



How Asians View Democracy: Three Puzzles

Professor Chu Yun-han
Distinguished Research Fellow
Institute of Political Science, Academia Sinica,
Director, Asian Barometer Survey and
Professor of Political Science, National Taiwan University



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A Comparative Survey of Democracy, Governance and Development

- First systematic comparative survey of attitudes and values toward governance, democracy and reform, and citizen politics in Asia
 - Standardized survey instruments designed around a common research framework
 - Headquartered at **National Taiwan University**, and principally funded by Taiwan's Ministry of Education
 - Supplementary funding support from Henry Luce Foundation, and national funding agencies throughout East Asia
- All surveys are based on country-wide probability sampling and face-to-face interview.
 - The survey network covers 14 East Asian countries and 5 South Asian countries. Together it gives voice to almost half of the world population.
 - The core partner of **Global Barometer Surveys**
 - Web address: www.asianbarometer.org

Five Waves of Regional Survey

	Period	Scope
First Wave	2001-2002	8 countries in East Asia
Second Wave	2005-2007	13 countries in East Asia and 5 countries in South Asia
Third Wave	2010-2012	13 countries in East Asia
Fourth Wave	2014-2016	14 countries in East Asia and 5 countries in South Asia
Fifth Wave	2018~2020	14 countries in East Asia, 4 countries in South Asia, and Australia

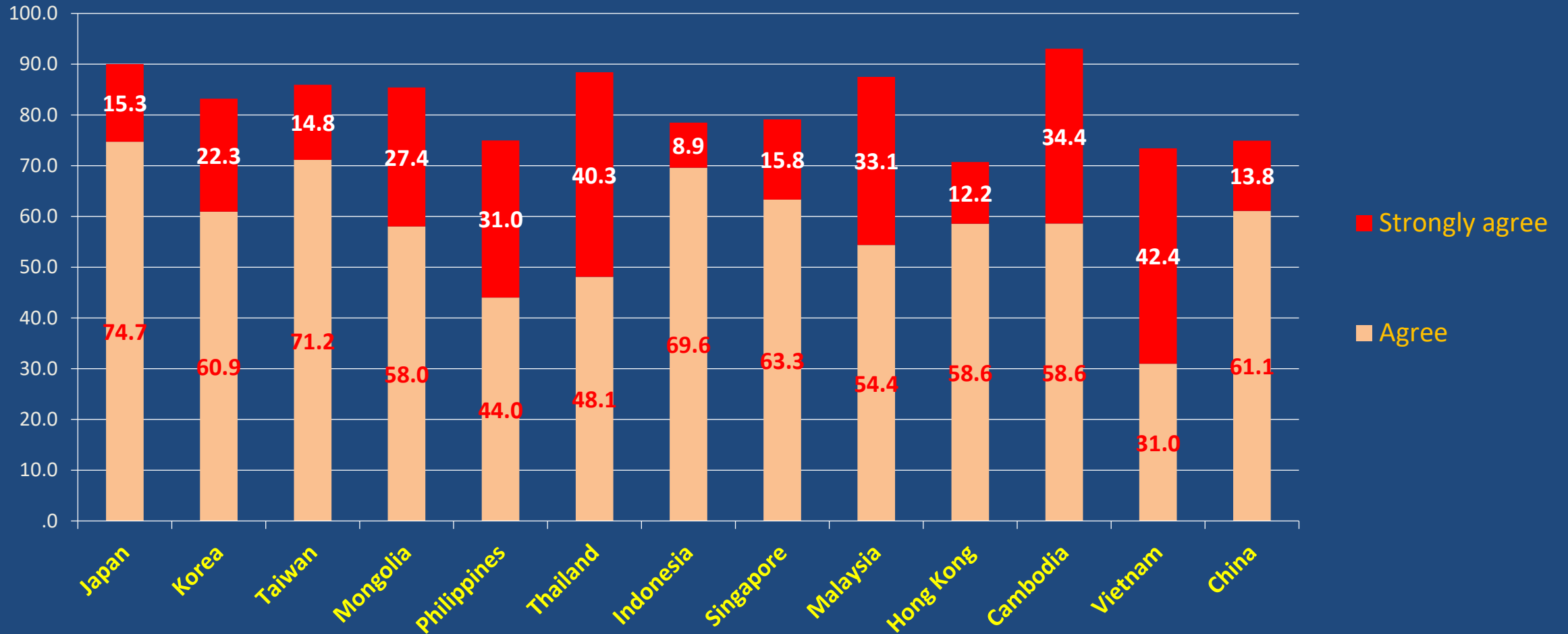
Asian Barometer Survey Schedule (3rd-5th)

Code	Country	Wave 3		Wave 4		Wave 5	
		Period	Sample Size	Period	Sample Size	Period	Sample Size
1	Japan	2011.12	1880	2015.1-2	1000	2019.7-10	1045
2	Hong Kong	2012.9	1207	2016.2-3	1000		
3	Korea	2011.5	1207	2015.10-12	1200	2019.5-7	1268
4	China	2011.7-10	3473	2015.7-2016.2	4217	2019.7-12	4941
5	Mongolia	2010.4-5	1210	2014.6-9	1228	2018.7-8	1284
6	the Philippines	2010.3	1200	2014.7	1200	2018.12	1200
7	Taiwan	2010.1-2	1592	2014.6-10	1657	2018.7-2019.1	1259
8	Thailand	2010.8-12	1512	2014.8-10	1200	2018.12-2019.2	1200
9	Indonesia	2011.5	1550	2016.1	1550	2019.7	1540
10	Singapore	2010.4-8	1000	2014.10.-12	1039		
11	Vietnam	2010.9-10	1191	2015.9-10	1200	2018.6-7	1200
12	Cambodia	2012.2-3	1200	2015.10-11	1200		
13	Malaysia	2011.10-11	1214	2014.9-11	1207	2019.4-5	1237
14	Myanmar			2015.1-3	1620	2019.9-10	1627
15	Australia					2018.10-2019.1	1630
18	India					2019.11	5318

First, the Good News

- Democracy is embraced by a great majority of East Asian citizens everywhere.
- The overwhelming popular support for democracy as the best form of government is observed in democracies, hybrid regimes, or even single-party authoritarian regimes.
- Many citizens in Mongolia, Vietnam and Thailand embraced it enthusiastically.

Figure 1: Diffuse Support for Democracy
"Democracy may have its problems, but it is still the best form of government." (Source: ABS Wave 3)



The First Puzzle

Many citizens in Asian democracies have mixed feeling about democracy, much more so than citizens living under authoritarian and hybrid regimes.

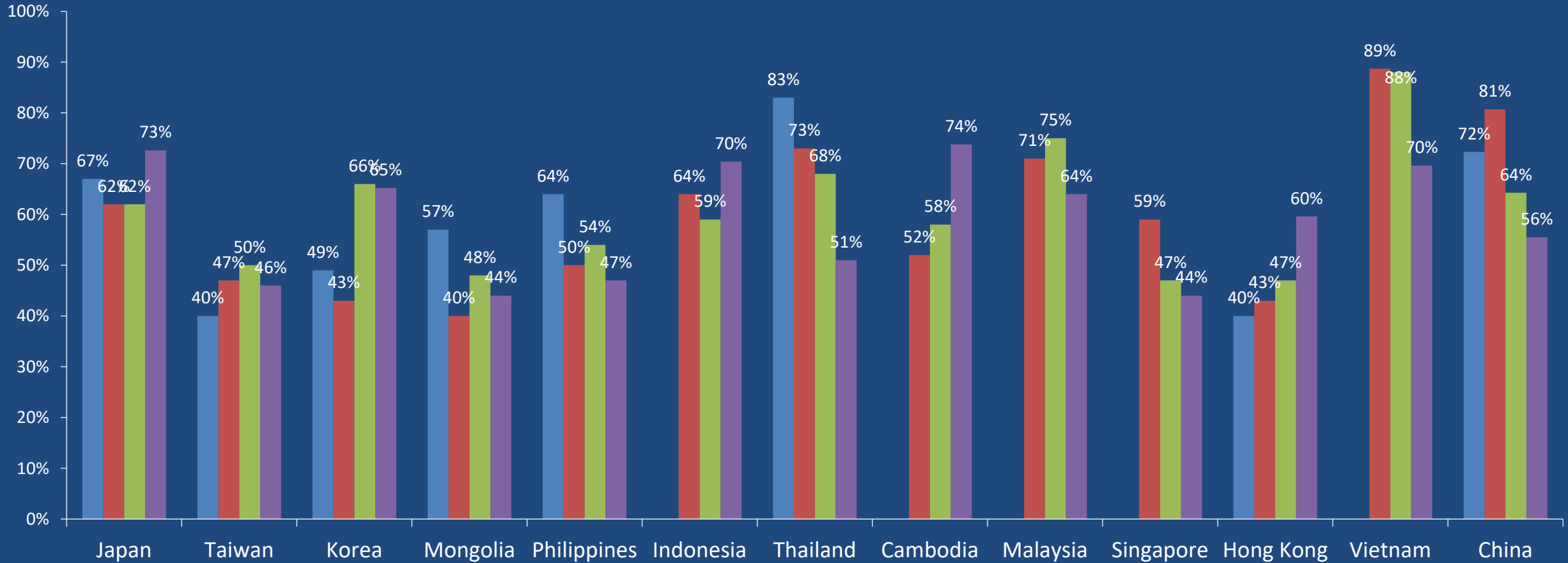
Although large numbers of people say that democracy is the best form of government, fewer deem it suitable for their own countries now, still fewer view it as an effective or preferable form of government, and only minorities rank it as more important than economic development.

At the same time, large number of people in Asian young democracies are willing to consider non-democratic alternatives.

Preference for Democracy

(% of "Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government")

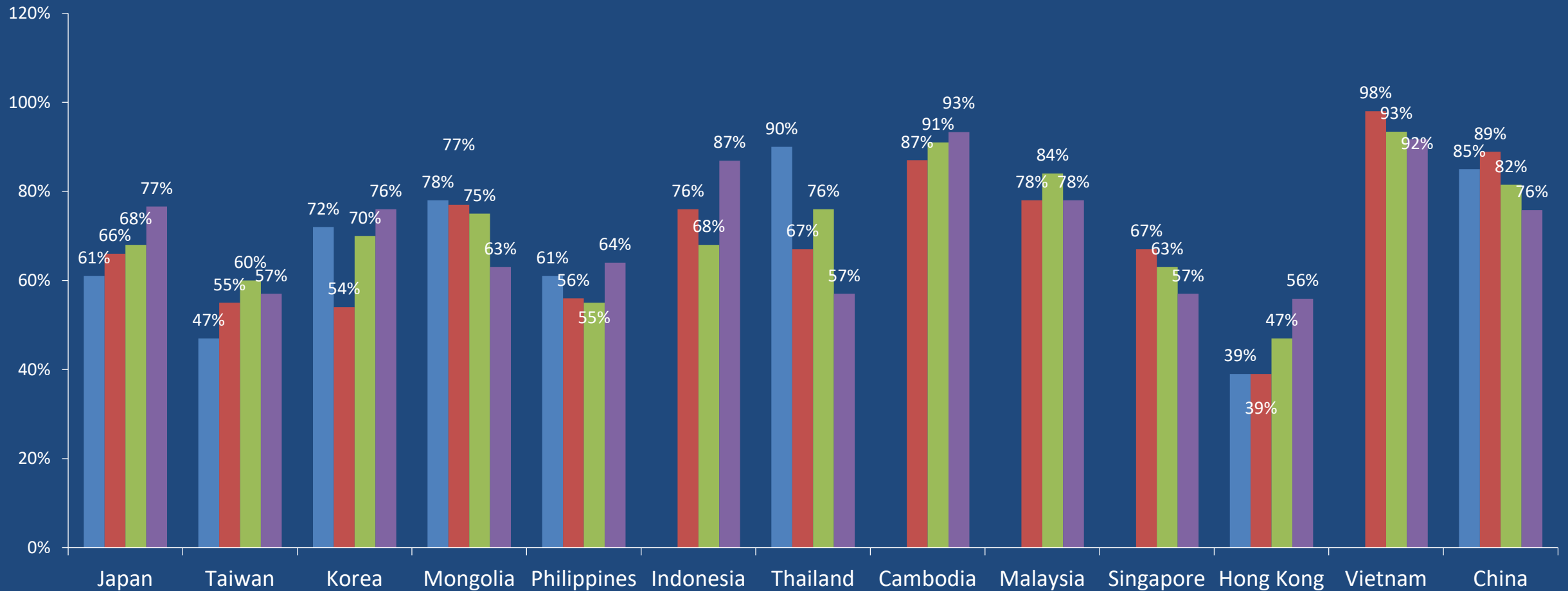
Wave 1 Wave 2 Wave 3 Wave 4



Efficacy of Democracy

(% of "Democracy is capable of solving the problems of our society")

