; popular protests for democracy have been highly visible in the recent transition to democracy, but the breadth of these sentiments within the general public is unclear.

The World Values Survey (WVS) provides an exceptional resource for studying how the citizens in East Asia actually view democracy. The WVS includes seven East Asian nations in either the third or fourth wave of the study: China (PRC), Indonesia, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam. In addition, we examine the established Pacific Rim democracies of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States—to provide a reference point for interpreting the East Asian patterns against the benchmark of established democracies. This comparative approach should provide a context for better interpreting public sentiments in any single nation, as well as provide a valuable research tool for investigating the interaction of political/economic structures with public sentiments. Not all nations are included in both waves of the WVS, and the following table presents the surveys that include the democracy questions and the number of respondents in each survey.

Wave	China	Indon	JPN	Sing	SKOR	TWN	VN	AUS	CAN.	NZ	USA
1995	--	--	1054	--	1249	1452		2048	--	1201	1542
2000	1000	1004	1362	1512	1200	--	1000	-	1931	-	1200

Equally important, the World Values Survey includes several different measures of public orientations toward democracy, which we describe and analyze in this section.

### **Democracy versus Other Regimes Forms**

Public support for democracy is a complex orientation to measure. The concept of democracy is itself complex. If political theorists continue to be divided on what democracy means, then equal diversity might exist in the minds of citizens who are asked to evaluate democracy or democratic potential in their nation. Understanding the meaning of democracy is especially uncertain in those nations where actual experience with democratic politics is limited or non-existent. This is a serious concern that we discuss as the analyses proceed. In addition, opinions toward democracy might be conditioned by the nature of the current political regime. It may be as unlikely for an Australian to express their dissatisfaction with the principles of democracy as it is for a Vietnamese (or an East German before 1989) to express opposition to the communist government. Conversely, with the global spread of democracy, it seems that governments of all types claim to be democratic, and thus ritual support for democracy may be seen as the social acceptable response to a public opinion interview (see, for example, Klingemann 1999). Democracy can be an elastic term, used by leaders in Washington and Beijing.<sup>5</sup> The solution to these potential problems is to proceed cautiously, and with multiple items to tap different aspects of democratic sentiment.

To address these concerns, the World Values Survey included a battery that assessed orientations toward different regime types, presenting democracy as one of four options. Respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed with a set of four statements:

*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?*

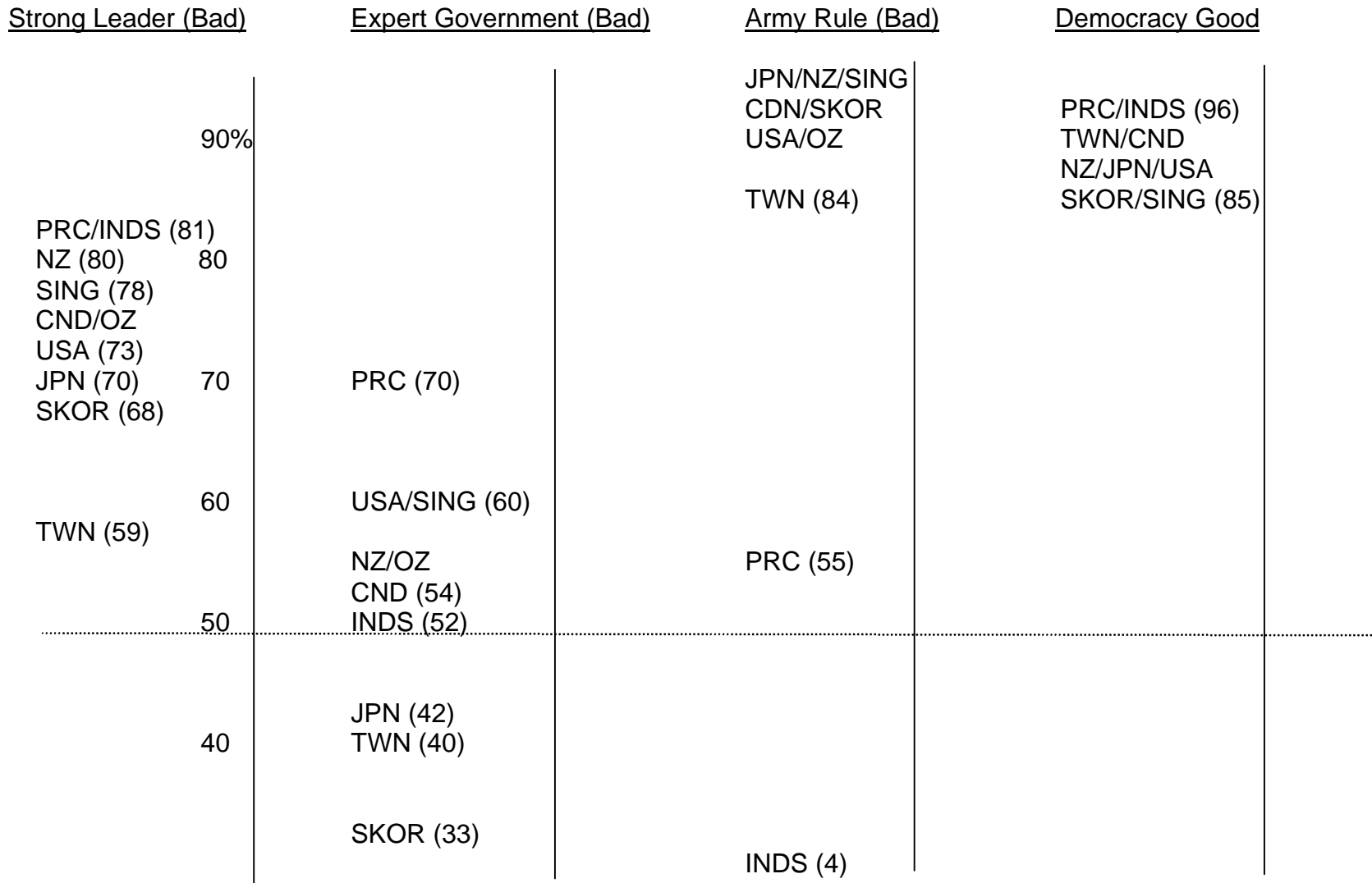
- *Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections*
- *Having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country*
- *Having the army rule*
- *Having a democratic political system*

