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In Focus

Asian Barometer Survey

East Asia Wrestles With Questions of Trust and Democracy

Democracies Under Stress: The Dwindling Public Trust in Asian Political Institutions

By Yu-tzung Chang,
Mark Weatherall
& Jack Wu

Political institutions are central to properly functioning democracies, in part because they move political systems away from the whims of individual rulers and vested interests that aren't accountable under the norms and procedures of a democracy.

Trust in those institutions would therefore also seem to be central. But as Yu-tzung Chang, Mark Weatherall and Jack Wu explain, trust in political institutions in Asia's democracies is on the decline. What gives?

TRUST in political institutions has been widely used as an indicator of political support for a regime at the institutional level.¹ To function effectively, democracies rely on a myriad of public institutions. The key democratic institutions empower citizens to exercise their political rights and put the principle of horizontal accountability and popular (vertical) accountability into practice. The governing quality of a democratic system depends on the functioning of key public institutions. Democracy also allows for the existence of a public space outside of government. The existence of this public space means that the government no longer has a monopoly on public decision making. Diverse social actors can organize to advance their own agendas and interests, ensuring a more pluralist form of public debate and policy-making. In addition, an effective and accountable civil service and politically neutral armed services are both necessary to democratic governance. Perhaps the most distinctive public institutions in modern democracies are political parties, which are expected to aggregate and mediate diverse interests, as well as to form governments. Although parties are, of course, political actors, strictly speaking they are free associations that are formed in the public sphere.

Trust in political institutions is a very important issue to emerging democracies in East Asia. Low levels of institutional trust will prompt citizens to withdraw from the political process and over time erode the foundation of democratic legitimacy. East Asian emerging democracies must not only compete with former authoritar-

¹ Ola Listhaug and Matti Wiberg. 1995. "Confidence in Political and Private Institutions." In *Citizens and the State*, eds. H. Klingemann and D. Fuchs. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Author Miller and Ola Listhug. 1999. "Political Performance and Institutional Trust." In *Critical Citizens*, ed. Pippa Norris. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

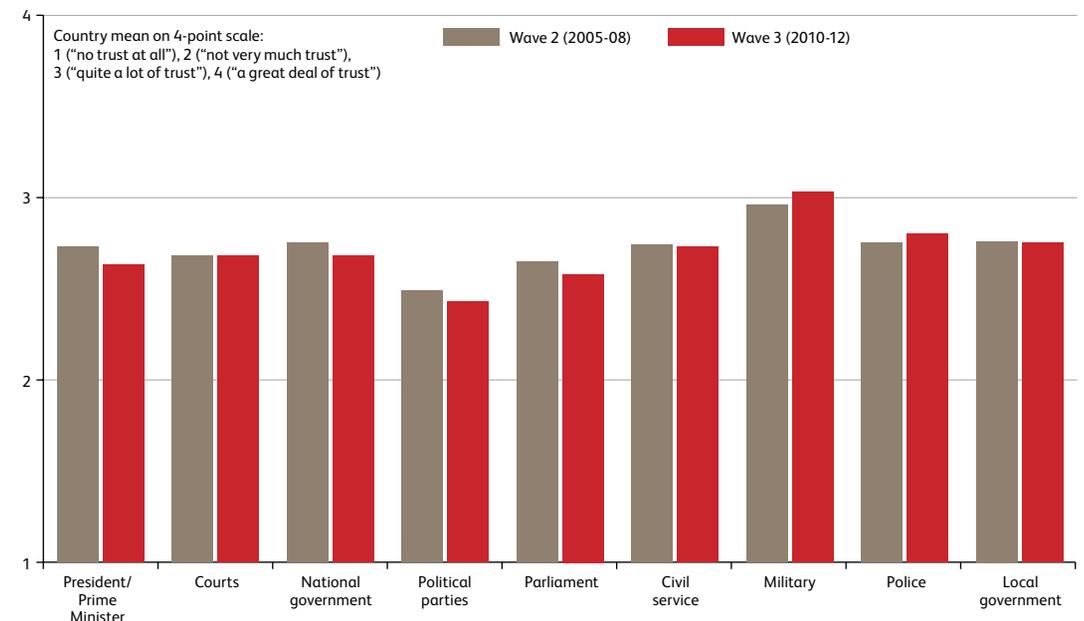
² Our analysis are data from the second and third wave of the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS). Second wave surveys were conducted from 2005 to 2008 (the Philippines and Vietnam 2005; Taiwan, Thailand, Mongolia, Singapore, South Korea and Indonesia 2006; Japan, Malaysia and Hong Kong 2007; China 2007 and 2008; Cambodia 2008). Third wave surveys were

conducted from 2010 to 2012 (the Philippines, Taiwan, Mongolia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam 2010; Malaysia, China, Japan, South Korea and Indonesia 2011; Hong Kong and Cambodia 2012). In each country, the adult population was randomly sampled according to the probability proportion to size principle; interviews were conducted face-to-face. Please see the ABS website, www.asianbarometer.org, for more details.

