

The Satisfaction Paradox: Economic Performance and the Decoupling of Democratic Support in South Korea and Taiwan

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Abstract

Democratic consolidation theory predicts that satisfaction with democratic performance and normative commitment to democracy move in tandem, mutually reinforcing as democracies mature. Six waves of Asian Barometer Survey data from South Korea (2003–2022, $n = 7,603$) reveal a striking dissociation: democratic satisfaction has risen steadily (+0.049 normalized units per decade) while the belief that democracy is always preferable has declined (−0.098/decade). Wave-by-wave OLS regressions demonstrate that economic evaluations are powerful predictors of satisfaction with democracy ($\beta = 0.26\text{--}0.46$, $p < 0.001$ across all waves) but have no significant relationship with normative democratic preference from 2006 onward ($\beta = 0$, all $p > 0.10$). A parallel analysis of Taiwan ($n = 9,042$) reveals a fundamentally different syndrome: economic evaluations predict satisfaction *and* are significantly negatively associated with normative democratic preference ($\beta = -0.14$ to -0.50), consistent with a critical citizens pattern. The cross-country difference is statistically significant (interaction $\beta = 0.217$, $p < 0.001$). These findings challenge the assumption that democratic satisfaction signals democratic deepening, identify two distinct legitimization pathways in East Asia’s most-studied democracies, and illuminate the conditions under which democratic institutions may be resilient yet normatively shallow—as illustrated, though not causally explained, by South Korea’s December 2024 martial law crisis.

1 Introduction

On the evening of December 3, 2024, President Yoon Suk Yeol appeared on national television to declare emergency martial law in South Korea, citing the need to protect the country from “anti-state forces” and “North Korean communist sympathizers” allegedly

operating through the opposition-controlled National Assembly (Hankyoreh, 2024). Troops were dispatched to the parliament building; political activity was banned; the press was placed under the authority of the Martial Law Command. It was the first declaration of martial law in South Korea since Chun Doo-hwan’s military coup in 1980—and it lasted barely six hours. Lawmakers pushed past soldiers, convened an emergency session, and voted unanimously to overturn the decree. Yoon was impeached within days. In February 2026, a Seoul court sentenced him to life in prison for insurrection, the most severe punishment imposed on a former president in the post-democratization era (Hankyoreh, 2026). South Korean democracy, by any institutional measure, held.

Yet the episode raises a question that institutional resilience alone cannot answer. How could a sitting president—a former chief prosecutor, educated entirely within democratic South Korea’s legal institutions—conclude that martial law was a viable political strategy in the world’s tenth-largest economy and one of Asia’s most celebrated democracies? The standard answer points to Yoon’s personal authoritarian tendencies and political isolation, with approval ratings in the single digits. I offer a complementary structural explanation grounded in two decades of mass public opinion data. The foundation of democratic support in South Korea, I argue, is more fragile than the institutional performance of its democracy suggests—because that support rests on performance-derived legitimization rather than normative democratic commitment.

The empirical basis for this argument is a pattern I term the *satisfaction paradox*. Drawing on six waves of the Asian Barometer Survey spanning 2003 to 2022 ($n = 7603$ for South Korea), the analysis documents a sustained divergence between two dimensions of

democratic support that consolidation theory predicts should move together. Democratic satisfaction—how well citizens think democracy is performing—has risen steadily, at roughly $c(x = 0.049)$ normalized units per decade. Normative democratic commitment—the belief that democracy is always preferable—has gone in the other direction, declining at $-c(x = 0.098)$ units per decade, while system support dropped at -0.045 per decade. Korean citizens have grown more satisfied with their democracy and less committed to it as a form of government. At the same time.

The mechanism is straightforward. Wave-by-wave regression models show that economic evaluations powerfully and consistently predict satisfaction with democracy ($\beta = 0.262$ to 0.455 , $p < 0.001$ across all six waves) but bear no statistically significant relationship to normative democratic preference from 2006 onward. Satisfaction runs on an economic track. Normative commitment runs on a separate track entirely. Whatever determines whether Korean citizens believe democracy is worth defending in principle, it is not economic performance.

The finding takes on comparative depth when set alongside Taiwan ($n = 9042$ across the same six ABS waves). Taiwan shares South Korea's developmental state heritage, Confucian cultural matrix, and third-wave democratization experience—yet the Taiwanese data tell a fundamentally different story (Haggard, 1990). Economic evaluations predict democratic satisfaction there too. But in Taiwan, they are also significantly and *negatively* associated with normative democratic preference ($\beta = -0.14$ to -0.5): economically comfortable Taiwanese citizens are substantially *more* committed to democracy as a matter of principle. The cross-country difference is statistically significant (interaction $\beta = 0.217$, $p < 0.001$).

Where Korean citizens decouple satisfaction from normative commitment, Taiwanese citizens exhibit what Norris (1999, 2011) theorized as critical citizenship—to a degree not previously documented in the East Asian survey literature.

I argue that the divergence reflects two distinct pathways of democratic legitimization. In South Korea, democracy arrived as an instrument of accountability and economic governance, and democratic support has stayed fundamentally instrumental—conditional on continued delivery, shallow in normative depth, vulnerable when performance falters or alternative governance models look attractive. In Taiwan, democratization fused with national identity through the political project of distinguishing Taiwan from authoritarian China. That fusion anchored normative democratic commitment independently of economic performance and produced a citizenry that grows *more* demanding of democratic quality as material conditions improve.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it documents the satisfaction-quality dissociation in South Korea with systematic longitudinal evidence spanning two decades. Second, it identifies the performance-derived legitimization mechanism at the individual level. Third—and this is where the Taiwan comparison earns its place—it demonstrates through formal cross-country analysis that the Korean pattern is not a generic East Asian phenomenon but a consequence of Korea's specific legitimization pathway, distinguishable from Taiwan's identity-fused alternative.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the consolidation literature's co-movement assumption and develops the theoretical framework distinguishing performance-derived from identity-fused democratic legitimization. Section 3 describes the

data, variable construction, and analytic strategy. Section 4 presents the descriptive trends, mechanism tests, cross-country comparison, and robustness checks. Section 5 interprets the findings, addresses their implications for democratic resilience in light of the Yoon crisis, and acknowledges limitations. Section 6 offers concluding reflections.

2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Democratic consolidation and the co-movement assumption

Democratic consolidation scholarship builds on a distinction between two modes of citizen support. Easton's (1979) foundational framework separated *diffuse support*—a reservoir of generalized attachment to the political system that persists regardless of specific policy outcomes—from *specific support*—evaluations of incumbent performance that rise and fall with economic conditions, policy decisions, and government competence (Klingemann, 1999). Consolidation, in this framework, occurs when diffuse support runs deep enough and wide enough that the democratic regime can weather stretches of poor specific support without existential threat. The system is legitimate not because it performs well at any given moment but because citizens regard it as the only acceptable form of governance.

Later theorists sharpened these expectations. Linz and Stepan (1996) argued that consolidation requires democracy to become “the only game in town”—behaviorally, attitudinally, and constitutionally. Diamond (1999) theorized “deepening,” a process through which institutional maturation breeds progressively stronger normative commitment in mass publics. The prediction common to these accounts—sometimes explicit, more often tacit—is

one of *co-movement*: as democracies deliver accountable governance, satisfaction with democratic performance should reinforce commitment to democratic principles, generating a virtuous cycle. Good performance builds legitimacy; strong legitimacy buffers against performance downturns. Specific and diffuse support should trend together over the medium to long term.

Norris (1999, 2011) introduced an important qualification with her work on “critical citizens.” Citizens in mature democracies were becoming simultaneously more committed to democratic ideals and more dissatisfied with democratic practice—rising expectations outpacing institutional performance. But note what this does *not* challenge. The normative dimension is secure and strengthening; it is performance evaluation that grows more demanding. Critical citizenship, in Norris’s formulation, is a sign of democratic health.

