

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 reinforce each other as democracies mature—that the two move in tandem. Six waves of Asian Barometer Survey data from South Korea (2003–2022, $n = 7,603$) upend this expectation. Democratic satisfaction has risen steadily (+0.049 normalized units per decade). The belief that democracy is always preferable has declined (-0.098/decade). Wave-by-wave OLS regressions show that economic evaluations powerfully predict satisfaction with democracy ($\beta = 0.26\text{--}0.46$, $p < 0.001$ in every wave) yet bear no significant relationship to normative democratic preference from 2006 onward ($\beta \leq 0$, all $p > 0.10$)—a decoupling that persists across demographic subgroups, model specifications, and alternative measures of democratic commitment. A parallel analysis of Taiwan ($n = 9,042$) exposes a fundamentally different syndrome, one in which economic evaluations predict satisfaction *and* are significantly negatively associated with normative democratic preference ($\beta = -0.14$ to -0.50), consistent with the critical citizens dynamic theorized by Norris but not previously documented at this level of specificity in East Asia. The cross-country difference is statistically significant (interaction $\beta = 0.217$, $p < 0.001$). I argue that the divergence reflects two distinct legitimization pathways: performance-derived in South Korea, where democratic support remains instrumental and conditional on continued economic delivery, and identity-fused in Taiwan, where democratization became constitutive of national self-definition. South Korea’s December 2024 martial law crisis—resolved by institutional safeguards rather than mass normative mobilization—illustrates, though does not causally confirm, the vulnerability that performance-derived legitimization creates.

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. But 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. System support dropped at -0.045 . 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 (Haggard, 1990). Yet the Taiwanese data tell a fundamentally different story. Economic evaluations predict

democratic satisfaction there too—no surprise. But in Taiwan, they are also significantly and *negatively* associated with normative democratic preference ($\beta = -0.14$ to -0.5), meaning that economically comfortable Taiwanese citizens are substantially *more* committed to democracy as a matter of principle. Not less. Not indifferent. More. 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’s central contribution is empirical: it documents the satisfaction-quality dissociation in South Korea with systematic longitudinal evidence spanning two decades and identifies the performance-derived legitimization mechanism at the individual level, showing precisely where economic evaluations do and do not reach into the structure of democratic support. The Taiwan comparison earns its place by demonstrating—through formal

cross-country analysis, not impressionistic juxtaposition—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.

Section 2 develops the theoretical framework distinguishing performance-derived from identity-fused democratic legitimization, building from the consolidation literature’s co-movement assumption. 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 in light of the Yoon crisis and acknowledges limitations.

2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Democratic consolidation and the co-movement assumption

The analytical scaffolding for democratic consolidation rests on a distinction Easton (1979) drew between two modes of citizen support. *Diffuse support*—a generalized attachment to the political system that persists regardless of specific policy outcomes—is the reservoir that keeps democracies afloat when governments fail, economies contract, or scandals erupt.

Specific support is the day-to-day evaluation: How is the economy? Is the government competent? Are services delivered? The two are conceptually independent but, in Easton’s account, not causally so. Sustained specific support was expected to deposit gradually into the reservoir of diffuse support, building legitimacy over time (Klingemann, 1999).

This expectation hardened into a prediction as the consolidation literature developed. Linz

and Stepan (1996) gave it a memorable formulation—democracy must become “the only game in town,” behaviorally, attitudinally, and constitutionally—but the underlying logic was more consequential than the phrase: democratic norms internalize through democratic practice. Citizens who experience accountable governance develop principled attachment to the system that produces it. Diamond (1999) theorized a parallel “deepening” process. The prediction common to these accounts, sometimes stated explicitly but more often operating as a tacit assumption, is one of *co-movement*. Good performance builds legitimacy; legitimacy buffers against performance downturns. Satisfaction and commitment trend together.

Norris (1999, 2011) complicated the picture, but less than it might seem. Her “critical citizens” were becoming simultaneously more committed to democratic ideals and more dissatisfied with democratic practice—rising expectations outpacing institutional performance. But note what remained intact. The normative dimension was secure and strengthening; only performance evaluation grew more demanding. Critical citizenship, as Norris theorized it, is a sign of health. The democratic immune system working.

