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Assessing Citizen Responses to Democracy: A Review and Synthesis of Recent Public Opinion Research

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/89k3z6q2>

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Publication Date

2015-06-29

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“In newly democratic or democratizing countries, where people are just beginning to learn the arts of self-government, the question of citizen competence possesses an obvious urgency.”

Robert A. Dahl (1992: 45)

“Studying people’s aspiration toward democracy without carefully examining what democracy means to them would cause researchers to reach inaccurate conclusions about the relationship between people’s support for democracy, regime change, and democratic consolidation.”

Tianjian Shi (2015: 220)

The third wave of democratization, which began in southern Europe four decades ago, has ushered in a new age of public opinion research on democratic culture and politics (Heath, Fisher and Smith 2005; Mattes 2007; Norris 2009).¹ The spread of democracy to more than 80 countries throughout the globe² has facilitated new national and multi-national surveys that monitor people’s reactions to the process of democratization in their countries and elsewhere.³ Results of these surveys have recently led a growing number of political scientists in the West to advocate the theses that democracy has emerged as a universal value (Diamond 2008; Sen 1999) and it is also becoming the universally favored system of government (Diamond 2013; Klingemann 2014; Mattes 2010; Welzel and Inglehart 2009; Welzel 2013).

Is the whole world becoming democratic, as these proponents of global democratization claim? To test the validity of their theses, this study first reviews the voluminous literature on citizen conceptions of democracy, and identifies two important questions, which previous public opinion research has largely overlooked. Then it reanalyzes the World Values Surveys conducted in 2005-8, and explores these two questions of how well ordinary people around the world understand democracy and whether they support democracy with an informed understanding of it.

This paper first highlights puzzling findings on mass responses to democracy from previous public opinion surveys, and discusses the controversial issues in defining the term

“democracy”. Then it reviews recent advances in the conceptualization and measurement of democratic understanding. Next it introduces notable findings from the open-ended and closed-ended survey approaches, and discusses their inconsistencies and shortcomings. In view of these limitations, this paper introduces new notions of informed understanding and support of democracy, and tests those with the fifth wave of the World Values Surveys. With results of this test, it explores whether the whole world is becoming democratic, by embracing democracy as the most-favored system of government (Diamond 2013; Fukuyama 2014; Sen 1999).

Puzzles of Mass Support for Democracy

In waves of regional and multiregional surveys, overwhelming majorities of ordinary citizens express an affinity for democracy (Booth and Richard 2014; Bratton and Mattes 2009; Chu *et al.* 2008a; Chu *et al.* 2008b; Dalton and Shin 2006; Gilani 2006; Klingemann 2014; Tessler 2015; Welzel 2013; UNDP 2013). In the last two waves (the 5th and 6th) of the World Values Surveys (WVS), for example, nearly nine out of ten global citizens approved of a democratic political system as a “very good” or “fairly good” way of governing their countries. Equally many also expressed their personal desire to live in a country that is “governed democratically.” In all regions of the world that the WVS surveyed, including Africa and the Middle East, extreme large majorities of more than 95 percent of their adult populations were in favor of democracy for either themselves or their country (see Table 1).

Table 1. Expressing Approval for Democracy among Global Citizenries

Region	Dimensions		Affinity
	Valence	Saliency	
Dem. West	93.2%	94.2%	97.8%
Trans. West	86.4	85.7	95.1
Latin America	91.3	89.9	97.4
East Asia	88.9	95.3	99.0
South Asia	93.5	93.6	99.2
Muslim Zone	94.9	89.4	98.5
Africa	93.4	90.8	98.4
(Pooled)	91.5	91.4	97.6

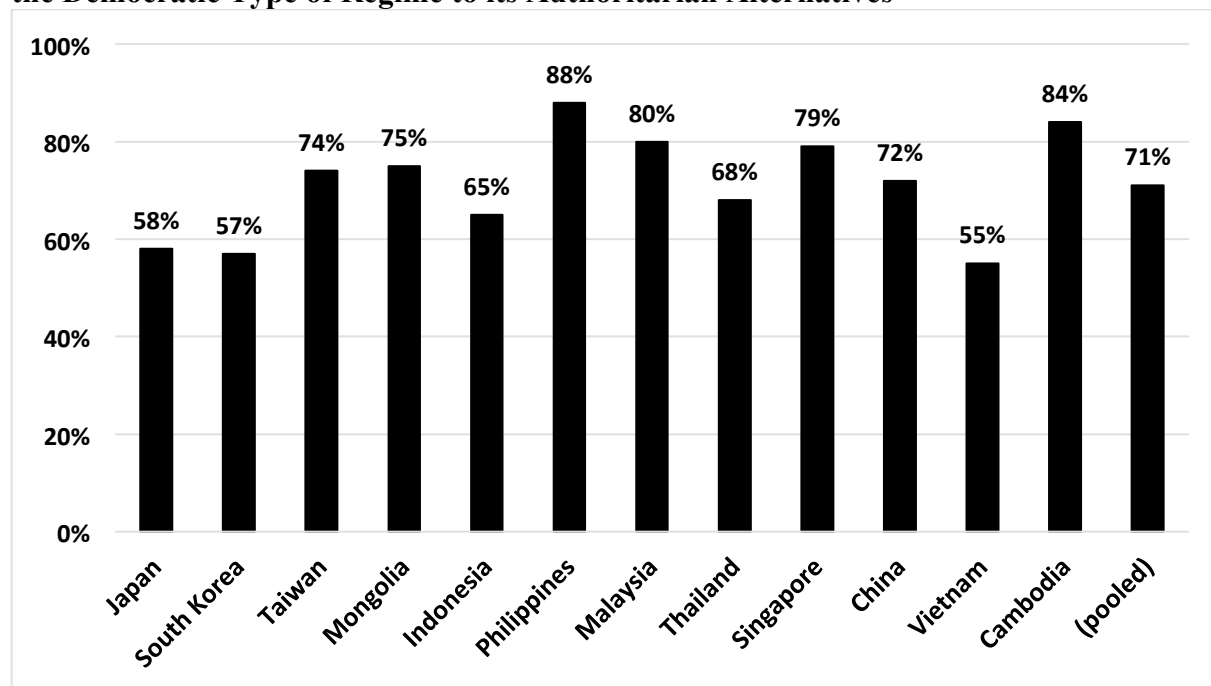
Note: The seven zones listed above are created by collapsing Inglehart and Welzel’s (2005) five Western zones into the two zones of the old-democratic West and the former communist West. Source: 2005-8 World Values Surveys

In a 2013 global survey by the United Nations in 194 countries, people chose democracy as one of the top three priorities for a future global development agenda (UNDP 2013; see also Lekvall 2013). Even in Africa, Islamic Middle East, Confucian East Asia, and the states of the former Soviet Union, large majorities are favorable toward democracy (Amaney and Tessler

2008; Blokker 2012; Booth and Richard 2014; Bratton, Mattes and Gimah-Boadi 2005; Chu et al. 2008b; Klingemann, Fuchs, and Zielonka 2008; Rose, Mishler and Haerpfer 1998; Welzel 2013). From these findings, it is apparent that the notion of democracy has achieved overwhelming mass approbation throughout the world, and it has become “virtually the only political model with a global appeal” (Inglehart 2003; see also Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Mattes 2010).

In many third-wave democracies in Africa, Asia, and other regions, however, recent barometer surveys have consistently revealed that even after decades of democratic rule, avowed supporters of democracy as a regime remain attached to some of the practices of the authoritarian system in which they once lived (Carrion 2008; Chu *et al.* 2008b; Bratton, Mattes and Gyimah-Boadi 2005; Dalton and Shin 2014; Hale 2011, 2012; Rose, Mishler and Munro 2011; Schedler and Sarsfield 2007; Shi 2008, 2015; Shin 2012, 2015; Shin and Wells 2005; Welzel and Alvarez 2014). In East Asia, for example, majorities of its mass citizenries, including the Japanese, remain attached to the authoritarian method of governance (see Figure 1).

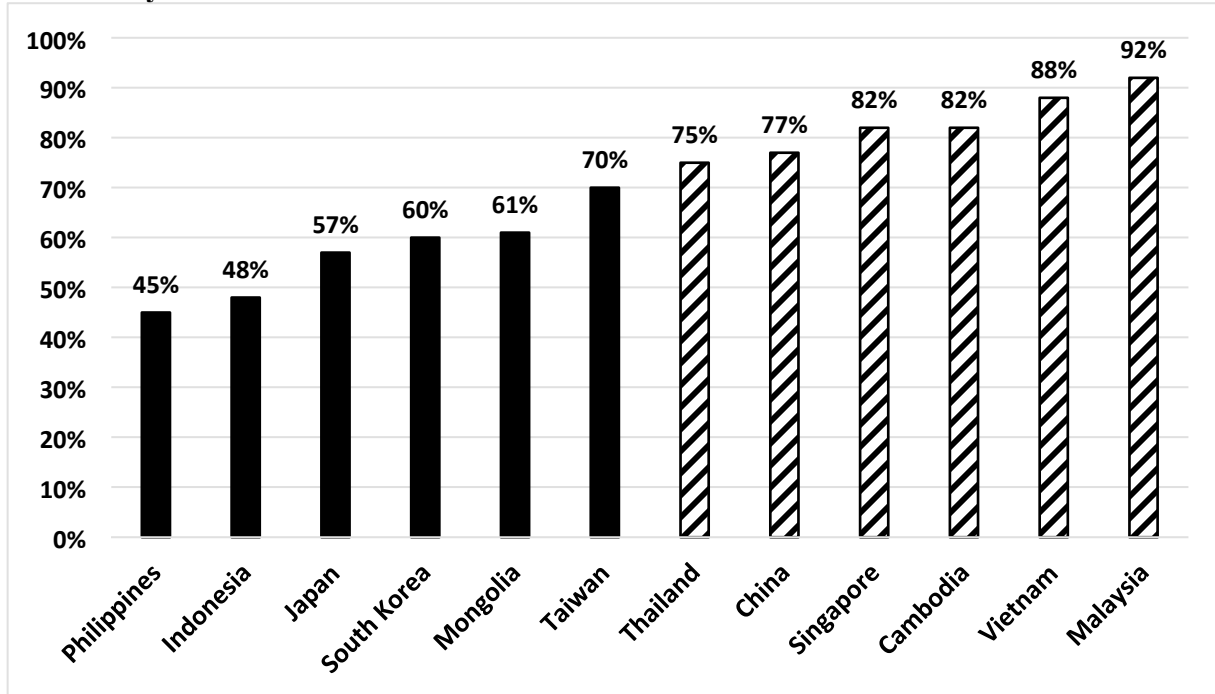
Figure 1. East Asians who Favor the Authoritarian Method of Governing while Preferring the Democratic Type of Regime to its Authoritarian Alternatives



Source: 2005-8 Asian Barometer surveys.

In authoritarian countries like China and Vietnam, moreover, large majorities of more than 80 percent consider their one-party autocratic regime to be a democracy, not an autocracy (Chu and Huang 2010; Dalton and Shin 2006; Huang 2014; Huang, Chu and Chang 2013; Shi 2015). More notably, citizens of these autocracies express a significantly higher level of satisfaction with the way their country is “governed democratically” than do those of democratic Japan, Korea, and Taiwan (see Figure 2). These survey findings indicate that ordinary people around the world apparently do not agree about the meaning of democracy, and many of those avowed democrats may not be fully capable of differentiating democracy from its alternatives.

