On May 25-26, the Taiwan Democracy Project (with support from the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in San Francisco) held its seventh annual conference entitled "How the Public Views Democracy and its Competitors in East Asia: Taiwan in Comparative Perspective.” The conference, co-sponsored by the Program for East Asia Democratic Studies at National Taiwan University, brought together leading political scientists from Taiwan and social scientists from a number of other Asian countries to examine the levels, trends, and causal determinants of support for democracy in Taiwan and throughout East Asia. The papers analyzed data from the recently completed third wave of the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS), with discussants including leading scholars of comparative politics and comparative public opinion globally.

The conference was structured in six panels of two or three papers each, arranged around cohesive themes. After the paper presentations, time was allotted for responses from discussants drawn from the participants, with additional time remaining left to group discussion and questions from the public.

Panel I. The Challenge of Consolidating Third-Wave Democracies in East Asia.

The first panel of the conference considered recent progress toward and challenges to democratic consolidation in Taiwan and other East Asian democracies. The paper by Jack Wu, Mark Weatherall, and Yu-tzung Chang used Larry Diamond's framework for measuring democratic consolidation in conjunction with all three rounds of ABS results to diachronically evaluate the extent of democratic consolidation in Taiwan. The authors found growing support for democracy on many of the indicators, including a significant increase in satisfaction with democracy, support for liberal democratic norms, and rejection of non-democratic alternatives. While Taiwan is making progress on these “belief”-based metrics, practical support has not fared as well. As a result, Wu et al. describe Taiwan as a case of “democracy backward,” where electoral democracy emerged before certain
relevant institutional elements had fully developed. Nevertheless, the trends over time are encouraging in many respects.

A paper by Yutzung Chang, Yun-han Chu, and Larry Diamond worked to conceptualize and measure public perceptions of democratic legitimacy across the ten-year time span of the three waves of the ABS. Most global barometers use two measures to measure perceptions of democratic legitimacy, one a direct measure of support for democracy and the other an indirect measure of support looking at liberal democratic values. The ABS adds a third, inverse measure of support: the rejection of authoritarian alternatives. The survey finds that for the vast majority of East Asian systems these indicators are not good. The authors reach the tentative conclusion that for East Asian citizens nothing is more important than the responsiveness of the government to their needs, and in this regard democratic governments do not necessarily fare better. The authors continued to discuss stronger control of corruption as one possible method for improving the situation in East Asia.

Chong-min Park’s paper compares the quality of governance in nine East Asian countries and the resulting implications for democratic legitimacy. Park found that the citizens in liberal democracies are much more critical of the performance of their governments, and thus public evaluation diverges sharply from expert assessment. This reflects the higher expectations of citizens in liberal democracies, or perhaps the fact that they are simply better informed about the goings-on of their political system. A correlation analysis uncovered that in the minds of people living in authoritarian regimes, the elements of democratic quality are more likely to be perceived as unrelated, while in liberal democracies they are strongly linked.

The following discussion addressed the relative importance of assessments from varying groups on the quality of democracy, with participants noting that while the public may not be as well-informed and therefore not the best judge, ultimately they are the stakeholders in a democracy and their views should be taken seriously. Larry Diamond suggested the ABS should work in the future to interrogate rising expectations and skepticism among the public, and to identify the characteristics of citizens who are simultaneously supportive of democratic norms and critical of their regimes.

Panel II. East Asian Conception of Democracy: Procedural vs. Substantive

The second panel began with a paper from Lu Jie regarding the demographics of varying conceptions of democracy. Lu's analysis of the data found that there is no substance for the hypothesis that fear drives the level of people saying they are satisfied with how democracy is performing.
Comparing a procedure-based understanding of democracy (as in Mongolia or the Philippines) to a substance-based conception (as in Taiwan, Japan, Thailand, and so on), Lu found the vast majority of variation to be attributable to within-society differences rather than cross-society differences. These results show that political context matters strongly with regards to public conceptions of democracy; thus, pooling observations may not be the best approach.

Min-hua Huang and Yun-han Chu measured how people support various political systems without overtly mentioning the “D-word” (democracy), acknowledging that even people within a country with a similar political experience might have different understandings of what constitutes democracy. The authors found a negative correlation between regime support and perceived economic progress; that is, as the democracy becomes stable diffuse regime support decreases, while also demonstrating that individuals less satisfied with their economic situation are likely to have a more procedural understanding of democracy.

