Guardianship Democracy: Mapping Elite Rule Preferences in East and Southeast Asia*

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Abstract

This paper maps support for guardianship democracy, which is defined as the public's simultaneous endorsement of democracy and elite-led democratic alternatives across six post-authoritarian democracies in East and Southeast Asia. Drawing on democratic political theory and research in political behavior, and using pooled World Values Survey data from 1995 to 2020, we conceptualize and empirically identify three ideal-typical forms of guardianship democracy: technocratic, military, and strongman rule. Each measure captures the share of respondents who simultaneously rate democracy and one non-democratic form of rule as good ways to govern. We examine how support for these variants is distributed across countries and political generations. The results show that guardianship democracy in some form is a stable and widespread feature of public opinion in all five cases. While support for democracy remains high, substantial minorities also endorse elite governance. Most notably, in South Korea and Taiwan, support for technocratic and strongman rule is highest among younger, democratically socialized cohorts. These patterns challenge the assumption that liberal-democratic attitudes consolidate through generational replacement and raise new questions about the conceptual boundaries and empirical measurement of democratic support.

Keywords: democracy, guardianship, public opinion, Southeast Asia, East Asia

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Introduction

Citizens in many democracies affirm the value of democratic government while also expressing support for alternative forms of rule. Across regional and regime contexts, survey data reveal substantial minorities of respondents who evaluate technocratic, military, or strongman rule as good ways to govern, even as they express commitment to democracy. While such findings are often treated as evidence of democratic ambivalence or authoritarian resilience, little work has systematically examined how these preferences co-occur, how they vary across political contexts, and how they are patterned within electorates.

This study takes an exploratory and descriptive approach to this question and problem, building on global public opinion analysis (Wike et al., 2017) and recent scholarly work (Choi and Woo 2025). It focuses on guardianship democracy, defined here as the co-endorsement of democracy and one or more forms of elite-led, non-democratic authority. Drawing on classical political theory and recent work in political behavior, we distinguish between three forms: technocratic guardianship (rule by experts), military guardto assess variation in guardianship support furtherianship (rule by the armed forces), and strongman guardianship (rule by a dominant executive). These are not presented as competing regime types, but as ideal-typical orientations that may coexist within democratic publics.

Using pooled World Values Survey data from 1995 to 2020, we examine the distribution of these attitudes across six post-authoritarian democracies in East and Southeast Asia: Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Mongolia, and Indonesia. We focus on these cases because each has undergone a major democratic transition since the late twentieth century, enabling analysis of how citizens relate to democracy in contexts with relatively recent institutional foundations. We incorporate a generational framework grounded in political socialization theory to assess variation in guardianship support further. Respondents are classified into political generations based on their age during the democratic transition, allowing us to assess whether elite rule preferences are concentrated among older cohorts or persist among those socialized under democracy.

The findings reveal that guardianship democracy is a widespread and persistent feature of public opinion in all five countries. While support for democracy remains high, many respondents also express positive views of expert rule, military governance, and strongman leadership. Most notably, in South Korea and Taiwan, endorsement of guardianship variants is highest among the youngest, democratically socialized cohorts. These patterns do not conform to the assumption that liberal-democratic attitudes intensify over time through generational replacement. Instead, they point to the need for further inquiry into how democratic publics understand and qualify their support for democracy in practice.

This paper makes related conceptual, theoretical, and empirical contributions. First, it advances greater conceptual clarity on the idea of guardianship democracy by identifying and distinguishing three ideal-typical variants (technocratic, military, and strongman), each representing a distinct way citizens may qualify their support for democracy through preferences for elite rule. By foregrounding these logics as structured and measurable orientations rather than contradictions or anomalies, the paper pushes toward more precise definitions of democratic legitimacy in mass belief systems. Second, it offers a comparative, measurement-grounded account of guardianship democracy in East and Southeast Asia, drawing on pooled survey data from five post-authoritarian democracies.

While we do not aim to explain these patterns causally, the descriptive findings show notable trends, especially the high levels of guardianship support among younger and democratically socialized cohorts in Taiwan and South Korea. Additionally, these results beckon us to scrutinize the validity of existing survey instruments more seriously and the assumptions embedded in measures of democratic support, which we reflect on in the conclusion.

Conceptualizing Guardianship Democracy

Modern democratic theory recognizes a persistent tension between the ideal of popular rule and the impulse to vest authority in a select few deemed especially qualified or "guardians"

of the public interest. Citizens often express strong support for democratic principles, such as government by the people, political equality, and civil liberties, while simultaneously endorsing elite-led forms of governance that appear at odds with full popular sovereignty. This apparent paradox has deep roots in political thought. Classical theorists such as Plato argued that government works best when guided by wise guardians rather than the unrefined will of the masses. In *The Republic*, Plato famously envisions a regime led by philosopher-kings, trained from youth in the pursuit of justice and reason, who are uniquely qualified to govern wisely on behalf of all (Bloom, 1968: 153–180). By contrast, the democratic tradition emphasizes rule by the people, based on political equality and collective autonomy.

Robert Dahl labels Plato's model "guardianship" and contrasts it with democracy, which he defines by its commitment to the equal intrinsic worth and competence of all citizens (Dahl 1989). Dahl notes that the Platonic urge for rule by the knowledgeable persists in modern form as technocracy – the governance of society by experts and specialists insulated from public contestation. While democratic theorists have long criticized this model, Dahl concedes that the appeal of guardianship remains strong in contexts of complexity and risk. (Dahl 1989: 318). Indeed, throughout history and across societies, many have harbored "mixed" intuitions—valuing democracy's ideals of legitimacy and inclusion, yet doubting the competence or stability of rule by ordinary citizens alone.

Democratic elitism in modern theory provides one explanation for how pro-democratic and pro-elite attitudes can coexist. Schumpeter (1942) re-conceived democracy not as direct rule by the people, but as a mechanism for the people to choose between competing elites who actually govern. In this view, democracy is consistent with substantial elite control, since citizens only intermittently influence leadership selection while day-to-day decision-making lies with those leaders (the "protective" or "elitist" theory of democracy). Thus, a citizen could embrace democracy in principle – preferring that leaders be chosen via elections – yet also favor vesting great authority in those leaders or in other unelected elites after elections.

The intellectual roots of democratic elitism extend beyond Schumpeter to early twentieth-

century sociological theorists such as Gaetano Mosca (1939), Vilfredo Pareto (1935), and Robert Michels (1915). These thinkers argued that elite rule is not merely compatible with democracy but an inevitable feature of all complex organizations, including modern states. Michels, in particular, formulated the "iron law of oligarchy," based on his study of European labor parties. He found that even democratic and egalitarian movements tend to generate their own internal hierarchies. Over time, power concentrates in the hands of a few leaders, not only because of the structural requirements of the organization, such as specialization, coordination, and decisiveness, but also because of the preferences of the masses. According to Michels, ordinary members often desire strong leadership and are willing to delegate decision-making authority in exchange for security and order. Thus, even in democratic systems, a de facto form of guardianship can emerge: a cadre of leaders accumulates superior expertise and organizational control, while the public acquiesces.[1]

Similarly, theories of "stealth democracy" find that many individuals like the idea of democracy but dislike the messy reality of partisan politics, preferring that neutral experts or decisive leaders handle governance out of the public eye (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Such citizens are not anti-democratic *per se*; rather, they believe the spirit of democracy (government for the people) might be better achieved if competent guardians make decisions for the people (perhaps imagining this as more efficient or in the "national interest"). In short, support for democratic ideals can coexist with preferences for elite rule because people often interpret democracy in diverse ways – some emphasize its egalitarian promise, while others focus on its performance outcomes, leading them to welcome authoritative guidance to "make democracy work."

