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Generational Change, Political Institutions, and Regime Support in East Asia

Saiful Mujani and R. William Liddle

Abstract

Using individual-level data from the Asian Barometer Survey, Wave 3, this essay examines the effect of generational change on regime support in eleven East Asian countries with different histories of democracy (including nondemocracies). We test the effect of the political socialization hypothesis derived from political culture theory against the rational calculation hypothesis derived from the institutional perspective. Our conclusion is that regime support is influenced mainly by how the individual evaluates the performance of the system in which he or she now lives, not by early political socialization.

Keywords: Democracy, generational change, regime support, political socialization, political institutions.

In the political culture perspective, political attitudes and behavior, including orientations toward political regimes, are formed by a process of socialization from childhood to maturity which is called early life socialization. Members of society are believed from an early age to be exposed to attitudes, values, and behavior that support a certain regime, whether authoritarian or democratic. Individuals who are socialized from childhood under an authoritarian regime are exposed to attitudes, values, and behavior that support authoritarianism, while individuals who are socialized in a democracy are exposed to values, attitudes, and behavior supportive of that regime. For this reason, individuals who are born and raised to adulthood in an autocratic era are expected to be more supportive of an autocratic regime than of a democracy, even though they subsequently experience a democratic regime. And, members of a society who

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are born and raised in a democratic regime are expected to be more oriented toward a democracy when they become adults. Further, a democracy will grow stronger when members of the generation socialized under a nondemocratic regime become fewer with the passage of time, when there is a generational change from the nondemocratic to the democratic generation.

Scholars working from the institutional perspective, on the other hand, believe that support for a regime is formed not by early socialization but by a process of learning and adaptation toward the institution that is experienced. This will also happen if the subject is older and experiences a regime that differs from the one into which he or she was born and experienced during early socialization. In other words, every individual undergoes a process of relearning when he or she is exposed to institutional change and makes a rational calculation regarding institutional performance.\(^2\) For this reason, individuals born and raised to adulthood in an authoritarian regime tend to conduct rational assessments concerning, for example, positive or negative evaluations of a democratic regime. Consequently, even a member of society born and politically socialized in an autocratic era will tend to support not the regime experienced when young but the democracy directly experienced in adulthood, if that democracy is judged to be more beneficial. If this perspective is correct, an East Asian who experienced early socialization under an autocratic regime nonetheless will have a positive attitude toward democracy, providing that he or she positively evaluates the democratic regime currently experienced. Moreover, there will be no difference in orientation between the two relevant generations. What is more determinative is not the difference in generations but a pure evaluation of the currently experienced regime. If the currently experienced regime, whether a democracy or an autocracy, is judged more beneficial than the previous one, the individual will support that regime, regardless of his or her birth generation.

Is the generational difference important for regime support in East Asia as maintained by the political culture approach? Or does the institutional approach better explain regime support in the region, where assessments of regime performance are more determinative of regime support, regardless of the difference in generations?

Several studies demonstrate that generational difference influences regime support in East Asia.\(^3\) In ten East Asian states, the younger generation tends to be more supportive of democratic values than traditional political values, even

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though that difference is less meaningful in terms of democratic preference. In China, support for the current nondemocratic regime is stronger within the generational cohort that came to political maturity before the reforms of the late 1970s under Deng Xiaoping, compared to the succeeding cohort.

The finding concerning the Mao Zedong generation in China is consistent with findings in other parts of the world, for example in Russia. Nonetheless, the impact of generational change on regime support does not erase the importance of the institutional context. Even though the effect of generational difference is important, cross-generational evaluation of institutional performance is also relevant. Russians from the pre-perestroika generation experienced relearning after democratic institutions were introduced, so that they are able to evaluate whether democracy works well in terms of their interests.

This essay offers an evaluation of the above findings with data from the third wave of the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS 3). Our study focuses on the concept and measures of regime support and how political socialization, generational difference, and institutional performance are associated with that support. With the exception of generational difference (specified below), all of our measures are taken from the ABS 3 as listed in appendix A of the Introduction to this *TJD* issue.