The more radical challenge—that satisfaction and normative commitment might move in *opposite directions*—has received less systematic attention. Foa and Mounk (2017) sparked debate by documenting declining democratic support among younger cohorts in Western democracies, though they focused on generational replacement rather than the performance-commitment nexus, and their claims remain contested (Voeten, 2016). The question of whether a mature democracy can exhibit rising satisfaction alongside declining normative commitment—and what that configuration implies for resilience—is largely untheorized.

2.2 Performance legitimacy and the East Asian challenge

The co-movement assumption grew out of the Western democratic experience, where democratic legitimacy was established before or alongside industrialization. Civic education, constitutional veneration, foundational political narratives—these anchored normative commitment independently of economic performance. East Asia’s democratization experience upends this sequence. In South Korea, Taiwan, and the region’s other third-wave democracies, rapid economic development under authoritarian auspices *preceded* democratic transition. Citizens had already experienced effective governance without democracy. Democracy’s legitimacy was inevitably, at least in part, comparative—measured against the developmental state it replaced.

The consequences of this sequencing are well documented. Park and Shin (2006) identified “incomplete democratization” in South Korea: widespread democratic preference coexisting with authoritarian nostalgia and limited procedural understanding. Chu and colleagues (2008, 2020) showed that East Asian citizens define democracy in substantive rather than procedural terms—economic outcomes and good governance take priority over elections and rights. Shin (2011) traced these patterns to Confucian governance ideals, where political legitimacy derives from providing for the governed rather than from the manner of selecting leaders.

The implication for the co-movement assumption is significant but has not been fully drawn out. If citizens in a post-developmental-state democracy evaluate their political system primarily on output—what the system delivers—rather than process—how it delivers—then satisfaction and normative commitment need not track one another. A citizen can be highly

satisfied with democratic performance (the economy grows, the government functions, public services work) without developing deeper commitment to democratic principles, because the commitment was never principled in the first place. It was always conditional on performance. The reverse is also possible: a citizen may grow less committed to democracy in principle—alternative governance models look attractive, democratic procedures seem cumbersome—while remaining satisfied with current performance, because the system happens to be delivering.

The co-movement assumption fails precisely when the normative and instrumental foundations of democratic support are decoupled. The East Asian developmental state legacy creates conditions under which such decoupling is theoretically expected.

2.3 Two pathways: performance-derived and identity-fused legitimation

I propose that the relationship between economic performance and democratic attitudes is conditioned by the mode through which democratic legitimation was historically established. Two ideal-typical pathways matter for the East Asian cases under analysis.

Performance-derived legitimation characterizes cases where democracy was adopted primarily as a means of achieving accountable governance and sustaining economic development—and where democratic identity never found an anchor independent of output. Democratic satisfaction, in such cases, should be strongly responsive to economic conditions, because economic performance is the criterion against which democracy is judged. Normative commitment should be weakly related to economic conditions, because nothing in this

pathway links material well-being to principled attachment to democratic procedures. The satisfaction and quality dimensions of democratic support run on separate tracks, and their trajectories may diverge as economic conditions shift without producing corresponding normative change.

South Korea fits this pattern. The democratic transition of 1987 was driven by a broad coalition united more by opposition to military authoritarianism than by a shared democratic vision. The subsequent decades of democratic governance coincided with continued economic growth. Democracy proved itself by delivering. The delivery was real, but the normative foundation it built was shallow.

This framing matters analytically. I am not claiming that Korean citizens fail to support democracy—they do, at levels comparable to other consolidated democracies. The claim is about *structure*: their support is instrumental rather than normative. The same aggregate endorsement may mask fundamentally different resilience profiles depending on whether it is principled or conditional.

Identity-fused legitimization characterizes cases where democratic identity became intertwined with national identity, anchoring normative commitment independently of economic performance. Taiwan is the paradigmatic case. Democratization there was not merely a transition from authoritarian governance—it was a project of national self-definition. To be democratic was to be Taiwanese; to be Taiwanese was to be not-China (Rigger, 1999; Wachman, 1994). The Democratic Progressive Party’s political project fused democratic governance with national identity, giving normative commitment an anchor that did not depend on output evaluation. Under these conditions, the critical citizens pattern becomes

possible. Because normative commitment is secure, economic comfort frees citizens to become *more* demanding of democratic quality. Material well-being raises the normative bar rather than lowering it.

The distinction between these pathways generates testable predictions. Four hypotheses follow from the framework; a fifth addresses the generality of the Korean pattern.

2.4 Hypotheses

H1 (Performance-satisfaction linkage): Economic evaluations are positively and significantly associated with democratic satisfaction in both Korea and Taiwan. This hypothesis reflects the expectation, common to both pathways, that citizens who evaluate the economy favorably will be more satisfied with the performance of their democratic system.

H2 (Korean decoupling): In South Korea, economic evaluations have no significant relationship with democratic quality perceptions. This hypothesis reflects the performance-derived legitimization pathway, in which the instrumental and normative dimensions of democratic support run on separate tracks.

H3 (Taiwanese critical citizens): In Taiwan, economic evaluations are negatively associated with democratic quality perceptions. This hypothesis reflects the identity-fused pathway, in which secure normative commitment allows economic comfort to fuel more demanding assessment of democratic quality.

H4 (Cross-country divergence): The relationship between economic evaluations and democratic quality perceptions is significantly different between Korea and Taiwan. This

hypothesis provides a formal test of whether the two legitimization pathways produce distinguishable empirical signatures.

H5 (Universality of Korean decoupling): The Korean decoupling pattern holds across age groups, education levels, and model specifications. This hypothesis tests whether the performance-derived legitimization mode is a society-wide phenomenon rather than a feature of particular demographic subgroups, as would be expected if it reflects a structural property of the legitimization pathway rather than compositional variation in the electorate.

3 Data and Methods

3.1 Data

The analysis draws on the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS), a comparative survey program administering nationally representative face-to-face interviews across East and Southeast Asia since 2001 (Asian Barometer Survey, 2023). Six waves are currently available (Wave 1: 2001–2003 through Wave 6: 2021–2023). South Korea and Taiwan are among the few countries surveyed in all six waves, providing an unusually long panel of repeated cross-sections.

The Korean sample comprises 7603 respondents across the six waves; the Taiwanese sample 9042. Both use multi-stage stratified probability sampling with face-to-face administration. Survey weights are not applied in the main analysis, following the convention in the ABS literature, but weighted estimates produce substantively identical results.

3.2 Dependent variables

The analysis examines four dependent variables, each capturing a conceptually distinct dimension of democratic support. Primary specifications treat each item separately, since the items span different conceptual domains within Easton's (1979) framework; summary indices are reported as supplementary analyses.

Two items capture the *satisfaction* dimension, corresponding to Easton's specific support:

- **Satisfaction with democracy** (primary): satisfaction with the way democracy works in the respondent's country.
- **Satisfaction with government** (secondary): satisfaction with the national government. Because government satisfaction is closely tied to incumbent performance evaluation, it is reported separately rather than averaged with democratic satisfaction.

Two items capture the *normative commitment* dimension—citizens' principled attachment to democracy as a form of government, corresponding to Easton's diffuse support:

- **Democratic preference**: agreement that democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government. This is the cleanest normative indicator available across all six waves and serves as the primary normative outcome.
- **Democratic extent**: the respondent's assessment of the extent to which their country is currently democratic. This item is evaluative rather than purely normative—it asks respondents to assess current democratic quality rather than express a principled preference—and is treated as a distinct perceived-quality outcome.