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

literature has largely left unasked.

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—anchored by civic education, constitutional veneration, foundational political narratives that gave normative commitment an independent basis regardless of economic performance. East Asia’s democratization experience upends this sequence entirely. 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. The developmental state worked. Democracy’s legitimacy was therefore, inevitably, at least partly comparative—measured against the system it replaced.

Park and Shin (2006) identified the resulting configuration in South Korea: widespread democratic preference coexisting with authoritarian nostalgia, limited procedural understanding, and what they termed “incomplete democratization.” Chu and colleagues pursued the point across East Asia (Chu et al., 2008, 2020), documenting something the Western consolidation literature had not anticipated: citizens in the region define democracy in substantive rather than procedural terms. Economic outcomes and good governance take priority over elections and civil liberties. 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—but the explanation need not be cultural. The

sequencing alone is sufficient. When citizens have experienced competent authoritarianism, democracy must justify itself on output.

The implication for the co-movement assumption is significant but has not been fully drawn out. If citizens 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 while developing no deeper commitment to democratic principles, because the commitment was never principled to begin with. It was conditional on performance. Always was. 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. The system happens to be delivering. That is enough. For now.

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 this decoupling is not a pathology but an expected consequence of how democratic legitimization was historically established.

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

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

Performance-derived legitimization 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 run on separate tracks. Their trajectories may diverge.

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—students, labor unions, the middle class, and opposition politicians whose programmatic commitments diverged sharply once the immediate authoritarian threat receded. The subsequent decades of democratic governance coincided with continued economic growth, and democracy proved itself by delivering. The delivery was real. The normative foundation it built was not.

I should be precise about what this framing does and does not claim. I am not arguing 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 of democracy 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, entangled at every stage with the question of what it meant to be Taiwanese rather than Chinese (Rigger, 1999; Wachman, 1994). The Democratic Progressive Party’s political project fused democratic governance with national identity, and cross-strait tension continuously reinforced the fusion: to be democratic was to be not-China, and the distinction carried existential weight. Under these conditions, the critical citizens pattern becomes possible. Because normative commitment is secure—anchored to identity, not output—economic comfort frees citizens to become *more* demanding of democratic quality rather than complacent about it. Material well-being raises the normative bar.

The distinction generates testable predictions.

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 tapping a conceptually distinct dimension of democratic support. Primary specifications treat each item separately rather than combining them into indices—a decision that proves analytically consequential, since the items span different conceptual domains within Easton’s (1979) framework and, as the results demonstrate, respond to economic evaluations in different and theoretically informative ways. Summary indices are reported as supplementary analyses.

Two items capture the *satisfaction* dimension, corresponding to Easton’s specific support. The primary indicator is satisfaction with the way democracy works in the respondent’s country. The secondary indicator—satisfaction with the national government—is reported separately rather than averaged with democratic satisfaction because government satisfaction is so closely tied to incumbent performance evaluation that combining the two would obscure the distinction between system-level and government-level assessment.

Two items capture the *normative commitment* dimension—citizens’ principled attachment to democracy as a form of government, corresponding to Easton’s diffuse support. The primary normative outcome is agreement that democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government, the cleanest unconditional normative indicator available across all six waves.

The second item asks respondents to assess the extent to which their country is currently democratic. This item is evaluative rather than purely normative—it asks citizens to rate current democratic quality rather than express a principled preference—and is treated as a distinct perceived-quality outcome, a decision whose importance becomes clear in the results, where these two items diverge sharply in their relationship to economic evaluations.

Two additional items are available from Wave 3 onward and serve as supplementary regime legitimacy indicators: agreement that the political system deserves support, and disagreement that the system needs major change. These tap regime legitimacy and status quo acceptance rather than normative democratic commitment *per se*. They appear in the robustness section.