Figure 2. The East Asians Satisfied with the Way their Country is Governed as a Democracy



Source: 2005-8 Asian Barometer surveys.

In principle, these puzzling findings—support for authoritarian rule among many self-proclaimed democrats and greater citizen satisfaction with what respondents hold to be democratic governance in autocracies than in democracies—confirm the dictum that “how strongly people desire democracy is meaningless unless we also know how people understand democracy” (Welzel 2013, 310). The findings also confirm the counsel that studying people’s responses to democracy requires a careful examination of what democracy means to them (Shi 2015, 220; see also Ariely 2015; Ariely and Davidob 2011; Bratton 2010; Carnaghan 2011; King *et al.* 2014). In practice, the crucial question arises of whether their stated support for democracy can be considered *authentic* or *genuine*, as many advocates of global democratization and neo-modernization assume.

Contending Issues

In the political science literature, democracy is one of the most popular and yet highly contested concepts with many different connotations (Collier and Levitsky 1997). Since the time of ancient Greece more than two and a half millennia ago, a great deal of change has taken place in its ultimate ends and means. Contrary to Aristotle’s notion, for example, democracy is no longer viewed as an undesirable or pejorative form of government working exclusively for the interests of the masses (Baker 1962, book 3). Democracy also no longer allows people to participate directly in all important aspects of governance, as done in ancient Greek city states.

As a system of representative government for the people as a whole, moreover, methods of daily governance vary considerably from one democratic state to another (Joshi 2013; Lijphart 1999). Even more confusing are the official proclamations of non-democratic one-party states

and other autocracies that they too are democracies. Such historic transformations of democracy as a form of government, and the multiplicity of its contemporary practices make it difficult to equate democracy with one particular type of political system. As a result, there is considerable debate and division over the meaning of democracy, a concept with such a long and convoluted history (Dahl 1989, part 1).

One of the contending issues is whether democracy represents a political ideal or reality. To some scholars like Robert Dahl (1971, 2), democracy can represent an ideal type of political system that responds *perfectly or nearly perfectly* to the preferences of its people. To others like Richard Rose (1996, 2007), in contrast, it represents an *imperfect* type of government that exists in the real world of politics. Even as an imperfect government, it involves a variety of constitutionally defined regime structures and methods of daily governing. How to define democracy, therefore, depends largely upon the chosen level of its characteristics. By and large, definitions become *idealistic* with the conception of democracy-in-principle, while becoming *realistic* with that of democracy-in-practice. In short, the issue here is whether democracy represents a political ideal or practices.

Another issue is whether democracy even as an existing form of government constitutes a unidimensional or multidimensional phenomenon (Diamond 1999, 2008). If it is viewed as a unidimensional phenomenon, democracy is defined narrowly in terms of a few characteristics representing the chosen dimension, such as elections and universal franchise. If it is viewed as a multidimensional phenomenon, it is defined in terms of several different characteristics, including those of liberalism and constitutionalism. In the political science literature, narrow and broad definitions are often called minimal and maximal or supplemental definitions. They are also called thin and thick definitions (Coppedge 1999). Broad or thick definitions encompass not only minimal definitions but also the constitutional guarantees of social rights and the political realization of those rights (Fuchs 1999, 125; Moller and Skaaning 2013, 98).

Even when democracy is viewed as a unidimensional phenomenon, there is a contending issue of which dimension best embodies its true character. When it is defined exclusively in terms of its means, it is equated with government by the people (Dahl 1971). When it is defined exclusively in terms of its ends, it becomes government for the people (Shi and Lu 2010; Shi 2015). Definitions based on such means as elections, and other political institutions and procedures, are known as procedural definitions. Those based on their policy outcomes, such as equality, responsiveness, and welfare, are known as substantive definitions. Procedural definitions are further subdivided into liberal and illiberal categories, depending on whether undemocratic procedures of restricting political participation and competition are taken into account as a defining characteristic of democracy (Carrion 2008; Zakaria 1997, 2007).

Of these two unidimensional types of minimal definitions, the procedural type is far more popular in the current scholarly literature. Of the two subcategories of the procedural type, liberal procedural definitions are more popular than illiberal procedural ones. As David Collier and Steven Levitsky (1997) note, empirical research on democratization often equates democracy with the institutional procedures of conducting free and competitive elections and guaranteeing freedom of speech, assembly and association, which are known as a “procedural minimum.” In this minimalist view, democracy is nothing more than a set of political procedures or means, and these means are assumed to automatically ensure the achievement of its desirable outcomes.

In the real world of democratic politics, however, those procedures have often failed to respond to the preferences of the electorate, not to mention government by the people as a whole. For this reason, Terry Karl (2000) coined the term “electoralism” to highlight the shortcomings

of defining democracy exclusively in terms of a procedural minimum. For the same reason, the practice of defining democracy minimally and procedurally is not favored by ordinary citizens, despite its enormous popularity among scholars of democracy. As I will discuss later, contemporary publics tend to define broadly in terms of both political procedures and policy outcomes.

Conceptualization

Despite all these differences across the proposed definitions, the scholarly community generally agrees that understanding democracy constitutes the cognitive, not affective or conative, component of citizens' attitudes toward its ideals and practices. There is also a general agreement that as a cognitive orientation, our understanding of what constitutes democracy embraces the beliefs, information, thoughts, and knowledge we associate with it. Even as an object of cognition, democracy is a highly complex subjective phenomenon, which involves much more than being merely aware of or recognizing democracy.

To understand democracy accurately, therefore, we first need to decide what democracy is, and it is not (Sartori 1987: 183-185; see also Schmitter and Karl 1991). As a two-dimensional phenomenon, democratic knowledge or understanding consists of cognitive competence in the identification of what democracy is and the differentiation of what it is from what it is not. Specifically, an informed understanding of democracy entails not only the capacity to identify the essential properties of democracy but also that to differentiate the democratic regime properties from those of its authoritarian and other alternatives (McClosky and Brill 1983; McClosky and Zeller 1984; see also Cho 2014; Norris 2011; Shin 2009a, 2012). Of these two dimensions, it is the capacity to make such a differentiation that makes people accurately and fully informed about democracy.⁴

Some citizens can be more or less able to identify democracy's essential properties. People's abilities can also change over time with changing exposure to relevant information. Likewise, the capacity to differentiate the properties of democracy from those of its alternatives can vary across people who live even in the same or similar types of political system. Democratic understanding is, therefore, a phenomenon with multiple characteristics each of which varies in degree or quantity.

Furthermore, variations in each dimension can take place independent of whatever happens to the other.⁵ The capacity to *identify* democratic regime properties, for example, can remain low or high regardless of the ability to *distinguish* these features from authoritarian regime properties. Likewise, a high level of democratic identification can coexist with a low or high level of democratic differentiation. In short, the overall capacity of understanding democracy can vary not only in degree but also in kind. Both quantitative and qualitative variations should be taken into account to fully describe how much or little people understand democracy, and accurately evaluate how well or poorly they understand it.

To date, most of comparative public opinion research on the subject has measured the level and complexity of people's capacity to *identify* what democracy means to them. Relatively little has been done to measure their capacity to *differentiate* its properties from their alternatives. Much less has been done to *evaluate* their overall capacity to identify and differentiate all those properties. As a result, the existing literature is concerned primarily with the question of *how they understand democracy*. In addressing this question, moreover, this work is concerned more

with the questions of whether they are capable of *identifying* its properties than with issues about how complex their capacity to do so is.

To examine the level and complexity of such identifiable capacity, previous studies first determined whether survey respondents could define democracy in their own terms or could prioritize its properties. If they could do so, the studies then counted the number of those properties they named in order to determine the breadth of their democratic understanding. In addition, this earlier research classified those properties into distinct categories to judge the structural complexity and substantive difference of democratic definitions (Canache 2012). The number of the named properties is often employed as an indicator of the breadth of a person's democratic understanding, while that of the classified categories is often used as an indicator of the individual's grasp of democracy's complexity.

To identify substantive distinctiveness in democratic understanding, researchers have proposed a number of taxonomies whose categories vary considerably in number and content. Tianjian Shi and Jie Lu (2010) and Jie Lu (2013) developed the two categories of the procedure-based liberal conception and the substance-based *minben* conception to analyze how distinctively East Asians understand democracy. Further, Jie Lu and Tianjian Shi (2015) proposed a framework pitting liberal democracy against guardianship discourses as a conceptual tool for unraveling popular democratic conceptions in authoritarian and post-authoritarian societies, respectively.

Alternatively, Dieter Fuchs (1999) proposed three categories—libertarian, liberal, and socialist—to compare democratic conceptions among citizens of East and West Germany. In yet one more conceptualization, Russell Dalton, Doh Shin, and Willy Jou (2007) suggested three categories—political freedom, political process, and social benefits—to identify and compare common patterns of democratic conceptions across 47 countries. Similarly, Pippa Norris (2011) offered three categories—procedural, instrumental, and authoritarian—for cross-national and cross-regional comparisons.

To compare democratic conceptions across 10 cultural zones in the world using the fifth wave of the World Values Surveys, Christian Welzel (2011, 2013) formulated four categories: liberal, social, populist, and authoritarian. To examine variations within Europe, Mónica Pereira (2012) outlined four different categories, procedural, indifferent, demanding, and autocratic. Min-Hua Hung (2014) also developed four categories: freedom and liberty, social equality, norms and procedures, and good governance as a way to study democratic conceptions in 13 East Asian societies. In her study of 13 Latin American countries, in contrast, Damarys Canache (2012) distinguished six categories, including liberty and freedom, political equality, participation, rule of law, economic and social outcomes, and negative meaning. To ascertain and contrast patterns of democratic conceptions across 29 European countries, Monica Ferrin and Hanspeter Kriesie (2014) also identified six categories, including electoral, liberal, social, direct, inclusive, and representative.

Yuan-han Chu and his co-authors (2008b, 12) chose eight categories, including freedom and liberty, institutions and process, market economy, equality and justice, good government, government by and for the people, “in generally positive terms,” and “in negative terms.”⁶ Siddhartha Baviskar and Mary Malone (2004) developed a list of as many as nine categories, including the presence of civic values as well as the absence of corruption, and of the abuse of power. Michael Bratton and his co-authors (2005) also worked with as many as 10 categories of positive, neutral, and negative meanings in the way citizens of Southern African defined

democracy in their own words. As such, political scientists put forward a large number and varying types of conceptual devices to ascertain mass conceptions of democracy.

But what many of them fail to address is what I would target as a critical question, namely: Are ordinary citizens capable of *differentiating* democracy from non-democracy? To address this much-neglected question, three complementary approaches have recently been proposed. The first of these approaches focuses on abstract knowledge of democratic and authoritarian regimes, by testing whether citizens can associate democracy with any of its own properties, such as free elections and the rule of law, as distinct from non-democratic traits, such as intolerance of political opposition and media censorship (Cho 2013; Ferrin and Kriesi 2014; Norris 2011; Pereira 2012; Shin 2012; Welzel and Alvarez 2014). Only those who associate democracy exclusively with its properties are considered capable of making a *democratic differentiation*.