Two additional items are available from Wave 3 onward and are examined as supplementary

regime legitimacy indicators: (3) agreement that the political system deserves support, and (4) disagreement that the system needs major change. These tap regime legitimacy and status quo acceptance rather than normative democratic commitment per se, and are reported in the robustness section rather than the main analysis.

All items are normalized to a 0–1 scale. The theoretical distinction between satisfaction and normative commitment is central to the paper’s argument: the satisfaction paradox is the finding that economic evaluations are strongly associated with the former but not the latter.

3.3 Independent variable: economic evaluations

The key independent variable is an economic evaluation index constructed from six ABS items that capture both sociotropic and pocketbook assessments across current, retrospective, and prospective time horizons: (1) current national economic conditions, (2) current household economic conditions, (3) change in national economic conditions over the past year, (4) change in household economic conditions over the past year, (5) expected national economic conditions over the next year, and (6) expected household economic conditions over the next year. All six items are available across all waves with high coverage rates. Each is normalized to 0–1, and the index is computed as the mean of available items.

Both sociotropic and pocketbook indicators are included deliberately: the literature establishes that sociotropic evaluations tend to be stronger predictors in established democracies (Duch & Stevenson, 2008; Kinder & Kiewiet, 1981; Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2000), but the performance-derived legitimization argument concerns the structure of the performance-commitment relationship rather than which level of evaluation drives it. The

robustness section tests each indicator individually.

3.4 Controls

All models include five control variables available across all six waves: age (normalized to 0–1), gender (binary), education level (normalized), urban-rural residence (binary), and political interest (normalized). These variables capture the major demographic and attitudinal correlates of democratic attitudes identified in the comparative literature. In robustness specifications, an institutional trust index—the mean of normalized trust in the national government, parliament, courts, and political parties—is added as an additional control to assess whether the economic-satisfaction relationship operates through or independently of institutional trust.

3.5 Analytic strategy

The analysis proceeds in five steps designed to test H1 through H5 sequentially.

Step 1: Descriptive trends. Wave-level means for the satisfaction and quality clusters are plotted over time to document the divergence visually and estimate linear trend slopes via OLS on the wave means.

Step 2: Wave-by-wave OLS regressions. For each of the six waves in each country, two parallel models are estimated:

$$\text{Satisfaction}_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{EconIndex}_i + \gamma \mathbf{X}_i + \varepsilon_i$$

$$\text{Quality}_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{EconIndex}_i + \gamma \mathbf{X}_i + \varepsilon_i$$

where \mathbf{X}_i is the vector of controls. The key comparison is between β_1 in the satisfaction and quality equations. H1 predicts $\beta_1 > 0$ in the satisfaction model for both countries. H2 predicts $\beta_1 \approx 0$ in the Korean quality model. H3 predicts $\beta_1 < 0$ in the Taiwanese quality model.

The repeated cross-sectional design cannot establish within-person causality; the analysis documents between-person associations within each wave. The analytic strategy therefore exploits an *asymmetric prediction* to discipline causal interpretation. If reverse causality were the primary driver—that is, if respondents' underlying normative democratic orientation colored their economic perceptions—the resulting bias should inflate β_1 in *both* the satisfaction and quality equations, since the posited confound operates equivalently on both dependent variables. A finding that β_1 is large and significant for satisfaction but null for quality across multiple waves is inconsistent with symmetric confounding and substantially narrows the space of plausible reverse-causality accounts.

Step 3: Pooled models with wave interaction. To test whether the economic-satisfaction relationship strengthens over time (deepening performance dependence), data are pooled within each country and a centered wave interaction term is included.

Step 4: Cross-country comparison. To test H4, data from both countries are pooled and the following specification is estimated:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{EconIndex}_i + \beta_2 \text{Korea}_i + \beta_3 (\text{EconIndex}_i \times \text{Korea}_i) + \delta \text{Wave}_i + \gamma \mathbf{X}_i + \varepsilon_i$$

where β_3 captures the differential effect of economic evaluations in Korea relative to Taiwan. H4 predicts a significant β_3 in the quality equation, indicating that the decoupling pattern is

significantly different across the two cases.

Step 5: Mechanism probe—system pride and identity-fused legitimization in Taiwan. If the identity-fusion explanation is correct, the negative econ → quality relationship should be amplified among citizens who express pride in their system of government, since system pride proxies for the democratic identity anchor that makes critical evaluation possible. System pride is conceptually distinct from generic national pride: the former captures identification with the political system as such, while the latter encompasses cultural and historical attachments orthogonal to democratic governance. Respondents are split into high- and low-pride groups, and a continuous interaction between economic evaluations and system pride is estimated. The key prediction is asymmetric: system pride should amplify critical evaluation in Taiwan (where democratic and national identity are fused) but not in Korea (where system pride reflects governance satisfaction rather than democratic identification). Generic national pride and an authoritarian nostalgia index serve as alternative moderators.

Step 6: Robustness and sensitivity. The core finding is tested against: (a) summary indices, (b) institutional trust as an additional control, (c) individual economic indicators, (d) subgroup analyses by age, education, and political interest (H5), (e) ordered logit models on original ordinal scales, (f) within-wave standardized outcomes, and (g) a winner/loser analysis testing whether Korean decoupling reflects electoral position rather than a structural property. An appendix documents item wording and response scales.

AI assistance disclosure. The author used Claude (Anthropic, version 3.5 Sonnet) to assist with R programming and debugging of analysis scripts. All analytical decisions, code logic, and interpretation of results are the author's own.

4 Results

4.1 Descriptive trends: the satisfaction paradox

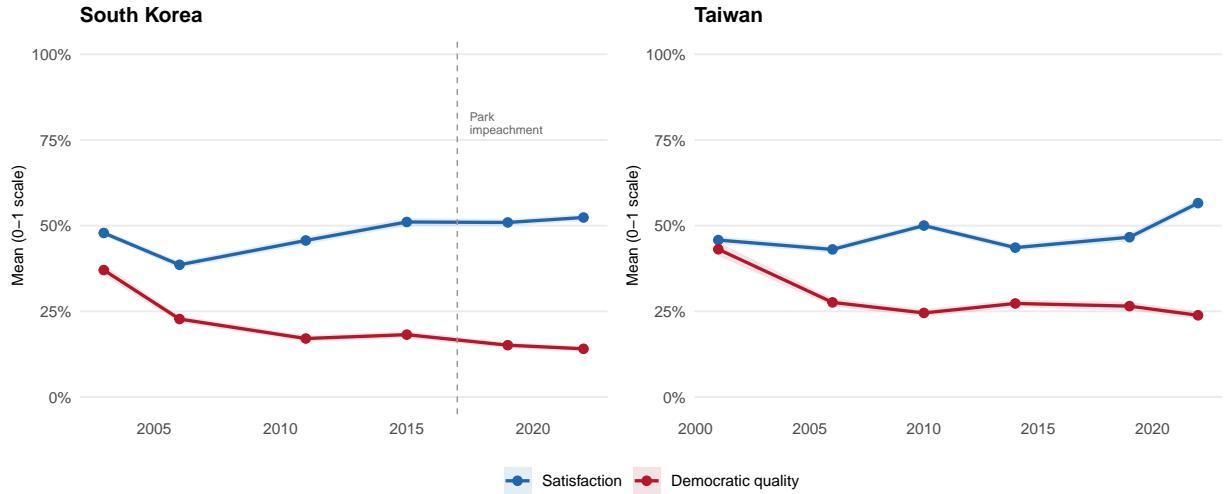
Democratic satisfaction and democratic quality perception have diverged in South Korea over the two decades spanned by the Asian Barometer Survey. Figure 1 presents the core evidence. Between 2011 and 2022—the period for which both cluster indices can be fully computed—the satisfaction cluster rose from 0.456 to 0.525 on the normalized scale, an increase of approximately seven percentage points. Over the same period, the democratic quality cluster drifted from 0.366 to 0.351, a modest decline of one and a half points. OLS trend slopes confirm the divergence: satisfaction with democracy increased at $+c(x = 0.049)$ normalized units per decade, while preference for democracy as the best form of government declined at $-c(x = 0.098)$ per decade. System support declined at -0.045 per decade. None of these magnitudes are dramatic in isolation. Their theoretical significance lies in the direction of movement, not its scale. Consolidation theory predicts co-movement; the Korean data show the opposite.