The coexistence of democratic ideals and support for authoritarian alternatives is not necessarily irrational or ideologically inconsistent. As Przeworski (2019; 2022) argues, the

[1]Dahl (1956) argued that oligarchy is not necessarily singular or unaccountable. Multiple, competing elites and institutionalized checks can constrain dominance and preserve the pluralistic foundations of democratic governance. Hence his idea of "polyarchy" (rule by many). In such a system, public policies are decided by elected officials, but those officials are constrained by inclusive institutions – universal suffrage, free expression, organized interest groups, and regular elections that ensure leaders are responsive to voters.

appeal of autocracy often stems from a pragmatic evaluation of performance: when democratic institutions appear incapable of delivering stability, order, or public goods, citizens may become receptive to more centralized, hierarchical alternatives. Autocracy, in such cases, is not endorsed out of disdain for democracy, but out of disillusionment with its perceived failures. In his critique of authoritarian regime models, Przeworski emphasizes that support for strong, unconstrained leadership frequently arises "on the margins" of democratic legitimacy. This is where democratic dissatisfaction meets the desire for efficacy and decisiveness (Przeworski 2022: 987–991). This reinforces our core claim: citizens do not necessarily reject democracy outright but may reinterpret its implementation as requiring forms of guardianship, particularly in contexts of perceived crisis or dysfunction.

Research by Choi and Woo (2025) offers a closely related empirical formulation, and one that helped motivate this study. They (re)introduce guardianship democracy to describe individuals who support democracy in principle but believe that strong, unconstrained leaders are necessary for it to function effectively. Using World Values Survey data, they show that these respondents differ from conventional authoritarians: they retain confidence in elected governments and political parties, while expressing distrust toward legislatures. Their work challenges the assumption that support for strongman rule entails a rejection of democratic legitimacy, instead framing it as a re-conceptualization of democracy that privileges executive decisiveness. While our approach builds on this work, we extend the concept of guardianship democracy to encompass a broader set of elite-centered preferences – including technocratic and military variants – and explore their distribution across countries and generations in East and Southeast Asia specifically.

Empirically, this co-existence is evident in global opinion patterns. Surveys show that large majorities across the world affirm democracy as the best form of government, even in countries with recent authoritarian legacies. At the same time, nontrivial minorities in both established and emerging democracies express support for ostensibly undemocratic alternatives, such as rule by unelected experts, by the military, or by a strong leader who

"doesn't bother with elections" (Chu et al. 2008: 282–287; Foa and Mounk 2016; Inglehart et al. 2014). A 2017 Pew Global survey across 38 countries found that while a median of 78 percent endorsed democracy, nearly half (49%) also supported expert-led governance, and substantial minorities favored strongman or military rule (Wike et al., 2017). In Asia-Pacific countries, only 15 percent of respondents qualified as "committed democrats" (i.e., those who rejected all non-democratic alternatives) compared to nearly one-quarter worldwide. Most people surveyed want democracy, but only on conditions that it functions efficiently, decisively, and without the delays and conflicts associated with liberal procedures.

In East Asia, this paradox has been well documented. In South Korea, for instance, the public overwhelmingly embraced democratization in the late twentieth century, yet surveys consistently reveal a residual openness to strongman leadership and military intervention "in the national interest" (Park and Shin 2006: 350–353; Shin and Kim 2018: 128–132). This is no mere academic debate, either. In December 2024, then-President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law and deployed the military to block the National Assembly, a dramatic assertion of executive authority that reignited debates over democratic fragility and public tolerance for strongman rule in times of crisis (Kim 2025).

These attitudes reflect a pattern in which citizens affirm democracy as an aspirational ideal while simultaneously accepting undemocratic alternatives under conditions of perceived dysfunction or threat. Analysts have variously attributed this ambivalence to legacies of developmental authoritarianism, performance-based legitimacy norms, and historically contingent experiences of national crisis management by centralized elites. Earlier interpretations emphasized Confucian orientations toward hierarchy and social harmony, though these have since been critiqued for cultural essentialism (Chu et al. 2008: 289–291; cf. Shi 2014). Regardless of cause, the outcome is a complex political culture: citizens express normative allegiance to democratic rule, yet frequently hedge against its perceived inefficiencies or vulnerabilities by endorsing elite guardianship in specific spheres.

To capture these nuanced and seemingly contradictory orientations, we develop three

analytically distinct variants of democratic guardianship, each combining a baseline commitment to democracy with a preference for elite oversight. These categories represent ideal-typical conceptual forms in the Weberian sense: stylized models that isolate logics of guardianship in relation to democracy through expert, military, or executive authority. While the empirical section will inductively trace patterns across attitudinal data, we begin by elaborating the conceptual structure required to interpret those findings meaningfully. As Sartori (1970) emphasizes, concept formation is a precondition for valid measurement in comparative analysis; without clarity at the level of definition and differentiation, empirical inference risks collapsing into descriptive tautology. Accordingly, we refrain from proposing a rigid typology or exhaustive classification. Rather, we aim to clarify the conceptual ideas, identifying recurring logics by which citizens reconcile democratic commitments with elite rule preferences and then match these with existing questions from cross-national surveys. This exploration thus remains exploratory and descriptive: it serves to establish the theoretical space within which different manifestations of "guardianship democracy" may arise.

Forms of Guardianship

The first form of guardianship within democratic societies centers on delegating authority to experts. This variant links democracy to expert governance and the delegation of policy authority to specialists rather than elected generalists. It reflects a belief that democratic legitimacy is improved, not compromised, when key decisions are insulated from mass or partisan politics. Citizens endorsing this model accept elections as necessary but prefer that non-partisan experts or technocrats "take charge" to implement rational policy without short-term interference.

The outlook echoes Plato's guardian ideal, re-framed by Dahl as "guardianship via technocracy" (Dahl 1989: 318–320). Here, legitimacy derives from outputs—stability, growth, competent administration—rather than participatory inputs. Many who hold this view see

no contradiction between democracy and elite control. As Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) argue, such preferences constitute "stealth democracy": a belief that governance should be efficient, apolitical, and largely invisible.

Comparative examples confirm its appeal. In Europe, economic crises enabled technocratic cabinets in Greece and Italy. In East Asia, South Korea's developmental bureaucracy cultivated enduring public respect for elite competence over party politics. Even after democratization, Koreans have favored expert-led governance – an outlook Bell (2015) calls "political meritocracy," understood as the belief that the educated and capable should govern.

Theoretically, this variant highlights tensions between input and output legitimacy. Majone (1997) defends non-majoritarian institutions (i.e., regulatory bodies insulated from electoral volatility) as guardians of long-term public interest. Yet this logic risks undermining accountability. Technocratic guardianship may stabilize democracy, but only if expert authority remains subject to democratic constraint. Our analysis examines how citizens navigate the tension between democratic commitment and support for elite authority. Specifically, we map endorsement of technocratic guardianship as a structured, though often ambivalent, feature of mass opinion.

A second form of guardianship within democratic systems centers on the military, which some citizens view as the ultimate guarantor of national stability and order. Democracy is endorsed in principle—elections, civilian rule, constitutional procedures—but held as conditional: the military may intervene if elected officials are perceived to threaten security, unity, or foundational values. This orientation, which we term civil–military guardianship, reflects the belief that armed forces may legitimately constrain or override democratic governance when civilian authority falters.

This logic aligns with what scholars of democratization have termed tutelary or protected democracy. These are political systems where unelected institutions, particularly the military, retain informal or constitutional authority to constrain elected governments. Merkel

(2004) labels this defect "domain democracy," in which the military controls specific policy areas. Other work on new democracies identifies "reserved domains" (Mainwaring 1999), where constitutional or *de facto* arrangements allow military vetoes. Finer (1962) characterizes such interventions as "guardian coups," legitimated by appeals to national rescue rather than regime replacement. In this view, the military stands above factionalism, entrusted to defend the state against internal decay.

Empirically, civil–military guardianship emerges most often in regimes where armed forces have played formative roles in state-building, national unification, or economic development. In Turkey, the military long positioned itself as the protector of secular republicanism. In Thailand, generals repeatedly invoked national unity to justify coups against elected governments. In Chile, the 1980 constitution institutionalized military tutelage even after a return to civilian rule (Loveman 1994). In several East and Southeast Asian cases, military legitimacy was grounded in Cold War anticommunism and developmental performance, producing public trust in uniformed leadership even after transitions to electoral democracy.

This variant raises classical questions about civilian control and democratic consolidation (Huntington 1957). A fully liberal democracy presumes armed forces are subordinate, apolitical, and institutionally constrained. Yet in contexts where militaries are trusted more than elected politicians, public support for conditional military intervention may remain surprisingly durable. Citizens could view soldiers as more disciplined, impartial, or nationally committed than self-serving civilian elites. Civil–military guardianship thus becomes a hedging logic: democracy is preferred, but military oversight is deemed necessary insurance against democratic dysfunction.