Keeping these different regime principles separate is intended to lessen a routinized endorsement for democracy. Respondents can express support for any of the non-democratic alternatives in the first three items before the democratic alternative is even presented. In addition, response set normally encourages individuals to agree with questions, which facilitates potential non-democratic responses on the first three items. In other words, we measure support for democracy primarily by assessing disapproval of non-democratic regime forms. In the terms of Almond and Verba (1963), we are assessing orientations toward the political system and not the incumbent government.

Figure 2 presents the percent of the public in each nation giving the “pro-democratic” responses to each of the four items. The pro-democratic responses are to disagree with the first three items, and agree with the fourth.<sup>6</sup> The first clear pattern is the breadth of pro-democratic sentiment across this diverse array of nations. For instance, the last panel in Figure 2 demonstrates that expressed support for democracy is nearly universal. A large majority in each nation is positive toward democracy, even in the nations that Freedom House would rank as only partly free or not free (this battery was not asked in a comparable way in Vietnam). Indeed, the lack of differentiation in positive support for democracy between the established Western democracies and the range of nations in East Asia is especially striking.

The wording of this question may reflect the affective endorsement of democracy that results from the democratization wave of the past decade, and the rhetorical endorsement of “democracy” from very different regimes. But generally similar patterns emerge when we consider orientations toward other regime forms. For instance, nearly as large majorities in most nations disapprove of government by a strong leader who exercises power without democratic controls.<sup>7</sup> One might rightly ask whether a Chinese peasant understands the term democracy, but

**Figure 2. Orientations toward Political Systems by Nation**



Source: 1995-98, 2000-2001 World Values Surveys. Figure entries are percent giving pro-democratic responses on each item (V164 to V167).

they certainly understand government by oligarchic leaders: What is especially striking is the broad disapproval of such a governing system in nations such as China and Singapore, where the oligarchic experience is still common.