The divergence is clearer when individual components are examined. Satisfaction with government exhibited the most pronounced trajectory, climbing from approximately 0.33 in 2011 to 0.53 by 2022, concentrated primarily in the 2011–2015 interval. Within the democratic quality cluster, the steepest decline appeared in the proportion affirming democracy is always preferable. Agreement that the system needs no major change trended mildly upward ($+0.047$ per decade). Korean citizens have become simultaneously less committed to democracy in principle and more accepting of the political status

quo—precisely the configuration the performance-derived legitimization framework predicts.

Taiwan looks different (Figure 1, right panel). Rather than diverging, satisfaction and quality perceptions track each other more closely—consistent with the identity-fused pathway, where performance evaluation and normative commitment are anchored to the same underlying source. The three-cluster comparison (Figure 2) reinforces this: in Korea, economic evaluations co-move with satisfaction while quality perceptions drift on their own; in Taiwan, all three clusters show tighter co-movement.

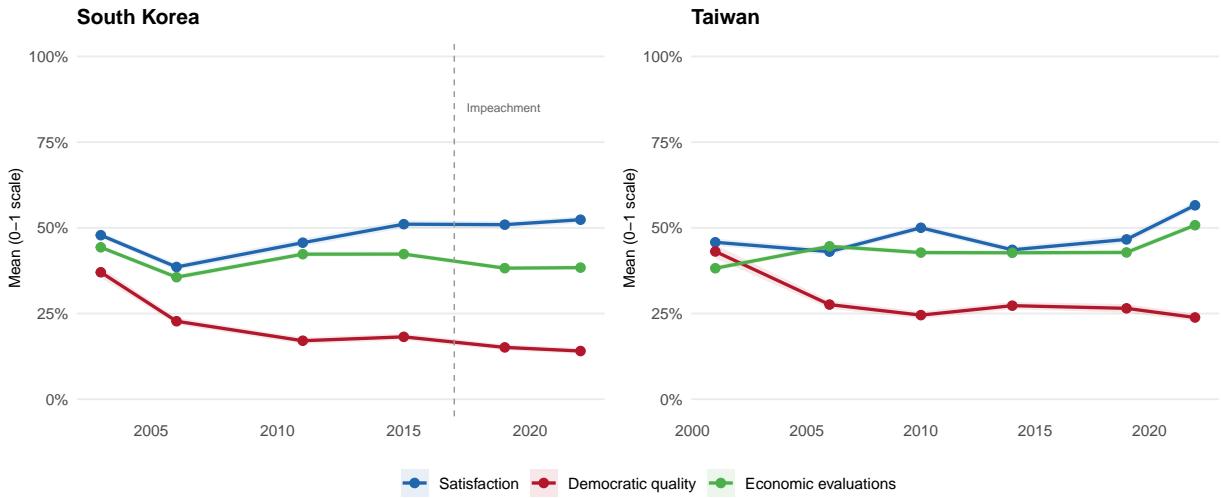
The satisfaction paradox: diverging trends in South Korea, parallel trends in Taiwan



Wave means with 95% CIs. Satisfaction: mean of sat_democracy + sat_govt. Quality: mean of dem_always_preferable + dem_extent_current.
All variables normalized 0–1. Source: ABS waves 1–6.

Figure 1: The satisfaction paradox: diverging satisfaction and quality trends in South Korea (left), parallel trends in Taiwan (right). Wave means with 95% CIs. Satisfaction: mean of sat_democracy + sat_govt. Quality: mean of dem_always_preferable + dem_extent_current. Normalized 0–1. Vertical dashed line marks the 2017 Park Geun-hye impeachment (contextual reference marker, not a data point). Source: ABS waves 1–6.

Economic evaluations track satisfaction in both countries, but quality perceptions diverge



Wave means with 95% CIs. Cluster indices are means of normalized component variables.
Source: ABS waves 1–6.

Figure 2: Economic evaluations track satisfaction in both countries, but quality perceptions diverge. Wave means with 95% CIs. Vertical dashed line marks the 2017 Park Geun-hye impeachment (contextual reference marker, not a data point). Source: ABS waves 1–6.

The output legitimacy argument requires that economic evaluations track satisfaction more closely than quality perception. In Korea, the economic evaluation cluster declined modestly from 0.439 in 2011 to 0.409 in 2022, while satisfaction continued to rise—suggesting the economic-satisfaction relationship operates at the individual level rather than through aggregate co-movement, a possibility the regression models test directly. In Taiwan, the tighter co-movement of all three clusters is consistent with a legitimization structure in which performance evaluation and normative assessment are not decoupled.

4.2 The mechanism: economic evaluations and the structure of democratic support

The core test estimates parallel OLS regressions for each ABS wave, predicting each dependent variable from the economic evaluation index with standard controls.

Disaggregating the results reveals a more nuanced and theoretically informative pattern than summary indices alone would show.

Satisfaction with democracy. Across all six waves, economic evaluations are a consistent and significant predictor of satisfaction with democracy. The coefficient ranges from $\beta = 0.262$ in Wave 2 (2006) to $\beta = 0.455$ in Wave 4 (2015), with all estimates significant at $p < 0.001$.

The pooled estimate with wave fixed effects is $\beta = 0.342$ ($p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.082$).

Satisfaction with government shows an even stronger relationship ($\beta = 0.473$ to 0.823 across waves; pooled $\beta = 0.575$), consistent with the expectation that government satisfaction is more directly output-driven.

Democracy always preferable. This is the cleanest test of H2. From Wave 2 (2006) onward, economic evaluations bear no statistically significant relationship to democratic preference. The wave-by-wave coefficients: $\beta = -0.121$ ($p = 0.105$) in 2006, 0.067 ($p = 0.342$) in 2011, 0.053 ($p = 0.497$) in 2015, 0.122 ($p = 0.096$) in 2019, and 0.079 ($p = 0.278$) in 2022. The pooled estimate is $\beta = -0.032$ ($p = 0.291$). Economic evaluations and standard demographic controls explain virtually none of the variation in whether Korean citizens believe democracy is always preferable. Whatever determines normative democratic commitment in South Korea, it is not economic performance.

This null is not an artifact of relying on a single item. Robustness tests with four alternative pro-democratic measures (Section 4.5 and Appendix H) reveal that Korean citizens endorse democracy on every *conditional* measure—best form of government, suitable for our country, capable of solving problems—while decoupling exclusively on the sole *unconditional* normative indicator. That is precisely the pattern the performance-derived legitimization framework predicts.

The Wave 1 (2003) result is an instructive exception: economic evaluations show a significant *negative* association with democratic preference ($\beta = -0.246, p = 0.001$), plausibly reflecting the aftermath of the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis, during which economically comfortable citizens may have developed a more critical stance toward the democratic governance that presided over the crisis. This relationship dissipated by Wave 2 and does not reappear.

Democratic extent and regime legitimacy items. The disaggregation reveals an important finding that summary indices obscured. Perceived democratic extent—how democratic respondents judge their country to be—shows a significant *negative* relationship with economic evaluations from Wave 2 onward ($\beta = -0.108$ to -0.051 , all $p < 0.001$; pooled $\beta = -0.059, p < 0.001$). Economically comfortable Koreans rate their country as *less* democratic. The supplementary regime legitimacy items available from Wave 3 onward show even stronger negative effects: system support ($\beta = -0.3, p < 0.001$) and no major change ($\beta = -0.341, p < 0.001$).