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 spanning both sociotropic and pocketbook assessments across current, retrospective, and prospective time horizons. The items ask respondents to evaluate current national and household economic conditions, to assess whether both have improved or deteriorated over the past year, and to predict how both will fare 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.

Including both sociotropic and pocketbook indicators is deliberate. The literature has established that sociotropic evaluations tend to be stronger predictors of political attitudes in established democracies (Duch & Stevenson, 2008; Kinder & Kiewiet, 1981; Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2000), but the theoretical question here is not which level of economic evaluation drives democratic attitudes—it is whether economic performance *as a class of explanation* links to normative commitment at all. The robustness section tests each indicator individually to confirm that the structural pattern holds regardless of which economic measure is used.

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)—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 to assess whether the economic-satisfaction relationship operates through or independently of institutional trust. The trust index is excluded from the primary specification because trust is plausibly endogenous to both economic evaluations and democratic satisfaction, making it a mediator rather than a confounder; its inclusion as a robustness check tests whether controlling for it eliminates the core finding.

3.5 Analytic strategy

The analysis is organized around the five hypotheses, building from descriptive evidence through individual-level mechanism tests to formal cross-country comparison.

The starting point is visual. Wave-level means for the satisfaction and quality clusters, plotted over time, document the divergence and estimate linear trend slopes via OLS on wave means. This establishes what needs explaining.

The core analytic engine is wave-by-wave OLS regression. 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.

Running these models separately within each wave—rather than pooling and relying on wave fixed effects alone—is not merely a methodological convenience. It allows the economic-attitude relationship to vary freely across time, making visible any temporal instability that a pooled specification would average away. Pooled models with centered wave interaction terms are estimated separately to test whether the economic-satisfaction relationship strengthens over time, which would indicate deepening performance dependence.

The cross-country comparison provides the sharpest test. To assess H4, data from both countries are pooled and the following specification 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.

A mechanism probe tests the identity-fusion explanation directly. If the Taiwanese critical citizens pattern reflects the anchoring of democratic commitment in national identity, the negative econ → quality relationship should be amplified among citizens who express pride in their system of government—since system pride, unlike generic national pride, proxies for identification with the political system as such. Respondents are split into high- and low-pride groups, and a continuous interaction is estimated. 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.

The repeated cross-sectional design cannot establish within-person causality; the analysis documents between-person associations within each wave. But the analytic strategy exploits an *asymmetric prediction* to discipline causal interpretation. If reverse causality were the primary driver—if respondents' normative 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. It substantially narrows the space of plausible reverse-causality accounts, even absent panel data.

Robustness checks test the core finding against summary indices, institutional trust as an additional control, individual economic indicators, subgroup analyses by age, education, and political interest (H5), ordered logit models on original ordinal scales, within-wave standardized outcomes, a winner/loser analysis, and alternative normative dependent variables. 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

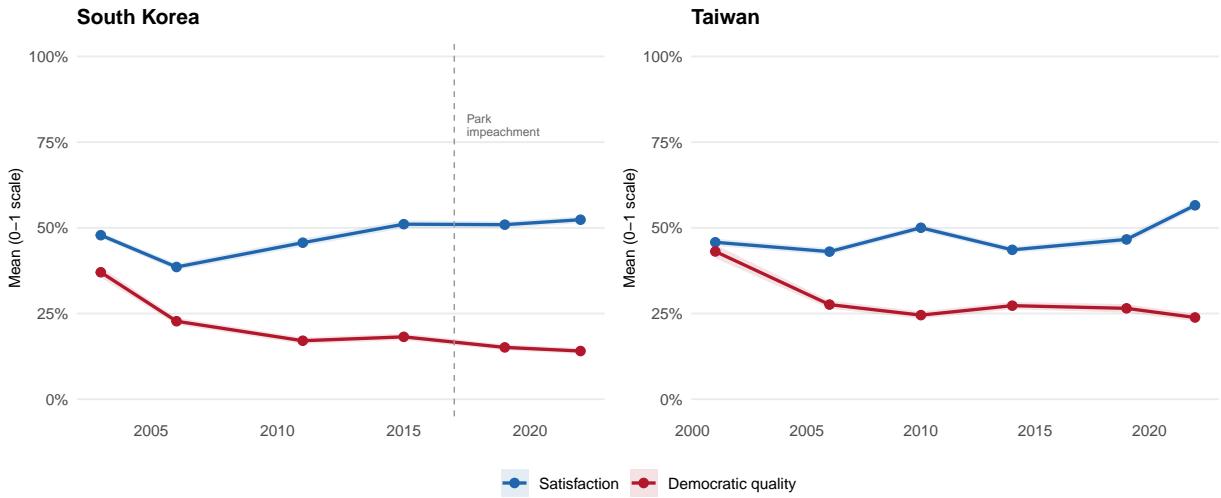
Democratic satisfaction and democratic quality perception have diverged in South Korea over the two decades spanned by the Asian Barometer Survey. Figure 1 presents the core evidence. Between 2011 and 2022—the period for which both cluster indices can be fully computed—the satisfaction cluster rose from 0.456 to 0.525 on the normalized scale, roughly seven percentage points. The democratic quality cluster drifted in the other direction: 0.366 to 0.351, a 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;