Analytical Strategy

Determining whether generational difference, between the “democratic generation” and the “nondemocratic generation,” is important in shaping individual orientations requires a specific analytical strategy. Our basic argument centers on the problem of socialization, that is, how a person acquires cognition and attitudes and chooses behaviors in a political system. Generational difference becomes fundamentally important because there is a change in the system in which one generation has lived. In order to know the importance of generational change, we must first conduct cross-sectional analysis, that is, comparison among states according to regime type, at least between democratic and nondemocratic state types. This regime distinction is expected to shape differences in individual orientations toward the regime concerned. Individuals who have been socialized in a democratic regime are expected to have a more positive orientation toward democracy; conversely, individuals who have been socialized in a nondemocratic regime are expected to have a weaker orientation toward democracy. The ABS 3 data make it possible to conduct this cross-sectional analysis.

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4 Tan and Wang, *Are Young People in Asia More Pro-Democratic?*

performs well. Members of both the Malaysian generation socialized during the
democratic regime before the 1969 communal rioting, and the generation later
socialized under authoritarianism, support the current authoritarian regime if
they believe that it is performing well.

In addition to institutional performance, social trust represents an important
factor for institutional trust (table 5). It is more important than generational
difference. The most important component of the socio-economic factor,
education, has a consistent influence on regime support. Education positively
strengthens democratic values, but also becomes a source of criticism of the
existing regime and political institutions. As in the case of individuals who
are very committed to democracy, individuals with a high level of education
tend not to be satisfied with governmental performance and are not inclined to
believe in political institutions.

The influence of religiosity on regime support is limited and inconsistent.
But it would be interesting to examine further the fact that religiosity in
Singapore tends to be related negatively to democratic values. This pattern is
not seen in any of our other cases.

**Conclusion**

How important are political generational differences for regime support in
East Asian society? How important is the effect of early political socialization
on support for regimes after individuals reach adulthood? Is it true that
early political socialization shapes political orientations even for adults who
subsequently live in a regime that is different from the one in which they grew
up? Are individuals incapable of relearning in new political environments not
experienced during early political socialization?

From this analysis of public opinion survey data in a number of East
Asian states with a wide variety of contexts—from consolidated democracy
and electoral democracy to nondemocracy—our first important finding is that
individuals in East Asia, in general, have a positive attitude toward democracy,
tend to support the regime under which they presently live, and are apt to
believe in their political institutions.

But there is a meaningful difference in orientations. Citizens who live
in consolidated democracies tend to have a strong preference for democracy
and for democratic values compared to citizens of electoral democracies such as
Indonesia, Mongolia, Thailand, and the Philippines, or the subjects of
authoritarian regimes such as Vietnam, China, Singapore, and Malaysia. The
probable cause of this difference is that there are more citizens of consolidated
democracies who have been democratically socialized for longer periods of
time, compared to their counterparts in electoral democracies, not to mention
in authoritarian regimes. This finding demonstrates that the political system in
which one lives influences his or her political orientation.

Nonetheless, citizens of consolidated democracies tend to be critical of the
performance of the democracy in which they live. They prefer democracy and have a strong commitment to its values. Because of this, they tend to be critical of democratic practice and concerned about how democratic government deals with problems considered important by the citizenry, for example, challenges in the economy. Criticism and incremental or gradual improvement, by trial and error, is possible in a democracy. In the end, democracy can save itself from destruction. Even if disturbed, it can restore itself.

Non democracies are different. Their subjects tend to have confidence in their regime and its institutions. Space for criticism and dissatisfaction that can lead to improvement is far more closed, however, than in consolidated democracies. For that reason, political change may be marked by great and often radical upheavals, consuming many victims. Early political socialization makes it difficult to effect change and regime improvement. Once socialized within a system, whatever the system, the individual tends to be oriented to and to act in accordance with the values and the norms of that system.

Nonetheless, the evidence of this study demonstrates that differences in political generations do not close the space for orientation toward and adaptation to other systems. What apparently is more determinative is not early political socialization but how the individual evaluates the performance of the system under which he or she lives. If there is system change and the new system is felt to perform better, an individual will tend to support the new system; but if the individual believes that the new system is inferior to the one it replaced, he or she will express support for the former system. For this reason, it is difficult for Japan to renounce democracy because the democratic regime performs well and far better than the Shōwa government which led Japan into political and economic destruction before the promulgation of a new constitution in 1946. Perhaps it is also difficult to imagine how democracy can emerge in China or Singapore because their subjects believe that their non-democratic system works well. However, a democracy can collapse if the government does not perform well, and so, too, can an autocracy.