³ Christian W. Haerpfer and Kseniya Kizilova. 2014. "Support for Democracy in Postcommunist Europe and Post-Soviet Eurasia." In *The Civic Culture Transformed: From Allegiant to Assertive Citizens*, eds. Russell J. Dalton and Christian Welzel. New York: Cambridge University Press, Pp. 158-189.

FIGURE 1 TRUST IN MAJOR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS IN RESPONDENT'S COUNTRY

Source: Asian Barometer Survey Waves 2 (2006-08) and 3 (2010-12)



ian regimes that performed well in the memories of many citizens, they must also compete with efficient, contemporary authoritarian or semi-authoritarian neighbors. In recent years, citizens of emerging democracies in Asia have become disappointed and mistrustful toward their government and politicians, indicating that performance of current democratic institutions are unable to live up to the expectations of citizens and respond effectively to their demands.

Witnessing this trend, we aim to understand if this is a sign of democratic maturing or an alarming symptom of a burgeoning anti-democratic undercurrent. This article tries to answer these questions by looking at data from two waves of the Asian Barometer Survey.²

DWINDLING TRUST IN POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

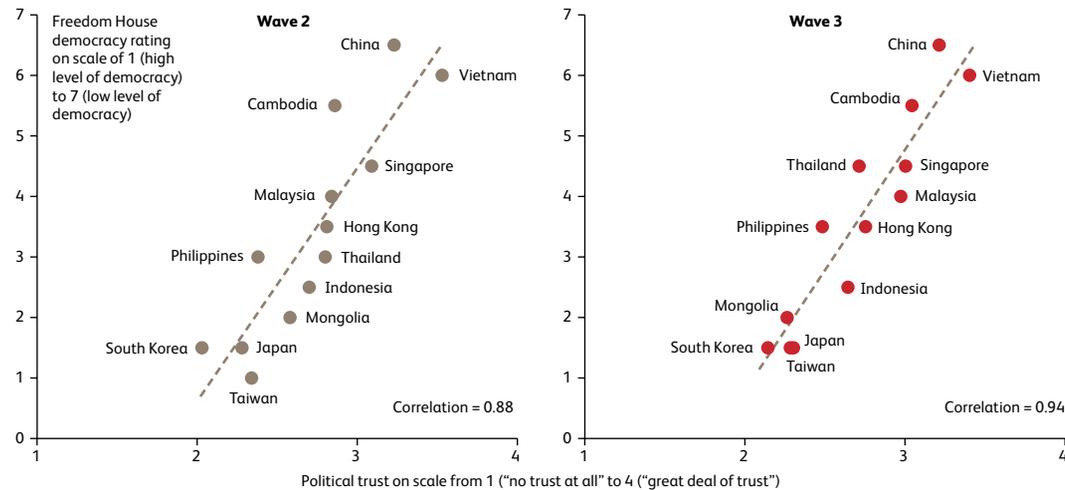
Previous studies on the level of political trust in political institutions have tended to focus on the executive, legislative and judicial branches, as well as some core components of the state apparatus such as the bureaucracy, the military and the police. Few studies have looked at political parties and social groups that play a critical mediating role between the government and the people.³ The Asian Barometer Survey developed a more comprehensive framework, asking respondents to say how much trust they placed in nine institutions that perform essential functions in a democratic system. The results, as reported in Figure 1 above, reveal both the strengths and

4 When we calculate the region's average, our data is weighted according to sampling order and to ensure even sample sizes, eliminating differences caused by different sample sizes in each country.

5 The degree of trust in institutions was scored as followed: a great deal=4, quite a lot=3, not very much=2, none at all=1. We then produced a value for the average trust in each institution. Overall political trust is the weighted total of all trust items.