A third variant of democratic guardianship, and the last one considered here, centers on the strongman: a singular executive figure empowered to govern decisively with minimal institutional constraint. Citizens endorsing this model express support for democracy in principle, yet also approve of concentrated authority in a dominant leader who, in their

view, should not be encumbered by parliament, courts, or opposition. Public support for statements such as "having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections is a good way to govern" signals this disposition. The model reflects a vision of executive-centered democracy, where electoral legitimacy justifies expansive, unaccountable authority.

This variant aligns with trends in authoritarian populism and democratic backsliding, where elected leaders dismantle institutional checks while claiming to embody the popular will. O'Donnell (1994) describes this as delegative democracy, in which citizens entrust power to a charismatic leader seen as indispensable, tolerating the erosion of horizontal accountability. Zakaria (1997) defines the result as illiberal democracy, while Bermeo (2016) identifies executive aggrandizement as a dominant mode of democratic erosion—legal, incremental, and often electorally sanctioned. Underpinning this is a populist logic: the leader alone represents the people, and institutional limits merely protect corrupt or obstructive elites. In this narrative, democracy is reinterpreted as unified rule by a singular guardian, not pluralistic contestation.

Empirically, this pattern is visible across regional contexts. Leaders such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Narendra Modi in India, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela all rose through elections but subsequently concentrated power, undermined judicial and legislative constraints, and framed opposition as anti-national. Their popularity often rests on a guardian narrative: a promise to defend the nation from disorder, decay, or elite betrayal. Citizens attracted to this model frequently do not reject democracy outright. Rather, they seek a strong leader to restore functionality and moral clarity, especially in contexts of perceived crisis.

This variant highlights a foundational tension in democratic theory: is democracy primarily majoritarian, legitimizing unconstrained executive action, or liberal-institutional, emphasizing checks and balances, and minority rights? Strongman supporters tend to favor the former, viewing concentrated authority as a corrective to democratic dysfunction. As Müller

(2016) observes, populism asserts a moral monopoly of representation; only the leader and their faction truly express the will of the people, legitimizing the exclusion of dissenters. In public opinion, this logic allows individuals to reconcile support for democracy with support for near-authoritarian leadership. The strongman is not viewed as a threat to democracy, but as its savior; that is, its guardian.

Our analysis examines this pattern of executive guardianship, focusing on how citizens affirm democratic ideals while endorsing concentrated authority. This form of guardianship, like the others, reveals how support for democracy can coexist with preferences for elite constraint – here, vested in a single, dominant figure.

Together, these three variants – technocratic, civil–military, and strongman guardianship – represent distinct ways in which democratic legitimacy is reconciled with preferences for elite authority. Each reflects a logic of delegated trust, wherein citizens support democracy in principle but simultaneously favor guardians – experts, soldiers, or dominant executives – who are seen as more capable, disciplined, or morally upright than ordinary politicians. While these orientations differ in institutional focus and historical lineage, they share a common structure: the reimagining of democracy as something that may function best when guided or constrained by those deemed better equipped to govern. By identifying and disaggregating these attitudinal configurations, we seek to clarify how guardianship logics persist within democratic societies, and how they may structure mass preferences in contexts of institutional fatigue, partisan gridlock, or perceived national threat. Table 1 summarizes the three forms of guardianship we identify, along with the institutional logic and authority source characterizing each variant.

Guardianship Type	Shorthand Label	Core Logic
Technocratic Guardianship	Dahlian Guardianship	Delegation to credentialed experts; authority derives from output legitimacy and bureaucratic competence.
Civil–Military Guardianship	Military Guardianship	Military as guarantor of national unity and order; conditional support for democracy constrained by the armed forces.
Strongman Guardianship	Strongman Guardianship	Centralization in a dominant executive; electoral legitimacy justifies bypassing institutional checks.

Table 1: Ideal Types and Shorthand Labels of Guardianship Democracy

Note: Each variant reflects a hybrid attitude combining support for democracy with preference for elite oversight, anchored in a distinct institutional guardian. Shorthand labels correspond to operational categories used in the empirical analysis.

Case Selection: Democratic Transitions in East and Southeast Asia

This study focuses on five East and Southeast Asian countries: South Korea, Taiwan, Mongolia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. All five countries transitioned from authoritarian rule to electoral democracy over the past several decades. These cases are ideal for exploring how democratic legitimacy coexists with support for elite-led governance in post-authoritarian contexts. Each country represents a variation on a common trajectory: periods of non-democratic rule followed by institutional democratization, often under conditions of rapid socioeconomic change or geopolitical stress.

The rationale for this selection is twofold. First, these countries exhibit substantial variation in regime histories, elite-mass dynamics, and military influence, allowing for comparative analysis of how different authoritarian legacies shape public attitudes toward democracy and guardianship. Second, all five underwent democratization (full or complete) recently enough that cohorts socialized under authoritarian or transitional regimes remain active in public life, making it possible to examine how regime exposure interacts with support for techno-

cratic, military, or strongman variants of guardianship democracy. Japan is unique in that its transition took place several decades before the others, but this very difference provides a useful contrast. With a longer history of uninterrupted democratic rule and no *recent* authoritarian legacy, Japan serves as a baseline case for evaluating the long-term effects of democratic consolidation. Including Japan allows us to assess whether prolonged exposure to (liberal) democratic institutions fosters greater resistance to elite-led alternatives.

Focusing on post-transition democracies, let us consider whether and how latent authoritarian dispositions persist beneath normative support for democracy. Rather than treating support for elite authority as a contradiction, this study interprets it as part of a hybrid attitude: a space where democratic ideals are often reconciled with preferences for order, performance, or decisiveness, especially in regimes with relatively recent, and in some cases uncertain, democratic transitions (see Figure 1).

Data and Methods

This study draws on individual-level data from the World Values Survey (WVS) Time Series dataset (1981–2022), spanning seven waves of harmonized cross-national surveys. The analysis focuses on the last five survey waves covering the period 1995–2020 and five East and Southeast Asian countries – Japan,[2] the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Mongolia, and Indonesia – all of which experienced periods of authoritarian rule followed by regime transition.

We proceed in three stages. First, we examine respondents' support for different political systems based on four WVS items: democracy, rule by experts, rule by a strong leader, and rule by the military. Each system is evaluated on a four-point scale from "very good" to "very

[2]Japan differs from the other cases in that its democratic transition occurred much earlier, in the immediate postwar period under US Allied occupation (1945–1952. As a result, it offers an opportunity to examine guardianship attitudes in a context where democratic institutions have had a longer period to consolidate and where a democratic generation has been firmly established over time. This contrasts with the more recent transitions in the other cases, where authoritarian legacies remain more proximate.