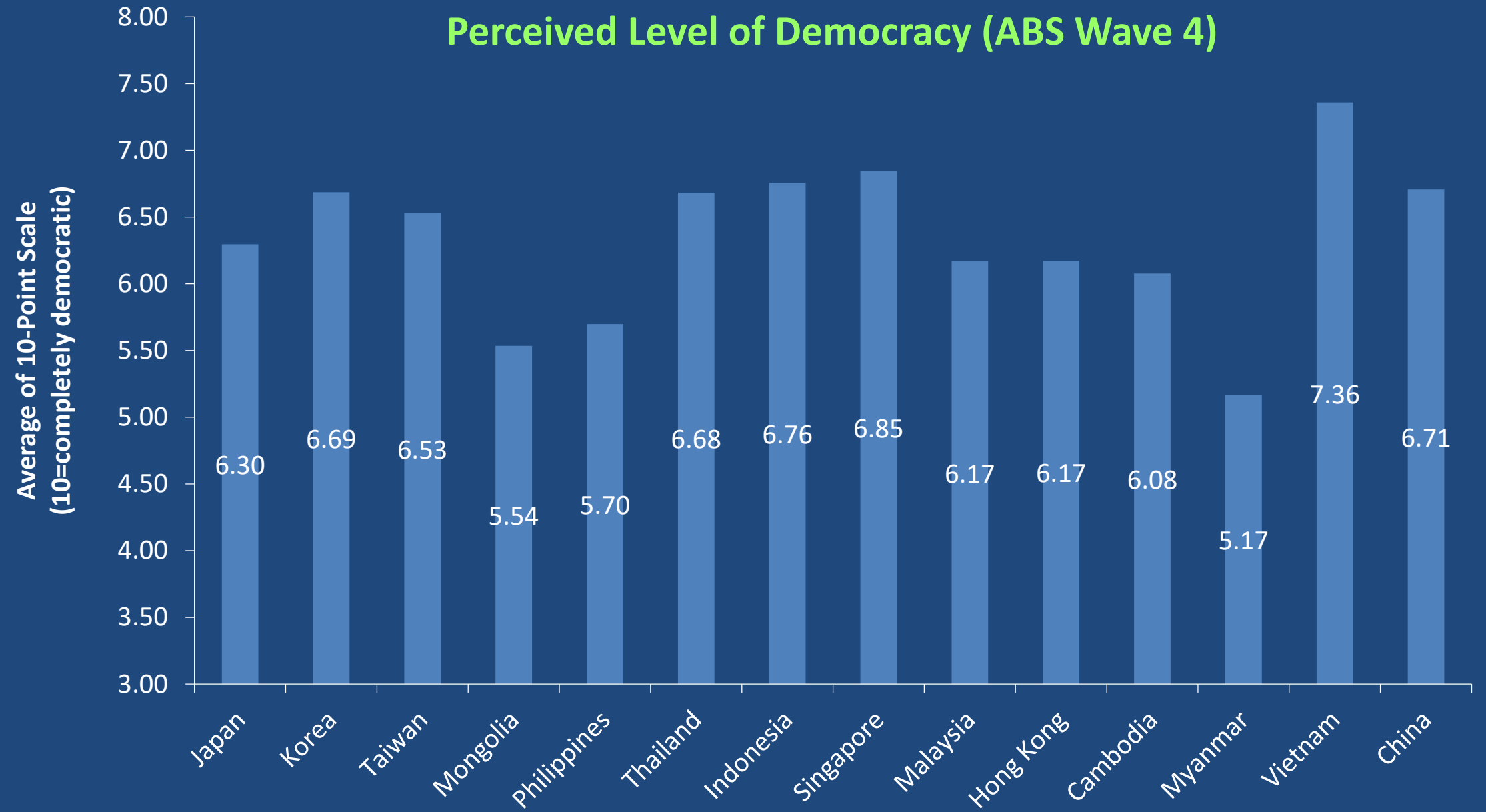
Wave 1 Wave 2 Wave 3 Wave 4



Here Comes the Second Puzzle

- We ask the respondents to place the country's system on a 10-point scale where 0 represents "completely undemocratic" and 10 "completely democratic."
- Citizens living under non-democratic regimes rated their countries higher than citizens living under democratic regimes.
- Apparently our respondents in Vietnam are using very different benchmarks from our respondents in Japan.

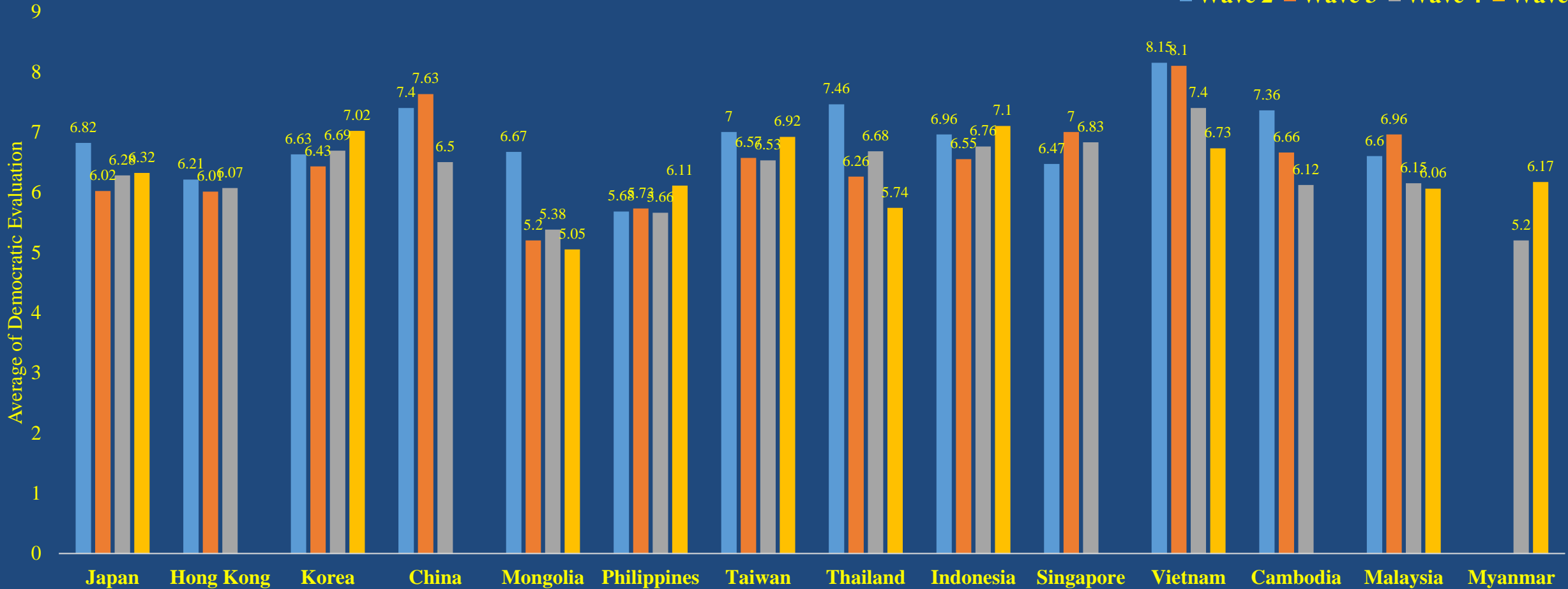
Perceived Level of Democracy (ABS Wave 4)



ABS W2-5 Democracy Evaluation of Own Country

Where Would You Place Our Country under the Present Government?

Wave 2 Wave 3 Wave 4 Wave 5



Score: 1 Completely Undemocratic ~ 10 Completely Democratic

Measurement problems come with all items carrying the “D” word

- First it runs the danger of **eliciting socially desirable answers** from respondents, because all items carry the “d” word.
- In our time, “democracy is a “brand name” nowadays. Even dictators embrace the concept of democracy while twisting its meaning, contents and practices.
- Second, the direct measure runs the danger of **lumping together apples and oranges**, since people are known to entertain varying ideas about what democracy is.
- Third, it is difficult to tell whether respondents were thinking of **democracy as an ideal** or **real-life democracy** they have experienced (or a combination of the two) when they answered the SD battery.

Measuring Diffuse Regime Support

- Since ABS Wave III, we have addressed the question to what extent political regimes have to be democratic to be perceived legitimate by their citizens by comparing the level of diffuse regime support across different types of regime.
- Since diffuse regime support is a multi-faceted concept, we have developed a five-item battery to measure its affection, loyalty, efficacy, desirability and superiority aspects.

The Third Puzzle

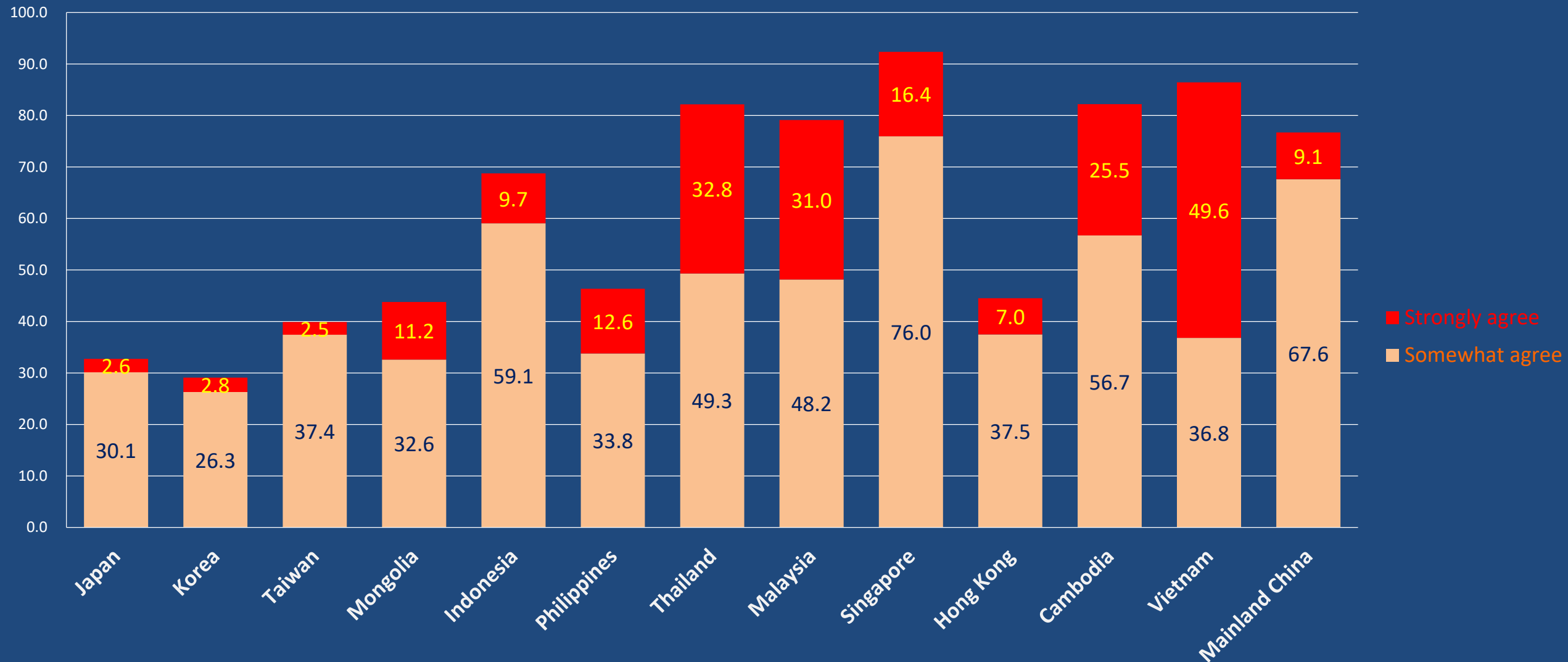
➤ In contemporary time, normative political theory typically expects democratic regimes to be more legitimate than authoritarian regimes because democracy is built on the consent of the ruled and universal suffrage.

➤ Empirically, however, in East Asia non-democratic regimes and hybrid regimes enjoy much higher level of popular legitimacy than democratic regimes on virtually every indicator.

➤ There is almost a reversed relationship between a country's objective level of democratic development and regime support.

Figure 2a: Regime Support (First Item)

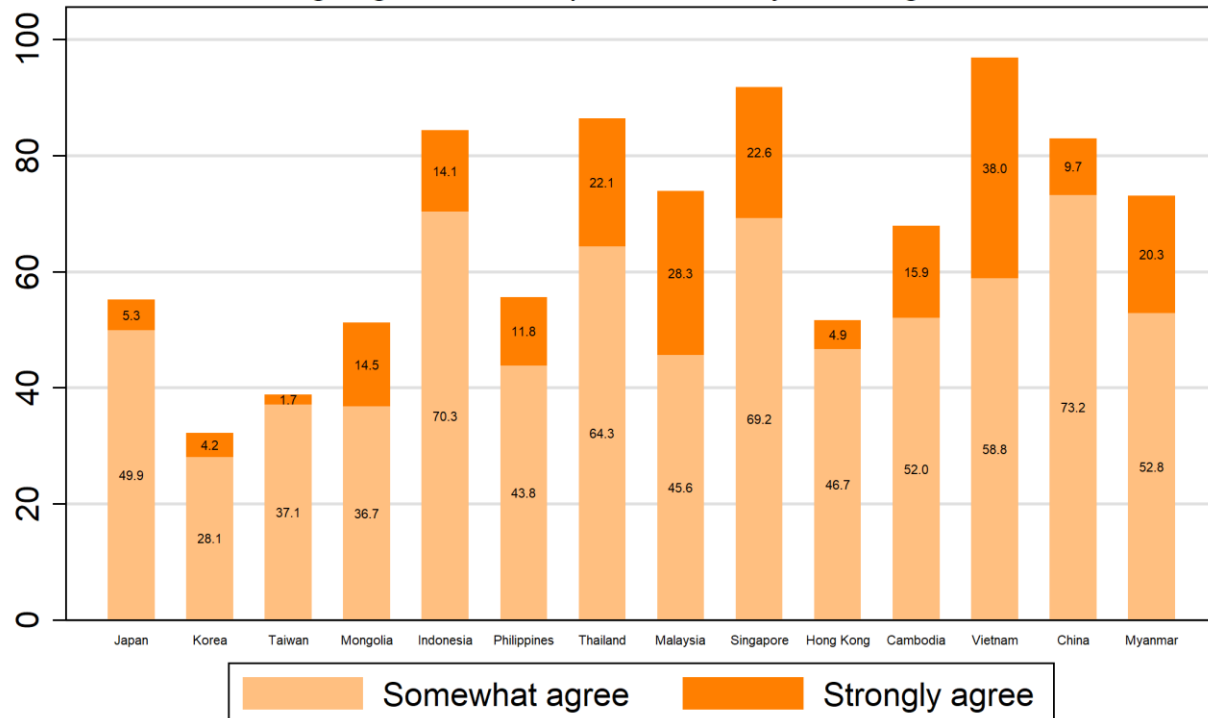
"Thinking in general, I am proud of our system of government "