preference for democracy as the best form of government declined at $-c(x = 0.098)$; system support at -0.045 . 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.

When individual components are examined, the divergence comes into sharper focus. 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 quality cluster, the steepest decline appeared where it matters most theoretically: the proportion affirming democracy is always preferable. Meanwhile, 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. That is 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 point: in Korea, economic evaluations co-move with satisfaction while quality perceptions drift independently; in Taiwan, all three clusters exhibit tighter co-movement.

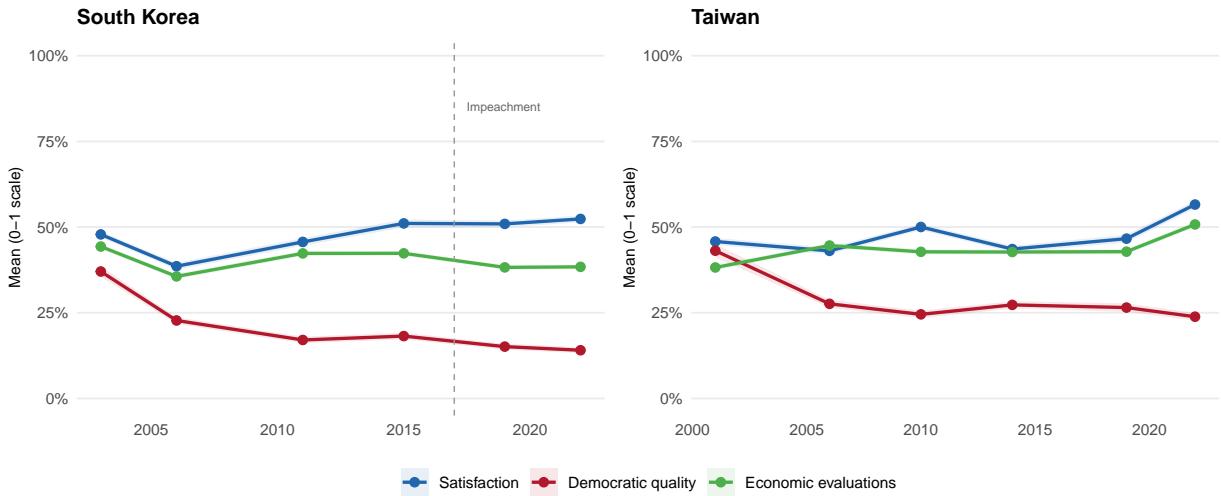
**The satisfaction paradox: diverging trends in South Korea,
parallel trends in Taiwan**



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 by item—rather than relying on summary indices—reveals a more nuanced and theoretically informative pattern.