FIGURE 2 CORRELATION BETWEEN DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL TRUST

Source: Asian Barometer Survey Waves 2 (2006-08) and 3 (2010-12)



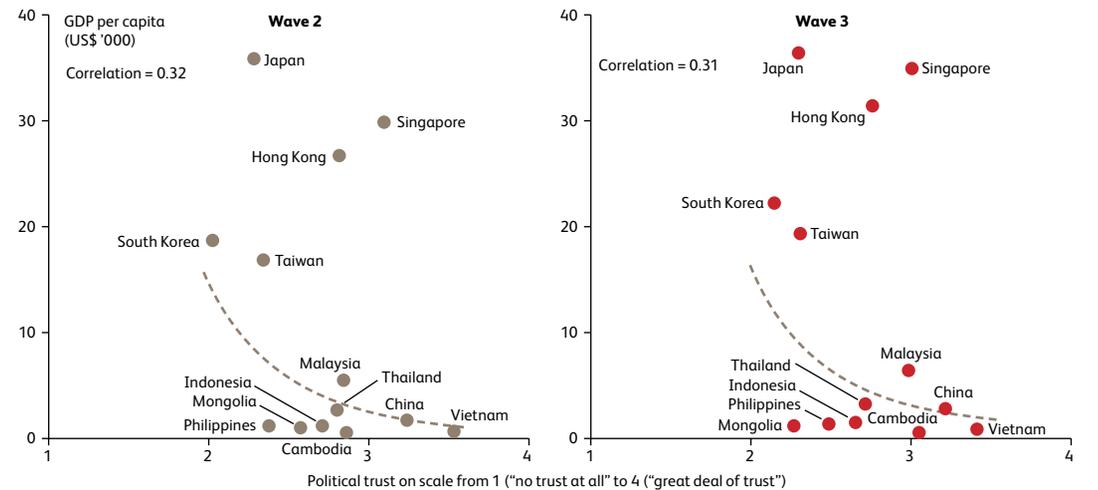
6 Yu-tzung Chang, Yun-han Chu and Chong-Min Park. 2007. "Authoritarian Nostalgia in Asia." *Journal of Democracy*, 18(3): 66-80.

7 Larry Diamond. 1999. *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

8 Hans-Dieter Klingemann. 2014. "Dissatisfied Democrats: Democratic Maturation in Old and New Democracies" in *The Civic Culture Transformed: From Allegiant to Assertive Citizens*, eds. Russell J. Dalton & Christian Welzel. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 116-157.

FIGURE 3 CORRELATION BETWEEN GDP PER CAPITA AND INSTITUTIONAL TRUST

Source: Asian Barometer Survey Waves 2 (2006-08) and 3 (2010-12)



In Focus: Asian Barometer Survey

the weaknesses of Asia's emerging political systems as seen by their citizens.⁴ Results from two waves of the Asian Barometer Survey carried out between 2005 and 2011 show that trust in political institutions in Asia is relatively low on a four-point scale, with 2.5 as the mid-point.⁵ We found similar distributions in the two survey waves, but with a trend toward dwindling trust. Aside from a slight increase in trust in the military and the police between the two waves of the survey, we found a stagnation or decline in trust, especially for the institutions of representative democracy, including the president or prime minister, central government, political parties and parliament. Most respondents dismissed the trustworthiness of what are arguably the two key institutions of representative democracy — political parties and parliament. On the positive side, respondents saw the new democracies as endowed with a trustworthy military, police, local governments and civil service, in that descending order — all key parts of an effective state. Why is public trust in the key institutions of representative democracy in decline? First, many of the region's democratic regimes are endowed with the burden of authoritarian nostalgia and few of the region's former authoritarian regimes have been thoroughly dis-

credited. Moreover, many of Asia's new democracies have found their performance hampered by grave governance challenges flowing from political strife, partisan bickering, recurring scandals, sluggish economic growth and uncertain economic outlooks.⁶

We will gain more insights as we examine individual countries' details, to which we now turn.

DEMOCRACY, DEVELOPMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL TRUST

The legitimacy of the democratic regime depends on the effective functioning of its key institutions. If the public is disappointed with their performance and withdraws its confidence from these institutions, this will adversely affect the public's support for the regime as a whole.⁷ The effective functioning of democratic institutions also depends on the spontaneous participation of willing ordinary citizens in the political process. The presences of a large number of disenchanted and disaffected citizens will result in a decay of political institutions. The Asian Barometer Survey found that the region's democratic regimes have suffered from a very low level of regime support compared to non-democratic regimes (see the first In Focus essay in this issue). The dwindling

public trust in key institutions is probably one of the major reasons for the disparaging findings.

Figure 2 reveals a high level of correlation between the level of democratic development and institutional trust, with correlation coefficients over the two waves of 0.88 and 0.94, respectively. In other words, the more democratic a country is according to the Freedom House rating, the lower the level of institutional trust. Conversely, the less democratic the country, the higher the level of institutional trust. In South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and Mongolia, which are the highest-rated liberal democratic countries in East Asia, we find exceptionally low levels of institutional trust. In contrast, Mainland China, Vietnam and Cambodia, which receive the lowest rating on the Freedom House score in the region, have very high overall levels of institutional trust.