Marta Lagos of the Latinobarometer responded as a discussant, reminding that polls are relatively shortsighted and measure people's behaviors and attitudes today rather than some deeper “values” or future outcomes. Reiterating the finding that the more you know about democracy the more critical you become, Lagos noted that such well-informed individuals are also “more democratic,” though they often want to retain traditional values. Discussion from participants brought up the central question demonstrated in cases such as China: is the theory true that economic development and growth alone will produce political change? There is also an issue regarding the lack of benchmarks since we have no similar surveys from established or “permanent” democracies: how varied are conceptions of democracy in those societies? The insight that context matters was expanded upon in concluding discussion, where Sandeep Shastri warned of the danger of a conceptual stretching of what constitutes democracy as well as the danger of conclusions being drawn from a single measure. The classification into liberal democracies, electoral democracies, and authoritarian regimes used by many studies for the ABS, Shastri commented, might sometimes pre-emptively define what conclusions may be drawn.

Panel III. Sources of Institutional Trust

Panel three addressed the sources (and inhibitors) of institutional trust using the ABS results. Eric Chang began with a paper on how corruption erodes institutional trust. Chang discussed how corruption inherently violates the fundamental principles of democracy by distorting the allocation of
public resources, turning public goods into private luxury. Several questions in the ABS were aimed directly at measuring values of trust for various institutions. Chang found that in Thailand more than half of the citizens have directly witnessed corruption, and indeed while corruption hurts citizen trust in Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand, it appeared to have no bearing at all in Mongolia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. He suggested the key to solving this puzzle is a focus on the market structure of corruption, evaluating the predictability of corruption around the world. Highly predictable corruption, in fact, has less of a negative impact on institutional trust because it is simply a better integrated aspect of the society and often acts as a simple, well-established transaction cost.

Feng-yu Lee presented her paper with Tse-Min Lin, a comparative study on institutional trust based on the theory of social capital. As social capital develops, it helps to build effective and efficient institutions, which in turn boosts people’s trust. Lin and Lee found that while objective assessments of government performance are correlated with institutional trust, subjective evaluations influenced by partisanship also matter. This necessarily leads us, the authors explained, to a somewhat pessimistic outlook. If institutional trust is subject to partisan projection, then there is a significant limit to what a government can do to improve trust by focusing on improved government performance. When governments suffer dramatic declines in political trust, it may be difficult to now if these are due to bad governance or simply increasing polarization among the electorate.

Ken’ichi Ikeda, similarly, discussed the relationship between social trust and institutional trust, focusing on cultural factors in East Asia. Ikeda began by posing a question: do so-called Asian cultural values bring about a different structure of social vs. institutional trust to that found in developed Western countries? Investigating the plausible routes from social trust to political participation, Ikeda used a hierarchical linear modeling approach to the ABS data to find that a stronger commitment to Asian traditional social values correlates to higher levels of generalized trust, and that in spite of the effects of a private-life cultural orientation, this promotes political participation.

Discussant Mike Bratton observed that while institutional trust is a strong predictor of support for democracy, it is not in and of itself a dimension of democracy. For Bratton, the survey results demonstrate that the personal experience of corruption is less systematically corrosive of institutional trust than previously perceived, though we still need a reliable indicator of such experience. Discussion then focused on the definition and measurement of experiences of corruption. Larry Diamond offered the thought experiment of two imagined countries, one where corruption permeates everything and and thus expectations of accountability and transparency are very low, as opposed to a country where corruption is largely under control, the institutions are stronger, and corruption is more visible because
it is regularly exposed by a vigorous and competitive free media. Although corruption is much lower in the second type of country, citizens of that country may perceive more corruption than citizens of the first type of country (particularly if there has been a recent scandal in the media). This underscores that public opinion surveys measure perceptions of corruption instead of actual corruption. Marta Lagos offered the example from the Latinobarometer of finding a benchmark for understanding, namely, finding an institution everyone trusts to act as a normalizing factor. In Latin America, Lagos explained, everyone trusts the firefighters, and so they can be used as a benchmark.