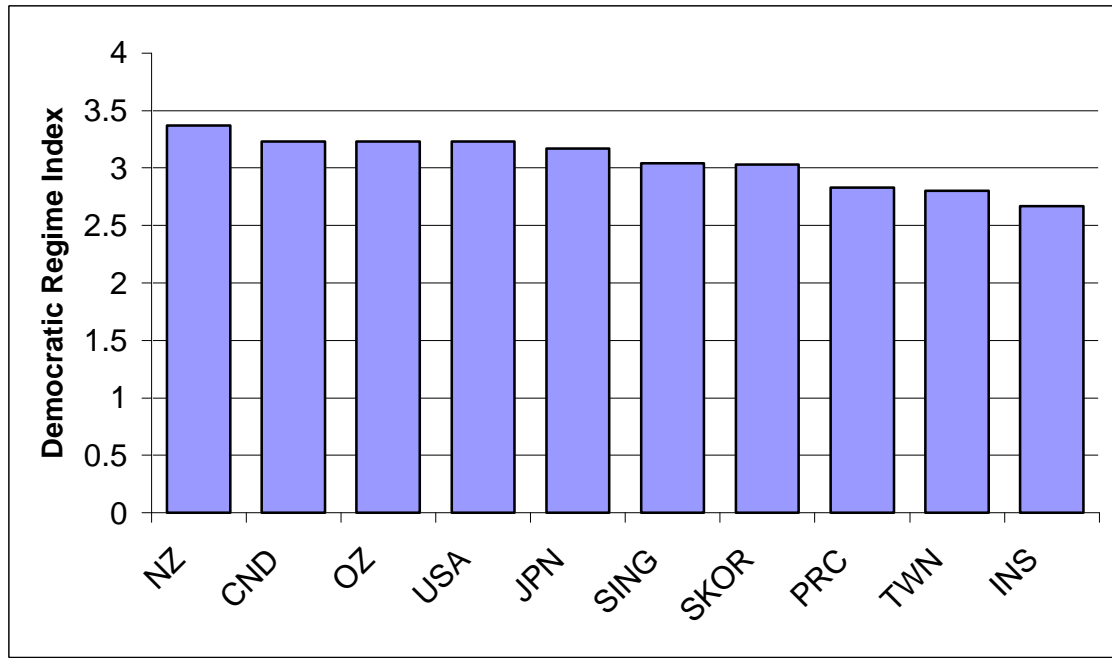
Even on the other dimensions in Figure 2, the majority of citizens in most East Asian nations give what is considered a “pro-democratic” response. The most notable exception is also illustrative. Only 4 percent of Indonesians said that army rule is bad—far lower than in any other nation. But this presumably reflects the military’s positive role in easing Suharto from office in 1998; the *dwi-fungsi* tradition in Indonesian politics (Sundhaussen 1988). Even today, the democratically elected parliament reserves seats for the military and police. The military also continues to play an active role in Indonesian politics, and terrorist concerns have reinforced this involvement. In all the other nations of East Asia, however, a majority of the public disapprove of military rule. Opinions on the role of experts are more varied (and more ambiguous in terms of democratic theory), but there is only modest support for this alternative.

The general level of democratic support is clearly seen if we combine these four items to create a summary index of support for a democratic regime.<sup>8</sup> The national mean scores on the democratic regime index are presented in Figure 3.<sup>9</sup> A score of 4.0 on this scale is the highest level of pro-democratic sentiment, and a score of 1.0 is anti or non-democratic. In all ten nations, the mean score tends toward the democratic end of the continuum. As we would expect, citizens in New Zealand, Canada, Australia, and the U.S. are more likely to favor a democratic structure over non-democratic governing principles (the four nation average is 3.27). Pro-democratic sentiments are slightly less common in the nations of East Asia (2.92)—although the size of the East-West gap is quite modest. Prior research from the World Values Survey suggests that this index, which contrasts democratic versus authoritarian governing principles, is a more robust measure of commitments to democratic rule (Klingemann 1999) than the democratic process measure presented in the next section.

Certainly we should question whether people in all of these nations understand the democratic process when they answer these questions.<sup>10</sup> But the primary finding is that aspirations for democracy--and negativity toward non-democratic governing systems--are common among the people in East Asia, and these sentiments broadly transcend the current type of political regime. This does not mean that they are equally pleased with the policies the current government is following or the behavior of the current incumbents of power—often support for democracy co-occurs with criticism of the government (e.g., Klingemann 1999; Shin 2000b; Tanaka 2001). But the viability of democracy is based more on these system orientations than

incumbent evaluations, and citizens in these Pacific Rim nations see democracy as the best form of regime to address their policy preferences.

**Figure 3. Democratic Regime Index by Nation (mean score)**



Source: 1995-98 and 1999-2003 World Values Survey.

Note: Figure entries are the mean score on the four-point index of support for a democratic regime: 1) support non-democratic regime, and 4) support democratic regime.