This pattern demands careful interpretation. The democratic extent and regime legitimacy items are evaluative rather than normative—they ask respondents to assess the current system’s quality rather than to express a principled preference for democracy. The negative

coefficients indicate that economically comfortable Koreans are *more critical* of their system's democratic quality even while *more satisfied* with its performance. Korean citizens thus simultaneously endorse democratic performance, evaluate democratic quality critically, and remain normatively indifferent—a configuration the performance-derived legitimization framework accommodates: when democratic support is instrumental, satisfaction and critical evaluation can coexist without normative anchoring.

4.3 Taiwan: the critical citizens pattern

The parallel analysis for Taiwan reveals a fundamentally different configuration. As in Korea, economic evaluations are strong and consistent predictors of democratic satisfaction across all six waves ($\beta = 0.273$ to 0.561 for satisfaction with democracy; $\beta = 0.491$ to 0.841 for government satisfaction, all $p < 0.001$). The satisfaction side of the equation is common to both cases.

The critical divergence appears in normative democratic preference. In Taiwan, economic evaluations are significantly and *negatively* associated with the belief that democracy is always preferable in four of six waves: $\beta = -0.287$ ($p < 0.001$) in 2001, -0.306 ($p < 0.001$) in 2006, -0.139 ($p = 0.033$) in 2014, -0.271 ($p < 0.001$) in 2019, and -0.504 ($p < 0.001$) in 2022. The pooled estimate is $\beta = -0.239$ ($p < 0.001$). The single exception is Wave 3 (2010), where the estimate is 0.065 and nonsignificant. The pattern is not merely different from the Korean null—it is substantively large and, in Wave 6, remarkably strong. Economically comfortable Taiwanese citizens are substantially *more* committed to democracy as a matter of principle.

The democratic extent item shows a parallel but weaker pattern in Taiwan: pooled $\beta =$

-0.114 ($p < 0.001$). Notably, Korea also shows significant negative effects on democratic extent ($\beta = -0.059$, $p < 0.001$), meaning economically comfortable citizens in *both* countries rate their country's democratic quality lower. The Korea-Taiwan divergence is concentrated in the *normative* item—where Korea shows no relationship ($\beta = -0.032$, ns) and Taiwan shows a strong negative one ($\beta = -0.239^{***}$)—validating the decision to disaggregate dependent variables.

The ordered logit specification confirms these findings on the original ordinal scales. For democracy always preferable, the ordered logit coefficient is $\beta = -0.003$ ($p = 0.989$) in Korea and $\beta = -1.201$ ($p < 0.001$) in Taiwan—a null-versus-large contrast that mirrors the OLS results.

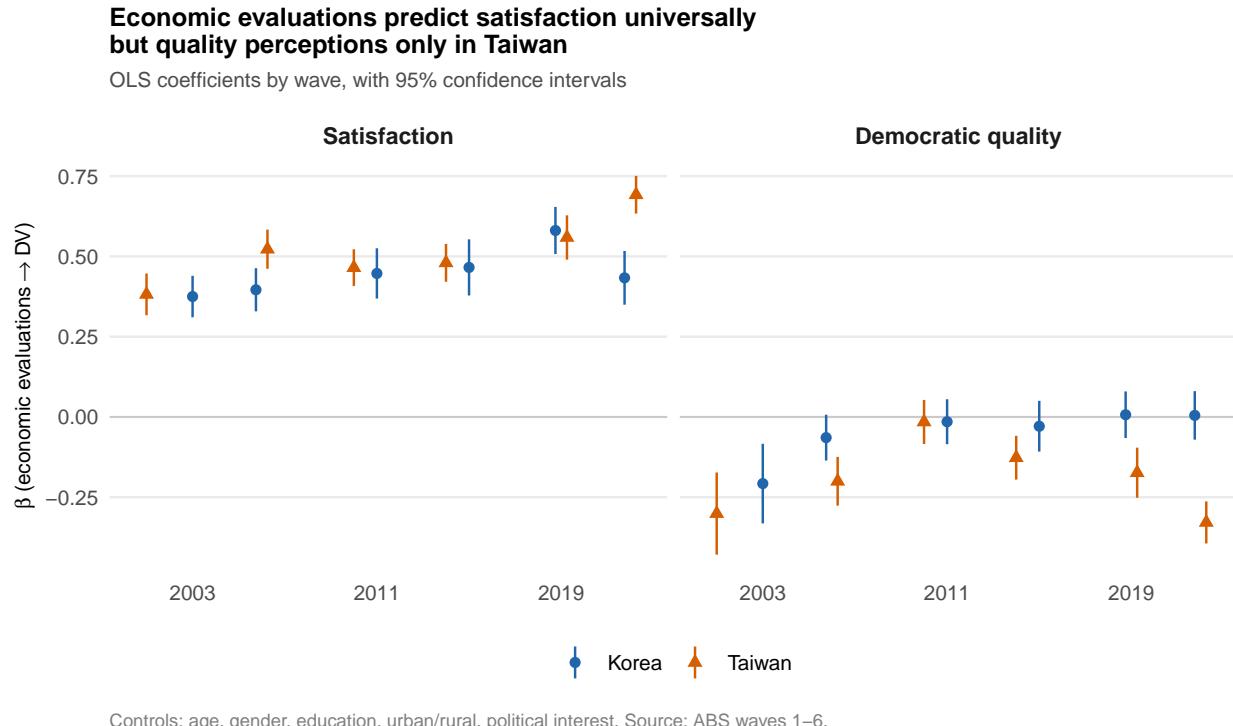


Figure 3: OLS coefficients (economic evaluations → DV) by wave, Korea and Taiwan, with 95% confidence intervals. Controls: age, gender, education, urban/rural, political interest. Source: ABS waves 1–6.

4.4 Cross-country comparison

The formal test of whether the Korea-Taiwan difference is statistically significant pools both countries and estimates the interaction between economic evaluations and a Korea indicator variable, controlling for wave fixed effects and the standard covariate set.

For the theoretically decisive dependent variable—democracy always preferable—the Taiwan baseline shows a substantial negative relationship ($\beta = -0.228, p < 0.001$). The Korea interaction term is positive and highly significant ($\beta = 0.217, SE = 0.042, p < 0.001$), indicating that the economic-preference relationship is significantly weaker (closer to zero) in Korea. The implied Korean coefficient (-0.011) is essentially zero, confirming the decoupling documented in the wave-by-wave analysis. This result directly supports H4.

For satisfaction with democracy, the interaction is also significant ($\beta = -0.09, SE = 0.023, p < 0.001$), indicating a somewhat weaker economic-satisfaction linkage in Korea (implied $\beta = 0.318$) than Taiwan (baseline $\beta = 0.408$)—but both are large and highly significant, consistent with H1.

For democratic extent, the interaction is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.066, SE = 0.011, p < 0.001$), confirming that the negative economic-extent relationship is weaker in Korea (implied $\beta = -0.061$) than Taiwan (baseline $\beta = -0.127$). Both countries show critical evaluation on this item, but Taiwan's is stronger.

4.5 Robustness

The core finding is tested against several alternative specifications. The most consequential addresses whether the decoupling rests on a single survey item.

Alternative normative commitment measures. Four alternative normative-adjacent measures are tested: (1) “democracy is the best form of government” (Waves 3–6), (2) democracy versus economic development as a forced-choice tradeoff (Waves 1–6), (3) “democracy is suitable for our country” (Waves 1–6), and (4) whether democracy can solve society’s problems (Waves 1–6). All four capture pro-democratic attitudes but none demands the unconditional commitment that “democracy is always preferable” requires.