Satisfaction with democracy. Economic evaluations are a consistent and powerful predictor of satisfaction with democracy across all six waves, ranging from $\beta = 0.262$ in Wave 2 (2006) to $\beta = 0.455$ in Wave 4 (2015), every estimate significant at $p < 0.001$. The pooled estimate with wave fixed effects is $\beta = 0.342$ ($p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.082$). No surprises here. Satisfaction with government shows an even stronger relationship ($\beta = 0.473$ to 0.823 across waves; pooled $\beta = 0.575$), as expected given that government satisfaction is the most directly output-driven of the four dependent variables.

Democracy always preferable. This is where the paper’s argument lives. From Wave 2 (2006)

onward, economic evaluations bear no statistically significant relationship to democratic preference. The 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 $\beta = -0.032$ ($p = 0.291$). Five consecutive waves of nulls. 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) show 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 specificity is the pattern the performance-derived legitimization framework predicts. Instrumental evaluation produces positive conditional assessments. It does not generate the unconditional principled attachment that Easton’s diffuse support requires.

Wave 1 (2003) 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. The relationship dissipated by Wave 2 and does not reappear.

Democratic extent and regime legitimacy items. The disaggregation reveals a finding that summary indices would have obscured entirely. 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 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, because it adds a third element to what initially appeared as a two-part story. The democratic extent and regime legitimacy items are evaluative rather than normative—they ask respondents to assess the current system’s quality, not to express a principled preference for democracy as a form of government. 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. The performance-derived legitimization framework accommodates this tripartite configuration: when democratic support is instrumental, satisfaction with output and critical evaluation of the system’s democratic credentials can coexist without normative anchoring, because normative commitment was never part of the evaluative calculus.

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 track is common to both cases. That is not where the action is.

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—and the relationship is not marginal. In Wave 1 (2001), $\beta = -0.287$ ($p < 0.001$). The relationship persists: $\beta = -0.306$ in 2006 ($p < 0.001$), -0.139 in 2014 ($p = 0.033$), -0.271 in 2019 ($p < 0.001$). By Wave 6 (2022), the coefficient reaches $\beta = -0.504$ ($p < 0.001$)—a remarkably strong effect. 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, temporally stable, and growing stronger. 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 $\beta = -0.114$ ($p < 0.001$). 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. But the Korea-Taiwan divergence concentrates in the *normative* item. Korea: $\beta = -0.032$, nonsignificant. Taiwan: $\beta = -0.239^{***}$. This is precisely why the decision to disaggregate dependent variables matters. An index combining democratic preference with democratic extent would have blurred the distinction that carries the theoretical weight.

The ordered logit specification confirms the pattern on the original ordinal scales: $\beta = -0.003$

($p = 0.989$) in Korea, $\beta = -1.201$ ($p < 0.001$) in Taiwan. A null-versus-large contrast that mirrors the OLS results exactly.