### **Democracy as a Process**

Another aspect of democracy involves the performance traits of democracy. Indeed, support for a regime in principle is far different from evaluations of how that regime will perform in practice. This is a common criticism of democracy, communism and other regime forms.<sup>11</sup> Thus, people might express support for democracy in the abstract, but then worry about how the process actually functions.

To tap such sentiments, the World Values survey asked respondents about various traits that might be attributed to a democratic system:

*I'm going to read off some things that people sometimes say about a democratic political system. Could you please tell me if you agree strongly, agree, disagree or disagree strongly, after I read each one of them?*

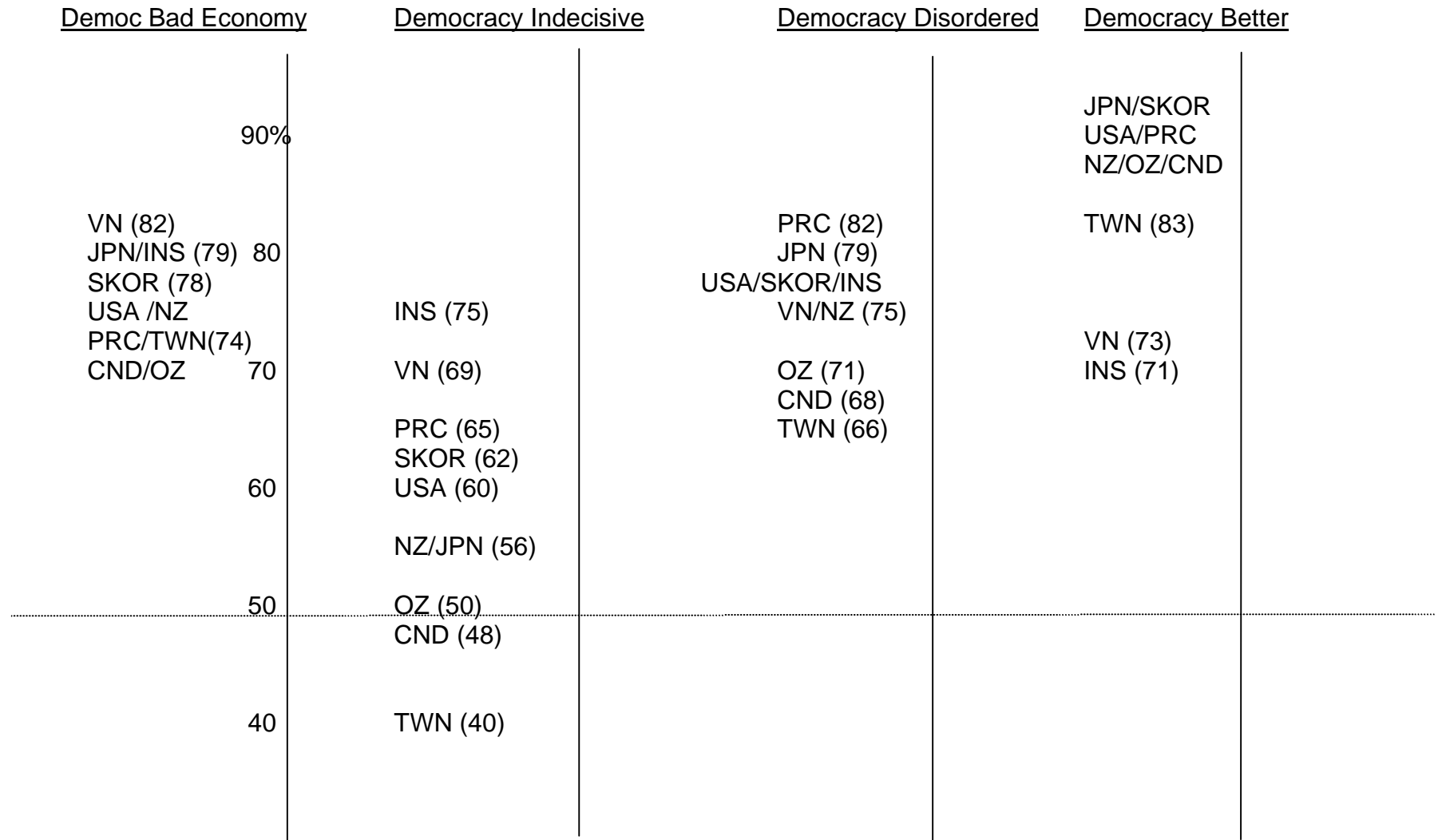
- *In a democracy, the economic system runs badly*
- *Democracies are indecisive and have too much quibbling*
- *Democracies aren't good at maintaining order*
- *Democracy may have problems but it's better than any other form of government*