The second approach asks respondents to evaluate a number of actually existing democracies and non-democracies, such as China, Japan, and the United States, in terms of whether they are democratic or authoritarian (Braizat 2010; Dore 2015). Those who rate democracies as democracies and non-democracies as non-democracies are considered to be *those generally capable* of making a *democratic differentiation*. The generally capable can be divided into two groups, *the fully capable and partially capable*. The former are those who can accurately distinguish less-developed electoral democracies from more developed liberal democracies, while the latter are those who cannot distinguish between countries at different levels of democratic development.⁷

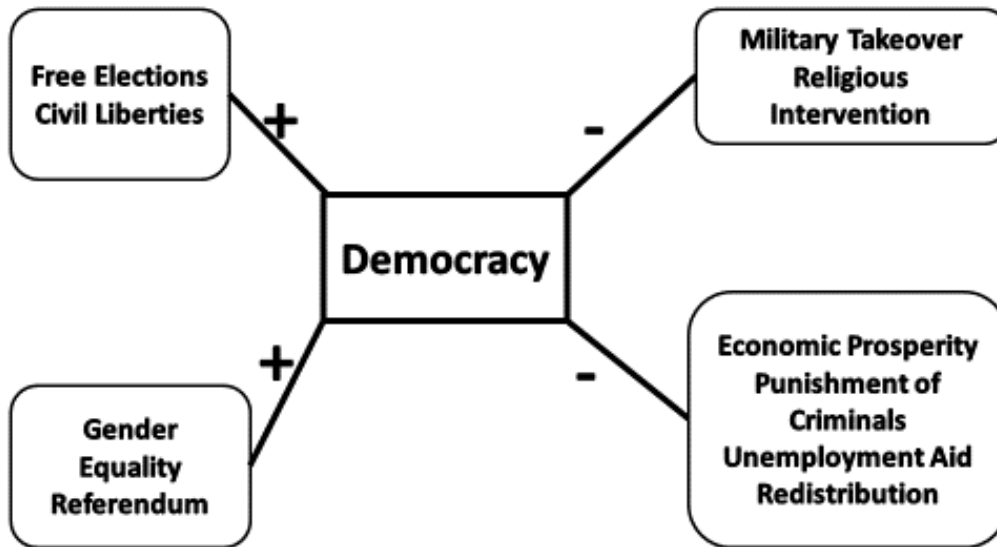
The third approach focuses exclusively on citizens of newly emerging democracies. Specifically, these citizens are asked to compare their current democratic regime with the authoritarian regime in which they once lived (Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998; Rose, Mishler, and Munro 2011; Shin 2009b). Results of this comparison generate four different patterns of regime experiences: democratic present and authoritarian past, democratic present and democratic past, authoritarian present and authoritarian past, and authoritarian present and democratic past. Of these patterns, the first one of the democratic present and the authoritarian past is viewed as that exhibiting the capacity to make a democratic differentiation to the fullest degree.

Finally, it should be noted that citizens' conceptions of democracy can be flawed and thus need to be evaluated before the sources and consequences of such conceptions are explored⁸ (Ariely and Davidov 2011). However, very little research addresses the important question of *how well or poorly ordinary people around understand democracy*. To evaluate the overall quality of their democratic understanding, Pippa Norris (2011) and Doh Chull Shin (2009a, 2012), respectively, independently proposed new conceptual tools. Norris's "*enlightened democratic knowledge*" and Shin's "*informed democratic understanding*" are both built on a two dimensional notion of knowledge, that is, the idea that people become fully knowledgeable about a concept only when they are able to *identify* its essential characteristics and to *discriminate* between those characteristics and those of all other concepts that repudiate it (Mclosky and Brill 1983; Mclosky and Zaller 1984; Sartori 1987). Theoretically, therefore, these two new concepts are derived from the same principles of knowledge formation.

Conceptually, however, these authors disagree on what constitutes the essential properties of the regimes that repudiate democracy. Norris viewed several desirable outcomes of governance, such as economic prosperity and welfare, as distinctive properties of non-democratic governance. Accordingly, she assumed that the embrace of these substantive policy

outcomes as the essential properties of democracy detracts from enlightened knowledge about it, as illustrated Figure 3, She also reasoned that the more people rate such policy outcomes as essential to democracy, the less enlightened they are about what genuinely constitutes democracy. The more exclusively they are attached to its procedural means, on the other hand, the more enlightened they become about democracy, she argues.

Figure 3. Pippa Norris’s Notion of Enlightened Democratic Knowledge



In contrast, Shin rejects Norris’ notion of non-democracy that holds that economic prosperity, welfare, and other desirable policy outcomes constitute distinctive properties of non-democratic governance, with the implicit assumption that the presence of these properties, therefore, repudiates democracy. In the theoretical literature, there is a long tradition of defining democracy as government for the people (Dahl, Shapiro, and Cheibub 2003; Lu and Shi 2015; Shi 2015). In the real world of politics as well, the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals lists economic welfare as a common property of democratic as well as non-democratic political systems.⁹

In both democracies and autocracies, moreover, ordinary citizens value those substantive outcomes more than the procedures that allow them to participate in the political process, as will be discussed later. In evaluating the overall quality of people’s knowledge about democracy, therefore, Shin contends that economic prosperity and welfare should not be considered the exclusive properties of either democracy or non-democracy. Nor should they be considered antithetical to democracy.

Measurement

What has been done to measure democratic knowledge or understanding? For the past two decades, a growing number of national and multinational public opinion surveys have examined a variety of new questions, employing a range of approaches, as noted above, all aiming at either defining (and identifying) or differentiating democracy from other regime types, or both. The questions employed can be divided into two broad types: *open-ended* (unstructured) and *closed-ended* (structured). Closed-ended questions can be further grouped into two categories, which Andreas Schedler and Rodolfo Sarsfield (2007, 641) characterize as *constrained* and *indirect*.

To measure the capacity to *define* democracy and *identify* its essential properties, surveys asked both types—open-ended and closed-ended—of questions. In measuring the capacity to *discriminate* between democracy and its alternatives, all previous surveys relied on closed-ended questions. These close-ended questions can be grouped into two categories, depending on whether they use numeric scales or relied instead on vignettes, a technique that allows respondents to express their beliefs and attitudes toward democracy in a less abstract, real-life context. Between these categories, numeric scales are the more often employed.

In general, open-ended, or unstructured questions seek to identify the specific terms that people associate with democracy, and to discern their dimensions and complexity. The close-ended approach, in contrast, tries to determine the breadth of democratic definitions and the priority accorded to their various referents, such as competitive elections, civil liberties, and economic security. This close-ended approach also addresses the important question of *how well or poorly people understand democracy*. Both closed-ended and open-ended questions are occasionally asked together to describe and evaluate the democratic understandings of those surveyed.

The Closed-Ended Approach

The procedure most often employed in asking closed-ended questions is to tap the meaning of democracy indirectly, using a list of its properties researchers preselected. The best examples of this approach include the 5th wave of the World Values Survey (WVS) conducted in 57 countries, and the latest 6th round of the European Social Survey (ESS) asked in 29 European countries. This method asks whether people agree or disagree with an individual statement that touches upon a principle or institution that is generally held to be essential to democracy.

The WVS, for example, asked respondents to rate the importance of as many as 10 regime properties on a 10-point scale with the following instruction:

Many things may be desirable, but not all of them are essential characteristics of democracy. Please tell me for each of the following things how essential you think it is as a characteristic of democracy. Use this scale where 1 means ‘not at all an essential characteristic of democracy’ and 10 means it definitely is ‘an essential characteristic of democracy.’

The 10 regime properties in the WVS include: (1) taxing the rich and subsidizing the poor; (2) interpreting laws religiously; (3) electing leaders in free elections; (4) receiving state

aid; (5) military intervening in politics; (6) protecting civil liberties; (7) fostering economic prosperity; (8) punishing criminals severely; (9) changing laws in referendums; and (10) guaranteeing gender equality. The breadth of respondents' democratic conceptions is often measured by counting the total number of properties that they scored higher than the scale midpoint (5.5). The quality of those conceptions is also assessed by determining whether they rate all democratic regime properties as essential to democracy and all authoritarian regime properties as unessential to it.

Unlike the WVS, the ESS asked citizens of 29 European countries a long battery of 19 questions that deal with different procedural or substantive domains of democratic politics. The questions cover the behavior of individual voters and their political leaders, and the performances of their government, and its institutions, including political parties, the mass media, and the courts. Each of these domains was rated on an 11-point scale. By counting the number of the domains respondents score higher than the scale midpoint (5), researchers can measure the breadth of democratic conceptions among Europeans. By comparing the average scores of all the domains on the scale, moreover, they can also identify the domains citizens of each European country consider the most and least important.

Unlike the WVS and ESS, which tapped *indirect definitions*, the latest wave of the Asian Barometer Surveys (ABS) employed the most sophisticated procedure of tapping *constrained definitions*. The technique requires each respondent to compare a number of various regime properties in terms of their essentiality to democracy. The ABS presented respondents of 13 East Asian societies with four sets of statements each of which, as described below, includes the two procedural properties of norms and procedures and freedom and liberty, and the two substantive properties of social equity and good government.¹⁰ The sample questions below illustrate this approach:

- Q85. 1. Government narrows the gap between the rich and the poor.
2. People choose the government leaders in free and fair election.
3. Government does not waste any public money.
4. People are free to express their political views openly.
- Q86. 1. The legislature has oversight over the government.
2. Basic necessities, like food, clothes and shelter, are provided for all.
3. People are free to organize political groups.
4. Government provides people with quality public services.
- Q87. 1. Government ensures law and order.
2. Media is free to criticize the things government does.
3. Government ensures job opportunities for all.
4. Multiple parties compete fairly in the election.
- Q88. 1. People have the freedom to take part in protests and demonstrations.
2. Politics is clean and free of corruption.
3. The court protects the ordinary people from the abuse of government power.
4. People receive state aid if they are unemployed.

For each set, respondents were asked to choose the statement that they would consider the most essential to democracy. Considering the responses to all the four sets of items together makes it possible to identify the patterns of procedural and substantive conceptions among East Asians. It also allows for measuring the depth of such conceptions.

Unlike all the aforementioned multinational surveys that rely on numeric scales, the Afrobarometer program employed the vignette technique to measure the capacity of people in southern Africa to *discriminate* between divergent types of government (Bratton 2010). The 4th round surveys presented three vignettes, one for each of three regime types, authoritarian, electoral democratic, and liberal democratic, as described below.

Q42B Alex lives in a country with many political parties and free elections. Everyone is free to speak their minds about politics and to vote for the party of their choice. Elections sometimes lead to a change of ruling party. In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Alex's country?

Q42c Beatrice lives in a country with regular elections. It has one large political party and many small ones. People are free to express their opinions and to vote as they please. But so far, elections have not led to a change of ruling party. In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Beatrice's country?

Q42D Charles lives in a country with regular elections. It has one big political party and many small ones. People are afraid to express political opinions or to vote for the opposition. The opposition is so weak that it seems that it can never win an election. In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Charles' country?

In answering each vignette-based question, respondents were asked to choose one of four responses: (1) a full democracy; (2) a democracy, but with minor problems; (3) a democracy, but with major problems; and (4) not a democracy. The number of correctly described vignettes is then considered an indicator of the respondents' overall capacity to discriminate between democratic and autocratic systems, and between limited and full democracies.