Source: Asian Barometer Survey Wave III (2010~2011)

Regime Support (first item)

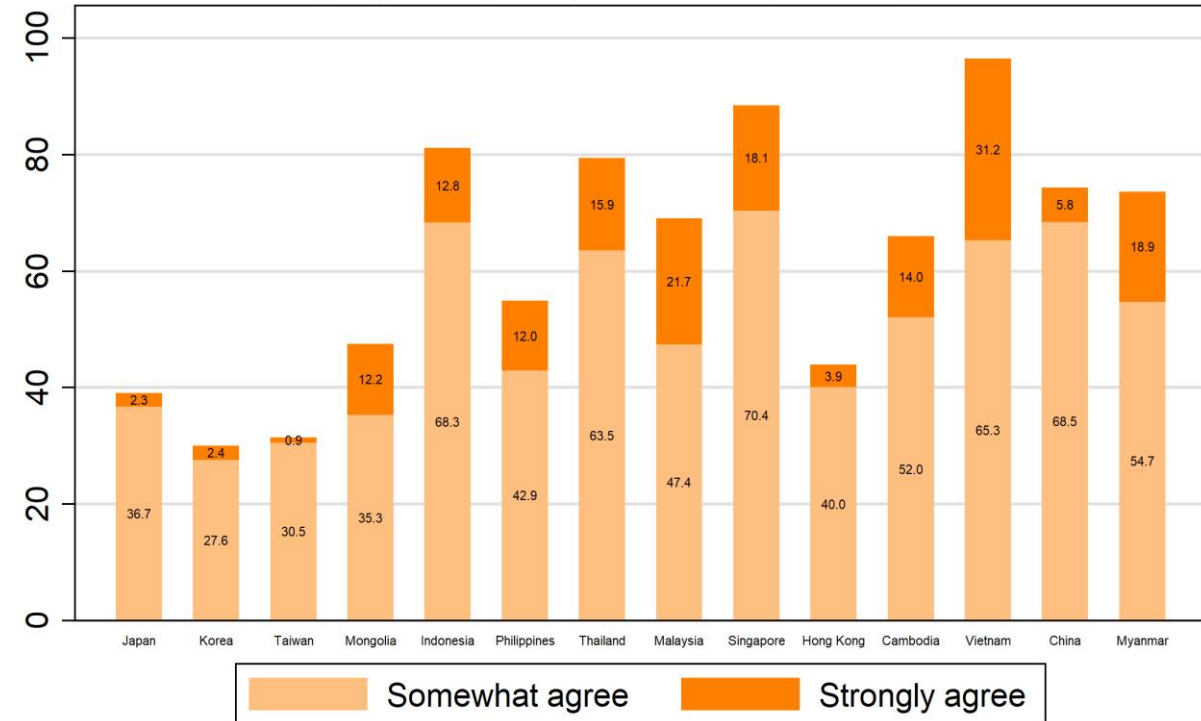
Thinking in general, I am proud of our system of government



ABS wave 4: 2014-2016

Regime Support from the Younger Generation (age ≤ 35)

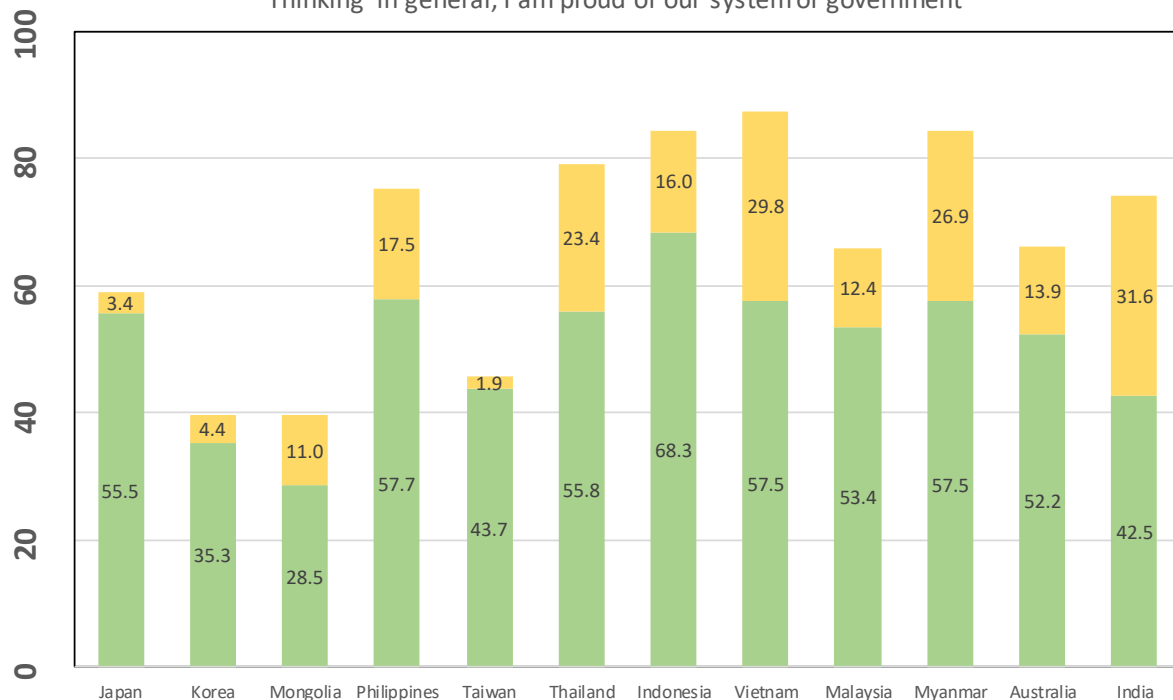
Thinking in general, I am proud of our system of government



ABS wave 4: 2014-2016

Q87 “Thinking in general, I am proud of our system of government”

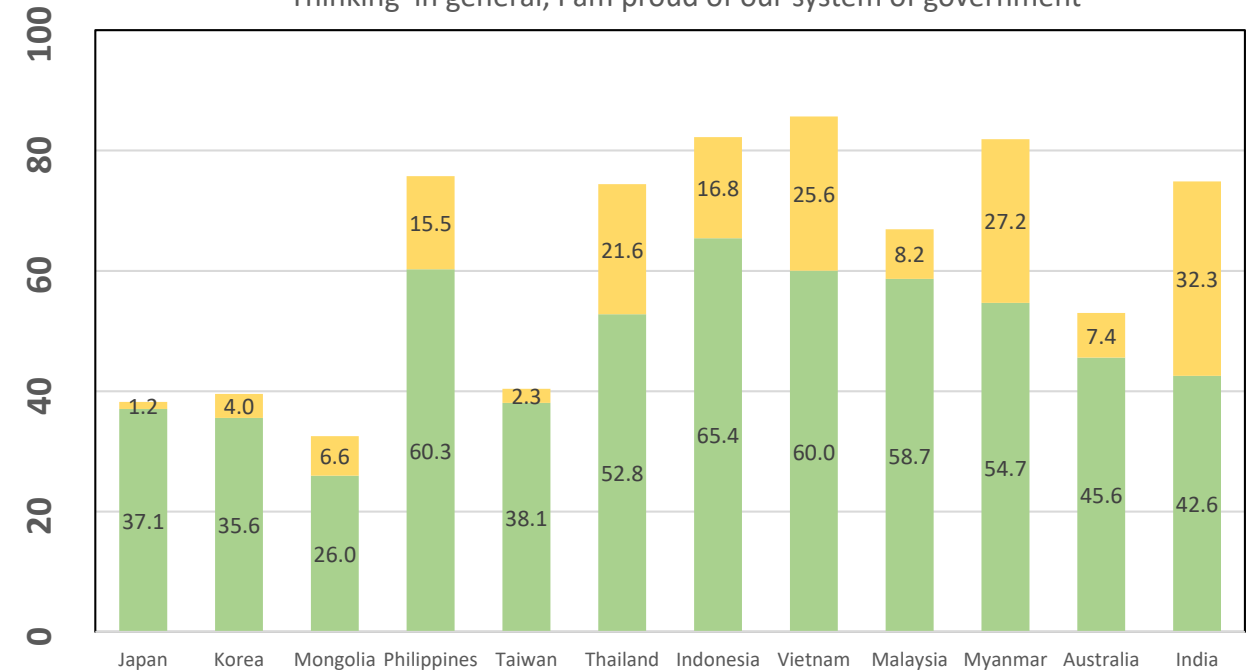
Regime Support
Thinking in general, I am proud of our system of government



ABS wave 5: 2018-2019

Agree Strongly agree

Regime Support for the Younger Generation (age <= 35)
Thinking in general, I am proud of our system of government

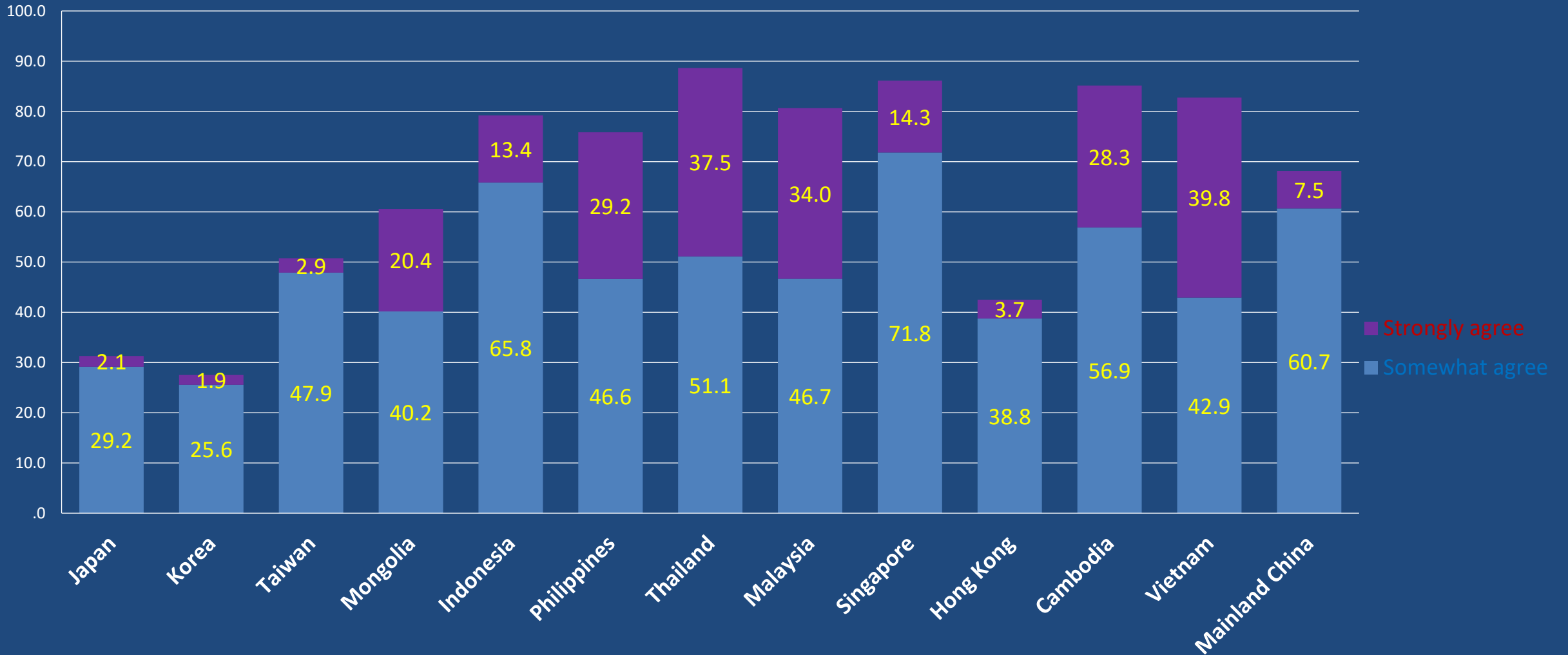


ABS wave 5: 2018-

Agree Strongly agree

Figure 2b: Regime Support (Second Item)