The advantage of these items is that they allow respondents to express doubts about democracy, without directly rejecting democratic principles. Moreover, the focus is on broad features of democratic governance, and not short-term judgments about specific governments. The first three items also are phrased so that a critical opinion is easy to express as approval of the statement. The disadvantage is that by explicitly asking about democracy, these questions might tap sentiments that democracy is now the hegemonic system and thus is should be endorsed. We should also point out that the fourth item testing the Churchillian principle that “democracy may have problems but it's better than any other form of government” has been widely asked in other surveys (Rose, Haerpfer and Mishler 2000).

Figure 4 presents the percentage who give pro-democratic responses to each of the four items (disagree with the first three items and agree with the fourth). If we begin with the fourth item asking whether democracy is the best form of government, we find that democratic aspirations are remarkably widespread, even in nations that lack a democratic government. For instance, support for democracy is relatively high in China (95%) and Vietnam (73%), which are the two communist nations in our study. When most people in these nations say that democracy is the better than other forms of government, this suggests that democracy is now seen as a basic human value. Indeed, surveys from Eastern Europe in the early 1990s detected similarly positive sentiments toward democracy virtually as the Berlin Wall was being breached (Dalton 1994; Rose, Haerpfer and Mishler 2000).

The other items in Figure 4 tap potential criticisms of the democratic process; that it weakens the economy, is indecisive, and does a poor job in maintaining order. Given the traditional description of East Asian political cultures and their presumed emphasis on agreement and aversion to conflict, it is striking that large majorities in Western and East Asian nations reject the view that democracy are not good at maintaining order. Similarly, large majorities reject the view that the economic system runs badly in a democracy. This is in stark contrast to the claims running from Lee Kuan Yew to Samuel Huntington (Huntington and Nelson 1976) that one must chose between economic development and democratic development—most people in East Asia reject this claim.<sup>12</sup> Opinions are more divided on whether democracies are

**Figure 4. Attitudes toward Democratic Performance by Nation**

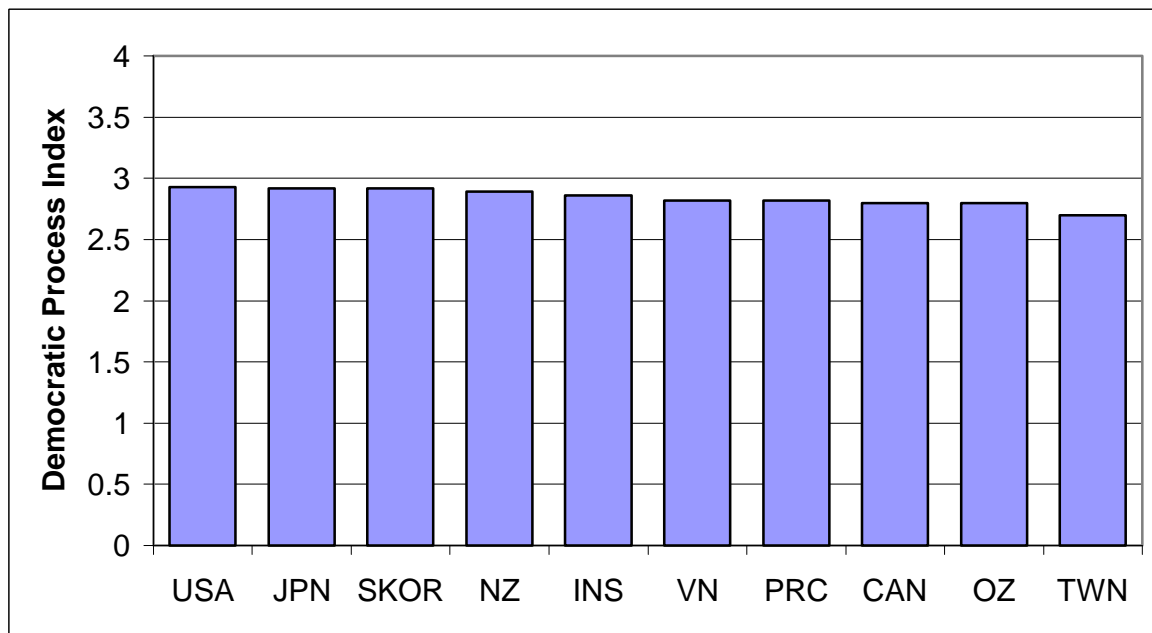


Source: 1995-98, 2000-2001 World Values Surveys. Figure entries are percent giving pro-democratic responses on each item (v167 to V172).

indecisive and have too much quibbling, and these sentiments actually seem to be more common in the Western democracies we surveyed.