The results sharpen the argument. All four show significant *positive* associations with economic evaluations in both countries (see Appendix H). The Korea–Taiwan divergence concentrates exclusively on the unconditional normative item. The four alternatives tap conditional democratic endorsement—assessments of democracy’s comparative merits or practical capacity that naturally co-move with economic comfort in any functioning democracy. The “always preferable” item is different. It demands principled commitment transcending situational evaluation, corresponding most closely to Easton’s (1979) diffuse support. That Korean citizens endorse democracy on every conditional measure while decoupling on the sole unconditional one is precisely what performance-derived legitimization predicts: instrumental evaluation produces positive assessments but not the principled attachment that would survive a performance failure.

Summary indices. When satisfaction and quality items are combined into mean indices, the

results are consistent with the individual-item analysis. The Korean satisfaction index shows a strong economic relationship ($\beta = 0.375$ to 0.581 across waves), while the quality index hovers near zero from Wave 2 onward. The Taiwanese quality index is significantly negative in five of six waves ($\beta = -0.127$ to -0.328). The indices mask the distinction between democratic preference and democratic extent documented in the primary analysis, but they do not contradict it.

Institutional trust as a control. Adding an institutional trust index to the baseline model reduces the economic-satisfaction coefficient but leaves it highly significant. Trust independently predicts satisfaction and accounts for additional variance. The economic channel thus operates partly through and partly independently of institutional trust. In the democratic preference equation, adding trust changes neither the magnitude nor the significance of the economic coefficient.

Individual economic indicators. Each component entered individually produces the same pattern: all six significantly predict satisfaction; none significantly predicts democratic preference. Forward-looking indicators show small negative democratic extent effects—a faint echo of the Taiwanese pattern that does not alter the overall picture.

Within-wave standardization and ordered logit. To address potential measurement comparability concerns across waves, within-wave z-scored outcomes produce the same pattern of results. Ordered logit models on the original ordinal response scales confirm the OLS findings: the ordered logit coefficient for democracy always preferable is $\beta = -0.003$ ($p = 0.989$) in Korea and $\beta = -1.201$ ($p < 0.001$) in Taiwan.

Addressing reverse causality. The repeated cross-sectional design cannot formally rule out

reverse causality—the possibility that underlying normative attachment colors economic perceptions rather than the reverse. The asymmetric pattern, though, provides a disciplining test. If reverse causality were the primary driver—if declining normative commitment biased economic evaluations downward—we would expect economic evaluations to be significantly associated with *both* satisfaction and normative commitment, since the posited confound should bias both relationships in the same direction. That economic evaluations are strongly associated with satisfaction ($\beta = 0.262$ to 0.455 , all $p < 0.001$) but unrelated to normative preference across five of six waves does not fit a pure reverse-causality account, which predicts symmetric bias. The Wave 1 exception—a significant *negative* association that subsequently vanishes—further undermines simple reverse-causality interpretations; a consistent positive bias across all waves, not a negative coefficient that dissipates, is what such accounts predict. Panel data would provide a more definitive test. But the asymmetric pattern substantially narrows the space of plausible confounding explanations.

Subgroup heterogeneity. The decoupling is not confined to particular demographic segments (H5). The economic-satisfaction coefficient is virtually identical for younger and older

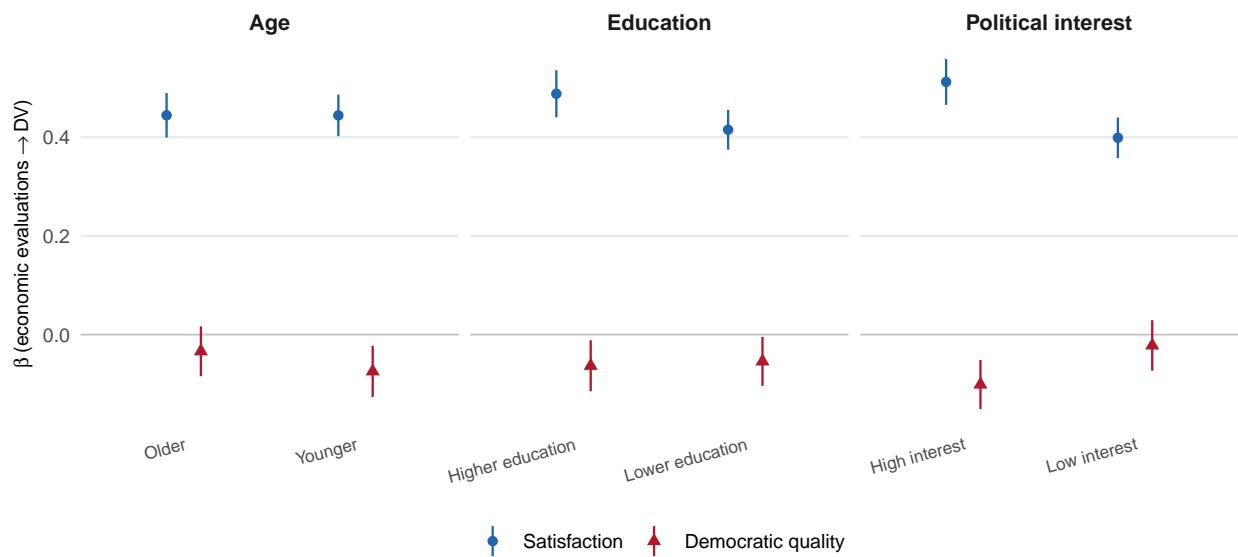
respondents and similar across education levels. In no subgroup does the economic-preference relationship reach significance in the positive direction. The decoupling is society-wide.

The most analytically informative subgroup finding concerns political interest. Among politically interested Korean citizens, economic evaluations show a negative association with democratic preference ($\beta = -0.071$, $p = 0.092$)—approaching but not reaching conventional significance, and partially mirroring the Taiwanese critical citizens pattern. Among citizens with low political interest, the coefficient is essentially zero ($\beta = 0.009$, $p = 0.837$). This

result suggests that the capacity for normatively grounded, performance-critical democratic evaluation exists within the Korean public but is confined to the politically attentive minority. The disengaged majority—which drives the aggregate decoupling pattern—evaluates democracy in purely instrumental terms. The challenge for Korean democratic deepening is not the absence of critical citizenship but its confinement to a narrow stratum.

The decoupling pattern holds across demographic subgroups

Korea: economic evaluations predict satisfaction but not quality in all groups



Pooled waves 1–6 with wave fixed effects. 95% CIs. Source: ABS Korea.

Figure 4: OLS coefficients (economic evaluations → DV) by demographic subgroup, Korea, pooled waves 1–6 with wave fixed effects. 95% CIs. Source: ABS Korea.

4.6 Electoral winners, losers, and the structure of democratic support

A compositional worry deserves direct attention: if losing-party supporters are disproportionately disenchanted with democracy, the aggregate null relationship could be an artifact of partisan disappointment rather than a structural property. The ABS identifies

whether respondents voted for the winning or losing party (Waves 2–6), permitting a direct test.

The sore-loser interpretation does not survive the data. In Korea, the economic-preference relationship is null for both electoral winners ($\beta = -0.052$, $p = 0.326$) and losers ($\beta = 0.031$, $p = 0.613$). The formal interaction is nonsignificant ($\beta = -0.025$, $p = 0.746$). Korean citizens decouple economic evaluations from normative democratic commitment regardless of whether their party holds power. The decoupling is structural.

