Public Opinion and Democracy in Transitional Regimes

A comparative perspective

Edited by
Juliet Pietsch, Michael Miller and
Jeffrey A. Karp

ROUTLEDGE

Public Opinion and Democracy in Transitional Regimes

Despite the enthusiasm surrounding the Colour Revolutions and the Arab Spring, the world's share of democracies has stagnated over the past 15 years. The steady rise of China, Russia, and Iran has also led to warnings of a resurgence of 'authoritarian great powers', especially in light of the financial crisis centred in the USA and Western Europe. On the positive side, however, democracy remains remarkably popular as an ideal. In the Global barometer's most recent survey, two out of three respondents say democracy is their most favoured political system, including a majority in 49 of the 55 countries. Yet there is evidence, much expanded upon in this edited collection, that commitments to liberal democracy in practice are not as strong. Nominally pro-democratic citizens frequently favour limitations on electoral accountability and individual rights in the service of improved governance or economic growth. Further, there are rising concerns that many citizens, especially across the developing world, are turning away from democracy out of frustration with democratic performance. In contrast to many transitional regimes, the more established democracies appear to be losing support among their highly educated citizens. The contributions in this edited collection compare how democracy is understood and experienced in transitioning regimes and established democracies.

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Public Support for Democracy in Transitional Regimes[†]

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

Electoral Competition and Citizen Orientations Towards Democracy

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

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

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

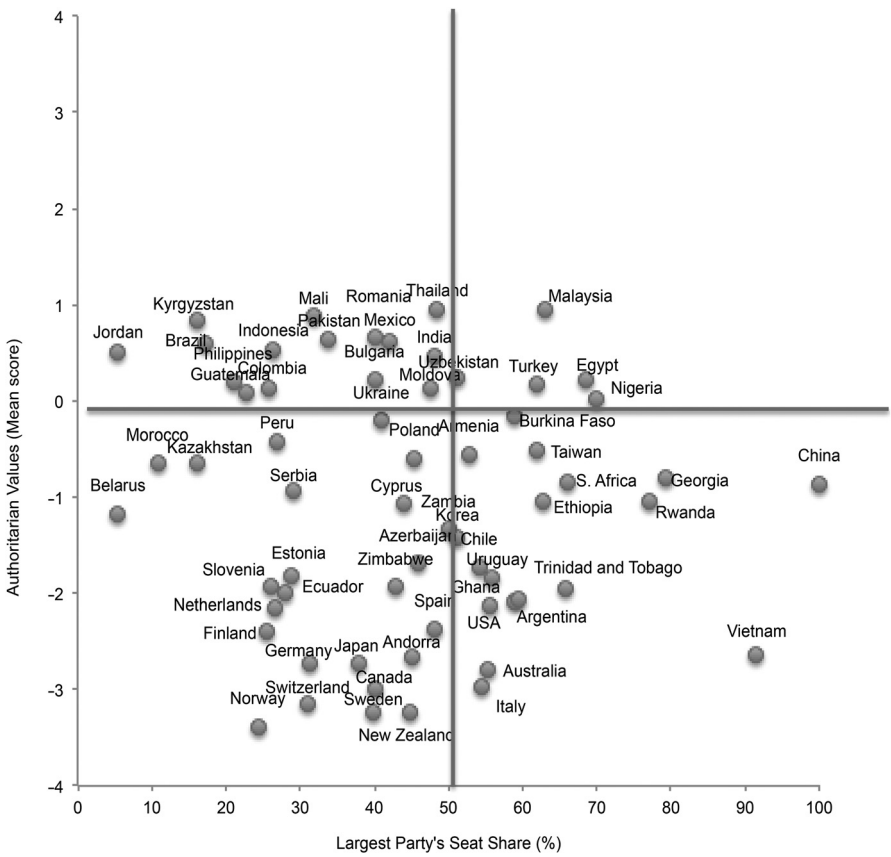

Figure 1. Authoritarian values by extent of party dominance in political system.

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

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

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

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

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