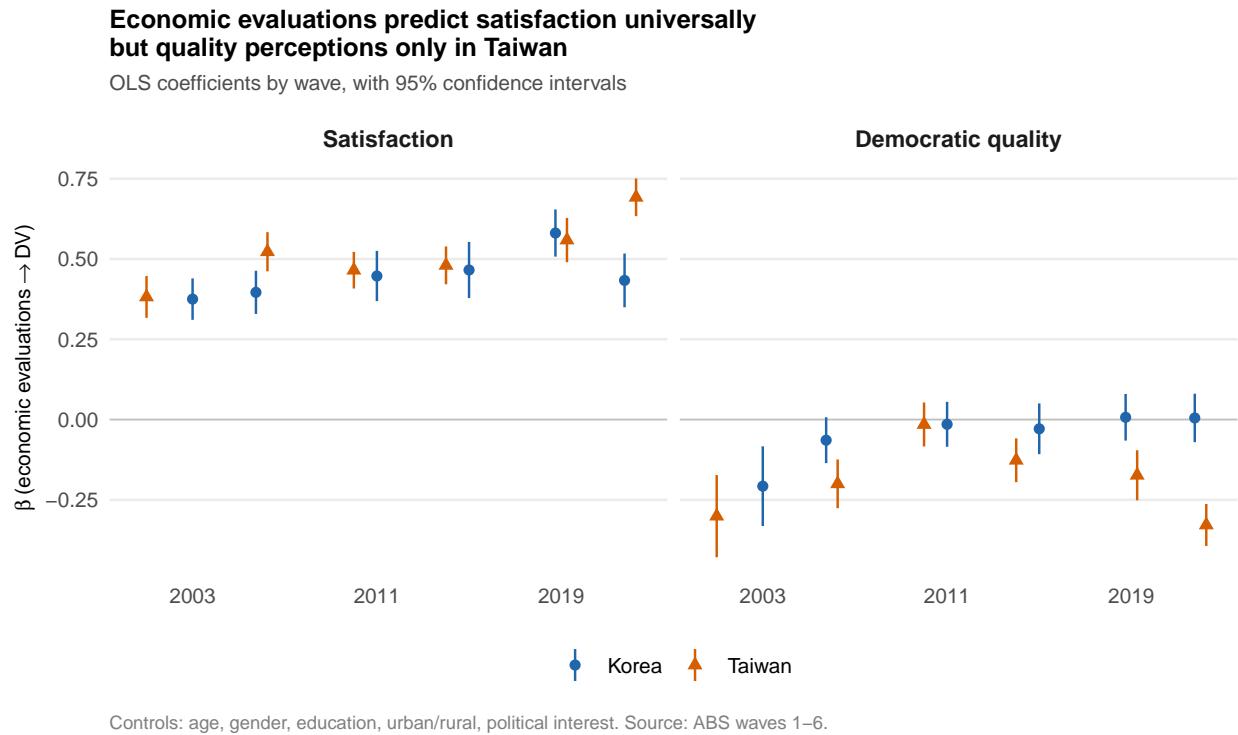


Figure 3: OLS coefficients (economic evaluations \rightarrow DV) by wave, Korea and Taiwan, with 95% confidence intervals. Controls: age, gender, education, urban/rural, political interest. Source: ABS waves 1–6.

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 most consequential robustness test asks whether the decoupling rests on a single survey item—and the answer sharpens rather than merely confirms the argument.

Alternative normative commitment measures. Four alternative normative-adjacent measures are available across various waves: “democracy is the best form of government” (Waves 3–6), democracy versus economic development as a forced-choice tradeoff (Waves 1–6), “democracy is suitable for our country” (Waves 1–6), and whether democracy can solve society’s problems (Waves 1–6). All four capture pro-democratic attitudes. None demands the unconditional commitment that “democracy is always preferable” requires. And the results could not be cleaner: 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.

Why does this matter? Because it eliminates the worry that Korean citizens are simply disengaged from democratic evaluation. They are not. 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 doing something different. It demands principled commitment that transcends 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 generates positive conditional assessments as a matter of course. What it does not generate—cannot generate, given its instrumental structure—is the principled attachment that would survive a performance failure.

Reverse causality. The repeated cross-sectional design cannot formally rule out the possibility that underlying normative attachment colors economic perceptions rather than the reverse. But the asymmetric pattern provides a disciplining test that substantially narrows the space of plausible confounding accounts. If reverse causality were the primary driver—if declining normative commitment biased economic evaluations downward—we would expect the bias to inflate β_1 in *both* the satisfaction and quality equations, since the posited confound should operate on both dependent variables symmetrically. The data show the opposite of symmetry: $\beta = 0.262$ to 0.455 (all $p < 0.001$) for satisfaction, effectively zero for normative preference across five of six waves. The Wave 1 exception—a significant

