During the so-called “Third Wave of Democratization” that swept Asia beginning in the 1980s, there was widespread optimism that democracy was developing deep roots in the region. But with growing rivalry between China and the US, and changing political dynamics in many countries in Asia, there are now growing fears of democratic backsliding throughout the region.
The backsliding of democracies around the globe has worried observers everywhere. East Asia is no exception. Yet history and recent events alike have shown that not all countries are susceptible to anti-democratic trends to the same extent. For example, authoritarian populist candidates failed miserably in Indonesia in the 2019 presidential elections (and in 2014); and most recently in Taiwan’s on Jan. 11 (see the essay by Aurel Croissant and Kim Jung-eun on page 22).

What, then, makes democracies vulnerable to backsliding? Scholars bring forward a whole range of potential causes, but one factor that is often overlooked are a country’s citizens. This seems like a strange oversight: after all, democracies by definition are built on the rule of the people and heavily rely on at least some level of goodwill and compliance from their citizens to function. If citizens decline to participate in democratic politics or to accept its outcomes, democracy may become easy prey for anti-democrats. On the other hand, when the support of citizens for the democratic political regime is strong and stable, anti-democratic actors will have a hard time gaining a foothold. Without the consent of citizens, abolishing democracy can become very hard work — as recent events in Hong Kong have demonstrated again, people tend to fight for what they hold dear (see the essay by Brian Fong on page 30).

Political trust as key source of democratic resilience
Research on political culture thus considers the attitudes of citizens toward the political system to be crucial for the stability of democracy. A deficit in trust between citizens and those institutions, a deficit that seriously threatens the future of democracy in the region, writes Marlene Mauk.

Of the six current democracies in East Asia, Indonesia has the strongest backing from its citizens. In contrast, a majority of citizens in South Korea, Taiwan, Mongolia, Japan, and the Philippines do not express particular trust in their core democratic institutions. Across the region, of the five core institutions of democracy, only the police receive support from a majority of citizens.
series of scholarly contributions has already highlighted how a so-called “democratic disconnect” may threaten even the established democracies of the West, provoking an academic as well as public debate on whether a global wave of democratic deconsolidation may be imminent following a decline in pro-democratic attitudes among citizens (Foa and Mounk 2016; 2017; Mounk 2018). With regard to those pro-democratic attitudes, one of the most central and stabilizing is political trust, i.e. the confidence of citizens that the core institutions of democracy will do what is right — for example, implement the policy preferences of citizens — even if not scrutinized at every step of the way. Its absence, however, can quickly challenge the stability of democracy. When trust in democracy’s core institutions is low, citizens tend to engage in elite-challenging and unconventional political actions, demand institutional reform, or even stop complying with the law (Dalton 2004; Tyler 2006).

For a democracy to be resilient, it is thus desirable that citizens have a high level of trust in core institutions — government, parliament, the judiciary, the police and the civil service. In addition, this trust should be reasonably stable, regardless of economic crises or major political scandals. For that to be the case, political trust needs to be rooted in a principled belief in democracy as a political system and a firm commitment to the political values and principles underpinning liberal democracy rather than depend primarily on short-term factors such as satisfaction with the economy or the popularity of the incumbent government. This is especially important for institutions such as the judiciary, the police and the civil service, where — unlike for government and parliament — citizens have little impact on who holds office and thus cannot easily “throw the rascals out.” Broad and steady citizen support for these institutions forms the backbone of democratic stability and should not be affected by day-to-day politics. Citizens can therefore only be a reservoir of resilience for democracy if their trust in democracy’s institutions is both strong and stable. If not, citizens may become a danger for the rule of the people.

**EAST ASIANS DON’T PARTICULARLY TRUST THEIR DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS**

So, how much can East Asian democracies rely on popular support? A glance at the data collected by the Asian Barometer Project Wave 1 to 4 (2001-2016) show that of the six current democracies in the region, Indonesia has the strongest backing from its citizens. In contrast, a majority of citizens in South Korea, Taiwan, Mongolia, Japan, and the Philippines do not express particular trust in their core democratic institutions. Across the region, of the five core institutions of democracy, only the police receive support from a majority of citizens (see figure 1).