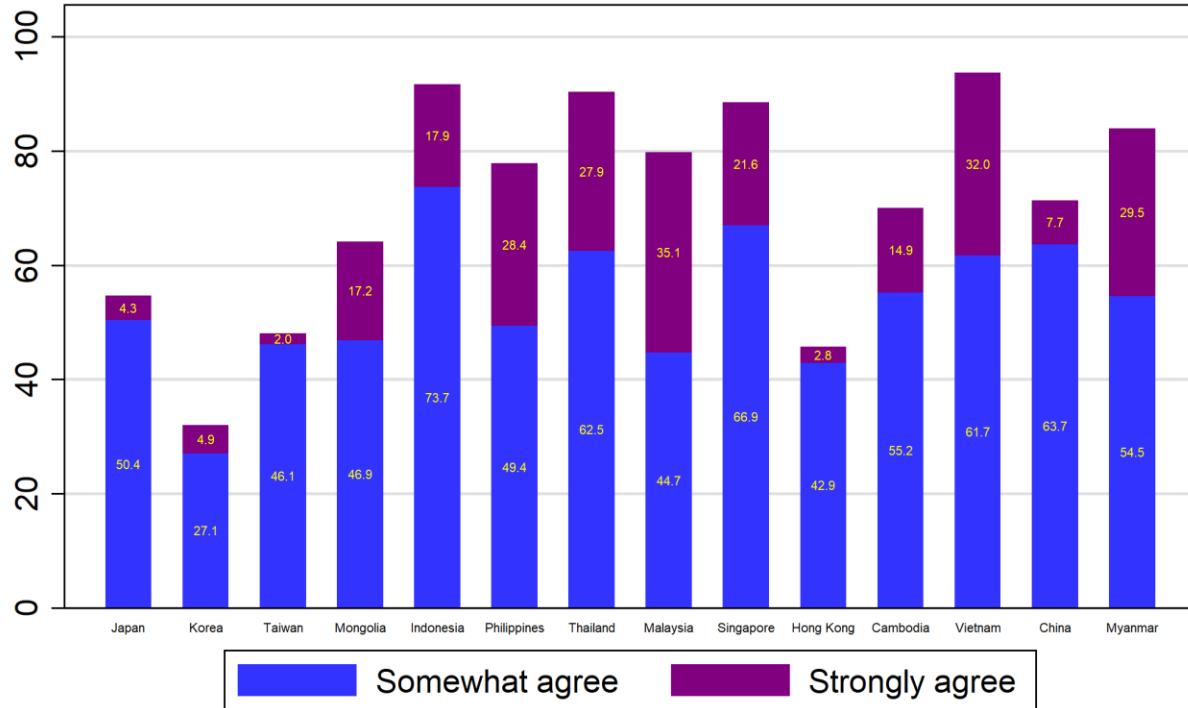
"A system like ours, even if it runs into problems, deserves the people's support"



Source: Asian Barometer Survey Wave III (2010~2011)

Regime Support (second item)

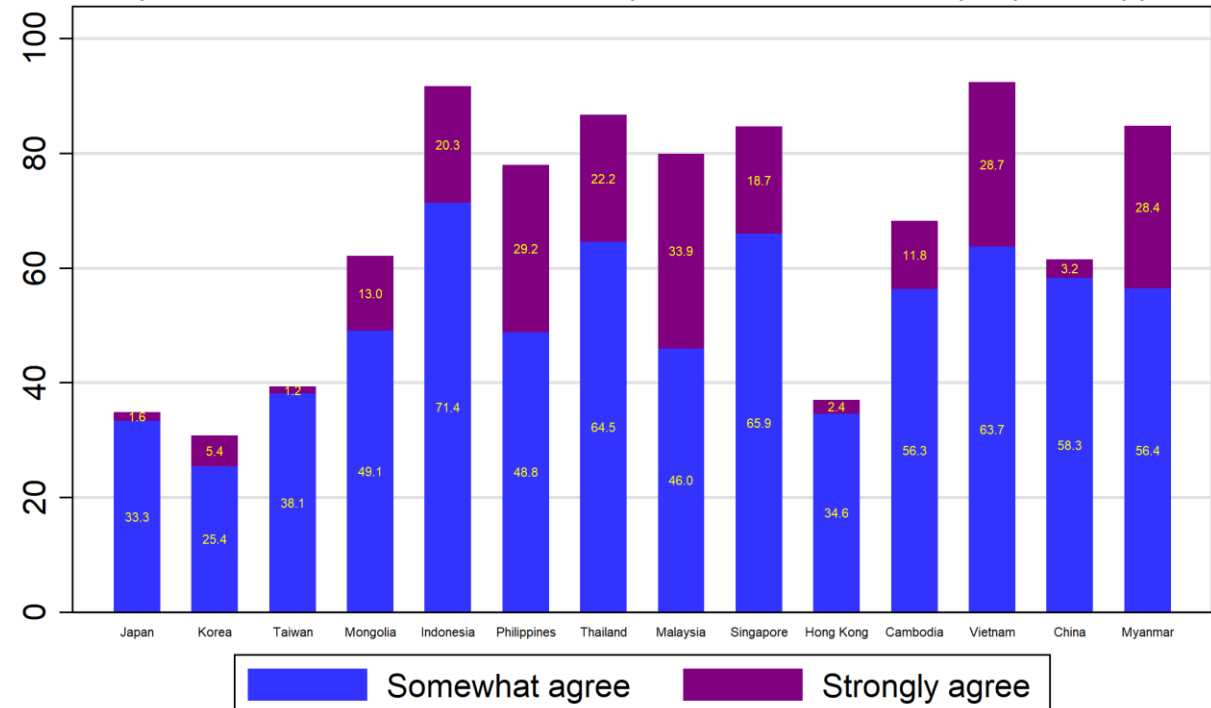
A system like ours, even if it runs into problem, deserves the people's support



ABS wave 4: 2014-2016

Regime Support from the Younger Generation (age<=35)

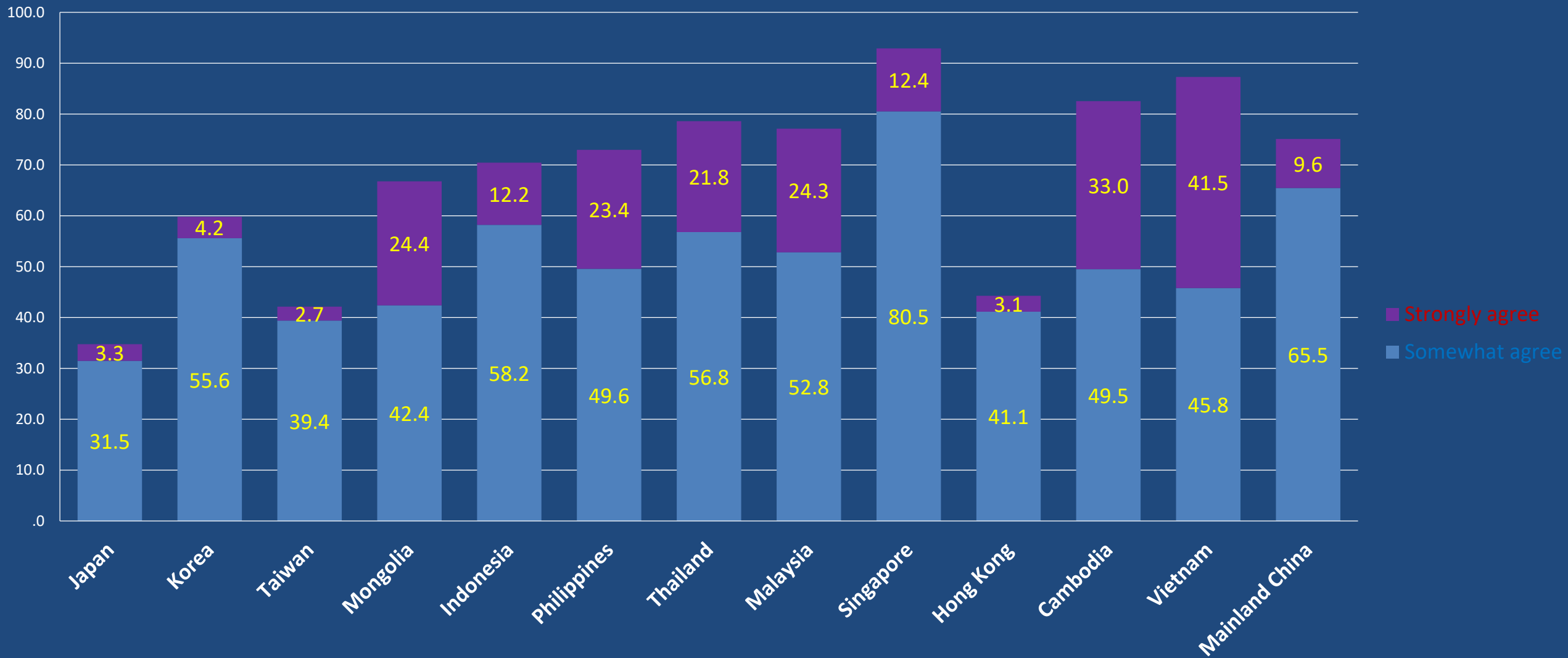
A system like ours, even if it runs into problem, deserves the people's support



ABS wave 4: 2014-2016

Figure 2c: Regime Support (Third Item)

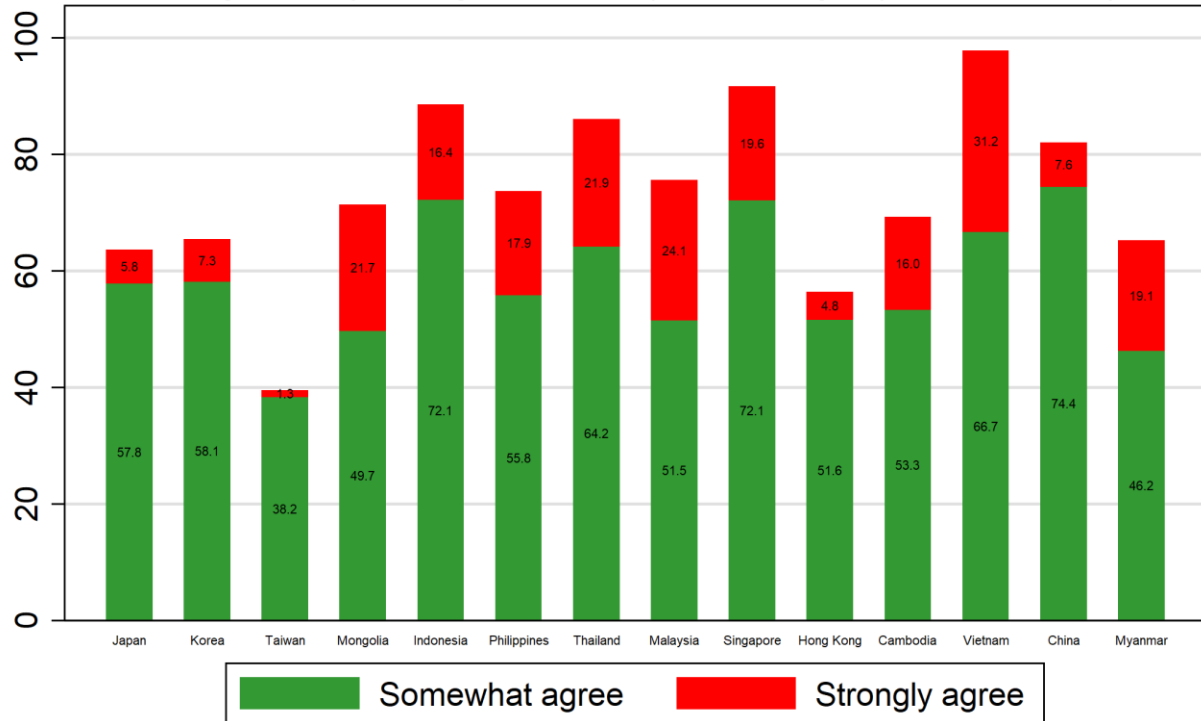
"Over the long run, our system of government is capable of solving the problems our country faces"



Source: Asian Barometer Survey Wave III (2010~2011)

Regime Support (third item)

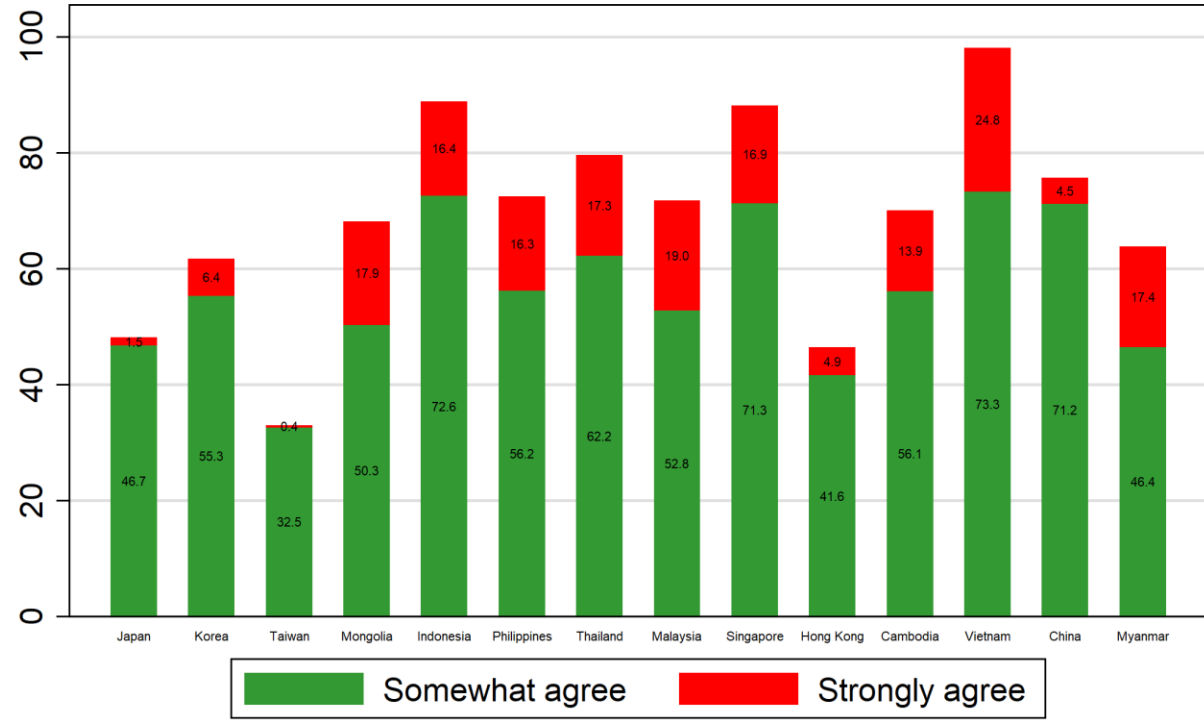
Over the long run, our system of government is capable of solving the problems our country faces