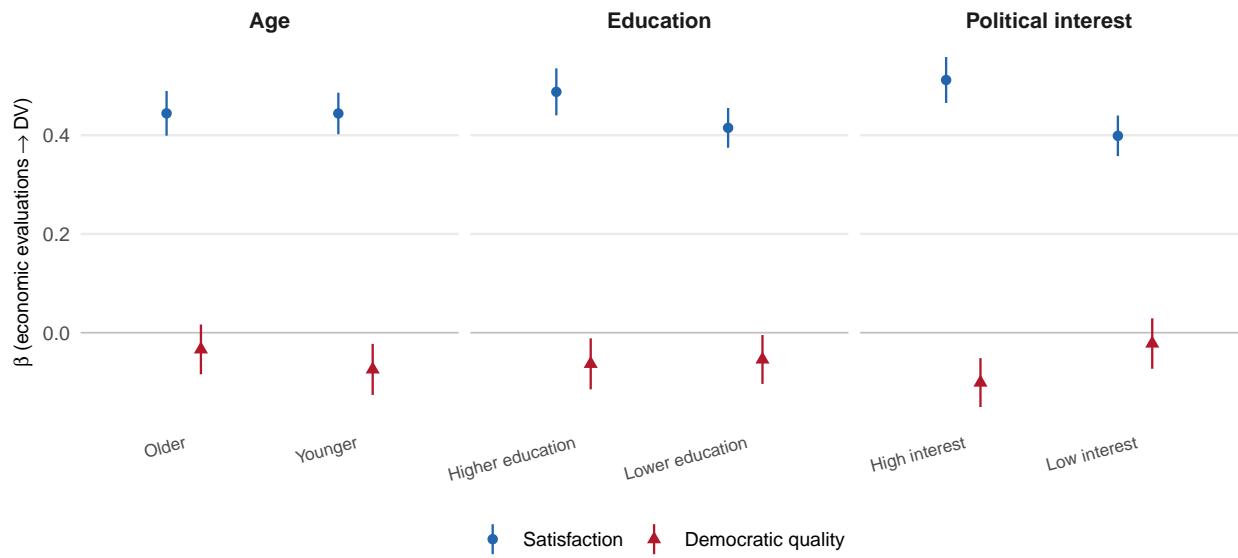
negative association that subsequently vanishes—further undermines simple reverse-causality interpretations, which predict a consistent positive bias across all waves, not a negative coefficient that dissipates. Panel data would provide a more definitive test. But the asymmetric pattern already eliminates the most straightforward reverse-causality accounts. The remaining robustness checks confirm the core finding without qualifying it. Summary indices produce the same pattern: a strong economic-satisfaction relationship ($\beta = 0.375$ to 0.581 across Korean waves), near-zero quality coefficients from Wave 2 onward, and significantly negative Taiwanese quality coefficients in five of six waves ($\beta = -0.127$ to -0.328). The indices mask the preference-versus-extent distinction but do not contradict it. Adding institutional trust as a control reduces the economic-satisfaction coefficient but leaves it highly significant and changes nothing in the democratic preference equation. Each of the six economic indicators entered individually produces the same structural pattern. Within-wave z-scored outcomes and ordered logit models on original ordinal scales confirm the OLS findings. The ordered logit coefficient for democracy always preferable: $\beta = -0.003$ ($p = 0.989$) in Korea, $\beta = -1.201$ ($p < 0.001$) in Taiwan.

Subgroup heterogeneity. The decoupling is not confined to particular demographic segments (H5). The economic-satisfaction coefficient is virtually identical for younger and older respondents, 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, partially mirroring the Taiwanese critical citizens pattern. Among citizens with low political interest, the coefficient is essentially zero ($\beta = 0.009$, $p = 0.837$). 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—evaluates democracy in purely instrumental terms. The challenge for Korean democratic deepening is not the absence of critical citizenship. It is 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

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

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.

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. The alternatives fail on specifics. Generalized political cynicism would predict declining scores on *both* satisfaction and quality, as disaffected citizens withdraw from democratic evaluation altogether; what we observe is the opposite, with satisfaction rising. A post-materialist critical citizens account, following Norris (1999), would predict rising quality

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.

perceptions alongside declining satisfaction, as materially secure citizens hold democracy to higher standards—again, the reverse of what appears in Korea. Satisfaction rises while quality declines. Only the instrumental evaluation framework parsimoniously accounts for a citizenry that evaluates its democracy more favorably on output while growing less attached to it in principle.