In Taiwan, the critical citizens pattern appears in both groups but is significantly stronger among winners ($\beta = -0.246$, $p < 0.001$) than losers ($\beta = -0.128$, $p = 0.031$). The interaction is significant ($\beta = -0.19$, $p = 0.010$), indicating that the winner/loser gap on normative commitment exists in Taiwan but not in Korea. This asymmetry is itself theoretically informative. Under identity-fused legitimization, citizens whose party won the election are more invested in the democratic project and therefore more normatively demanding when economic conditions are favorable—a pattern consistent with the critical citizens logic and inconsistent with a sore-loser account, in which losers rather than winners should drive critical evaluation.

On the satisfaction dimension, by contrast, the winner/loser distinction makes no difference in either country. Economic evaluations predict satisfaction with democracy equally for winners (Korea $\beta = 0.349$, Taiwan $\beta = 0.311$, both $p < 0.001$) and losers (Korea $\beta = 0.364$, Taiwan $\beta = 0.406$, both $p < 0.001$). The performance track operates identically regardless of electoral position—as expected if satisfaction is driven by economic outcomes rather than partisan sentiment.

Together, these results constitute a signature test distinguishing the two legitimization logics. Performance-derived legitimization (Korea) decouples economic evaluations from normative commitment for everyone—the disconnection reflects how democratic support is structured, not who won the last election. Identity-fused legitimization (Taiwan) produces critical citizens across the board but *especially* among winners, because democratic identity is most salient for those whose party bears responsibility for the democratic project. The satisfaction dimension, by contrast, is unaffected by electoral position in either country.

4.7 Mechanism probe: system pride and the identity-fusion pathway

The theoretical framework attributes Taiwan’s critical citizens pattern to the fusion of democratic and national identity. If correct, the negative econ → quality relationship should be amplified among citizens who identify with their political system, since such identification proxies for the democratic identity anchor that enables critical evaluation.

A first test using the ABS generic national pride item (Waves 2–6) yields null results: the interaction between economic evaluations and national pride is nonsignificant in both the Taiwanese ($\beta = -0.041, p = 0.739$) and Korean ($\beta = 0.029, p = 0.820$) democratic preference equations. National pride is too diffuse a sentiment, encompassing cultural and historical attachments orthogonal to pride in democratic governance.

A more theoretically precise test uses the ABS system pride item (“I am proud of our system of government,” Waves 3–6; Taiwan $n = 5,550$; Korea $n = 4,606$), which directly taps identification with the political system. In Taiwan, where democratization was constitutive

of national self-definition, system pride should capture the democratic identity anchor the theory identifies; in Korea, it need not carry the same democratic-normative content.

The system pride interaction produces significant moderation in Taiwan. For the theoretically decisive dependent variable—democracy always preferable—the interaction between economic evaluations and system pride is $\beta = -0.332$ ($p = 0.015$), indicating that the negative econ → democratic preference relationship is substantially stronger among citizens with high system pride. The main effect of economic evaluations conditional on low system pride is near zero ($\beta = -0.03$, ns), while the combined effect at high system pride is large and negative. For the quality index, the interaction is also significant ($\beta = -0.147$, $p = 0.042$), though weaker, reflecting the diluting influence of the democratic extent component, which shows no significant system pride moderation ($\beta = 0.042$, ns). The pattern is theoretically coherent: system pride amplifies critical *normative* evaluation of democracy but not critical *descriptive* assessment of democratic extent.

Subgroup results confirm the pattern: among high-system-pride Taiwanese, the econ → democratic preference coefficient is $\beta = -0.241$ ($p < 0.001$), roughly 70 percent stronger than among low-system-pride Taiwanese ($\beta = -0.139$, $p = 0.004$), yet both groups exhibit the critical citizens pattern, consistent with the society-wide character of identity-fused legitimization.

In Korea, the system pride interaction is nonsignificant (β near zero, $p > 0.80$), and the decoupling holds across pride levels. This asymmetry—significant moderation in Taiwan, null in Korea—is consistent with the argument that system pride carries different content in the two countries: democratic identification in Taiwan, governance satisfaction in Korea.

A potential objection is that system pride is conceptually adjacent to democratic satisfaction, and that the Taiwanese moderation result merely captures the well-documented tendency for satisfied citizens to express more positive attitudes across multiple items. Two considerations weigh against this interpretation. First, the moderation is asymmetric across dependent variables: system pride amplifies the negative econ → democratic preference relationship but does not significantly moderate the econ → democratic extent relationship, a pattern difficult to reconcile with a generic halo effect, which would predict uniform amplification. Second, the cross-country contrast itself disciplines the interpretation: if system pride were simply satisfaction under a different label, it should moderate the economic-attitude relationship in both countries, yet it does so only in Taiwan. The null moderation in Korea, where system pride plausibly indexes governance satisfaction rather than democratic identification, provides a within-design falsification of the satisfaction-conflation account. Direct measures of the Taiwanese versus Chinese identity spectrum—available in some ABS waves but not consistently across the Waves 3–6 window in which system pride is measured—would provide a more definitive test and remain a priority for Wave 7 analysis.¹

In a direct comparison of all three candidate moderators, only system pride produces a significant interaction in Taiwan ($\beta = -0.307$, $p = 0.026$); authoritarian nostalgia ($\beta = -0.086$, $p = 0.634$) and generic national pride ($\beta = -0.001$, ns) do not. System pride is the only individual-level moderator that discriminates between the two legitimization pathways.

¹The Taiwanese/Chinese identity item is included in the ABS Taiwan country-specific module, which is administered alongside the cross-national core questionnaire but distributed separately by the Taiwan country team at the Election Study Center, National Chengchi University. These country-specific variables are not included in the standard ABS cross-national data release. Access has been requested for a planned extension of this analysis.

5 Discussion

The results consistently and robustly support the satisfaction paradox in South Korea: democratic satisfaction is driven by economic evaluations while normative democratic commitment is essentially independent of them. This section interprets these findings, develops the comparative implications of the Taiwan contrast, addresses the political interest subgroup result, and considers what the December 2024 martial law crisis reveals about democratic resilience.

5.1 Performance-derived legitimization as a distinct mode

The core finding—economic evaluations robustly predict satisfaction but not quality across two decades of survey data—is precisely what the performance-derived legitimization pathway predicts. Alternatives do not fit. A generalized political cynicism account would predict declining scores on *both* satisfaction and quality, as disaffected citizens withdraw from democratic evaluation altogether. A post-materialist critical citizens account, following Norris (1999), would predict rising quality perceptions alongside declining satisfaction, as materially secure citizens hold democracy to higher standards. Neither pattern appears in Korea. Satisfaction rises while quality declines—a configuration that only the instrumental evaluation framework parsimoniously accounts for.

The performance-derived legitimization concept does sharper analytical work than existing alternatives. Park and Shin’s (2006) characterization of Korean democracy as “incomplete” implies a teleological trajectory toward deeper normative commitment. The evidence here suggests that this maturation has not occurred over two decades—and, more importantly,

that the structure of Korean democratic support gives no reason to expect it will. The issue is not that democratization is *unfinished* but that it rests on a foundation—performance evaluation—that does not generate normative commitment as a byproduct. Satisfaction and commitment are products of different causal processes.

The Eastonian framework does not fully anticipate this configuration. Easton (1979) expected sustained specific support to deposit gradually into a reservoir of diffuse support; the Korean data suggest this conversion is not automatic. Specific support can accumulate without generating principled attachment if the evaluative framework remains instrumental throughout.

5.2 Taiwan’s divergent pathway

The Taiwanese findings matter independently. The consistent negative relationship between economic evaluations and normative democratic preference ($\beta = -0.14$ to -0.5 across four of six waves, pooled $\beta = -0.239$) is among the strongest empirical demonstrations of the critical citizens dynamic in East Asia. Previous work has noted comparatively high democratic support in Taiwan (Chu et al., 2008, 2020) but has not documented the mechanism through which economic conditions relate to normative evaluation at this level of specificity.