To further test the surveyed individuals' discriminating capacities, the Afrobarometer asked citizens of post-authoritarian countries, such as Nigeria, to rate their own country at the time of the survey, and also prior to its transition to democracy on an 11-point scale of democracy. Similarly, the Asian Barometer asked respondents of South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, and Mongolia to rate the political regimes of their own country both before and after its transition to democracy on a 10-point scale.

In addition to the questions on the past and present regimes of their own countries, the Afrobarometer asked respondents to rate on an 11-point scale other democratic and non-democratic countries, including China, the United States, South Africa, France, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. The Arab Barometer asked respondents to rate Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Japan, the United States, China, and Israel on a 10-point scale. On the same 10-point scale, the Asian Barometer also asked respondents of 13 East Asian societies to rate the current regimes of China, the United States, Japan, and India. On these two different scales, the two extreme scores indicate, respectively, complete dictatorship and complete democracy.

As discussed above, ratings of the past and present regimes can be compared to determine whether people are capable of discerning the occurrence of democratic regime change

in their own country. Their ratings of various current regimes can determine whether people are capable of discriminating between non-democratic and democratic countries, and between limited and advanced democracies. To date, however, very little effort has been made to make such comparisons across time and space in order to fully appraise the discriminating dimension of democratic understanding in authoritarian and post-authoritarian societies.

The Open-Ended Approach

Open-ended questions, unlike closed-end ones, are difficult for respondents to answer because they have to use their own words, not those preselected by researchers. The answers to those questions are also difficult for researchers to code and analyze. How analysts code those answers is widely known to shape the results of their analysis. Despite these difficulties, a growing number of public opinion surveys have asked open-ended questions on democracy.

These questions have been asked in three different formats. In the first format, respondents are asked to think about what democracy means to them.¹¹ Then they are allowed to name only one of its properties. In the second format, they are asked the same question, but are allowed to name up to three or more properties. In the third format, they were told to identify their likes and dislikes about democracy. In the first and second formats, democracy is viewed, respectively, as a unidimensional or a multidimensional phenomenon. Unlike these two modes that encourage respondents to view democracy as a socially desirable phenomenon and identify its positive properties, the third mode is based on a neutral view that democracy is not a perfect system of government, and thus has its share of advantages and disadvantages.

An example of the unidimensional mode is Roderic Ai Camp's (2001) analysis of a survey conducted in Chile, Cost Rica, and Mexico, which asked respondents two open-ended questions: "In one word, could you tell me what democracy means to you?" and "In one word, could you tell me what you expect from democracy?" The first question deals with democracy-in-principle, while the second one concerns democracy-in-practice. The responses to these two questions could reveal whether people hold similar or divergent conceptions of democracy as a political ideal and a set of practices, respectively. However, no such effort has been made to address this question with these surveys.

In contrast, the 2006-2007 AmericasBarometer surveys asked one open-ended question: "In a few words, what does democracy mean to you?" Interviewers encouraged the respondents to name up to three properties to determine whether they view democracy as a multi-dimensional phenomenon. By comparison, two surveys conducted in Russia and the Ukraine allowed average citizens and elites to identify all the political and other values and practices they would associate with democracy (Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger 1997). These researchers designed the questions to test the widely-held belief that "citizens who have more to say about the meaning of democracy have more fully developed cognitions of democracy than those who say little or nothing to say about it" (Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger 1997, 164).

In 2001, Siddhartha Baviskar and Mary Malone (2004) administered written questionnaires to study how study citizens in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Guatemala understand democracy-in-practice. These questionnaires included two separate sets of questions, one on positive things about their democratic government, and the other on negative things about it. The survey instructed respondents to list all the things they liked and disliked about democracy. Their responses to these two separate questions can be considered together to determine whether those

queried are positive, negative, or mixed conceptions of democracy. Yet, the two authors merely compared the proportions of the respondents who named positive and negative attributes of democracy without reaching larger conclusions.

The Combined Approach

A limited number of public opinion surveys have asked both open-ended and close-ended questions. The Post-communist Citizen Project directed by Samuel Barnes and Janos Simon (1998) asked an open-ended question: “What does democracy mean for you?” In addition, it asked respondents to rate on a 4-point scale the relevance of 11 political and other values to democracy (Simon 1998).

Similarly, the 2nd wave of the Asian Barometer asked both open-ended and close-ended questions in 13 East Asian countries. This survey first asked people to name as many as three properties of democracy in response to the open-ended question: “To you, what does “democracy” mean? What else? What else?” It then asked a closed-ended question involving the assessment of four democratic regime properties: (1) “opportunity to change the government through elections”; (2) “freedom to criticize those in power”, (3) “a small income gap between the rich and poor people”; and (4) “basic necessities like food, clothes and shelter etc. for everyone”. Of these four, respondents were asked to choose the one they would consider the most essential to democracy.

These two regional surveys analyzed responses to the closed-ended questions to explore how people *prioritize* the importance of democratic components. Responses to the open-ended question, in contrast, were analyzed to explore how they *define* democracy in their own words, and to ascertain the breadth and complexity of their democratic conceptions. The extent to which those surveyed supply affirmative answers to both types of questions serves as a measure of citizens’ overall capacity to *conceptualize* democracy by expressing own personal views and weighing other popular views (Shin and Cho 2010).

Notable Findings

As an overall statement, we can say that ordinary people can be rated as fully informed or knowledgeable about democracy only when they can meet *two conditions*: first they must be able to define it in their own words and to identify and prioritize its essential properties; and secondly they must be able to differentiate these properties from alternative regime types. Below I explore survey results to test how citizens’ understandings fulfill these conditions.

Definition

Recent reviews of open-ended survey responses have identified a number of broad cross-national patterns of conceptions about democracy. The first pattern concerns respondents’ level of awareness. According to Russell Dalton, Doh Shin and Willy Jou’s (2007) aggregate analysis of the surveys conducted in 50 countries, including four established democracies,¹² a majority in nearly every country is able to offer a definition of democracy, even in nations with limited economic development and limited experience with a democratic form of government. In all

countries except Brazil and Indonesia, majorities accurately named at least one of its properties. In more recent waves of the Asian Barometer and AmericasBarometer surveys, however, majorities in these two countries, and in all others, were able to answer this question (Shin and Cho 2010; Carrion 2008). Evidently, an awareness and some understanding of democracy among ordinary people have diffused widely around the globe

The second pattern of democratic conceptions concerns the breadth of their scope or structure. The regional barometers in Africa, East Asia, and Latin America asked people to name up to three properties of democracy. As Table 2 shows, a majority or plurality of people in Africa, East Asia, and Latin America defined democracy as a phenomenon with a single characteristic. In all these regions, those who named two or more characteristics constitute a minority of less than two-fifths. Many of the respondents who offer multiple answers merely repeat or restate their initial answers (Canache 2012, 11). From these findings, it is apparent that contemporary global citizenries tend to view democracy narrowly, as suggested in the political science literature.

Table 2. The Number of Descriptions of Democracy

Surveys		Responses (%)			
Barometer	Country	None	One	Two	Three
Afrobarometer	12	22%	59%	14%	5%
Asian Barometer	9	30	39	17	14
Latinobarometer	19	26	35	19	19

Note: Table entries are the number of responses to open-ended questions on the meaning of democracy. Sources: Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi (2005); Cnache (2012); and Shin and Cho (2010).

A third broadly cross-regional pattern concerns the valence of democratic conceptions. In all regions and countries, overwhelming majorities understood democracy positively rather than negatively. In 12 Southern African countries as a whole, for example, only one percent gave a negative definition to it (Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi 2005, 69). In all seven East Asian societies also, small minorities of five percent or less offered negative views of democracy (Chu *et al.* 2008b, 12). Evidently, only a very small minority of global citizenries refuses to view democracy as an essential component of the good life for themselves and their country.

In defining democracy positively, most citizens do not think of it exclusively in procedural or institutional terms, as the literature on democratic theory and international democracy building activities would suggest. Instead, they think about it more in terms of its intended outcomes—freedom, liberty and rights—than its means, such as elections, majority rule, and political parties (Dalton, Shin and Jou 2007; Huang 2014). Therefore, there is a wide gap between how political scientists and ordinary citizens conceive of democracy (Baviskar and Malone 2004).

In defining democracy with reference to its outcomes, liberal conceptions, such as the values of freedom and liberty, are more prevalent than are those based on political procedures or the socio-economic benefits of democracy (Braizat 2010; Huang 2014). Of these three broad categories of conceptions, moreover, the one referring to social benefits is the least often selected

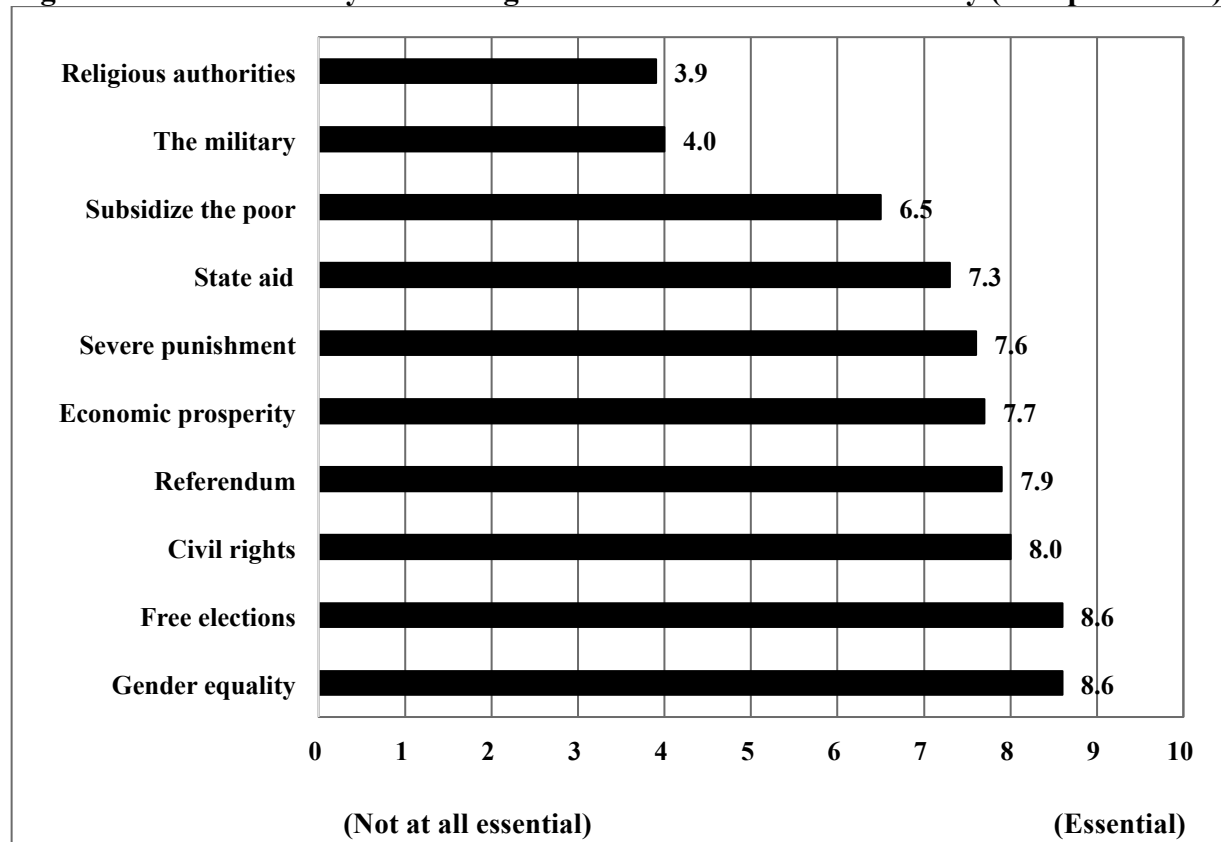
and on average, is present in only a sixth of all responses (Dalton, Shin and Jou 2007). In short, the open-ended approach reveals that contemporary mass publics are, by and large, capable of defining democracy in their own words, and their definitions tend to be overwhelmingly positive in valence, narrow in scope, and liberal in substance.