**Panel IV. Social Divide and the Issue of Political Inclusion (A)**

In panel four, Chin-en Wu and Feng-yu Lee presented their comparative analysis of the wealth divide and the issue of political inclusion, interrogating the differences between income groups with regard to political participation. The authors found that higher-income people in Asia tend to have higher political interest and are more likely to follow the news and discuss politics, but that they are less likely to trust officials, less likely to vote, and less likely to see the government as responsive to their needs. Higher incomes in this way are associated more with non-conventional political activities, though they don't endorse the system more and don't endorse democracy in general more.

The paper on gender and political inclusion from Alex Chang and Bridget Welsh looked at two primary dimensions on gender attitudes: the social, represented by a question about the sex preference for children, and political, represented by a question asking if women should play the same role in politics as men. They found high overall support for social gender equality, perhaps contrary to expectations. They also found a high level of support for political gender equality, with the surprising finding that Japan and Korea had the highest levels of such support. The question then becomes how one can explain the gaps between the reality of the political situations in Asia and the voiced support in the survey. A linear regression showed that individuals who have strongly democratic values tend to support gender equality, though social traditionalism and religion also have an influence.

Stephan Haggard and Don Lee looked at preferences for wealth redistribution, motivated by the growing salience of inequality in the region. They showed that class matters for preferences for redistribution, in much the manner one would expect, as does union membership. However, their regressions found a second-order effect wherein more democracy in a country dampened the mean preference for redistribution, accompanied by the counter-intuitive finding that in countries with a
higher Gini coefficient – that is, in more unequal societies – poor people are more likely to favor redistribution, but people in general feel that the rich and the poor are treated more equally.

In discussion following the papers, participants noted that in certain cases political participation is not just about the opportunity costs of participation but the rationality of it, insofar as higher income people, for example, may realize the incremental utility of “conventional” participation such as voting, while lower income people are more likely to be mobilized or compensated to vote. This tendency is made clear as well in the increased likelihood noted in Wu and Lee's paper for higher-income persons to sign a petition or directly contact an official. Yun-han Chu observed that it is hard to say for certain whether changes in the Gini coefficient (a common measure of inequality) for a country are a cause or a consequence of the extent to which citizens have a preference for redistribution.

Panel V. The Social Divide and the Issue of Political Inclusion (B)

The two papers in this fifth panel continued to address issues of political inclusion in relation to social concerns. A paper from Robert Albritton and Thawilwadee Bureekul focused on the urban-rural divide in Southeast Asia, suggesting that urban-rural distinctions may represent a significant portion of the within-society divergence on many of the aforementioned measures. The authors found that the urban-rural cleavage is a striking force determining a variety of attitudes related to democratic governance, including that urban residents tend to be very negative regarding support for democracy, trust in institutions, and perceived government control of corruption. Interestingly, rural citizens were found to have much higher support for liberal democratic values and regime support, which Albritton and Burkeekul explain by noting that urban citizens may be “critical citizens” while rural citizens are more likely to see government as an ally.

Saiful Mujani and R. William Liddle examined the generational gap by dividing survey respondents into generations in relevant countries. (They did so by establishing year-range periods of democratic versus non-democratic socialization (to age 10), based on the type of political system in place when a respondent was growing up). They found that in Taiwan, Japan, and Korea, democratic socialization shaped support for democratic values, while in Taiwan in particular it also shaped support for democratic preferences. In mainland China, the authors found that the pre-reform generation supports the existing regime more strongly than the reform generation, while in Singapore the pre-separation generation supports the existing regime more. In general, they found that the effects of institutional factors were more significant than generational factors. Furthermore, citizens of
autocracies support their regimes less critically, perhaps as a result of their early socialization within those regimes. This, they note, is an obstacle to change, but the space for reform is not closed, particularly insofar as regime performance matters the most for existing support and institutional trust.

Discussant Sandeep Shastri pointed out that it's very difficult to define clearly what constitutes the urban and the rural, considering the extent to which many citizens spend time in both and movement between the two is common. Larry Diamond cautioned, further, of the necessity to control for the influence of education differences in evaluating various measures along the urban-rural divide. Zheng-xu Wang suggested the possibility of using particular political events to define generations rather than ranges of years moving forward.