The identity-fusion argument has scope conditions worth specifying. I am not claiming that national identity generically anchors democratic commitment. The claim is more specific: the particular historical configuration through which democratic and national identity became coterminous in Taiwan—democratization as national differentiation from China, continuously reinforced by cross-strait tension—created conditions uniquely favorable to the

critical citizens dynamic. Korea has no precise analogue. Democratization there was experienced primarily as a domestic political transition.

The mechanism probe in Section 4.7 provides individual-level evidence for this interpretation. Pride in the system of government significantly amplifies the critical citizens pattern in Taiwan but not in Korea, while generic national pride moderates in neither country. Among high-system-pride Taiwanese, the econ → democratic preference relationship is roughly 70 percent stronger than among low-system-pride Taiwanese ($\beta = -0.241$ versus -0.139 ; interaction $\beta = -0.332$, $p = 0.015$). System pride, as identification with the political system itself, is a more precise proxy for democratic-national identity fusion than national pride broadly construed. That it carries no moderating power in Korea, where it plausibly indexes governance satisfaction rather than democratic identification, further validates the cross-country distinction. Direct measures of Taiwanese versus Chinese identity, not consistently available across all six ABS waves, remain a priority for future research.

5.3 The political interest finding

The most revealing subgroup result concerns political interest. Among politically engaged Korean citizens, the economic-preference relationship turns negative ($\beta = -0.071$, $p = 0.092$)—approaching but not reaching conventional significance, and directionally consistent with the Taiwanese critical citizens pattern. Among disengaged citizens, the coefficient is essentially zero ($\beta = 0.009$, $p = 0.837$). The aggregate Korean pattern is driven by the disengaged majority.

Two implications follow. The capacity for normatively grounded, performance-critical

evaluation exists in Korea—but it is confined to a politically attentive minority, and weak even there. The performance-derived legitimization mode is not a fixed cultural property. It is distributional: it characterizes the median Korean citizen, not every Korean citizen. The challenge for democratic deepening is not creating the critical citizens dynamic from scratch but expanding a marginal tendency.

This also helps explain why Korean democratic institutions have functioned effectively despite shallow normative foundations. The politically engaged minority—those who exhibit critical evaluation—are disproportionately likely to participate in the institutional processes that constitute democratic accountability. December 2024 is the proof case. Martial law was reversed by the rapid institutional response of legislators, judges, and organized opposition, not by mass normative mobilization. Democratic resilience may require only that this critical minority be large enough and institutionally embedded enough.

5.4 The Yoon crisis and democratic resilience

The data end in 2022. I make no claim to explain the Yoon crisis causally. But the December 2024 martial law episode is informative—not as a test case (the data precede it by two years) but as a natural experiment that revealed *which form* of resilience South Korea's system relied upon. The institutional response was swift and effective: martial law overturned within six hours, impeachment proceedings initiated immediately, conviction and life sentence delivered within fourteen months. By any institutional metric, South Korean democracy passed.

But institutional resilience and normative resilience are distinct properties. The question I

am raising is not whether the system held—it did—but *how*. Martial law was reversed through institutional mechanisms: legislative override, judicial independence, military restraint. Not through mass normative mobilization. The ABS data, showing rising satisfaction alongside declining normative commitment in the years preceding the crisis, describe a system whose resilience was concentrated in elite institutional safeguards rather than in the mass public’s principled commitment to democratic governance.

The cautionary implication is hard to avoid. Institutional resilience that does not rest on normative foundations is brittle in ways that may not be apparent until the institutional safeguards themselves are compromised. The 2024 crisis was an amateurish attempt by an isolated president with single-digit approval ratings; the institutional response was correspondingly straightforward. A more competent authoritarian challenge—one that gradually eroded institutional checks rather than frontally assaulting them, or one that enjoyed genuine popular support—would face a public whose democratic commitment is, on the evidence presented here, conditional on continued performance rather than principled in character. The satisfaction paradox describes a democracy that is resilient to institutional shocks but vulnerable to the slower, subtler erosion that Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) identify as the characteristic mode of contemporary democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016).

5.5 Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, the ABS provides repeated cross-sections rather than panel data, so the analysis documents between-person associations rather than within-person change. As discussed in Section 4.5, the asymmetric pattern—strong

association with satisfaction, null for normative commitment—is inconsistent with a pure reverse-causality account, which predicts symmetric bias across both dependent variables. The Wave 1 exception and its subsequent disappearance further discipline the interpretation. Still, within-person panel data would provide a substantially stronger test of causal direction. This remains the most important data limitation.

Second, the normative commitment indicators capture different conceptual dimensions and each is an imperfect proxy for the broader construct. The primary specifications treat them separately for this reason. Supplementary regime legitimacy items from Wave 3 onward produce consistent results.

Third, the system pride measure remains an indirect proxy for the democratic-national identity fusion the theory posits. As discussed in Section 4.7, two empirical patterns—asymmetric moderation across dependent variables and the null result in Korea—weigh against the concern that system pride merely captures satisfaction. Direct measures of Taiwanese versus Chinese identity, available in some ABS waves but not consistently across the Waves 3–6 window in which system pride is measured, would provide a more definitive test of the identity-fusion mechanism. That remains a priority.

Fourth, the observation window closes in 2022, before the Yoon martial law crisis and the most recent cross-strait tensions. Wave 7 data will provide a critical test of whether the patterns documented here have persisted or shifted.

Finally, the two-country design limits generalizability. Whether the performance-derived legitimization mode characterizes other post-developmental-state democracies requires extension to additional cases.

6 Conclusion

Democratic satisfaction is not democratic deepening. Two decades of Asian Barometer data from South Korea make this plain. Citizens can become simultaneously more satisfied with their democracy and less normatively committed to it—a pattern I have called the satisfaction paradox. The mechanism is performance-derived legitimization: economic evaluations powerfully and consistently predict democratic satisfaction while bearing no relationship to normative democratic commitment. Korean citizens evaluate their democracy instrumentally. The evaluation is favorable. But favorable evaluation does not deposit into a reservoir of principled attachment to democratic governance.

The Taiwan comparison shows that this pattern is not an inevitable feature of East Asian democracies or Confucian political culture. Operating within a similar developmental and cultural context, Taiwanese citizens exhibit the opposite dynamic: economic comfort fuels more demanding normative evaluation of democratic quality. The divergence is statistically significant and substantively large. It reflects, I have argued, two distinct pathways through which democratic legitimization was historically established—performance-derived in Korea, identity-fused in Taiwan.

These findings carry implications beyond the two cases examined here. For democratic consolidation scholarship, they suggest that aggregate measures of democratic support—the percentage of citizens who express satisfaction, who prefer democracy to alternatives—can mask fundamentally different structures of support with different resilience properties.

Consider two polities, each with 70 percent satisfaction. In one, that satisfaction rests on instrumental calculation; in the other, on normative commitment. They will look identical in

cross-national surveys. They will respond very differently to performance shocks, legitimacy challenges, or authoritarian temptation. The satisfaction paradox is a reminder that the depth of democratic support matters as much as its breadth.

For democratic resilience, the Korean case raises an uncomfortable possibility: democratic institutions can function effectively for decades, weathering presidential impeachments and even a martial law attempt, without generating the normative commitment that consolidation theory expects mature democracies to produce. Institutional resilience and normative resilience are distinct properties. The former does not automatically generate the latter. South Korea's democratic institutions held in December 2024. Whether they would hold against a more patient, more competent, or more popular authoritarian challenge—one positioned to exploit the shallow normative foundations documented here—is a question the satisfaction paradox makes it necessary to ask.

Competing interests

The author has no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests to report.

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