Should we be alarmed by low levels of political trust within Asia's democracies? The traditional view is that they threaten democracy. However, a new theory has emerged challenging this view. Beginning in the late 1960s, various protest movements emerged in Western countries. At the time, scholars believed this was due to the inherent contradictions in capitalist democracies. However, beginning in the 1990s, scholars began to

recognize that political distrust or criticism may not be a bad thing for democracy. In fact, the rise of critical citizens or dissatisfied democrats actually helps the deepening of democracy.⁸ Pippa Norris points out that greater criticism of democratic institutions is a positive development that actually strengthens democratic governments.⁹ William Mishler and Richard Rose find that excessive trust in the political system may not be a good thing. While democracy requires trust, it also requires active citizens who are willing to challenge their governments.¹⁰ Pierre Rosanvallon argues that tension and conflict cannot be avoided in genuine democracies. Since distrust has existed in all democracies, citizens use various constitutional and extra-constitutional measures to exercise control over the behavior of representative government. Rosanvallon refers to this tradition as "counter-democracy," meaning not an opposition to democracy, but a long-term distrust of democracy that aims to compensate for the weaknesses of representative democracy.¹¹ Therefore, we should not be too worried about the low levels of institutional trust in democracies, and instead view this phenomenon as a driving force behind the deepening of democracy.

At the same time, our finding on the relation-

9 Pippa Norris. 1999. "Introduction: The Growth of Critical Citizens?" In *Critical Citizens: Global Supportive for Democratic Government*, ed. Pippa Norris. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 1-30. Pippa Norris. 2011. *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

10 Mishler, William and Richard Rose. 1997. "Trust, Distrust and Skepticism: Popular Evaluations of Civil and Political Institutions in Post-Communist Societies." *The Journal of Politics* 59: 418-451.

11 Rosanvallon, Pierre. 2008. *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

12 Ryan Kennedy. 2010. "The Contradiction of Modernization: A Conditional Model of Endogenous Democratization." *Journal of*

Politics, 72(3): 785-798. Adam Przeworski, Michael E. Alvarez, Jose Antonio Cheibub, and Fernando Limongi. 2000. *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Wellbeing in the World, 1950-1990*, pp. 78-141. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

FIGURE 4 CORRELATION BETWEEN AGE AND INSTITUTIONAL TRUST

Source: Asian Barometer Survey Waves 2 (2006-08) and 3 (2010-12)

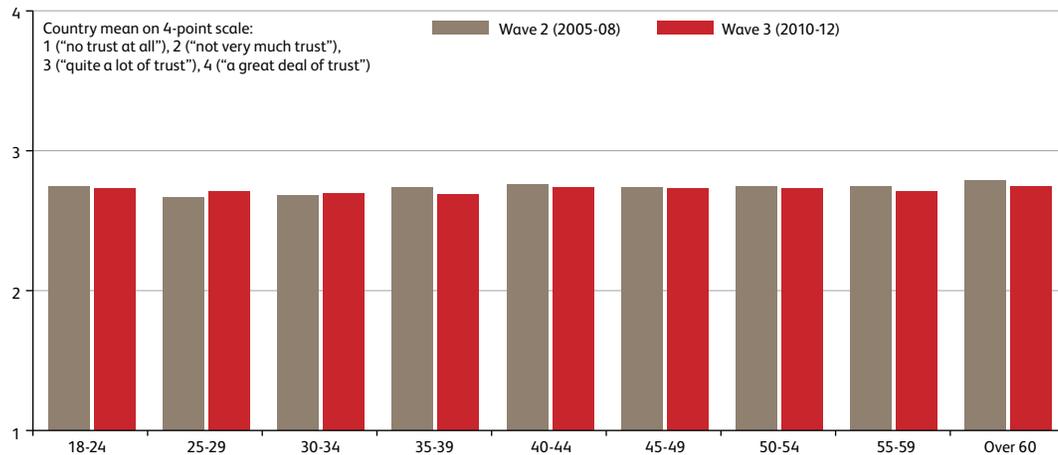
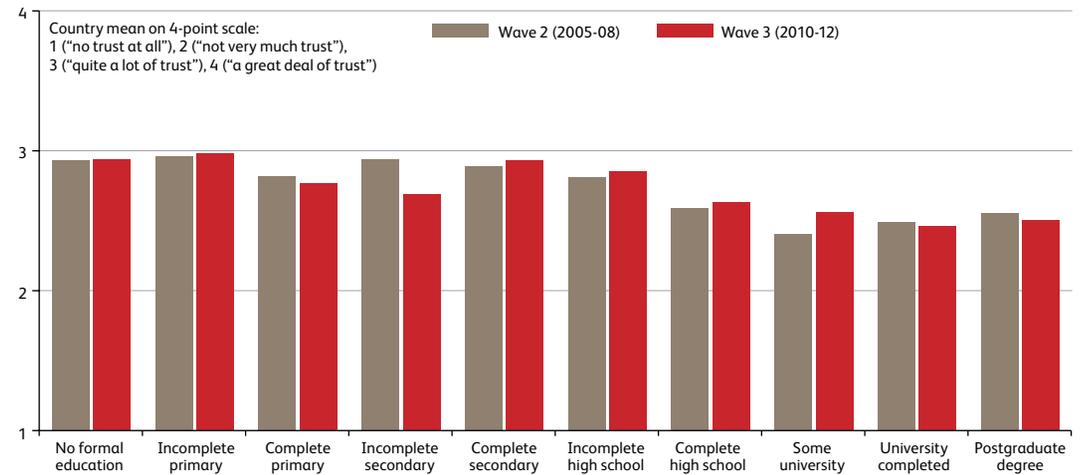