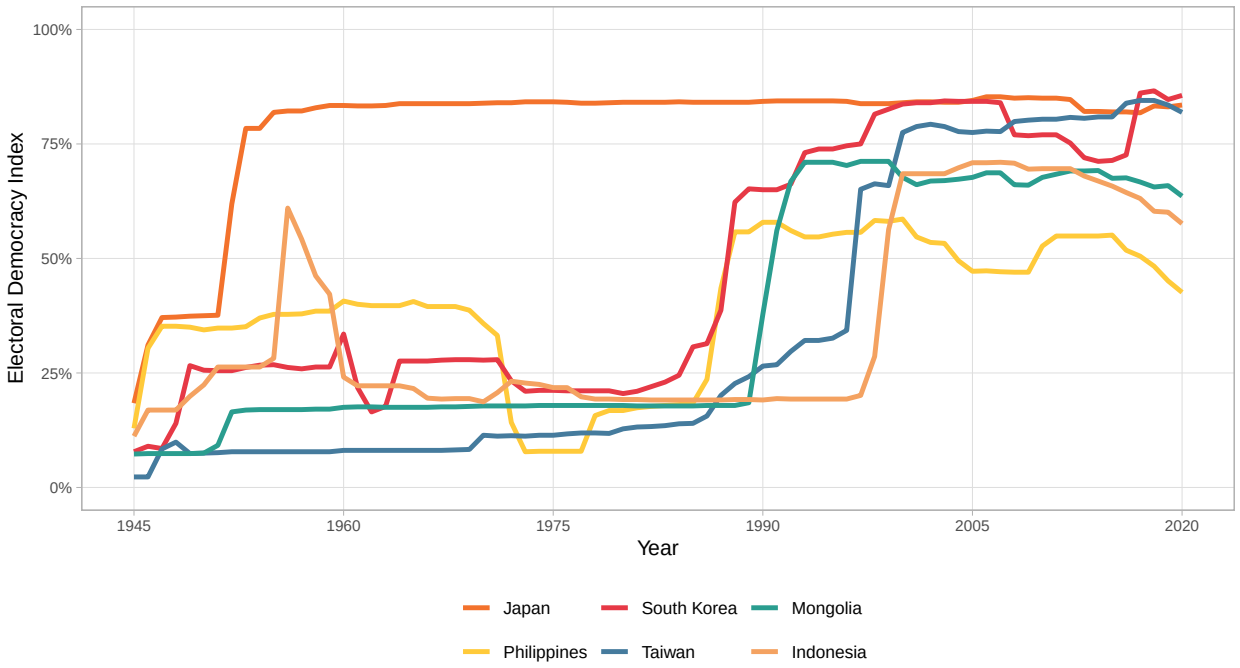

Figure 1: Electoral Democracy in East and Southeast Asia, 1945–2020

Note: The figure plots V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index (`v2x_polyarchy`) from 1945 to 2020 for five East and Southeast Asian countries: Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Mongolia, and Indonesia. The index ranges from 0 to 1 and captures the extent to which political systems satisfy core electoral democratic standards, including clean elections, inclusive suffrage, freedom of association and expression, and elected officials with real governing power. Data are drawn from version 13 of the V-Dem dataset and plotted as country-level annual time series. The figure highlights the timing and trajectory of each country's democratic transition and subsequent institutional development. Colors match those used throughout the paper.

bad." We recode responses of "very good" or "fairly good" as 1 (support), and all others as 0. Weighted proportions are computed by country-year using the WVS post-stratification weight (`S017`). Focal countries are highlighted in the plots, with all others shown as a reference group. The full question wordings are provided in Table 2.

Second, we construct compound measures of *guardianship democracy*—support for democracy in tandem with endorsement of non-electoral rule. We operationalize three variants identified in Table 1 above. Each is calculated as the weighted proportion of respondents supporting both democracy (`E117`) and the alternative system. These indicators are plotted over time for each country. Table 3 outlines the operationalization of our outcome variables.

Regime Type	WVS Item	Full Question Wording
Democracy	E117	"Having a democratic political system is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad, or very bad way of governing this country?"
Experts Rule	E115	"Having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad, or very bad way of governing this country?"
Military Rule	E116	"Having the army rule the country is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad, or very bad way of governing this country?"
Strong Leader Rule	E114	"Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad, or very bad way of governing this country?"

Table 2: World Values Survey Items on Regime Preferences

Note: Respondents rated each system on a four-point scale from "Very good" to "Very bad." Binary indicators are coded as 1 for "Very good" or "Fairly good," and 0 otherwise. Data are available for the following survey years: Japan (2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2020), South Korea (1996, 2001, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2020), Taiwan (1995, 2001, 2006, 2012, 2020), Mongolia (2006, 2012, 2018), Indonesia (2001, 2006, 2011, 2018), and the Philippines (1996, 2001, 2005, 2012, 2019).

Third, we analyze cohort-based variation using a generational framework grounded in political socialization theory. Foundational political attitudes are typically formed during adolescence and early adulthood, particularly around the age of 18, when individuals begin full participation in political life (Almond and Verba 1963; Niemi and Sobieszek 1977).

The core assumption in generational analysis is that citizens internalize the dominant norms of their formative political environment, which remain resilient over time even as regimes change (Verba 1965; Conradt 1980; McDonough et al. 1998; Neundorf 2010). If socialization produces lasting attitudinal predispositions, then individuals who came of age under authoritarian rule are expected to exhibit stronger preferences for order, hierarchy, and elite authority. By contrast, those socialized in more democratic and pluralistic contexts are expected to prioritize civil liberties, institutional constraints, and political equality (Nodia 1992; Kunovich 2009; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017).

Guardianship Type	WVS Items Used	Operational Definition
Dahlian Guardianship	E117 & E115	Support for both democracy and rule by experts.
Strongman Guardianship	E117 & E114	Support for both democracy and strong leader rule.
Military Guardianship	E117 & E116	Support for both democracy and military rule.

Table 3: Operationalization of Guardianship Democracy Measures

Note: Respondents are coded as endorsing a guardianship type if they evaluate both democracy (E117) and one of the alternative systems (E114–E116) as "Very good" or "Fairly good." All indicators are binary and computed using post-stratification weights (S017).

This approach aligns with recent cross-national work showing that generational differences in democratic attitudes persist after accounting for age and period effects. For example, Foa et al. (2020) demonstrate that youth dissatisfaction with democracy cannot be attributed solely to life-cycle effects; rather, younger cohorts appear systematically less committed to liberal-democratic norms than earlier generations were at comparable ages. These findings underscore the importance of distinguishing between cohort and age effects when analyzing democratic attitudes.

To implement this framework, we classify respondents into political generations based on their age at the time of democratic transition in each country. Those aged 26 or older at the time of transition are categorized as the 'authoritarian generation'; those aged 18 to 25 as 'transitional'; and those younger than 18 as 'democratic'. Table 4 summarizes these cohort definitions by country. The cutoff years correspond to democratizaiton moments, such as South Korea's 1987 democratization and Taiwan's transition in the early 1990s, and are consistent with prior research on political generational alignment (Dalton and Shin 2014; Inglehart and Welzel 2005). As Foa et al. (2020) emphasize, identifying cohort-specific attitudes requires comparing generations at comparable stages of life. We follow this approach by examining support for guardianship democracy by generation and age bin.

Age at the time of survey is computed using either the self-reported age variable (X003)

or the difference between the survey year (`S020`) and birth year (`X002`). We bin age into five-year intervals from 18 to 78, with a terminal "79+" bin. Within each bin and generation, we calculate the weighted proportion of respondents who endorse each guardianship variant.

All analysis is conducted in `R` using the `dplyr`, `tidyr`, and `ggplot2` packages. In lieu of a supplementary document with an overview of samples and other data concerns, readers are directed to the author's public Github repository for the paper, which includes an overview of the analysis and code for replication.[3]

Country	Transition Year	Authoritarian	Transitional	Democratic
Japan	1956	Born $\leq$ 1930	1931–1937	Born $\geq$ 1938
Philippines	1986	Born $\leq$ 1960	1961–1969	Born $\geq$ 1970
South Korea	1987	Born $\leq$ 1959	1960–1969	Born $\geq$ 1970
Taiwan	1991	Born $\leq$ 1953	1954–1968	Born $\geq$ 1969
Mongolia	1992	Born $\leq$ 1972	1973–1992	Born $\geq$ 1993
Indonesia	1998	Born $\leq$ 1960	1961–1969	Born $\geq$ 1970

Table 4: Generational Cohort Definitions by Country

Note: Authoritarian cohorts are defined as those who turned 18 before democratic transition; democratic cohorts reached adulthood under electoral rule. Transitional cohorts turned 18 within the window of regime liberalization or contested democratization. Cutoffs reflect the age of political socialization relative to each country's regime transition year.

Findings

Figure 2 presents pooled World Values Survey data for five East and Southeast Asian democracies. It traces over time trends in the proportion of respondents who evaluate various regime types as "very good" or "fairly good" ways to govern. In addition to plot lines for our main countries of interest, we also plot liberal democracies (*light blue*) and all other countries and regimes (*light grey*). The results reveal two headline patterns.

[3]Replication materials available here: `https://github.com/scdenney/guardianship_asia`

First, support for democracy as a political system remains consistently high across the full period and all five countries. Endorsement levels generally exceed 75 percent. This confirms that democracy enjoys strong normative legitimacy at the mass level, even in countries with recent authoritarian pasts. There is no evidence of a general collapse in democratic support based on this naive measure, concerns about measurement here notwithstanding.[4] However, one should note here that all people – basically everywhere – think democracy is a good system of government. This questions whether democracy is seen as a universally good system of government, or if this question suffers from serious construct validity problems. It may nevertheless be notable that South Korean support for "democracy" is one of the lowest of all countries for which data is available.

