

How East Asians Understand Democracy: From a Comparative Perspective

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Summary

Democracy is a political model with global appeal, but little is known about how contemporary publics understand it. Are East Asians capable of defining democracy in their own words? Are they also capable of prioritizing its properties? Do they tend to understand it procedurally or substantively? This paper addresses these questions by analyzing responses to the open-ended and closed-ended questions that the second round of the East Asia Barometer surveys asked in nine countries in 2006 and 2007. Results of this analysis confirm that most people in East Asia are cognitively capable of defining democracy. Contrary to what is known in the literature, however, the majority of East Asians do not equate democracy exclusively with political freedom. This finding leads to the conclusion that the prevalence of substantive or communitarian conceptions of democracy is one important characteristic of the cultural democratization unfolding in East Asia.

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The rapid diffusion of democracy throughout the globe, especially since the fall of the Berlin Wall, has made it possible for individual scholars and research institutes to conduct numerous public opinion surveys in a large number of democratizing countries (Heath, Fisher, and Smith 2005; Norris 2009; Shin 2007). Gallup International Voice of the People Project, the Pew Global Attitudes Project, the UNDP program on Democracy and Citizenship, the World Values Survey, and many other national and international surveys have monitored citizens' orientations toward democracy. Results from all of these surveys show that democracy has achieved overwhelming mass approval throughout the world and has become "virtually the only political model with global appeal" (Inglehart 2003, 52).

In the last two waves of the World Values Surveys, for example, "a clear majority of the population in virtually every society endorses a democratic political system" (Inglehart and Welzel 2005, 264). The 2005 Voice of the People surveys conducted in 65 countries by Gallup International (2005) between May and July 2005 also reports: "8 out of 10 global citizens believe that in spite of its limitations, democracy is the best form of government, almost 10 percent more than in 2004." Even in the Islamic Middle East, Confucian East Asia, and the former Soviet Union, large