FIGURE 5 CORRELATION BETWEEN EDUCATION LEVEL AND INSTITUTIONAL TRUST

Source: Asian Barometer Survey Waves 2 (2006-08) and 3 (2010-12)



ship between economic development and institutional trust was somewhat unexpected. Figure 3 (see previous page) shows a slight negative relationship between economic development and institutional trust, but this was not statistically significant. The upper half shows a positive correlation in five countries with relatively high levels of economic development, meaning that higher levels of economic development lead to greater institutional trust. Therefore, long-term economic development produces greater political support in both democratic and authoritarian systems. However, the lower half shows that there was no significant relationship between economic development and institutional trust. This means that economic development must cross a certain threshold before it starts to have an effect on institutional trust. The above findings provide firm evidence regarding previous debates about the relationship between economic development and democratization.¹²

AGE AND EDUCATION

Based on the Western experience, the formation of critical citizens or dissatisfied democrats is associated with continuous increase in "demand" for democracy. When citizens have high expecta-

tions for democracy, this will influence their evaluation criteria. The long-term process of social development including increases in literacy, levels of education, and cognitive ability increases citizens' expectations of democratic performance. These phenomena can be observed through variations between different ages and levels of education. Figure 4 shows there is a correlation between age and institutional trust. Older people have higher levels of institutional trust, especially for those over 55 years old, while younger people have lower levels of institutional trust, especially for the 25-35 age group. However, surprisingly, the 18-24 age group were located somewhere in the middle. People in this group may still be in school, so this finding may be due to their lack of social experience and limited exposure to news and information about politics and government.

Level of education and institutional trust have a high degree of negative correlation (see Figure 5). Higher levels of education are associated with less institutional trust; the lower the education level, the greater the institutional trust. This may be because education influences an individual's political knowledge and political sophistication. When a great majority of citizens with high education lose trust in the core institutions of a democ-

racy, there is a danger than they will become more cynical or disengaged from mainstream politics, hampering democratic governance.

ASIAN DEMOCRACIES: NOT EXCEPTIONAL

The effective functioning of democratic institutions depends on the capacity of ordinary people to participate in the political process and on popular confidence in the country's political leaders and in various institutions of state and society. Over the last two waves of the Asian Barometer Survey, the levels of institutional trust were not high, and appeared to be dwindling across the region. In particular, many citizens withdrew their confidence from some of the core institutions of representative democracy, such as political parties and legislatures. While some of the latest literature on political trust cautions us not to draw pessimistic conclusions from these findings, they suggest that a dosage of public distrust sometimes is conducive to the deepening of democratic reform. The evidence presented in this article also shows that levels of institutional trust were lower among younger and more highly educated citizens. These findings are consistent with the experiences in Western countries. In other words, East Asia is not an exception.

However, we should not be overly complacent either. Unlike Western democracies, some of the young democracies in the region remain fragile and are lacking a robust foundation of legitimacy. The region's geopolitical and cultural soil does not overwhelmingly favor democracy. Variants of developmental authoritarianism remain a fierce competitor to democracy in the ideological arena. Incidents of democratic backsliding or total breakdown cannot be completely ruled out, particularly given how a majority of Thailand's urban middle class have turned their back on democracy and embraced military rule. If emerging democracies in Asia cannot improve the quality of democratic governance over the long term, their legitimacy will be called into question, their demonstration effect will be counterproductive to the region's democratic future, and under the worst-case scenario, they will be vulnerable to the attack of anti-democratic forces.

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In Focus: Asian Barometer Survey