ABS wave 4: 2014-2016

Regime Support from the Younger Generation (age<=35)

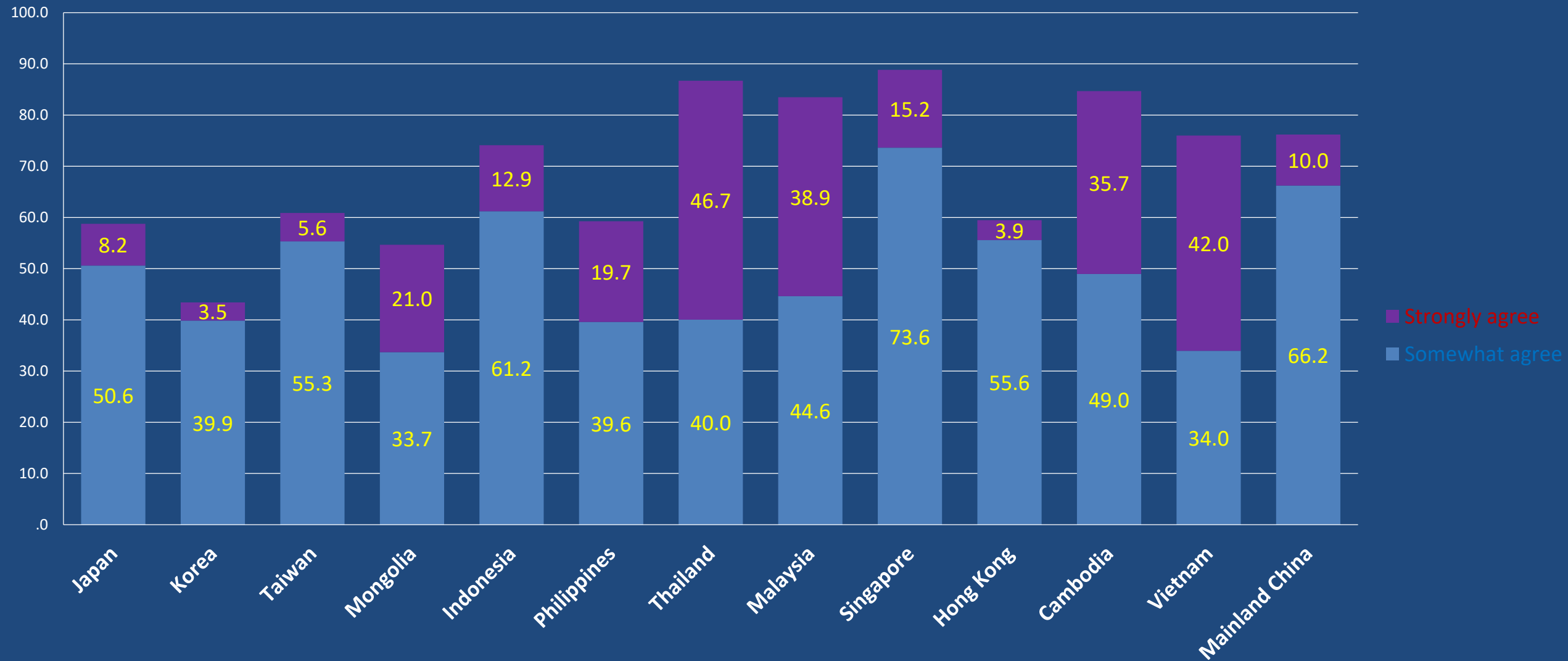
Over the long run, our system of government is capable of solving the problems our country faces



ABS wave 4: 2014-2016

Figure 2d: Regime Support (Fourth Item)

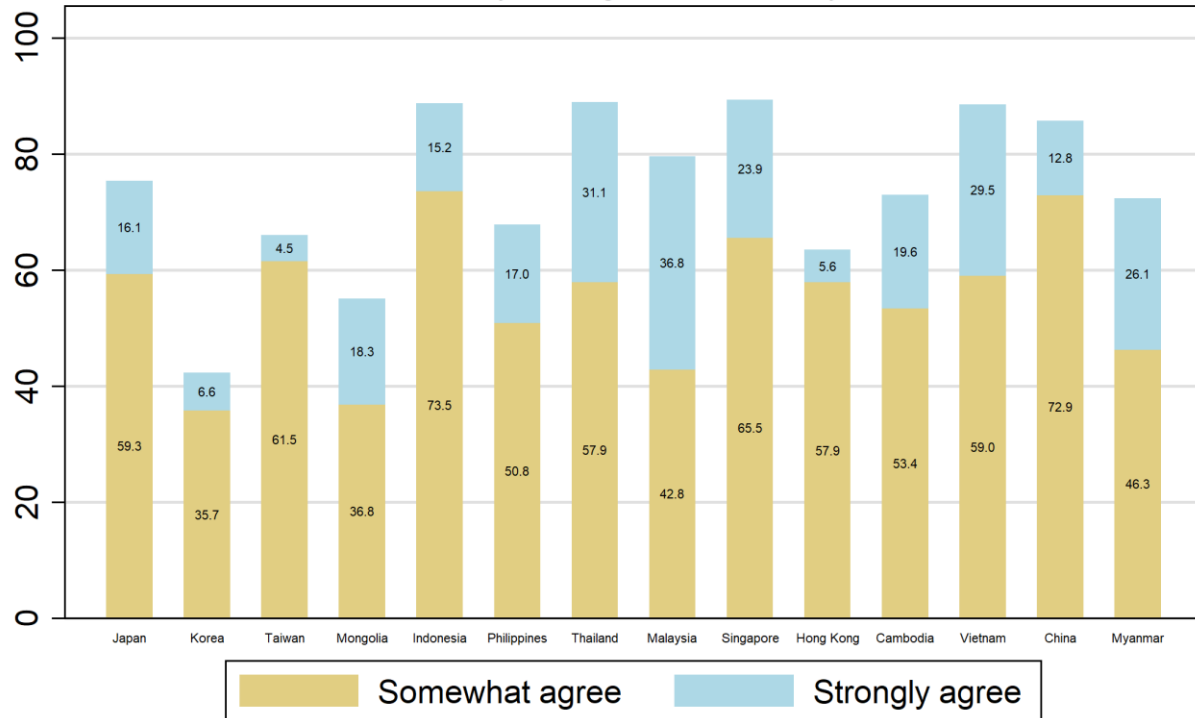
"I would rather live under our system of government than any that I can think of"



Source: Asian Barometer Survey Wave III (2010~2011)

Regime Support (fourth item)

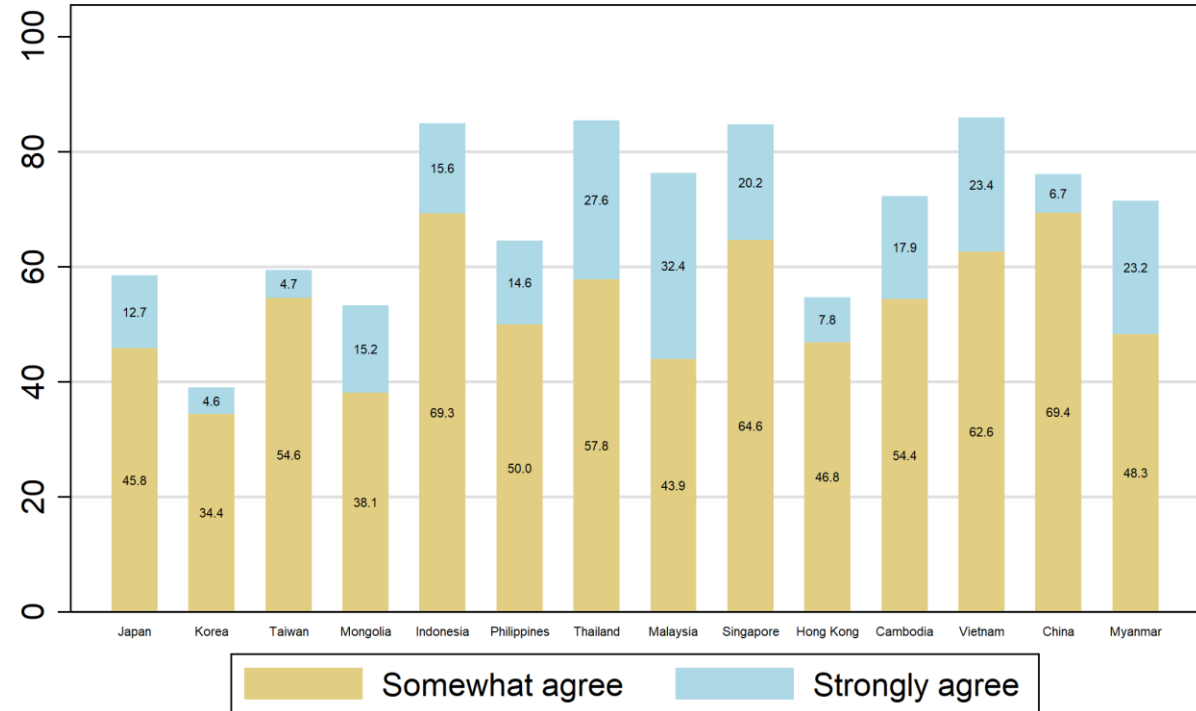
I would rather live under our system of government than any other that I can think of



ABS wave 4: 2014-2016

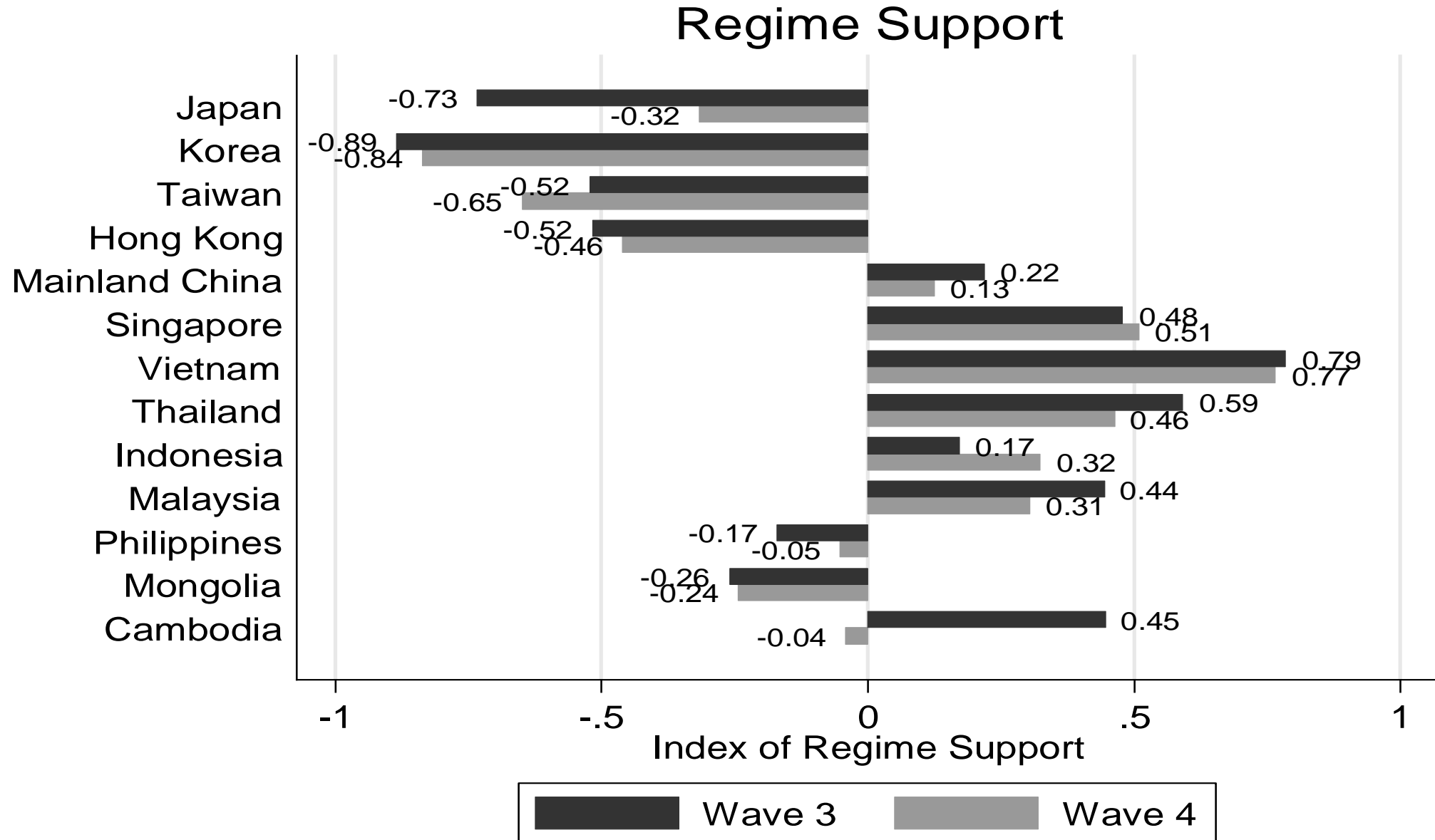
Regime Support from the Younger Generation (age<=35)

I would rather live under our system of government than any other that I can think of