Citizens’ views are especially critical when it comes to those institutions that are most subject to political contention: government and parliament. This is hardly surprising given the partisan nature of these two institutions. Democratic political competition and elections always divide the population into winners and losers, with government and opposition camps often depicting each other as adversaries rather than partners. Low levels of trust in government are thus primarily found among supporters of the opposition. For parliaments, the same winner-loser divide applies. In addition, parliaments are the one democratic institution where political conflicts are fought out in the open on a daily basis. Different factions engage in often heated debates about policies, and some conflicts even turn violent. For example, parliamentary debate on the rather mundane topic of school meals ended in members of the South Korean parliament pushing and shoving each other in a fight over the speaker’s podium in December 2010. Only a week later, the budgetary debate descended into a mass brawl, leaving one MP hospitalized with a head wound. In Taiwan’s Legislative Yuan, perhaps the world’s most infamous parliament in this respect, parliamentary debates regularly turn violent, with legislators pulling each other’s hair and biting one another. With media coverage typically focusing on these adversarial and hostile aspects of parliamentary politics — rarely covering what in most cases is rather co-operative day-to-day working operations — it is little wonder citizens do not see parliament as being very trustworthy.

**TRUST FLUCTUATES AND DIPS OVER TIME**

Going beyond the current views of citizens regarding their democratic institutions, data from previous years show considerable fluctuation in the backing of citizens for democracy since the early 2000s, with severe drops in confidence often following devastating events or major political scandals (see figure 2 overleaf). For instance, citizens’ trust in parliament, government, the civil service and the judiciary alike plummeted in Mongolia after the “dzud” of 2009-2010, a winter storm of unprecedented scale that killed a million animals and destroyed the livelihoods of tens of thousands of people. Similarly, South Koreans lost faith in pretty much all of their core democratic institutions after the “X file scandal” revealed illegal wiretapping and large-scale bribery in 2005. Whereas South Korean institutions have largely recovered from this sudden loss in trust — perhaps, at least in part, thanks to the subsequent change in government — the Mongolian political system continues to suffer from its plunge in confidence, with levels of trust nowhere near the pre-crisis years. And in Japan, the trust of citizens in government dropped to a record low in the aftermath of the 2011 Fukushima disaster. Unlike in Mongolia and South Korea, however, Japan’s other institutions remained virtually unaffected, indicating that ordinary people assigned responsibility for what happened primarily to the government. While fluctuations in institutional trust are

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**FIGURE 1 EAST ASIAN CITIZENS’ TRUST IN CORE DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS**

Comparatively minor in the Philippines, indicating perhaps a certain degree of resignation among Filipinos given the country’s rich history of corruption and political scandals, they run remarkably parallel for all core democratic institutions. Seemingly, Filipinos do not make much of a distinction when it comes to how they judge different branches of government, which does not bode well for democratic stability: as this ties the fate of one institution to all others, it makes the entire political system potentially unstable. It is thus hardly surprising that an immensely popular authoritarian populist such as Rodrigo Duterte had such an easy time dismantling almost all core institutions of Philippine democracy (see the essay by Mark Thompson on page 60).

In addition to these patterns of volatility, the longitudinal data reveal a steady decline in the trust of citizens in some of their core institutions. This is the case, for example, in Taiwan, where citizens have become less and less confident in their democratically elected government as well as the country’s courts since the early 2000s. Similarly, the views of Indonesians of their national parliament have continuously decreased over the past 15 years.

Only one institution seems to defy these general patterns of volatility and decline: Citizens’ views of the police have remained remarkably stable over the past 20 years in South Korea, Japan, Indonesia, Mongolia and Taiwan. In fact, the police are the only institution in which citizens across East Asia do express more trust today than they did in the early 2000s. For all other core democratic institutions, the general pattern points to a decline in citizen confidence rather than an increase.