Second, and more notably, substantial minorities and, in some cases, the majority of respondents simultaneously endorse nondemocratic alternatives, particularly those ruled by experts and strongman leadership. Approval of technocratic governance, defined as expert rule, consistently hovers between 40 and 60 percent across countries and survey years. This suggests a durable preference for technocratic guardianship in which citizens trust elite expertise alongside democratic procedures. Support for military rule is generally lower and more variable, but still notable in countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines, where it remains above 50 percent. In Indonesia, support is declining, whereas in the Philippines, it is on the rise.

The most striking trend appears in support for strongman rule; that is, government by a leader who need not be constrained by elections or parliament. The preference for this kind of rule has increased over time in every country where multiple waves are available. In South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia, support for strongman rule shows a clear upward trajectory, reaching nearly or above 50 percent in the most recent surveys.

[4]While support for democracy remains high across all cases, the survey item used to measure this sentiment – whether having a democratic political system is a "very good" or "fairly good" way to govern – does not distinguish between different understandings of democracy. Respondents may endorse "democracy" in a generic or symbolic sense without necessarily affirming its procedural components, such as checks and balances, civil liberties, or competitive pluralism. As such, high levels of support should not be interpreted as unambiguous evidence of commitment to democratic norms, liberal or electoral.

This suggests growing receptivity to executive-centered forms of guardianship, even among populations that continue to affirm democracy in principle (more on this below). Notably, all of the Asian democracies considered here have diverged over time from the broader cohort of liberal democracies. This trend is particularly striking in the cases of Taiwan and South Korea, because they are arguably the only two countries in the sample that can be credibly classified as liberal democracies.

Japan stands apart from the other East and Southeast Asian cases: it exhibits persistently high endorsement of democratic governance and comparatively low support for nondemocratic alternatives, including rule by experts, the military, or a strong leader.

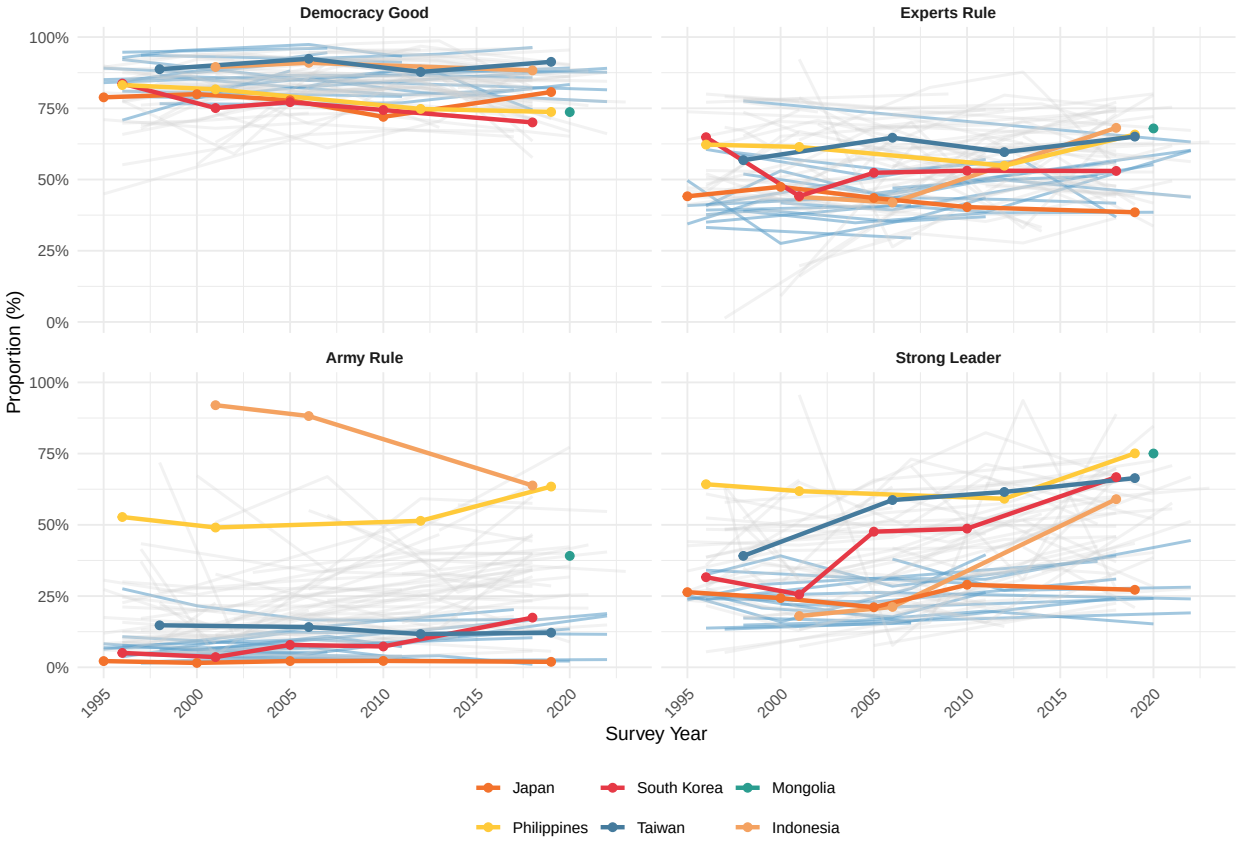

Figure 2: Support for Democracy and Elite Rule, 1995 to 2020

Note: The figure plots the proportion of respondents who evaluate each regime type (democracy, rule by experts, military rule, and strong leader rule) as a "very good" or "fairly good" way to govern. Data are pooled from all available World Values Survey waves between 1995 and 2020. Emphasis is placed on our five primary cases: Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Mongolia, and Indonesia. Countries classified as liberal democracies are shown in light blue and were identified using the V-Dem dataset (`v2x_regime` = 3) in 2024. All remaining countries outside the focal set are shown in light grey. Each regime type is measured independently, and all estimates are weighted using post-stratification weights.

Turning now to the core constructs of this study, Figure 3 presents trends in the three ideal-typical variants of guardianship democracy: Dahlian (technocratic), military, and strongman. These quantities of interest combine support for democracy with the simultaneous endorsement of a democratic alternative. The resulting proportions represent citizens who affirm democracy in principle while simultaneously favoring rule by experts, soldiers, or a dominant leader.

Several patterns are noteworthy. First, support for Dahlian guardianship, or technocratic rule within a democratic framework, is consistently the most prevalent form across all countries and survey waves. In Taiwan and South Korea, roughly 40 to 60 percent of respondents endorsed this configuration throughout the period, with only modest variation over time. The Philippines and Indonesia display slightly lower but still sustained levels of support, while Mongolia exhibits greater fluctuation, likely due to limited wave coverage. However, modest support for technocratic rule is not unique to East and Southeast Asian democracies; similar levels of endorsement are found across a wide range of countries in the World Values Survey.

Second, military guardianship shows considerable variation across countries and over time. In Taiwan and South Korea, endorsement remains consistently low. By contrast, support is significantly higher in the Philippines and Indonesia. Although it has dipped considerably in the latter in recent years, military rule remains a preferred political system to many. South Korea, meanwhile, shows a slight upward drift in recent years, suggesting that while military guardianship has minimal normative legitimacy, it remains a viable elite-led governance preference for a non-trivial share of the public.

Third, and most notably, support for strongman guardianship has risen steadily in all countries since the earliest wave – except Mongolia, where data is only available in one year. This form of executive-centered governance in South Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, and the Philippines now rivals or exceeds the other two types in public endorsement. The steady rise in support for strongman guardianship underscores the broader puzzle motivating this anal-

ysis: many citizens continue to affirm democracy while favoring the concentration of power in elite institutions or personalities, often at the expense of liberal checks and procedural accountability. What we see is that these dispositions appear to be specific to democracies in East and Southeast Asia.

Again, we note the outlier-like status of both Taiwan and South Korea relative to their liberal democratic peers. We also underscore the distinctiveness of Japan, which stands apart from all other countries in the region in its consistently low endorsement of all three forms of guardianship alternatives. Arguably because of, but perhaps despite, a longer time horizon for democratic consolidation and generational socialization, Japan shows no comparable rise in public support for strongman rule or military intervention, and maintains only modest levels of technocratic preference.