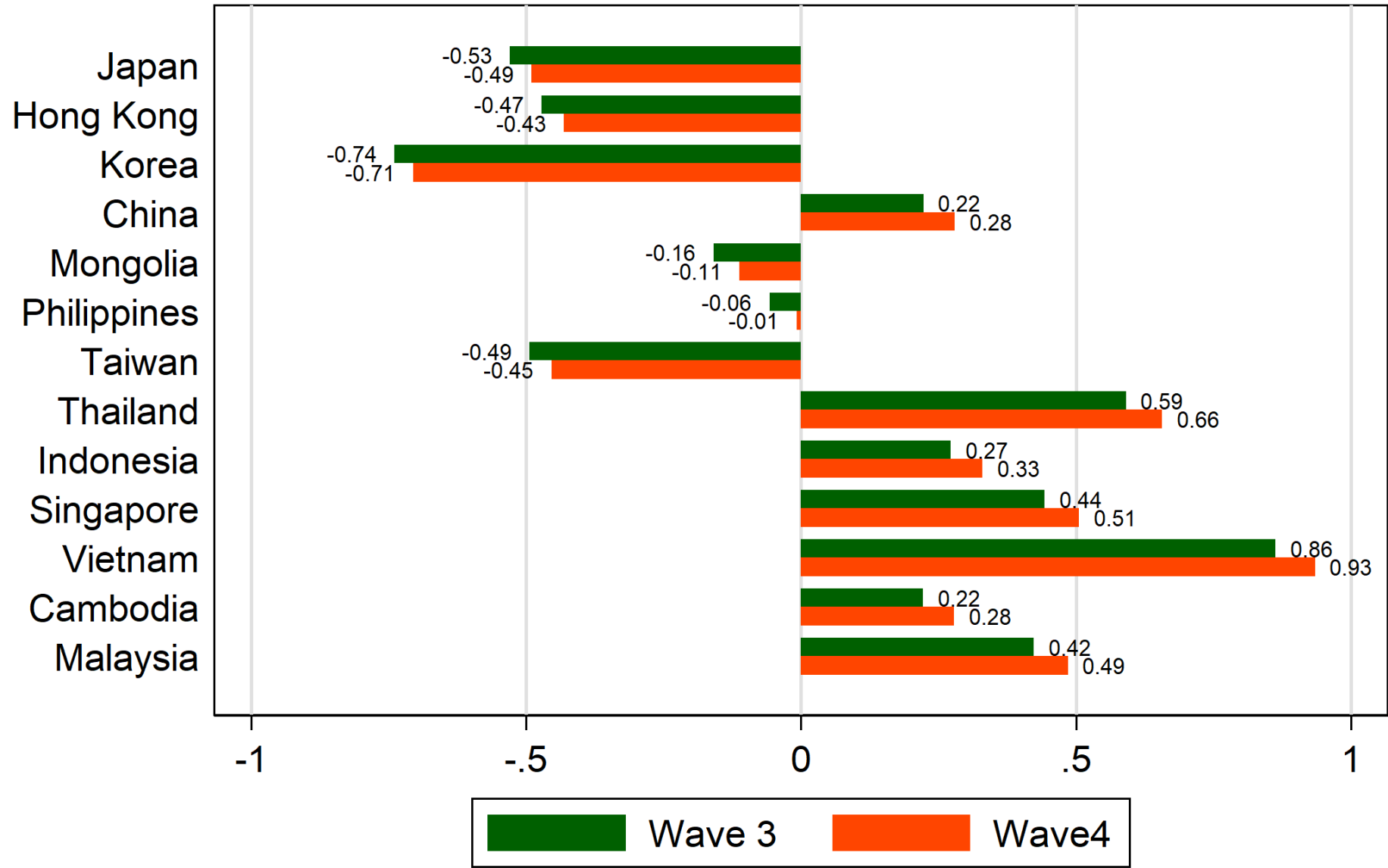
ABS wave 4: 2014-2016

Index of Regime Support in East Asian Countries

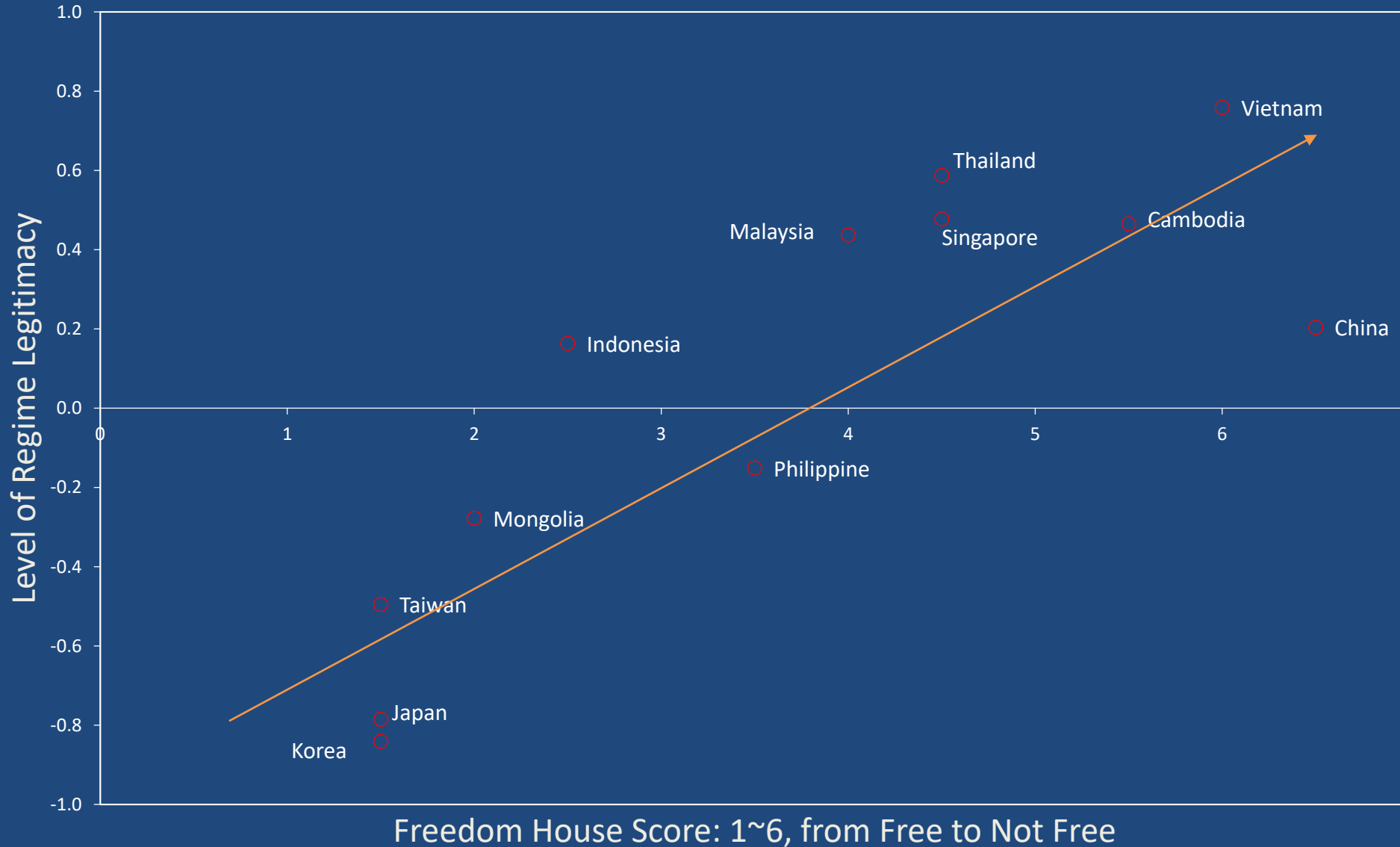


Asian Youth's Regime Support

Index of Regime Support



Level of Regime Legitimacy (ABS Wave 3) and Freedom House Score 2012 (1~7)



The less free countries enjoy higher level of regime legitimacy

Is democracy the only game in town?

- Our respondents are at least cognitively consistent. For example, Vietnamese citizens think their system is very democratic and also deserves their support.
- Most of the third-wave democracies in the region do not enjoy a deep and broad foundation of popular legitimacy.

The First Explanation

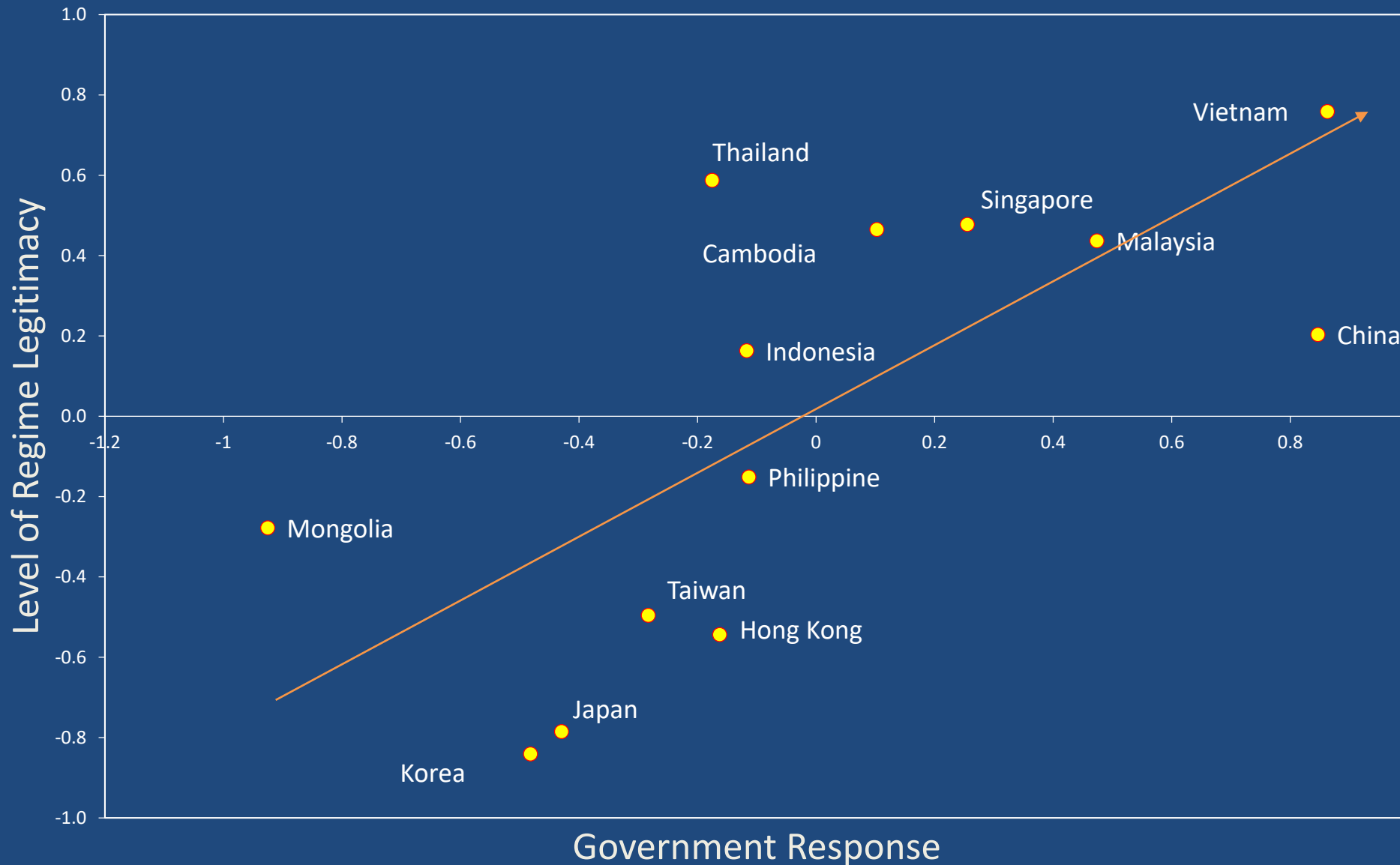
- The non-democratic regimes are seemingly enjoying a higher level of regime legitimacy is simply due to the fact that the citizens living in those countries are denied the access to free media, influenced by official propaganda, not exposed to open criticism from the opposition, and afraid to express their real feeling and opinions.
- This is the most obvious source of explanation. However, if we believe that this is the only or the primary reason, we run the risk of being too complacent.
- Besides, this does not explain why overall regime support is so low in Japan, Taiwan and South Korea.

The Second Explanation: Its Regime Performance Stupid

Democratic support and regime legitimacy could be created and maintained less at the input but more at the output side of the political system.

Non-democratic regimes while denying democratic rights to their citizens might still enjoy higher level of political support if they deliver economic wellbeing and are perceived to be responsive to the people's needs.