**TRUST IS DETERMINED PRIMARILY BY SHORT-TERM FACTORS**

What is more, the trust of citizens in democratic institutions seems to depend on short-term factors such as changes in economic performance or the popularity of the incumbent government everywhere in East Asia. As soon as the national economy takes a downturn, citizens across the region will start doubting whether they can still trust the institutions their democracy is built upon. The same goes for government popularity: when, for one reason or another, the incumbent government loses the favor of citizens — for example in the wake of a corruption scandal — the entire political system faces increased scrutiny from citizens (see figure 3 overleaf).

Among the countries most dependent on these short-term factors, Taiwan and Japan stand out as the ones where government popularity is exceptionally important for how citizens view core democratic institutions. While incumbent popularity is decisive mainly for the confidence of citizens in parliament and in the government itself in Japan, it determines citizen attitudes towards almost all democratic institutions in Taiwan. Moreover, even how much citizens trust the police is to a significant extent dependent on incumbent popularity in both Taiwan and Japan and, in fact, most of the region. Evaluations of the country’s economic performance are also particularly important in Taiwan and Japan, along with Indonesia and the Philippines. Especially Filipinos and Taiwanese seem to assign priority to the national economy when it comes to forming their opinions about the country’s democracy. Even though there is little apparent reason for why the police, the courts, or the civil service should be judged based on how well the economy is doing, this is exactly what we find citizens doing in the Philippines and Taiwan, as well as in Indonesia.

While democratic institutions in Mongolia appear less dependent on short-term economic performance and incumbent popularity compared to the rest of East Asia, the attitudes of citizens towards the political system are not completely oblivious to exogenous events and developments. Even here, citizen trust in both the courts and the police is mainly driven by economic factors, and a severe crisis such as the 2009–2010 will have a strong effect on how citizens view all democratic institutions.

In comparison, long-term factors such as the citizens’ belief in democratic values and principles such as media pluralism and government accountability or the principled rejection of authoritarian forms of government play only a minor role in shaping citizens’ view of their countries’ core democratic institutions. Even in Indonesia and Japan, the countries where citizens’ commitment to the political values underpinning liberal democracy and their aversion to authoritarian alternatives are more important than in any other East Asian democracy, short-term factors such as economic performance and incumbent popularity still take clear precedence over these long-term predictors of citizen confidence.

What is truly worrisome about this strong dependence on economic performance and incumbent popularity is that these factors not only affect how citizens view elected institutions such as the government and legislature, but also non-elected institutions such as the courts and the civil service, which are typically further detached from party politics. This points to considerable spillover effects between elected and unelected institutions and suggests that citizens generally do not distinguish clearly between different branches of government.

**EAST ASIAN CITIZENS: HARDLY A PILLAR OF DEMOCRATIC STABILITY**

Overall, citizens in East Asia are no reservoir of democratic resilience. Their generally low amount of trust in the core institutions of democracy, the volatility over time, and the strong dependence on short-term factors are not good omen for East Asian democracies: none of the six democracies in the region seems to be par-

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**FIGURE 2 TRENDS IN CITIZEN TRUST**

particularly well equipped to withstand future challenges to democracy.

If democrats cannot find ways to enhance and stabilize the trust of citizens or develop other means of safeguarding the democratic system against both internal and external attacks from authoritarian forces, the prospects truly look grim for democracy in the region. With the Philippines already backsliding down the authoritarian road, it might be only a matter of time before the next East Asian democracy starts to fall. Given its already below-average levels of citizen trust, the overall downward trend, and its extraordinarily high dependence on short-term factors such as economic performance and incumbent popularity, Taiwan appears especially at risk. Even though the most recent attempts at election meddling and misinformation campaigns orchestrated by China proved unsuccessful in the Jan. 11 presidential elections, observers agree that incumbent president Tsai Ing-wen’s bid profited immensely from the current political crisis in Hong Kong and that the political landscape is far from as pro-democratic as Tsai’s landslide victory makes it look. Should her opponents become more successful in smearing her reputation or should a major economic crisis hit the country, the tide could turn very quickly indeed.

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