Identification

Do most people around the world expect only one or just few things from democracy, as suggested by their answers to open-ended questions? Or do they associate it with several procedural and substantive properties? To explore these questions, a few surveys asked a large battery of closed-ended questions geared up to tap the meaning of democracy *indirectly*. As discussed earlier, the 5th wave of the World Values Surveys (WVS) and the 6th round of the European Social Surveys (ESS) asked a long battery of questions dealing with different regime characteristics (Welzel 2013; Ceka and Magalhaes 2014; Ferrin and Kriesi 2014).

Analysis of the WVS reveals that in every region of the world, eight of 10 regime characteristics except for two authoritarian ones—military and religious intervention in politics— were rated as essential to democracy, scoring 6 or higher on a 10-point scale (see Figure 4). Scores of 1 and 10 refer, respectively, to “not at all an essential characteristic of democracy” and “an essential characteristic of democracy”.

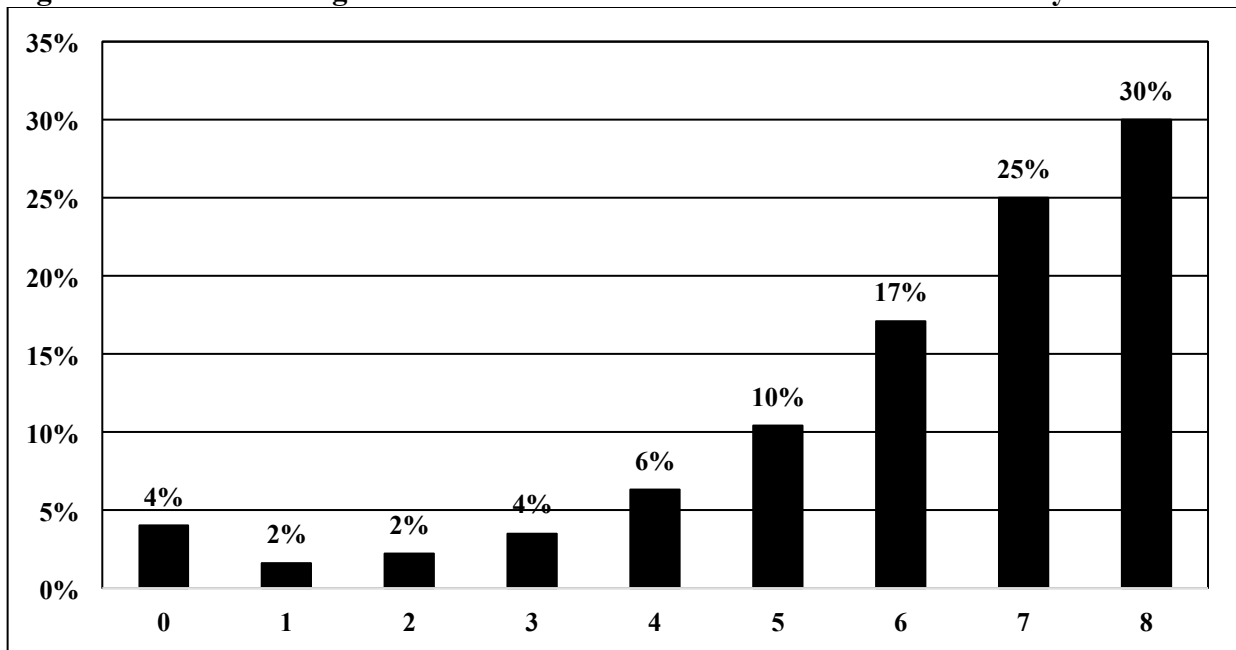
Figure 4. The Essentiality of Ten Regime Characteristics to Democracy (1-10 point scale)



Note: Figure entries are mean scores on 1-10 scale. Source: 2005-8 World Values Surveys.

A second measure of democratic understanding counts how many items each respondent mentions as essential to democracy. While a very small minority (4%) rated one or two of the eight characteristics as essential to democracy, a large majority (72%) chose more than five features as essential to it (see Figure 5).¹³ These findings do not accord with what is known from the open-ended approach: indeed, they demonstrate most ordinary people do not understand democracy minimally or unidimensionally.¹⁴

Figure 5. Number of Regime Characteristics as Rated Essential to Democracy



Note: Figure entries are the percentage citing various numbers of characteristics as essential to democracy (above the midpoint of the scale in figure 1). Source: 2005-8 World Values Surveys.

Another notable finding from the closed-ended approach employed in the WVS and ESS is that civil liberties as a democratic regime characteristic were not considered to be the most essential trait to or even important for democracy. In all regions the WVS covered, liberties ranked behind elections and gender equality (see Figure 4). In the ESS also, the freedoms to express political views and to criticize the government were rated as less important than six other practices of democratic governing, including those of treating citizens equally and protecting them against poverty.¹⁵ These findings raise the question of whether people consider liberties as the most important component of democracy, despite that they most often define democracy in terms of freedoms or liberties.

Prioritization

To address this question, I analyzed the Asian and Arab barometers, which posed an identical closed-ended question of a *constrained* type, namely, it asked respondents to choose the most essential of four democratic regime characteristics: elections, freedom, economic equality, and economic security. Citizens of 12 East Asian countries rated elections (33%) and economic security (32%) as the two most essential to democracy, and economic equality (21%) and

freedom to criticize government officials (14%) as the two least important to it (Shin and Cho 2010).¹⁶

Table 3. The Democratic Regime Properties Arabs and East Asians Prioritize as the Most and Least Important

Year	Arab Barometer 2006-2008	Asian Barometer 2005-2008
Elections	29%	33%
Freedom	20	14
Economic Equality	23	21
Economic Security	28	32

Sources: 2006-8 Arab Barometer surveys; 2005-8 Asian Barometer surveys.

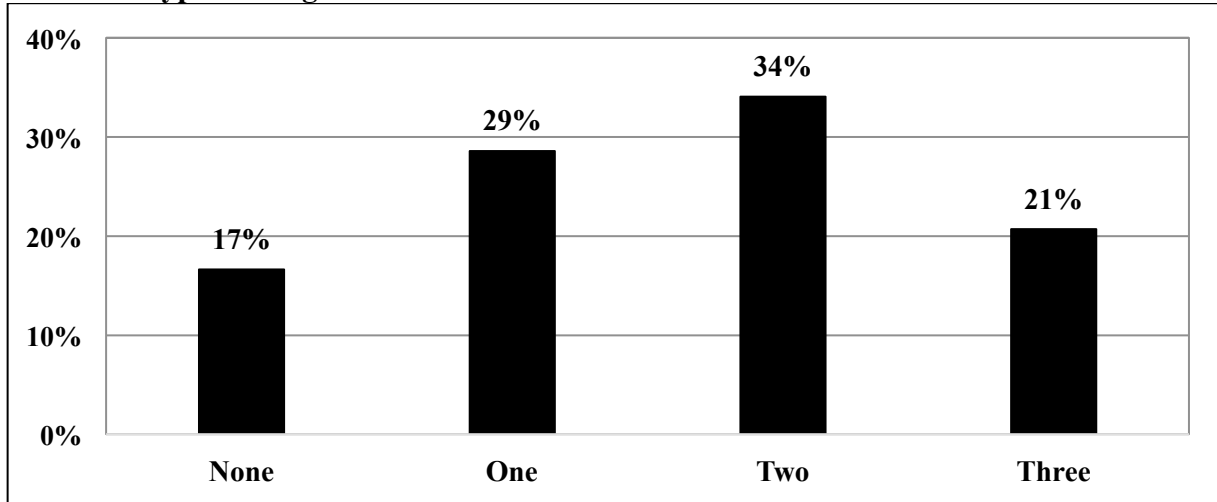
People in Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine also rated elections (29%) and economic security (28%) as the two most important characteristics, followed by economic equality (23%), with freedom of speech at 20%, the least significant (Doherty and Mecellem n.d.; de Regt 2013). As East Asians did, Arabs rated political freedom as the least important of the four democratic regime properties they were asked to prioritize.

When economic security and equality are combined into a broader economic category, this economic welfare category matters in both regions over two times as much as political freedom does (see Table 3). This finding casts serious doubt on the claim that a liberal notion of democracy is the prevalent one throughout the world (Dalton, Shin and Jou 2007; Welzel 2013, chap. 10).¹⁷ It also indicates that people in the non-Western world tend to understand democracy more as government for the people than as government by the people (Lu and Shi 2015; Shi and Lu 2010).