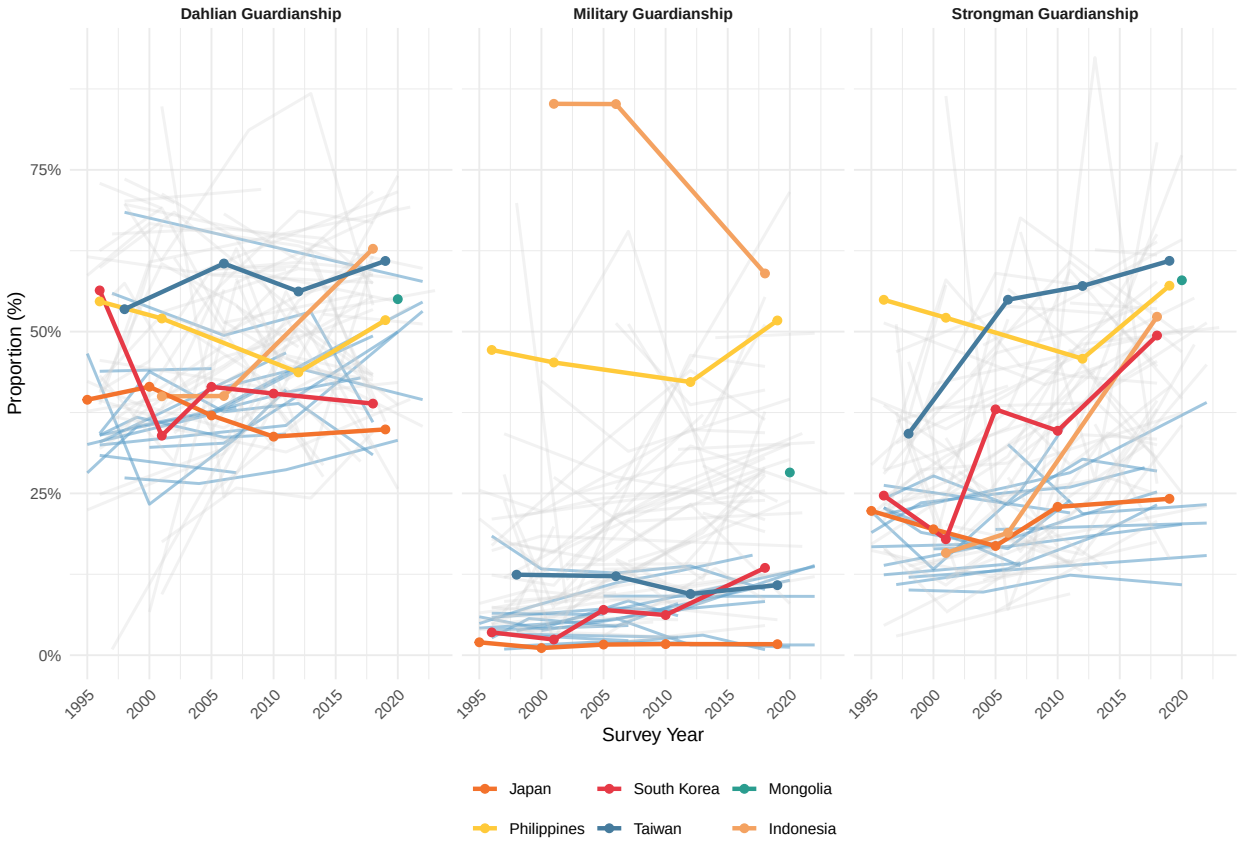

Figure 3: Support for Guardianship Democracy by Variant and Country, 1995 to 2020

Note: The figure shows the proportion of respondents who simultaneously endorse democracy and one of three elite-led alternatives: rule by experts (Dahlian guardianship), rule by the military (military guardianship), and rule by a strong leader unconstrained by elections or parliament (strongman guardianship). Each measure captures co-endorsement, with both regime types rated as "very good" or "fairly good." Data are pooled from all available World Values Survey waves between 1995 and 2020. Countries classified as liberal democracies are shown in light blue and were identified using the V-Dem dataset (`v2x_regime` = 3) in 2024. All other countries are shown in light grey. Estimates are weighted using post-stratification weights.

Finally, to assess how support for guardianship democracy varies across political generations and life stages. As noted, we disaggregate respondents by both cohort – defined by age at the time of regime transition – and age bin at the time of survey (Figure 4). This dual classification enables us to disentangle life-cycle effects from generational replacement. What do we find?

Across all five countries and all three guardianship types, generational patterns are complex and not uniformly consistent with theoretical expectations. Support for democracy tends to be high across generations, with relatively small differences by cohort. By contrast, the guardianship variants show some distinct generational predispositions, sometimes as expected but not always or necessarily so. Other insights are simply underexplored. Some notable findings here are as follows:

- Dahlian guardianship is consistently high across generations, with Democratic-generation respondents often showing equal or greater support than older cohorts. We note, in particular, the generational position of Indonesian democrats.

- Military guardianship is extremely unpopular in South Korea and Taiwan – across all cohorts – and while it remains a relatively desired political system in Indoesia, it's relatively young democratic generation are the least supportive; and, notably, our method indicates this is a *generational predisposition*.

- Strongman guardianship, surprisingly, exhibits no uniform decline among younger generations. In some contexts, support is flat across cohorts (the Philippines, Mongolia overall), and in the others (Taiwan, Indonesia, and South Korea), it shows strong generational support overall (Taiwan, Indonesia) or mixed *intra*generational support.

Support for strongman guardianship in Taiwan and South Korea warrants special attention, given the supposed degree of democratic consolidation in both countries; they are both so-called third-wave democracies. Democratic generation respondents display the highest

support for this form of guardianship. In both, younger citizens appear more favorable toward concentrated executive authority than their older counterparts. This is quite clearly true in Taiwan, whereas in South Korea some of the younger members of the democratic generation seem less supportive of this political system type.

These findings challenge the standard assumption that democratization produces an increasingly liberal-democratic citizenry through generational replacement. Instead, they suggest that in some post-transition democracies, younger generations may endorse elite rule as a response to perceived democratic dysfunction, a phenomenon that may reflect frustration with partisanship, institutional gridlock, or ineffective leadership. This inverted generational predisposition – where democratic-era cohorts are more supportive of guardianship – raises important questions about the stability and durability of democratic commitment in non-Western democracies.

Japan serves as a clear counterpoint. Unlike the newer democracies in the region, Japan's sample includes only respondents from its democratic generation, reflecting both the early timing of its democratic transition and the limited number of older respondents who came of age before 1956. Within its democratic cohort, support for all three forms of guardianship democracy remains consistently low. This underscores the likely significance of regime longevity: where democratic norms have been institutionalized over long generations, public receptivity to elite-led and non-democratic alternatives appears markedly weaker, even amid supposed contemporary dissatisfaction.