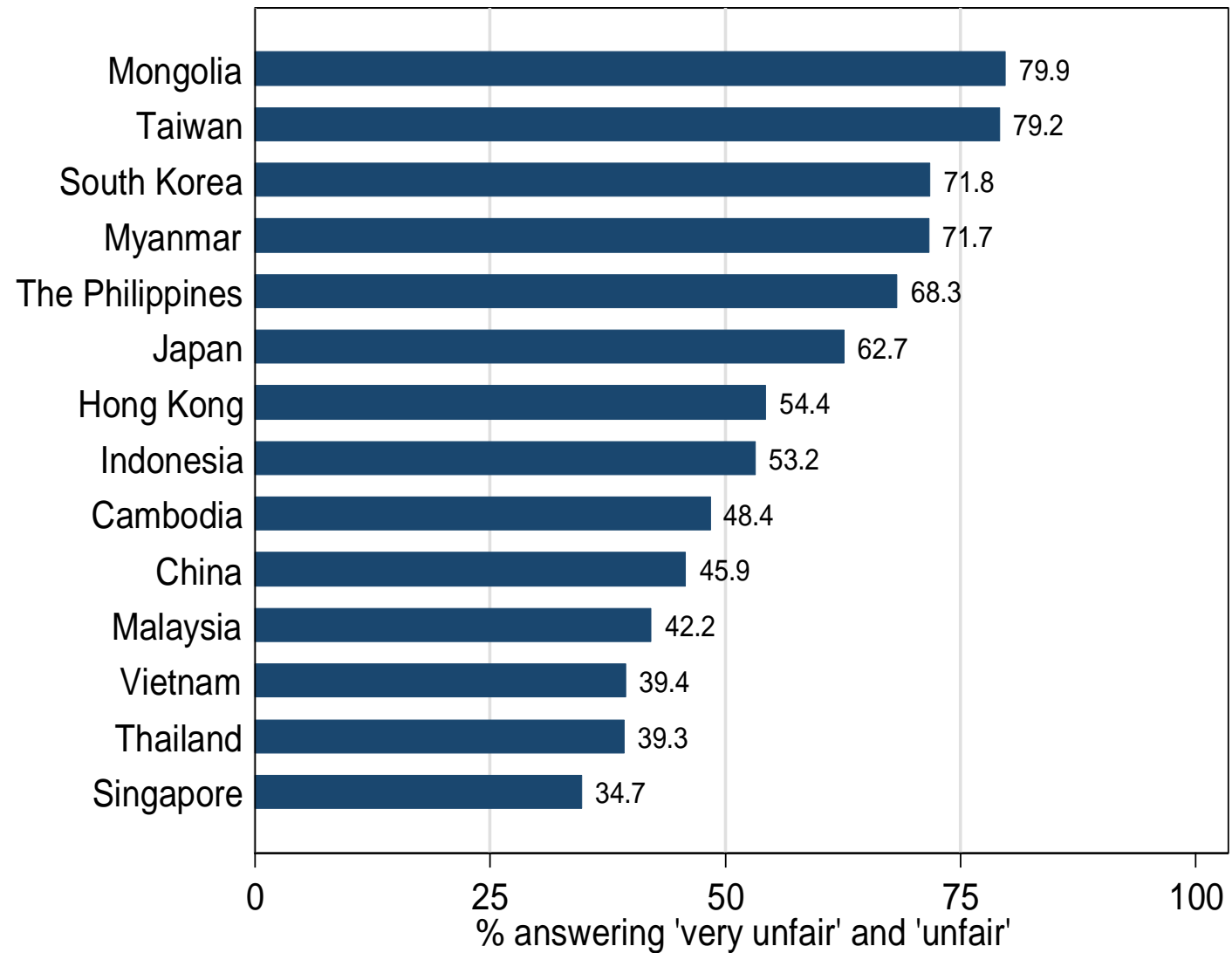
Level of Regime Legitimacy and Government Response



The more responsive the government is, the higher regime legitimacy.

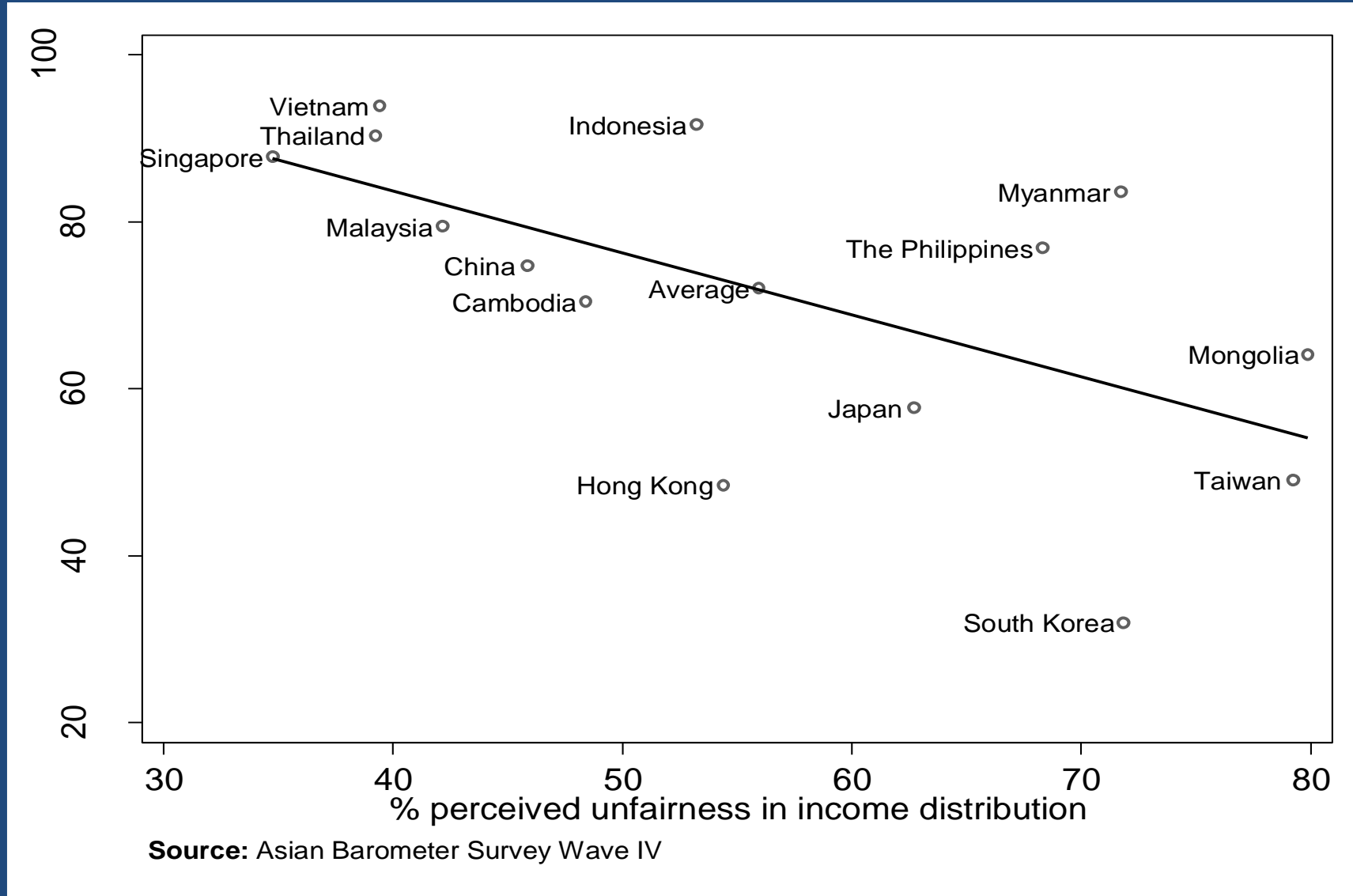
Figure 1: Perception of Income Distribution

"How fair do you think income distribution is in our country?"



Source: Asian Barometer Survey Wave IV

Figure 2: Regime Support and Perception of Unfairness in Income Distribution



The Third Explanation

Citizens don't share the same understanding of democracy within the country and much less across different types of regimes

- Democracy is a contested concept.
- In our time the concept of “democracy” has been embraced by virtually all politicians everywhere including leaders of non-democratic regimes.
- Most of the items carry the “D” word runs the danger of comparing apples with oranges as people’s conception of democracy may be quite different from the standard definition of liberal democracy.

Measuring Understanding of Democracy

We asked our respondent a set of four questions with the following opening statement: “Many things may be desirable, but not all of them are essential characteristics of democracy. If you have to choose only one from each four sets of statements that I am going to read, which one would you choose as the most essential characteristics of a democracy?”

The Idea behind the Design

- East Asians' understanding of democracy may contain four different components, namely norms and procedures, freedom and liberty, social equity, and good government.
- Each question presents four statements, one for each component.
- With four questions, each component has an equal chance of being placed the first, second, third and last on the response grid. In this way, we neutralize the order effect.

First Question

1. Government narrows the gap between the rich and the poor.
(social equity)
2. People choose the government leaders in free and fair election.
(norms and procedures)
3. Government does not waste any public money. (good government)
4. People are free to express their political views openly.
(freedom and liberty)

Second Question

1. The legislature has oversight over the government. (norms and procedures)
2. Basic necessities, like food, clothes and shelter, are provided for all. (social equity)
3. People are free to organize political groups. (freedom and liberty)
4. Government provides people with quality public services. (good government)

Third Question

1. Government ensures law and order. (good government)
2. Media is free to criticize the things government does. (freedom and liberty)
3. Government ensures job opportunities for all. (social equity)
4. Multiple parties compete fairly in the election. (norms and procedures)

Fourth Question

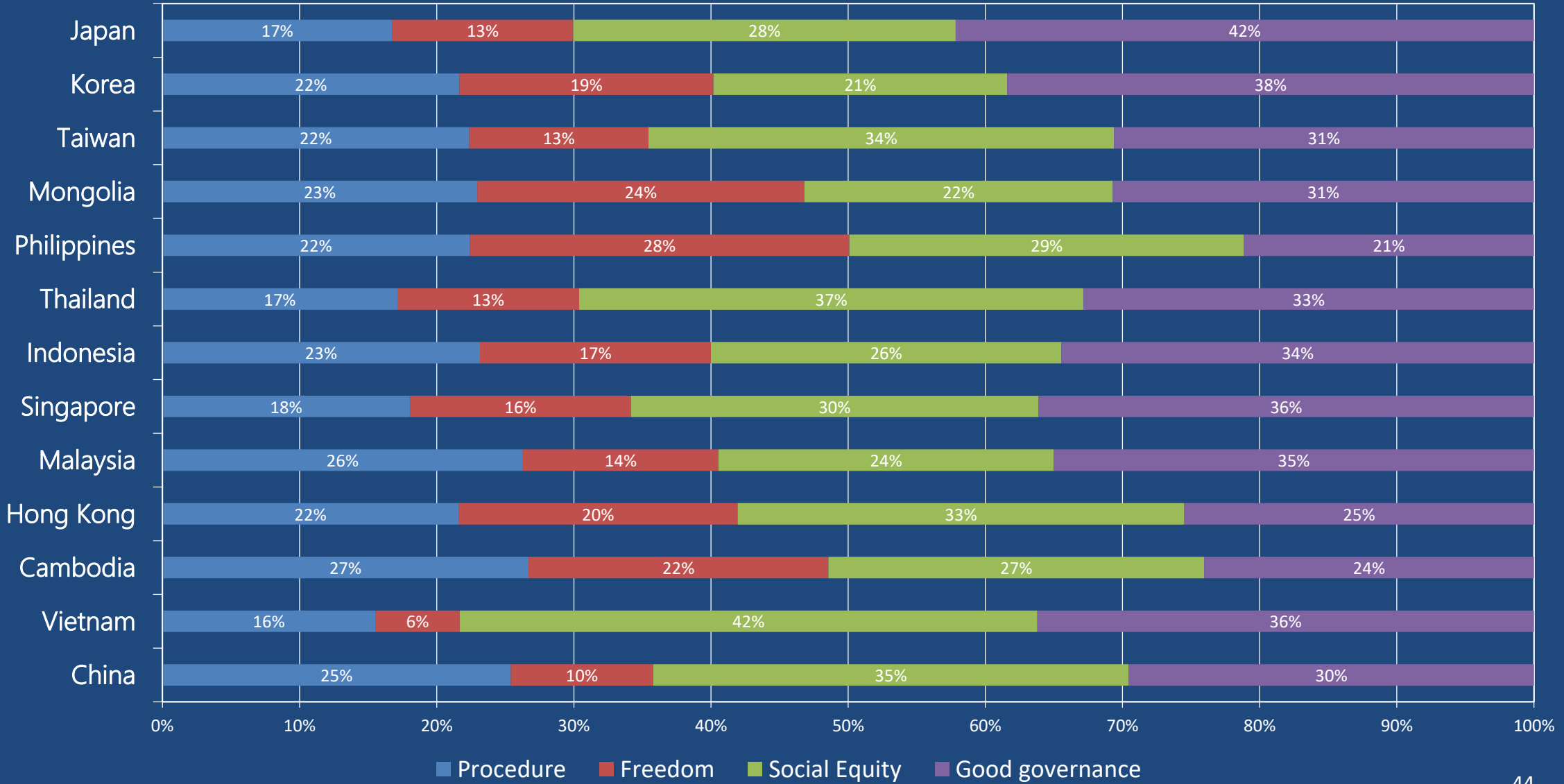
1. People have the freedom to take part in protests and demonstrations. (freedom and liberty)
2. Politics is clean and free of corruption. (good government)
3. The court protects the ordinary people from the abuse of government power. (norms and procedures)
4. People receive state aid if they are unemployed. (social equity)

We collapsed the answers to the four questions together to produce a summary statistics for each country.