Panel VI. Sources of Regime Support: Democracy vs. Non-democratic Regimes

Panel six began with a paper by Doh Chull Shin engaging in a comparative analysis of the cultural sources of diffuse regime support. Shin operated from anthropologist Mary Douglas' two-dimensional schema to establish a typology of cultural preferences: individualism, egalitarianism, fatalism, and hierarchism. Evaluating these preferences with the ABS data, Shin found that in fact traditionally Confucian states exhibit less hierarchism and more egalitarianism as compared with non-Confucian states. In turn, the data show more individualism and less hierarchism in liberal democracies as compared to authoritarian states. While cultural factors are not the most important influence on diffuse regime support, they matter more in democracies and matter more for systemic support as opposed to institutional. Shin concluded that culture matters significantly in orienting citizens towards or away from the regime, and democracies experience significantly lower levels of support for cultural reasons beyond traditional explanations of citizens as “critical democrats.”

Yun-han Chu, Bridget Welsh, and Alex Chang then presented a paper examining various independent variables and their relationships to diffuse regime support. Their statistical analysis found the major factors underlying regime support to be equality, corruption, leadership satisfaction, authoritarian values, economic performance, political competition, and the rule of law. These represent a combination of government performance and governance variables, but interestingly do not include citizen politics or demographics. Nationalism has a forked impact: in authoritarian regimes higher nationalism is linked to greater regime support, while in liberal democracies it's linked to lower support. Electoral participation also showed a non-linear impact, where in one-party authoritarian states and liberal democracies higher participation is linked to greater regime support, but in electoral
authoritarian states it is linked to less, which the authors explained by saying people there are actually trying to make significant changes with their participation.

The final paper presented by Zheng-xu Wang and Ern-ser Tan looked to explain the resilience of hybrid and non-democratic regimes in East Asia. They find a general decline in regime support in non-democracies, showing that education contributes to this growing lack of support. Procedural understandings of democracy, as well, become more important as an effect of socioeconomic development. The question the authors raise is: do people just want good government or do they want democratic government? The trend in East Asia, the authors claim, is toward a preference for democracy.

Discussant Don Emerson responded by questioning the depth of the ABS as regards these issues. He offered several questions for consideration: Does the ABS get at deep-held values? To what extent are the responses situationalized? Thereafter, Stephen Haggard suggested turning the dialogue around to investigate how the observed public opinions, when well-isolated as in authoritarian regimes, represent strategies for gaining support on the part of the regime. Do authoritarian regimes build support by doing things, or by having transparent procedures?

Concluding Panel

The concluding panel of the conference offered an opportunity for participants to consolidate the two days of responses in a full discussion. Mike Bratton began by suggesting the importance of getting away from the “D-word” to measure support for democracy by examining particular democratic institutions and comparing different forms of disaggregation of support for democracy. His appeal was to address the causal problems at hand – is institutional support the cause or result of the various factors discussed throughout the conference? Answering this requires further diachronic analysis. Yun-han Chu asked if perhaps in the process of the conference more puzzles were created than were solved. To move forward, he suggested fixing intervening factors to improve the reliability and authenticity of the answers, gathering more information on the glaring disparity of income and wealth, and comparing different batteries across the iterations of the barometer.

Stephan Haggard noted that most of the analysis was focused on individual people, but perhaps an understanding from the governmental perspective could be relevant and valuable as well. Marta Lagos emphasized the need for a stronger theoretical framework moving forward to handle the overabundance of information produced in the many analyses. She suggested complementary use of
qualitative work, elite studies, and incorporation of external factors such as GDP. She pointed as well to a nascent cross-regional comparison for future consideration. Doh Chull Shin mentioned areas needing further progress, such as conceptualizations of democracy or theoretical frameworks, and also the need for further statistical analysis to establish patterns of causality. Sandeep Shastri noted that while democracy is expanding across the world, our imagination of democracy should expand as well.

Larry Diamond concluded the panel by noting the multiple tracks, multiple audiences, and multiple interpretations offered by the proceedings of the conference. He noted that longstanding, compelling questions remain, and that we should take a keen interest in those electoral democracies whose survival and consolidation should not be taken for granted. Diamond suggested a need to continue to probe how to properly weight skepticism versus commitment to liberal democratic values, and to seek out the implications of relatively low diffuse regime support in established liberal democracies. On a note that the researchers involved ought to consider the continuing dialogue as working back and forth between theory and empirical investigations, the conference was closed after a rewarding two days of work.