Differentiation

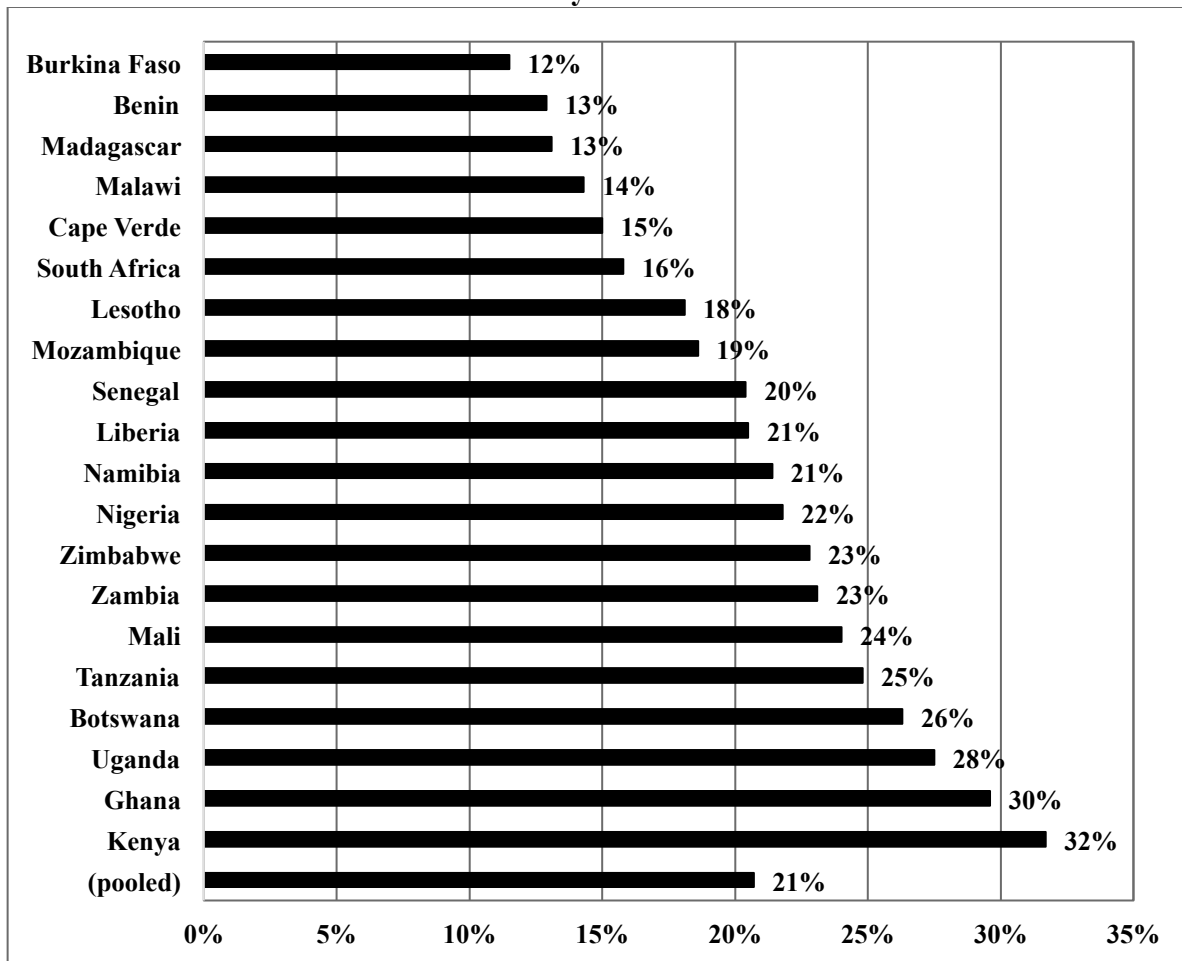
The second dimension of democratic understanding concerns whether they are able to differentiate democracy from other political systems or regime types. To explore this capability, the Afrobarometer program employed three vignettes (Bratton 2010). As discussed above, the 4th round of this barometer asked citizens of 20 Southern African countries to differentiate the three types of political systems referred to in those vignettes. As Figure 6 shows, a small minority (21%) of Southern Africans as a whole is *fully capable* of correctly differentiating all those types. Proportions of the *fully capable* vary considerably across the countries, ranging from just 12 percent in Burkina Faso to as much as 32 percent in Kenya (also see Figure 7 below). These findings suggest that Southern Africans' capacity to distinguish different types of political systems is not only very low but also highly uneven.

Figure 6. The Extent to which Southern Africans are Capable of Differentiating Three Different Types of Regimes



Source: 2008 Afrobarometer surveys.

Figure 7. Percentages of Southern Africans Fully Capable of Differentiating Three Authoritarian and Democratic Political Systems



Source: 2008 Afrobarometer surveys.

Unlike the Afrobarometer surveys, which asked about hypothetical political systems with which people were largely unfamiliar, the Asian Barometer surveys asked about political systems widely known as democracy or autocracy. Its 3rd wave surveys asked respondents to evaluate China, the U. S., Japan, and India on a 10-point scale where scores of 1 and 10 mean complete dictatorship and democracy, respectively. Of these four countries, I chose China and India to explore the extent to which East Asians can discriminate between democratic and authoritarian systems. These two countries represent, respectively, the world’s most populous autocracy and democracy.

On the basis of their rating of each country as above or below the scale midpoint (5.5), respondents are classified into one of four patterns: (1) they rate China as authoritarian and India as authoritarian; (2) they see China as authoritarian and India as democratic; (3) they label China democratic and India authoritarian; and (4) they call China and India also democratic. Of these four, just those choosing the second pattern are held to be the *fully capable* of differentiating democratic and authoritarian regimes in the real world, while those holding the third pattern are the *fully incapable* of doing that.

For each of 12 East Asian countries, Table 4 reports the percentages falling into the four patterns. One notable finding concerns those who were *unable* to rate both countries accurately on the scale. In the four countries of China, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam, *the unable* constitute more than half the population. Even in the other eight countries, it is only small minorities, ranging from a low of 11 percent in the Philippines to a high of 23 percent in Korea, who were *fully capable* of correctly rating China as an autocracy and India as a democracy. In four of these eight countries, including Malaysia and Singapore, the *fully capable* are outnumbered by the *fully incapable*, those who rate China as a democracy and India as an autocracy.

Table 4. Patterns of Regime Differentiation among East Asians

	Authoritarian China/authoritarian India	Authoritarian China/democratic India	Democratic China/ authoritarian India	Democratic China/ democratic India	(No Answer)
Japan	57.7%	17.7%	2.6%	2.7%	19.3%
South Korea	46.1	22.7	7.4	8.2	15.6
Taiwan	43.8	13.8	1.7	3.0	37.8
Mongolia	29.8	12.6	8.4	13.6	35.6
Indonesia	11.6	6.0	8.4	22.2	51.8
Philippines	29.6	11.2	15.4	28.2	15.7
Malaysia	34.3	11.4	20.2	18.5	15.6
Thailand	13.0	6.6	7.7	17.0	55.7
Singapore	22.2	18.5	20.0	37.8	1.5
China	8.1	3.2	13.2	13.4	62.1
Vietnam	6.3	3.6	8.6	31.4	50.1

Cambodia	21.8	16.3	11.2	26.0	24.7
(pooled)	25.7	10.9	10.1	16.8	36.6

Note: The bolded pattern represents the correct response. Source: 2005-8 Asian Barometer surveys.

As a further test of regime differentiation, the second wave of the Asian Barometer surveys asked citizens in Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, and Mongolia to rate the present democratic system and the past authoritarian one on a scale where 1 means complete dictatorship and 10 means complete democracy. Scores above the scale midpoint indicate that a regime is viewed as democratic, while those below it refer to its being considered authoritarian. Only those who rated the present regime as a democracy and the past regime as an autocracy are considered *capable* of understanding the occurrence of democratic regime change.

Table 5 shows that in all four East Asian democracies, just a small majority of three-fifths or even less cognitively understands the democratic regime transition that occurred in their country. Decades after the transition to democracy from harsh authoritarian rule, as many as four in ten citizens of East Asian third-wave democracies had not become able to recognize the democratic regime change taken place in their own country.

Table 5. The Capacity of East Asians to Differentiate the Regimes of the Authoritarian Past and the Democratic Present

Regimes		Third-wave Democracies			
Past	Present	Korea	Taiwan	Indonesia	Mongolia
Democracy	Authoritarian	6.6%	4.9%	7.8%	4.9%
Democracy	Democracy	17.9	11.3	21.9	12.6
Authoritarian	Authoritarian	13.5	12.0	9.4	17.8
Authoritarian	Democracy	59.2	58.0	49.4	60.4

Note: The fourth bolded response is the correct option. Source: 2005-8 Asian Barometer surveys

In summary, most people around the world do meet the *first condition* in their ability to conceptualize democracy. That is, they are conceptually aware of democracy and recognize it as a good system of government. In principle, too, they are capable of identifying and prioritizing its properties. Many of those conceptually capable, however, do not meet the *second condition*. That is, they are not able to discriminate between the practices of democracy and those of its alternatives. This raises the question of how well contemporary global citizenries really do understand democracy.

Informed Understanding

In short, *informed understanding of democracy* involves both the capacity to *identify* its essential characteristics and to accurately *distinguish* these features from the essential characteristics of authoritarian regimes. Analytically, however, it is neither possible nor desirable to identify and

consider all of the essential characteristics because they vary a great deal across space and time (Rose 2009). Rather, what matters is the power to focus on the most fundamental traits in order to identify the citizens who uphold an informed understanding of democracy and then to compare the distribution of such people throughout the world.

Thus I pose the following questions: What proportion of global citizens hold an informed understanding of democracy and how are they distributed throughout the globe? To explore this topic, I chose four questions from the 5th wave of the World Values Surveys conducted between 2005 and 2008. These questions asked respondents to assess the essentiality of (1) free and fair elections, (2) protection of civil liberties, (3) military intervention, and (4) intervention of religious authorities. While the first two are straightforward measures of democratic tenets, the last two are roundabouts in asking about conditions that are antithetical to the democratic tenets of citizen control of the military and separation of church and state.¹⁸

To identify those who possess an informed democratic understanding, I consider the two conditions or dimensions, which I have identified to make up this understanding. Using them together, I compose a four-fold typology.¹⁹ The first *identification* dimension concerns whether ordinary people are able to recognize the most fundamental of democratic and autocratic regime properties, respectively. The second *differentiation* dimension is whether they are able to evaluate the essentiality of those fundamental characteristics to democracy, thereby separating it from autocracy.

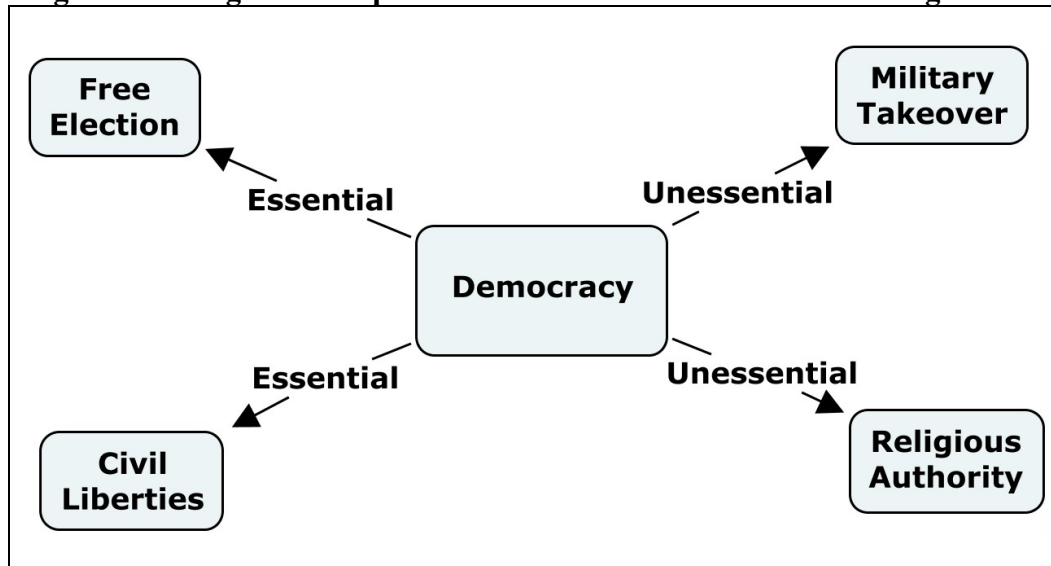
Table 6 illustrates how I conceptualize these four types. *The ill-informed* are those who can, despite being able to identify all the chosen regime characteristics of the two regime types, misunderstand one or more as unessential and/or essential to democracy. *The partially informed* are those who fail to recognize all the properties of both regime types, but do not have mistaken views of the significance to each regime type of those features they can identify. *The uninformed* are those who are unable not only to recognize but also to evaluate all of these features. *The well-informed* are those who accurately assess all of the features of each of the two regimes.