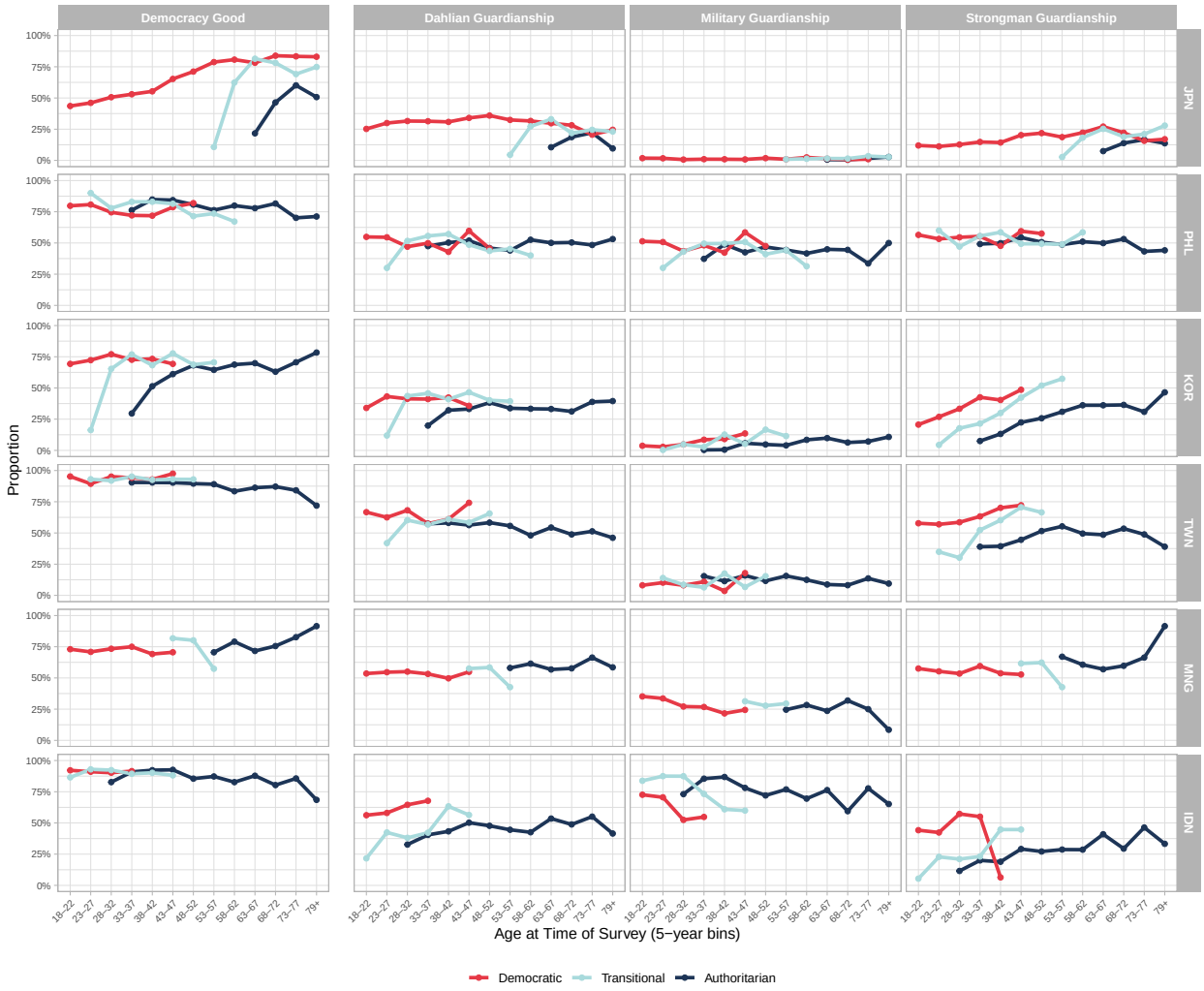

Figure 4: Support for Guardianship Democracy by Political Generation, 1995 to 2020

Note: The figure plots the proportion of respondents who simultaneously endorse democracy and one of three elite-led alternatives: rule by experts (Dahlian guardianship), rule by the military (military guardianship), or rule by a strong leader unconstrained by elections or parliament (strongman guardianship). Data are pooled from all available waves of the World Values Survey (1995 to 2020) for Japan (JPN), the Philippines (PHL), South Korea (KOR), Taiwan (TWN), Mongolia (MNG), and Indonesia (IDN). Generations are defined based on age at the time of each country's democratic transition: respondents aged 26 or older at the time are classified as the 'authoritarian generation', those aged 18 to 25 as the 'transitional', and those younger than 18 as the 'democratic'. All estimates are weighted using post-stratification weights.

Exploring the Role of Emancipative Values

To further assess how popular attitudes vary across contexts of democratic development, we turn to a widely used cultural indicator: the Emancipative Values Index (EVI). Developed by researchers associated with the World Values Survey project (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Welzel 2013), this index captures the extent to which individuals prioritize self-expression, freedom, equality, and civic autonomy over survival-oriented values such as conformity, authority, and material security. Constructed from a battery of World Values Survey (WVS) items, including those measuring tolerance (e.g., toward immigrants or LGBTQ groups), gender equality, freedom of speech, and civic activism, the EVI is designed to tap latent cultural orientations that underpin liberal-democratic citizenship. Higher scores are theorized to reflect a stronger mass foundation for liberal democracy, while lower scores suggest weaker cultural support for individual rights and pluralism.[5]

While the EVI has been validated across diverse world regions, its use here is more focused: we examine how emancipative values vary within the democratic generations of East and Southeast Asian countries. That is, rather than comparing whole populations, we isolate those respondents who came of age politically under democratic rule and compare their value orientations. This restriction allows us to hold regime exposure constant and focus on differences in normative socialization within democracy. It also aligns with our generational framework, which treats democratic cohorts as the critical carriers of (liberal) democratic values.

Figure 5 presents weighted average EVI scores by age bins for the democratic generations in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Mongolia, and Indonesia. We also include Germany in the analysis as a useful reference point. Like Japan, it transitioned to democracy in the aftermath

[5]The Emancipative Values Index (EVI) is constructed from 12 items in the World Values Survey. These include questions on gender equality (`A009`, `A010`, `A185`), tolerance of homosexuality (`F118`), immigrants (`F114`), and other marginalized groups (`F115`, `F116`); valuation of freedom of speech and civic engagement (`E001`, `E002`); and support for active participation in politics and protest activities (`E003`, `E005`, `E015`). The index reflects higher emancipative values when respondents prioritize autonomy, equality, and voice across these domains.

of World War II and has since experienced decades of uninterrupted democratic consolidation. While Germany is a Western liberal democracy, its historical trajectory – marked by authoritarian collapse, postwar occupation, and externally guided democratization – bears important structural similarities to Japan's. Including both cases offers a valuable basis for comparison with the more recent, post-authoritarian transitions in East and Southeast Asia.

Dotted horizontal lines indicate average values across liberal democracies, electoral democracies, and autocracies globally (based on V-Dem classifications), while shaded bands show the range of average emancipative values associated with each regime type. The benchmark lines are not thresholds of regime quality, but provide useful comparative anchors for interpreting the political values orientation of each country's democratic generation.

The findings offer several important insights. First, Japan and Germany, the two longest-standing liberal democracies in the sample, rank highest on emancipative values across age bins. Notably, Japan's democratic generation scores well above the other Asian democracies, reinforcing its distinctiveness within the broader East and Southeast Asian region. At the other end of the spectrum, Mongolia and Indonesia cluster near the global average for electoral democracies, while Taiwan and South Korea fall in between, generally above the electoral democracy benchmark, but below the liberal democratic range.

Second, the age gradients within democratic generations are generally flat, suggesting that younger members of these cohorts do not express stronger emancipative orientations than their older counterparts. This pattern reinforces a longstanding claim in political socialization research that formative regime exposure yields durable attitudes (Niemi and Sobieszek 1977). The apparent durability of these value profiles aligns with recent evidence that democratic attitudes among younger cohorts reflect genuine cohort effects, not temporary life-cycle fluctuations (Foa et al. 2020; Dalton and Shin 2014).

Taken together, these results reinforce the broader interpretation advanced throughout this paper. While democratic support remains high at the symbolic level, cultural orientations toward liberalism, autonomy, and pluralism vary substantially across contexts. Even

among democratic generations, emancipative values are unevenly embedded, with implications for how citizens understand and respond to elite-led, non-democratic alternatives. Japan's profile underscores the potential effects of regime longevity and normative consolidation; South Korea and Taiwan's position illustrates how even democratic cohorts may be open to guardianship rule when cultural foundations are weaker.