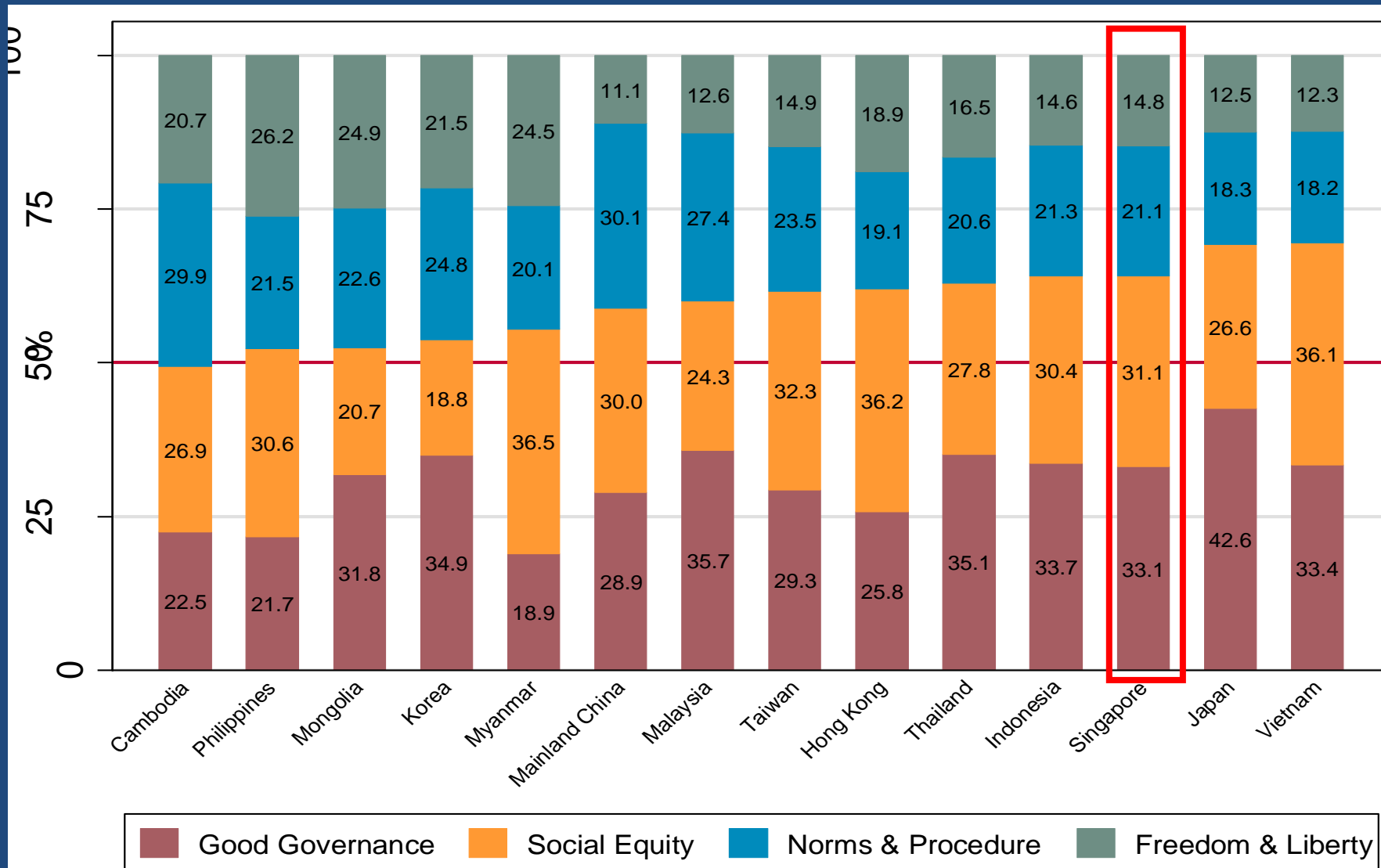
It tells us the relative importance of each component in constituting people's understanding of democracy in a given country.

We found that Asian people have very diverse understanding of democracy. There is huge difference what they consider as the essential characteristic of a democracy.

Popular Understanding of Democracy: Asian Barometer Survey Wave 3



Meaning of Democracy



Source: Asian Barometer Survey Wave 4

The Findings and Implications

- A substantive understanding of democracy is more popular than the one based on procedure or freedom across East Asia, specially among people living in Confucian societies.

- It is conceivable that a democratic regime may be viewed by its citizen as being not fully democratic and not fully legitimate if it fails to fulfill “good government” or “social equity” criteria.
- It is also possible for a non-democratic regime to be perceived as being democratic and legitimate if it fulfills “good government” or “social equity” criteria but lacks freedom and democratic procedures.

The Fourth Explanation: Critical Citizens

The fact that some democracies having a lower level of regime support than non-democracies could be attributed to the strong presence of critical citizens, who are committed to democracy as an ideal but are disappointed by the real-life democracy that they have experienced.

Also, the polemic and contentious nature of democratic politics could also reinforce their dissatisfaction.

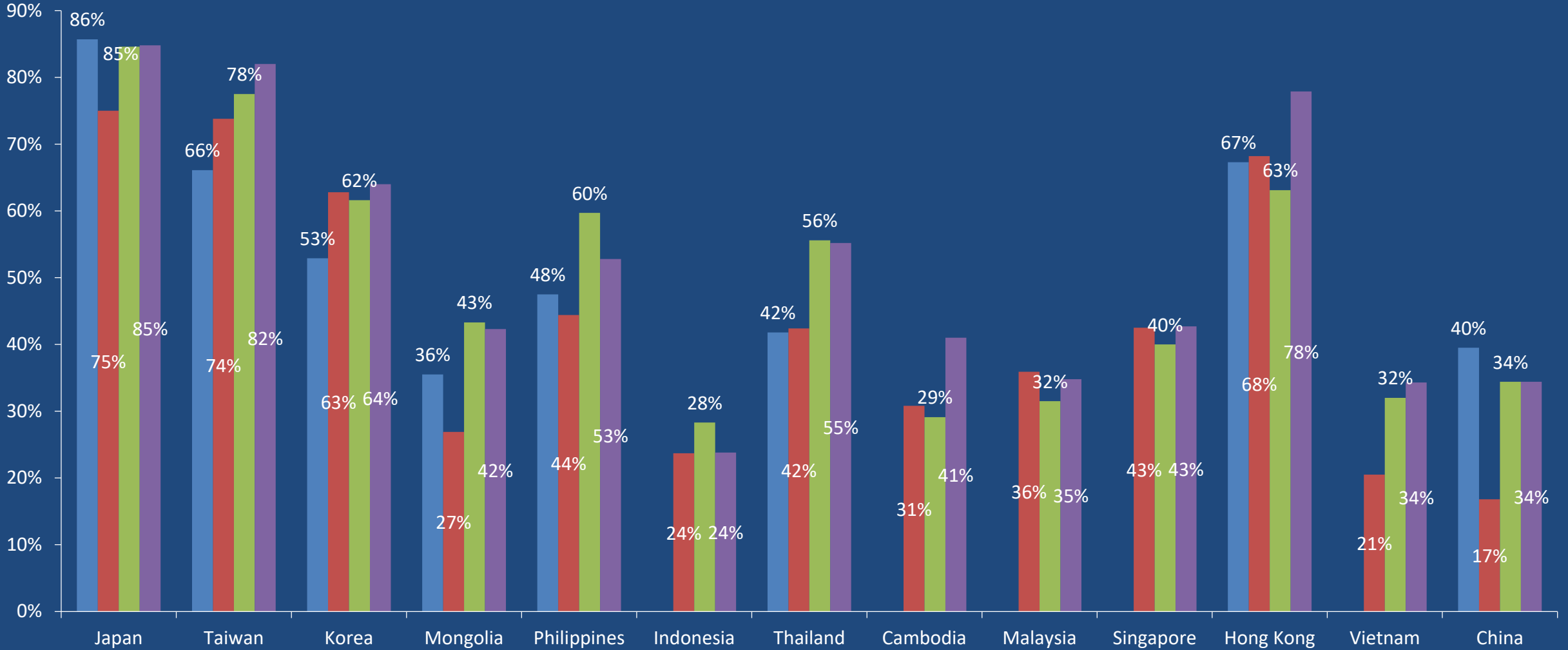
□ It is conceivable for some non-democratic regimes enjoy higher level of political support and are rated higher on subjective democratic scale due the fact that these countries have a large portion of uncritical, deferential and compliant citizens.

□ Political culture matters and legitimacy is in the eyes of the beholders.

Measuring Liberal Democratic Values

Government Leaders are like the Head of Family, We Should All Follow their Decisions (% of Disagree)

Wave 1 Wave 2 Wave 3 Wave 4



Government should decide if certain ideas are allowed to be discussed in the society. (% of Disagree)

Wave 1 Wave 2 Wave 3 Wave 4

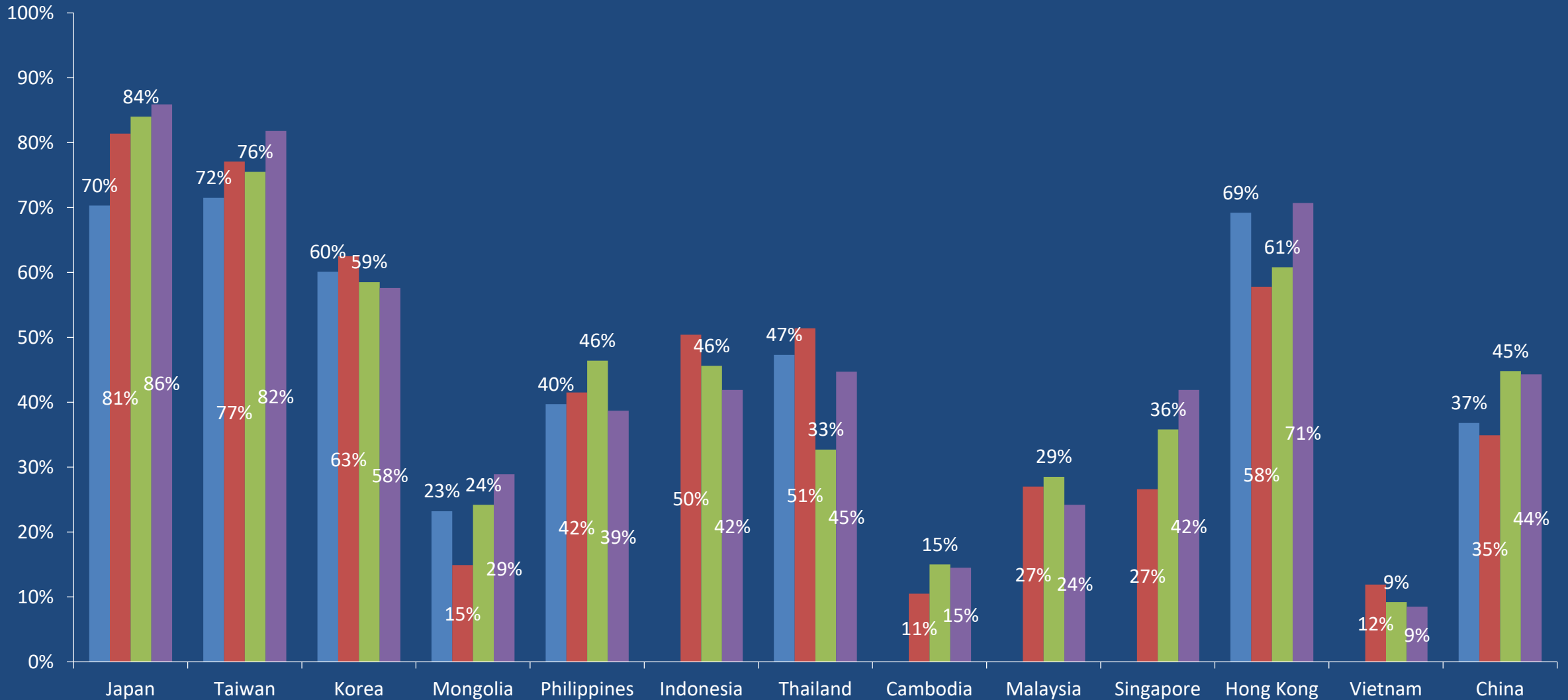


Table 2: A Typology of Democratic Orientation

Support for Democracy

Liberal Democratic

Value

	Low	High
High	Critical Democrats	Consistent Democrats
Low	Non-Democrats	Superficial Democrats

Table 3.2 A Typological Analysis of Democratic Orientations in East Asian Countries

Country and Survey Year	Consistent Democrats	Critical Democrats	Superficial Democrats	Non-Democrats
Japan 2002	49.0	31.3	10.3	9.5
Japan 2007	48.8	29.5	10.1	11.7
Korea 2002	20.9	51.3	9.1	18.6
Korea 2007	31.7	41.0	9.9	17.4
Taiwan 2001	22.8	43.5	11.4	22.3
Taiwan 2006	28.8	45.2	9.3	16.7
Mongolia 2001	20.9	12.7	38.3	28.1
Mongolia 2006	12.2	3.2	59.1	25.5
Indonesia 2007	37.9	24.8	21.0	16.3
Philippines 2001	21.4	30.9	22.2	25.5
Philippines 2005	10.8	30.8	18.1	40.3
Thailand 2001	26.5	7.3	56.3	9.9
Thailand 2006	22.2	10.4	49.9	17.5
Malaysia 2007	21.6	16.8	37.7	23.9
Singapore 2006	20.6	31.6	19.5	28.3
Hong Kong 2002	26.7	42.8	13.0	17.5
Hong Kong 2007	26.4	39.3	14.8	19.5
Cambodia 2008	15.9	8.8	51.1	24.2
Vietnam 2005	31.0	5.3	58.1	5.3
China 2003	32.6	15.6	38.2	13.7
China 2008	26.5	12.6	41.6	19.3

Four Democratic Orientations

ABS Wave 4

Country Survey Year	Consistent Democrats	Critical Democrats	Non- democrats	Superficial Democrats
JP16	55%	31%	7%	7%
HK16	35%	35%	21%	8%
KR15	42%	28%	14%	16%
CN15	22%	23%	27%	28%
MN14	14%	22%	40%	24%
PH14	16%	29%	34%	20%
TW14	31%	50%	14%	6%
TH14	25%	15%	31%	28%
IN16	28%	15%	22%	35%
SG14	21%	20%	34%	25%
VN15	8%	4%	28%	60%
KH15	21%	8%	22%	49%
MA14	23%	15%	24%	38%
MY15	26%	7%	25%	41%

Why Asians in New Democracies Have Mixed Feeling toward Democracy?

- Critical citizens
- Political polarization
- Authoritarian nostalgia
- Lingering influence of traditional social values (and slow acquisition of liberal democratic values)
- Disappointing with real-life democracy
 - ✓ Bad economic performance
 - ✓ Growing inequality
 - ✓ Bad governance (especially abuse of power and corruption)
- Low sense of political efficacy
- Poisonous media environment
- Measurement problem

Thank You