Table 6. Four Types of Democratic Understanding

		Capacity to Identify regime properties fully	
		No	Yes
Capacity to differentiate regime properties accurately	No	<i>Uninformed</i>	<i>Ill-Informed</i>
	Yes	<i>Partially informed</i>	<i>Well-informed</i>

Figure 8 characterizes the *well-informed* in terms of the four chosen characteristics. They recognize all those as relevant to the political world in which they live, and evaluate each of them correctly. Specifically, they evaluate elections and civil liberties as *essential* to democracy, and they consider military takeover and religious intervention in the political process as *unessential* to it.

Figure 8. A Cognitive Map of Informed Democratic Understanding



Source: Cho (2013).

Table 7 extends these analyses to report how regional publics vary across four distinct types of democratic understanding, which take into account the capacity to recognize the regime characteristics and evaluate them correctly (see below). Those in the *ill-informed* pattern are the most prevalent across the world with a plurality of 48 percent. They are followed by the *well-informed*, who constitute just 39 percent of all surveyed populations, the *partially informed*, who represent 9 percent, and the *uninformed*, who constitute just 4 percent. When the *uninformed*, the *partially informed*, and the *ill-informed* are combined to form a group we label the *poorly informed*, they constitute a solid majority of 62 percent of global citizenries.

To what extent is the prevalence of *poorly informed* citizens a global phenomenon? Or, alternatively, is it confined to certain cultural zones? Table 7 compares seven cultural zones in terms of the four types of democratic conceptions.²⁰ Of these zones, the long-democratic West is the only zone where the *well-informed* constitute a majority (59%) and the *poorly informed* a minority (34%). In all six other zones, the *poorly informed* constitute substantial or large majorities ranging from about three-fifths in East Asia (59%) and the once-communist West (60%) to nearly 90 percent in South Asia (88%), 81 percent in the Muslim, and a still substantial percentage, 79% in Sub-Saharan Africa. In Latin America, the region with the second-longest period of democratic political experience, two-thirds (67%) of its citizens remain *poorly informed* about democracy, while only a third (33%) is *well informed* about it.

Table 7. Regional Differences in Understanding Democracy

Region	Types of Democratic Understanding			
	Well-Informed	Ill-informed	Partially Informed	Uninformed
Dem. West	59.4%	34.2%	4.7%	1.8%
Eastern Europe	40.3	40.0	14.9	4.8
East Asia	41.5	35.5	17.6	5.5
South Asia	12.5	77.4	5.6	4.5
Latin America	33.2	53.7	8.7	4.4
Muslim	19.0	65.3	9.8	5.8
Africa	20.8	65.3	8.2	5.8
(pooled)	38.5	48.2	9.2	4.1

Source: 2005-8 World Values Surveys.

The prevalence of *the poorly informed* in all regions outside the old-democratic West indicates that learning about the essential characteristics of democracy and those of its alternatives is, at best, a very long-term evolutionary process, which can take many generations (Shi 2015). It also appears to indicate that people come to learn about democracy through its practices, as institutional learning theory holds (Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1999; Mishler and Rose 2007; Rose and Shin 2001). The concentration of the largest majorities of the poorly informed in the three least developed regions of the world, on the other hand, suggests that the forces of social-economic modernization also contribute to the process of democratic learning.

Another notable feature of Table 7 is the large amount of variation in the distribution of the *ill-informed* or misinformed across the world. In four cultural zones—South Asia, the Muslim zone, Southern Africa, and Latin America, those misinformed constitute a majority of the adult population (79%, 65%, 65% and 53%, respectively). In the three other zones, this group comprises minorities ranging from 34 percent in the fully democratized West and 36 percent in East Asia to 40 percent in post-communist Europe. Such large interregional differences raise the question of what makes citizens in some regions more misinformed about democracy than are populations in other regions. A growing body of the literature on democratic conceptions says little about this important question.

A more crucial question is why nearly half the world's people remain *ill-informed* about democracy. Are they unable to *identify* its essential characteristics, or are they unable to *differentiate* democratic regime characteristics from non-democratic regime characteristics? To explore this question, Table 8 introduces three new categories culled from the survey data. These are *the ill-informed*, including the *democratic misconceivers*, who are unable to identify or differentiate the essential characteristics of democracy, the *authoritarian misconceivers*, who are unable to differentiate or separate the characteristics of non-democracy from those of democracy,

and the *full misconceivers*, who are unable to identify and differentiate both democratic and authoritarian regime characteristics.

Table 8. The Three Types of Democratic Misunderstanding

Region	Types of Democratic Understanding		
	Authoritarian misconceivers	Democratic misconceiver	Full misconceiver
Democratic West	18.4%	11.6%	6.0%
Eastern Europe	29.3	9.6	5.9
East Asia	23.8	10.5	4.7
South Asia	54.6	13.4	13.9
Latin America	33.4	13.5	11.2
Muslim	52.6	9.7	9.6
Africa	42.3	14.6	14.2
(pooled)	31.9	11.9	8.6

Source: 2005-8 World Values Surveys.

The most notable feature of Table 8 is the prevalence of *authoritarian misconceivers* (32%), who are nearly three times more numerous than *democratic misconceivers* (12%), and over three times more numerous than *full misconceivers* (9%). In all cultural regions of the world, moreover, they constitute the most numerous grouping. In two regions, South Asia and the Muslim zone, *authoritarian misconceivers* amount to majorities. Even in the long democratic West, this type of misconceivers represents nearly one-fifth (18%) of the respondents. Throughout the world, it is ubiquitous, even if surprising, that such large portions of ordinary citizens mistakenly identify authoritarian political practices as being those of democratic rule. Given the worldwide prevalence of this perception, this practice of misconceiving democracy is most commonplace in three regions—South Asia, the Muslim zone, and black Africa, where Islam is the most dominant religion. This raises the question of whether culture has more to do with the second condition of informed democratic understanding than either the legacies of authoritarian rule or socioeconomic modernization.

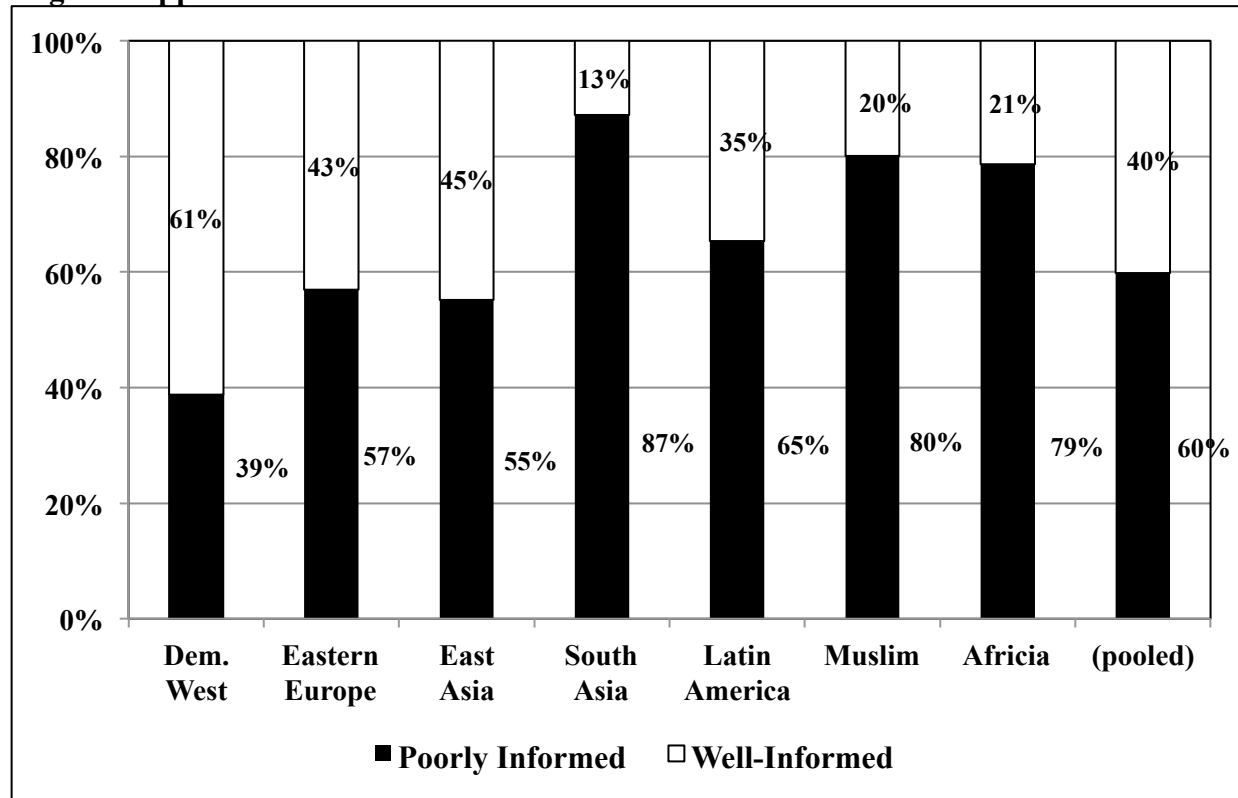
Informed Support

Larry Diamond (2008, 2013) and many other proponents of the global democratization thesis declare that democracy is universally approved as a system of government. They also proclaim that democracy has become the most favored system of government by large majorities in all regions of the world. Underlying their claims is an assumption that these majorities of avowed democrats are well informed supporters of democracy. The analysis of the WVS presented above directly challenges the validity of this assumption that ordinary people express

support for democracy with an accurate and full understanding of what constitutes it and what distinguishes it from its alternatives.

Can all the avowed supporters of democracy be branded well-informed supporters of democracy, and can they truly be so categorized as proponents of the global democratization thesis assume? To explore this question, Figure 9 compares across seven cultural zones the percentages of *the well-informed* and *poorly informed* among those who expressed support for democracy. *The poorly informed* constitute majorities of avowed democrats in every single region except for the democratized West. They are most numerous in the Middle East (82%), followed by South Asia (81%), Africa (78%), Latin America (64%), East Asia (60%), and Eastern Europe (54%). Only the democratized West has a majority of *well informed* democratic supporters (62%). When all seven zones are considered together, more than three out of five (62%) avowed democrats are either *uninformed* or *misinformed* about the essential characteristics of democracy and its alternatives. In other words, most avowed supporters of democracy are *superficial supporters* who do not accurately understand its meaning.