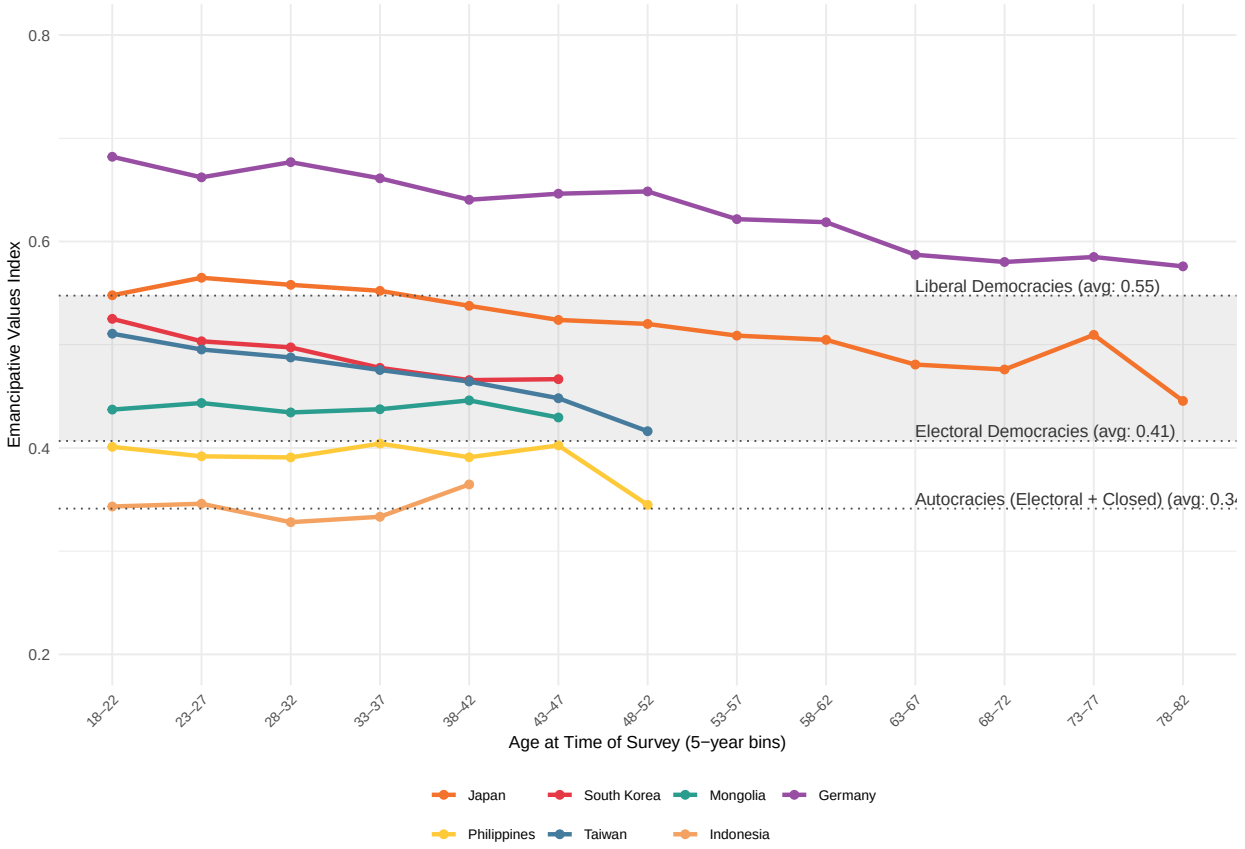

Figure 5: Emancipative Values Among Democratic Generations in East Asia and Germany

Note: This figure plots the Emancipative Values Index (EVI) for democratic-generation respondents, defined as those who came of age entirely under democratic rule, in six East and Southeast Asian countries (Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Mongolia, and Indonesia), with Germany included as a long-established liberal democracy for comparison. The EVI is a composite cultural measure capturing citizen prioritization of freedom, equality, self-expression, and civic autonomy. Higher values reflect stronger normative support for liberal-democratic principles. Respondents are grouped into five-year age bins at the time of the survey to observe within-generation variation. Horizontal dotted lines indicate average EVI levels among countries classified by regime type using V-Dem data: liberal democracies (0.55), electoral democracies (0.41), and autocracies (0.34). Country trends are weighted using post-stratification weights from the World Values Survey (1995–-2020).

Conclusions and Discussion

This paper has developed and applied the concept of guardianship democracy to describe a hybrid attitudinal orientation in which citizens affirm support for democracy while also expressing approval for democratic alternatives. Drawing on classical democratic theory and recent debates in political behavior, we identified three ideal-typical variants of guardianship: technocratic, military, and strongman rule. We examined their prevalence across five post-authoritarian democracies in East and Southeast Asia using pooled World Values Survey data from 1995 to 2020.

The empirical analysis confirms that guardianship democracy is neither anomalous nor marginal. Substantial minorities, and in some cases majorities, of respondents in every country examined express concurrent support for democracy and at least one elite governance alternative. Technocratic guardianship receives the widest and most consistent endorsement. Strongman guardianship has increased over time, especially in countries like the Philippines, Indonesia, and South Korea. Most notably, in South Korea and Taiwan, support for guardianship democracy is highest among the youngest, democratically socialized cohorts. This pattern challenges the assumption that liberal-democratic orientations strengthen with generational replacement. It also raises the possibility that younger citizens are reinterpreting democracy as compatible with elite control, particularly in light of perceived political dysfunction. Implications for the debate on democratic de-consolidation abound.

The findings presented here extend the analysis by Choi and Woo (2025), who identify a distinct constituency of guardianship democracy supporters that affirms both democracy and strong executive leadership. In South Korea and Taiwan, support for guardianship rule is especially pronounced among those we would least expect, with levels considerably higher than in other liberal democracies. In both, citizens who came of age under democracy—those we would expect to be most committed to liberal-democratic norms—are often the most supportive of guardianship variants, especially strongman rule. This generational pattern stands in tension with assumptions of democratic deepening through political socialization.

By contrast, Japan remains an important outlier. It exhibits persistently low support for all three guardianship variants. This may reflect the longer duration of democratic consolidation and institutional normalization, suggesting that regime longevity can dampen public receptivity to elite-led alternatives to liberal democracy even in a time of general dissatisfaction.

More critically, the findings presented here raise important questions about measurement and especially construct validity. The survey items used to capture support for democracy and its alternatives are phrased in simple, general terms, which may obscure the underlying meaning respondents assign to them. A person who rates "a democratic political system" as a good way to govern may be expressing general approval, rather than endorsing liberal-democratic norms such as competitive elections, civil liberties, or institutional constraint. Similarly, support for "rule by experts" or "a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections" could reflect frustration with partisan conflict or demands for effective governance rather than authoritarian sympathies, as suggested in Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002). These conceptual ambiguities caution against taking co-endorsement as straightforward evidence of normative inconsistency. Instead, they raise a deeper question: do citizens genuinely understand and mean what they say when endorsing both democracy and elite rule?

The supplementary analysis using the Emancipative Values Index (EVI) helps address these validity concerns. The EVI, which captures cultural orientations toward autonomy, equality, and self-expression, provides a benchmark of liberal-democratic commitment. We find that countries whose democratic generations score lower on this index are also those where support for guardianship democracy is most pronounced. This alignment suggests that co-endorsement of democracy and elite-led alternatives is not simply a function of survey artifact or misunderstanding. The puzzle that is strongman guardianship support among Taiwanese and South Korean democrats is also underscored.

If these measures meaningfully capture latent orientations toward elite rule within demo-

cratic belief systems, as suggested here, then this study offers motivation for identifying where and among whom such preferences are concentrated. A logical next step is to improve our understanding of the sources and structure of these attitudes. While recent work has begun to uncover patterns in institutional trust and partisan alignment that distinguish guardianship democracy from authoritarianism (e.g., Choi and Woo 2025), further research is needed to explore how these associations operate across contexts and over time. In particular, experimental and mixed-method designs could help disaggregate underlying motivations, test whether citizens interpret survey items in conceptually valid ways, and clarify whether support for guardianship systems reflects stable normative beliefs or instrumental reactions to dysfunction (perceived or real). Distinguishing between these possibilities is critical for assessing the durability and democratic implications of guardianship-oriented preferences.

Further development is also needed on the democratic theory side. This paper draws on foundational ideas to identify core variants of guardianship, but additional conceptual work is necessary to clarify how these orientations fit within broader traditions of democratic thought, especially regarding elite theories of governance, both classical and contemporary. What distinguishes technocratic rule within democracy from rule that undermines it? Under what conditions can guardianship be reconciled with political equality or popular sovereignty? These are questions that require more sustained engagement with democratic theory and institutional design. They are also essential for assessing whether guardianship democracy represents an accommodation to democratic complexity or a quiet retreat from its core principles.

In short, guardianship democracy should not be seen simply as a rejection of democratic values. Rather, it reflects how citizens in post-transition democracies balance aspirations for accountability with demands for order, competence, and decisiveness. Mapping these patterns more precisely, both conceptually and empirically, is essential for understanding how democracy is evolving in practice.

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