1 What Does Democracy Mean to Losers? Electoral Status and Conceptions of Democracy in Asia

1.1 Introduction

In a healthy democracy, losing an election is supposed to be tolerable. The loser accepts the outcome because she trusts the process: the rules were fair, the next election offers another chance, and basic rights remain protected regardless of who governs. This logic—central to theories of democratic consolidation—assumes that citizens share a common understanding of what democracy means. But what if they don't? What if winners and losers understand democracy itself in fundamentally different ways?

This article argues that they do. Using four waves of the Asian Barometer Survey spanning 17 years (2005-2022) and more than 34,000 respondents across 14 countries, I find that electoral losers consistently prioritize *procedural* elements of democracy—competitive elections, civil liberties, freedom of expression, government accountability—while winners are more likely to emphasize *substantive* outcomes like economic equality and the provision of basic needs. This "loser effect" is not large in any single survey, typically ranging from 4 to 6 percentage points. But it is remarkably consistent across diverse political systems, from Japan's consolidated democracy to Vietnam's single-party state.

More striking is how the loser effect responds to political conditions. Thailand offers a dramatic illustration. In 2006, shortly after the military ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, there was essentially no gap between winners and losers in how they conceived of democracy. By 2020, after a second coup and years of military-backed rule, losers had

become 17.5 percentage points more likely than winners to define democracy in procedural terms—a shift of 18 points over 14 years. South Korea presents the mirror image: a large gap between winners and losers during the Park Geun-hye administration collapsed entirely after the democratic opposition took power in 2017.

These patterns suggest something important about how citizens relate to democracy. Conceptions of democracy are not fixed cultural inheritances or stable psychological traits. They are shaped by political experience—specifically, by whether citizens find themselves on the winning or losing side of the political order. Losers come to value the procedural protections they are denied: the free elections that might return them to power, the civil liberties that protect them from retribution, the accountability mechanisms that constrain those who govern. Winners, secure in their position, can afford to emphasize outcomes over process.

This has troubling implications for democratic backsliding. When democratic erosion creates permanent winners and permanent losers—as in Thailand, where the same political forces have been excluded from power since 2014—support for procedural democracy becomes concentrated among those least able to defend it. The citizens who most value free and fair elections are precisely those whom the political system has rendered powerless to demand them. Meanwhile, winners may have little stake in the procedural rules that brought them to power if they no longer need those rules to stay there.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. I first situate the argument within debates over how citizens understand democracy, distinguishing procedural and substantive conceptions. I then describe the data and measurement strategy, which leverages a forced-choice battery that asks respondents to prioritize among competing democratic values. The

empirical sections present the main findings—first the overall loser effect across all countries and waves, then the divergent trajectories of Thailand and South Korea. I conclude by discussing what these patterns mean for democratic consolidation in an era of backsliding.