Figure 9. The Distribution of the Poorly and Well-Informed among Avowed Democratic Regime Supporters

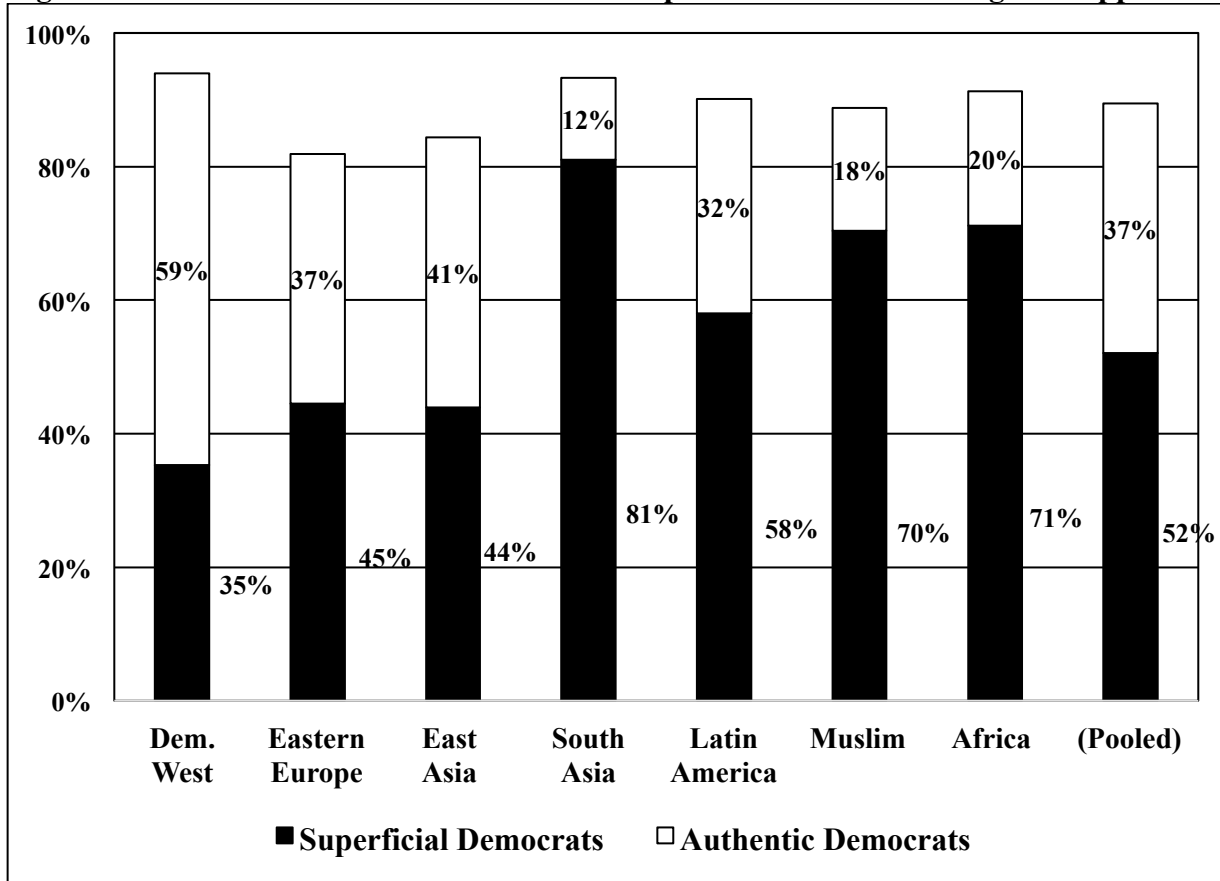


Source: 2005-8 World Values Surveys.

How common, then, is authentic support for democracy across the seven zones of the world that the WVS investigated? For each of these zones, Figure 10 reports the percentage of *authentic supporters*, that is, those who not only understand democracy fully and accurately but who also support it exclusively of its alternatives, such as military and civilian dictatorships. Such reliable and committed democratic supporters are prevalent only in the old-democratic West. In all six other regions, they form minorities, ranging from 12 percent in South Asia to 41

percent in East Asia. Most critically, there is a significant worldwide gap between citizens who, on the one hand, view democracy favorably and those who, on the other hand, *accurately* understand and *unconditionally* support it.²¹

Figure 10. The Distribution of Authentic and Superficial Democratic Regime Supporters



Source: 2005-8 World Values Surveys.

Evidently in the minds of contemporary global citizenries, democracy understood as a system of government, in which the masses participate and compete freely and fairly in the political process, is far from emerging as a *universally valued* system. Nor, in fact, is it emerging as the world's most preferred system of government. Contrary to the theses of global democratization and neo-modernization (Huntington 1996; Shi 2015), our analysis indicate that, instead, most people in the authoritarian and post-authoritarian worlds today appear to prefer a hybrid system of mixing democratic and authoritarian politics to a liberal democracy.²²

Concluding Remarks

How well do ordinary people around the world understand democracy? Do they avow support for it with an accurate understanding of what constitutes it? Since the fall of the Berlin Wall more than two and a half decades ago, numerous public opinion surveys have monitored and

compared their reactions to democracy and democratization. As the above review of the literature testifies, analyses of these surveys have failed to address either of these important questions adequately. In an attempt to overcome the shortcomings of previous survey-based studies, this work proposed a two-dimensional notion of democratic knowledge, and thereby assessed the quality of avowed support for democracy, which is increasingly recognized in the literature as a global phenomenon.

As waves of regional barometer surveys have revealed, most people around the world are, indeed, aware of democracy either to the extent to which they can define it directly in their own words or indirectly by answering a variety of closed-ended questions. But they are not capable of fully comprehending the fundamental properties of democracy and autocracy. Nor are they capable of evaluating the essentiality or inessentiality of those properties to democracy accurately. As a result, those who meet the two fundamental conditions—identification and differentiation—of informed democratic understanding constitute a minority of contemporary global citizenries.

Among those who express support for democracy, moreover, as many as three-fifths are not capable of distinguishing the essential properties of democracy from those of authoritarian regimes. Only in the fully democratized West, do authentic or informed supporters of democracy constitute a majority. In all six other regions, large majorities or pluralities are superficial supporters who are likely to offer “lip service” to it.

In the authoritarian and post-authoritarian worlds in which a vast majority of global citizenries lives, it remains a common practice to recognize authoritarian rule as democracy and democratic regime change as a continuation of authoritarianism. In these worlds, moreover, “overt lip service” to democracy appears to be nearly as universal as it was more than a decade ago (Inglehart 2003). Obviously, an informed view of democracy has failed to take root in the minds of their citizens. Even after more than two decades of extensive efforts in the West to promote the global expansion of democracy (Carothers 2015), progress has been very slow in developing truly democratic political cultures outside Western nations.

For much of the world today, “democracy” represents little more than an appealing rhetorical political symbol voiced in regimes that still retain authoritarian practices. Until a great many superficial democrats who remain attached to those practices are transformed into genuine—unqualified and full—supporters of democracy, that is, citizens who meet both of the two conditions posited here as necessary components, it is premature to endorse any of the increasingly popular theses of global democratization that argue that democracy is emerging as a universal value (Diamond 2008; Sen 1999), and that maintain that this regime type is becoming “the only political game in town” (Diamond 2013; Welzel and Inglehart 2009; Welzel 2013; see also Linz and Stepan 1996; Shin and Wells 2005). It is also premature to treat all those who express support for democracy as genuine democrats, as is often implied in survey-based studies.

In a nutshell, ordinary people around the world are yet to become democrats in the true sense. Most of them remain regime hybridizers, those who embrace the virtues of both democracy and autocracy (Carrion 2008; Shi 2015; Shin 2015). What they truly desire is not the democratization of their authoritarian political systems in toto. Instead, their true desire is to hybridize or combine the various known practices of democratic and autocratic politics.²³ Contrary to what Francis Fukuyama (1989, 2014) has repeatedly claimed over the past 25 years, therefore, liberal democracy is not likely to stand at “the end of History.”

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End Notes

¹ Acknowledgements: The author is very grateful to Russ Dalton and Dorie Solinger for the extensive comments and suggestions they kindly made on an early version of this paper. He would also like to thank Youngho Cho for preparing figures and tables.

² The number of democracy has increased to 125 in 2014 from about 40 in 1974 (see Freedom House 2015; Moller and Skaaning 2013). This figure of new democracies is significantly lower than Diamond's (2008) estimate of more than 90. For different methods of estimation, see Welzel (2013, 265-67) and Strand *et al.* (2013).

³ Some of these surveys, like Gallup International Global Surveys, Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, and the World Values Surveys, compare mass orientations to democracy across all the regions of the world. The Afrobarometer, the Americasbarometer, the Arab Barometer, the Asian Barometer, the Latino Barometer, the New Europe Barometer, and other regional barometers, in contrast, focus on the distinctive and shifting patterns of the political culture within a single region. Still other surveys, like the Korea Democracy Barometer and Jordanian "State of Democracy" surveys, seek to unravel the dynamics of cultural democratization occurring within a single country.

⁴ According Gerring (1999), differentiation is one of the criteria that make a good concept.

⁵ According to Cho's (2013) and Shin's (2012) analyses of the fifth wave of the World Values surveys reveal that contemporary global citizenries are far less capable of differentiating democracy from its alternatives than of identifying its properties.

⁶ These terms include chaos, corruption, violence, and inefficiency.

⁷ Diamond (1999, 8-13) offers a detailed account of what distinguishes liberal democracy from electoral democracy.

⁸ The late Tianjian Shi (2014) proposes a new theory of culture, which traces the genesis of divergent conceptions of democracy among the Chinese to the norms defining their self-interests and relations to political and other authorities. This work offers one of the last decade's most original contributions to the study of political culture, and most credible alternatives to the neo-modernization theory of liberal democratization, which a growing number of scholars in the West have recently advocated (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Welzel 2013).

⁹ One of the eight Millennium Development Goals is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.

¹⁰ Lu (2013, 121-122) offers a detailed account of the historical backgrounds to the development of these four sets of measures.

¹¹ In the Jordanian surveys, respondents were asked about what they think must be present in order to make a country a democracy (Braizat 2010).

¹² These democracies are Austria, Japan, Spain, and the United States.

¹³ When all ten regime characteristics, including two authoritarian ones, were taken into account, a larger majority of 77 percent rated more than 5 of them as essential to democracy.

¹⁴ A similar analysis of the 2012 ESS reveals that all the 19 regime characteristics scored above the scale midpoint where scores of 0 and 10 indicate, respectively, "not all important for democracy" and "extremely important for democracy". As in the WVS, a solid majority (55%) rated all or most of these characteristics as important for democracy.

¹⁵ On the 11-point scale, the freedom for every citizen to express political views, and the freedom for the media to criticize the government, scored 8.44 and 8.23, respectively. The courts' equal treatment of all citizens, and the government's protection of all citizens against poverty, registered significantly higher scores of 9.21 and 8.68.

¹⁶ The latest third wave of the Asian Barometer Surveys conducted in 12 East Asian countries shows that majorities of their citizens do not hold a procedure-based conception of democracy, which most political scientists do. Huang (2014) and Lu (2013) explore the reasons behind the predominant status of substance-based understanding of democracy among East Asians.

¹⁷ Schedler and Sarsfield (2007) report that a majority of Mexicans rejects the core principles of liberal democracy.

¹⁸ Factor analysis of these four items confirms that the first and second pairs of the four items represent two distinct dimensions of political orientations, as theorized here.

¹⁹ Unlike Norris' (2011) index of enlightened democratic knowledge and Welzel's (2013) index of the liberal democratic notion, the proposed typology takes into account both qualitative and quantitative variations in citizen understanding of democracy.

²⁰ The seven zones are created by collapsing Inglehart and Welzel's (2005) five Western zones into the two zones of the old-democratic West and the former communist West. A more detailed account of cultural zones can be found in Welzel (2013, 25-33).

²¹ The aforementioned analysis of the fourth round of Afrobarometer surveys reveals that only 6 percent of Southern Africans are well-informed and unqualified supporters of democracy, although 83 percent are generally in favor of it as a system of government.

²² A multi-level and multi-dimensional analysis of support for democracy among East Asians reveals that unqualified and full supporters of democracy constitute a small minority of 8 percent, while a large majority of 68 percent favors some type of a hybrid system (Shin 2015).

²³ Bell (2015) examines the Chinese model of political system from this perspective of hybridization.