The overall cross-national pattern is seen in Figure 5, which combines the four items into a single scale and presents national mean scores.<sup>13</sup> The data describe general support across these ten nations, with little evidence of a sharp East-West divide.<sup>14</sup> Citizens in the established democracies are generally positive about these features of the democratic process, but people in less-democratic nations are not significantly more skeptical about democracy. Moreover, because these process questions tap some of the themes about democracy's supposed limitations from the perspective of East Asian political traditions, it is significant that the actual opinions of most people in East Asia do not fit this pattern.

**Figure 5. Democratic Process Index by Nation (mean score)**



Source: 1995-98 and 1999-2003 World Values Survey.

Note: Figure entries are the mean score on the four-point index of support for the democratic process: 1) critical of the democratic process, 4) supportive of democratic process.

### **Political Culture and Democracy**

Scholars have engaged in a long debate on the influence of Asian political culture on the political development of the region. In large part this has been a debate among political experts and area specialists. One side of this debate questioned whether Confucian traditions and political history had produced a political culture potentially congruent with a democratic political system (e.g.,

Pye 1985; Scalapino 1989; Huntington 1996). The lack of democracy in most of East Asia was cited as evidence to support this position, and even those nations who had made the democratic transition functioned under the spectre of this cultural theory. On the other side, other experts suggested that cultural traditions were open to multiple meanings and applications, and that democracy was not a regionally distinct phenomenon that could only prosper in Western Europe (e.g., Friedman 1994; Diamond 1988: 14-18). Noticeably absent from this debate, however, has been cross-national empirical evidence on what people in East Asia actually think about democratic principles and the democratic process.

This research addresses this void, using the World Values Survey to describe citizen orientations toward democracy in the nations of the Pacific Rim. Although caution is warranted since tapping democratic orientations is a complex task, the WVS data describe broad support for democracy as a regime form, and rejection of the non-democratic alternatives of oligarchy and military rule. Similarly, most people are positive about the democratic process, rejecting the common claims of democracy's critics that it weakens the economy and leads to disorder. Indeed, when large majorities in the two communist nations of East Asia endorse the view that democracy may have its problems, but it is better than any other form of government, this is an indicator of how widespread democratic aspirations have become. Moreover, in comparing East Asia to the established Western democracies of the Pacific Rim, the differences in opinions are overshadowed by the broad support for a democratic regime and the democratic process that transcends the East-West divide.

Our findings thus add to the growing body of empirical evidence that the political cultures in East Asia are not inconsistent with further democratic development. For instance, the Pew Global Attitudes Survey (2002) done in summer 2002 found that majorities of the public in Vietnam (62%), Japan (62%), South Korea (58%) and Indonesia (52%) were favorable toward "democracy as it exists in the United States".<sup>15</sup> The 2003 Pew Global Attitudes Survey (2003) included a smaller set of East Asian nations, but it also found that when asked to choose between a democratic government and a strong leader, nearly two-thirds of Koreans and Indonesians favored democracy. Other questions from the 2003 Pew Survey point to the breadth of support for a fair judiciary, religious freedom, and freedom of speech as important for their nation. The initial results from the new East Asian Barometers also find majorities in support of democratic principles for most of the nations they surveyed (Chu 2003; Albritton and Bureekul 2003). Similarly, we cited other research on Chinese public opinion that also uncovers surprising support for democratic principles (Chu and Chang 2001; Shi 2000; Nathan and Shi 1999). One of

the most interesting results comes from Zweig's (2002) surveys in poor rural Chinese villages, where support for democratic principles was widespread. Doh Chull Shin (1999; 2000a) found across the 1990s that large majorities of the Korean public favored a democratic system for their nation, and most believed democracy was suitable for Korea (also Ahn and Kang 2003). And in comparison to data from Western Europe and other emerging democracies, Koreans also are relatively positive toward democracy (Shin 1999). In short, most of the publics we surveyed agree with the Churchillian premise that democracy may be the worst form of government—except for all the other forms.