Performance-derived legitimization does sharper analytical work than existing characterizations. Park and Shin’s (2006) description of Korean democracy as “incomplete” implies a teleological trajectory toward deeper normative commitment—maturation that has simply not arrived yet. Two decades of data suggest it is not arriving. More importantly, 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. Calling the result “incomplete” misdiagnoses the problem.

The Eastonian framework itself 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—for decades, apparently—without generating principled attachment, if the evaluative framework remains instrumental throughout. The reservoir does not fill because the water runs on a different track.

5.2 Taiwan's divergent pathway

The Taiwanese findings matter on their own terms, not merely as a foil for the Korean story. 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 isolated the mechanism through which economic conditions relate to normative evaluation at this level of specificity. The relationship is not just significant. It is growing stronger over time, with the Wave 6 coefficient substantially larger than the Wave 1 coefficient. That trajectory alone warrants attention.

The identity-fusion argument has scope conditions that should be stated plainly. I am not claiming that national identity generically anchors democratic commitment—a claim that would be easy to make and difficult to defend. 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 that carries existential stakes—created conditions uniquely favorable to the critical citizens dynamic. Korea has no precise analogue. Democratization there was experienced primarily as a domestic political transition, not as a project of national self-definition against an external authoritarian other.

The mechanism probe provides individual-level evidence. 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—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, validates the cross-country distinction from the individual level up. Direct measures of Taiwanese versus Chinese identity, not consistently available across all six ABS waves, remain a priority.

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, 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.

This means 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 capacity for normatively grounded, performance-critical evaluation exists—but it is confined to a politically attentive minority, and weak even there. The challenge for democratic deepening is not creating the critical citizens dynamic from scratch but expanding a marginal tendency into something closer to a social norm.

The finding also helps explain an apparent paradox: how Korean democratic institutions have functioned effectively for decades despite shallow normative foundations. The politically engaged minority—those who exhibit something like 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 to activate when the institutional order is threatened.

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

The most important limitation is the absence of panel data. The ABS provides repeated cross-sections, so the analysis documents between-person associations rather than within-person change. As argued 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 the causal direction I am proposing. This is not a limitation that can be hedged away.

The normative commitment indicators capture different conceptual dimensions, and each is an imperfect proxy for the broader construct—which is precisely why the primary specifications treat them separately rather than combining them into an index.

Supplementary regime legitimacy items from Wave 3 onward produce consistent results, but no survey item perfectly operationalizes Easton’s diffuse support.

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 under a different label. But 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. That remains a priority.

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, intensified, or—in light of the institutional response to the martial law attempt—shifted. And the two-country design limits generalizability. Whether the performance-derived legitimization mode characterizes other post-developmental-state democracies—Singapore after a future transition, perhaps, or the Southeast Asian cases—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 the normative conviction that democracy is always preferable. 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. Two decades of favorable evaluation have not done so.

Taiwan demonstrates that this outcome is not inevitable. Operating within a similar developmental and cultural context, Taiwanese citizens exhibit the opposite dynamic: economic comfort fuels more demanding normative evaluation of democratic quality, and the effect has grown stronger over time. The divergence is statistically significant, substantively large, and—I have argued—traceable to two distinct pathways through which democratic legitimization was historically established. Performance-derived in Korea. Identity-fused in Taiwan. Same region, same survey instrument, same two decades. Different structures of democratic support with different resilience properties.

The implications reach beyond these two cases. Aggregate measures of democratic support—the percentage of citizens who express satisfaction, who prefer democracy to alternatives—can mask fundamentally different structures with fundamentally different vulnerabilities. Consider two polities, each registering 70 percent satisfaction. In one, that

satisfaction rests on instrumental calculation; in the other, on normative commitment. They look identical in cross-national surveys. They will respond very differently to performance shocks, legitimacy challenges, or the slow erosion of institutional checks that Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) identify as the characteristic mode of contemporary democratic backsliding. The satisfaction paradox is a reminder that the depth of democratic support matters as much as its breadth—and that depth is invisible to the measures the field most commonly relies on. 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 rather than to frontally assault the institutional order—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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