Certainly, one must be cautious in interpreting these findings. In several of these nations, the average citizen is unlikely to understanding the full benefits and limitations of a democratic system. For example, 1999 surveys in Indonesia found that a majority of the public could not give a meaningful explanation of what it means for a nation to be democratic (Asia Foundation 1999).<sup>16</sup> Similarly, it is not realistic to think that when the Vietnamese express support for democracy that carries the same meaning as when citizens are surveyed in established, advanced industrial democracies. A similar problem existed in the first public opinion surveys in Eastern Europe after the fall of Communism (Dalton 1994; Rose, Haerpfer and Mishler 2000). But citizens in states with oligarchic leadership are willing to criticize this system of government, as well as military rule—they know how these systems work, and can meaningfully reject them. Thus democratic aspirations seem to be a common element of the human condition in the nations of the Pacific Rim, whether West or East.

The experience in Eastern Europe is also illuminating because it suggests that democratic aspirations are the beginning of a process of building a democratic political culture that accepts the frustrations and conflicts that come with the democratic process (Rohrschneider 1999). People generally welcome freedoms and rights, but it is more difficult to openly extend these rights to one's opponents. Elections and a fair judiciary are positive values, until one's party loses an election or an electoral appeal. We have less evidence on whether the citizens in the non-democratic states of East Asia understand and accept these democratic principles as an extension of their democratic aspirations. In fact, these norms might only be internalized by actually working within a democratic process. And a positive example comes from time series data from Taiwan. Taiwanese surveys find a broad shift toward democratic values of freedom and pluralism that follows the nation's democratization process (Xu 1998). Similarly, the voter education programs in Indonesia appear to have significantly increased public understanding of

democracy and the democratic electoral process after they began to hold democratic elections (Asia Foundation 1999).

We should also stress that we are studying broad orientations toward democracy and alternative regime forms, and not support for the present government and its policies. Political theory and empirical evidence suggests that there are important distinctions between public images of the political regime and images of the current holders of power. Americans can (and do) harshly criticize the policies emanating from the White House, while still embracing the democratic creed. This same dichotomy can apply to citizens in the nations of East Asia. Indeed, the economic crises of the 1990s have placed strains on many of the nations examined here, and this is reflected in growing public dissatisfaction with politicians and government in democratic nations like Korea and Japan (e.g., Shin 2000b; Tanaka 2001; Ahn and Kang 2003). This makes our findings even more meaningful, because we uncovered little change in basic orientations toward democracy across the last two waves of the World Values Survey in these two nations.

Public attitudes are, of course, only one part of the democratization process. The course of democratization, at least over the short term, is more likely to depend on the strategic decisions of national elites than on the responses of citizens to a public opinion survey. But in the long run, a democratic system requires a democratic public to survive and function. Especially when placed in the larger context of the global findings from the World Values Survey (Inglehart 1997; 2003), it appears that democratic aspirations are a common belief—more common than previously recognized.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> For discussions of the distinction between citizen evaluations of different levels of the political system—such as democratic values, evaluations of the regime, and evaluations of the incumbents—see Dalton (2004) and Klingemann (1999). Recent research emphasizes the distinctions between these different objects of evaluation in the minds of citizens, and these distinctions thus should be clear to the readers as well.

In addition, evaluations of the government and politicians are a function of the expectations of the citizenry and the acceptance of opposition in the political culture. A clear example of this contrast comes from Ahn and Kang's (2002) comparisons of citizen perceptions of government performance across a set of East Asian nations. They find that citizens were more critical of government in the more established democracies of Japan, Korea and Taiwan, while citizens in Malaysia and Singapore were more positive toward their government. This tendency for criticism of government to be higher in more established democracies has been noted by others (Norris 1999; Pharr and Putnam 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Vanhanen (1990: 11-26) reviews the previous empirical studies that measured scored nations in terms of their democratic development.

<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the Polity dataset measures democracy and scores Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States as a 10 in 1999 using their 10-point scale (<http://weber.ucsd.edu/~kgledits/Polity.html>). For additional information on the Polity measures see Jagers and Gurr (1995).

<sup>4</sup> The Polity data cited in footnote 3 also describe the same general patterns as the Freedom House measures. The national scores on the 0-10 scale in 1999 were: China 0, Vietnam 0, Singapore 2, Indonesia 8 (although it was scored 0 in 1998 before the regime change), South Korea 8, Taiwan 9, and Japan 10.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, in her study of local elections in China Anne Thurston (1998: ix) quotes Jiang Zemin as saying “without democracy there can be no modernization. We will ensure that our people hold democratic elections, make policy decisions democratically, carry out democratic management and supervision, and enjoy extensive rights and freedoms under the law. The overall goal of our political restructurings to build socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics while upholding and improving our basic political system.” Similarly, the most recent development plan in Vietnam includes democracy as one of the nation's goals: “prosperous people; strong nation; just, democratic and civilized society”.

<sup>6</sup> We do not distinguished between the two waves of the World Values Survey but simply present all the data available for each nation across the 1995-98 and 1999-2002 waves. Missing data were excluded from the calculation of percentages.

<sup>7</sup> A partial long-term time comparison is available for Korea. In 1972-73 Chong Lim Kim and Young Whan Kihl did a national opinion survey; they asked if “elite rule is desirable” and 65 percent agreed (cited in Kim 1978: 71-72) . In contrast, in the 2003 World Values Survey, on 28 percent were favorable to government by a strong leader without democratic controls.

8. We conducted factor analyses of these four items to verify they form a common dimension and one factor emerged (Eigenvalues = 1.73, 42% of the total variance), with all four items loading on this first dimension: strong leaders (.792), experts (.577), army rule (.740), and support for democracy (-.475). In separate analyses, the factor structure is stronger in the advanced industrial nations (US, Canada, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand) than in the remaining nations, but the same pattern applies. Then, we simply summed together responses to the four items (reversing the polarity of the democracy item) and divided the total by four. The resulting scale runs from 1) prefer non-democratic regimes and disapprove of democracy, to 4) prefer a democratic regime and disapprove of non-democratic regimes.

<sup>9</sup> We have two time points for 3 nations, and the overall democratic regime scale is relatively stable over these two waves:

	<u>Japan</u>	<u>S. Korea</u>	<u>USA</u>
1995-98	3.16	3.03	3.33
1999-03	3.18	3.01	3.18

<sup>10</sup> On this point, new evidence from the East Asian Barometers is very illuminating. Albritton and Bureekul (2003) followed a battery of items about democracy with an open-ended question asking what the respondent's meant by the term democracy. Nearly half the respondents replied with examples that fit traditional notions of liberal democracy, and an additional third mentioned personal freedoms or civil liberties that are very consistent with Freedom House definitions of civil liberties. Also significant was what was not mentioned: "Most surprising was the low response rate in terms of traditional "Asian values" as commonly understood – good governance, social equality, or duties to society. Only one respondent mentioned "openness or government transparency," and no one mentioned "solving employment," "providing social welfare," or "finding someone a job". Additional cross-national evidence on this point should be available from the East Asian Barometers in other nations.

In contrast, Shin (1999:47-48) shows that in 1993 high percentages of Koreans thought that economic prosperity and security "were important to democratic development in our country". Smaller numbers cited political freedom or fair justice in response to the same question.

Further research on the meaning of democracy to the publics of East Asia should be priority for future public opinion surveys on this topic.

<sup>11</sup> For example, a standard question in post-communist nations asks whether individuals think socialism was a bad idea, or a good idea badly carried out (Rohrschneider 1999).

<sup>12</sup> These data also illustrate the value of the cross-national research approach. Shin (1999: 31) noted that during the Koreans still appeared to question whether prior authoritarian government's were more effective than democracy in dealing with the nation's problems. But when placed in cross-national context, Korean support for the democratic process is relatively high compared to the Western democracies and other East Asian nations.

<sup>13</sup> The four items were added together to produce an additive scale, and then divided by four. The resulting scale is scored: 1) critical of the democratic process, 4) supportive of democratic process.

<sup>14</sup> We have two time points for 3 nations, and the overall democratic process scale is relatively stable over these two waves:

	<u>Japan</u>	<u>S. Korea</u>	<u>USA</u>
1995-98	2.91	2.92	2.94
1999-03	2.93	2.92	2.92

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<sup>15</sup> One might question this choice of wording, but the question has the advantage that the reference to the United States offers a clear reference that this is not democratic socialism or other claims to democracy practiced in a different way. So a citizen of Beijing, for instance, does not think of the Politburo's version of Chinese democracy in answering this question.

<sup>16</sup> This low level of awareness relative to Thailand may occur because of Indonesia's recent democratic transition. The Asia Foundation (1999) report notes that the percentage unable to describe a democratic nation dropped from 63% in early 1999 to 50% in July, presumably as a result of voter education programs for the June election.