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How well ordinary citizens understand democracy: the case of the South Korean electorate

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How do mass citizens understand democracy? Are they capable of distinguishing it from its non-democratic alternatives? Does their understanding about democracy matter? To reveal the contours of cultural democratization in South Korea, this article addresses these questions largely overlooked in earlier survey-based studies. Analyses of the 2010 Korea Barometer survey indicate that all segments of the Korean electorate, including the young and the college-educated, are neither accurately nor fully informed about what distinguishes a democratic regime from its non-democratic alternatives. Moreover, the study provides strong evidence of democratic learning in that an increase in democratic knowledge leads to committed support for democracy. The findings together imply an urgent need to improve the quality of civic education for the development of democratic political culture in Korea and new democracies.

Keywords: democratic knowledge; democratic political culture; committed support for democracy; civic education; South Korea

> In democracies, ignorance . . . will increase the concentration of power and the subjection of the individual (Alexis de Tocqueville 2000 [1840]).[1]

> Enlightenment has nothing to do with democracy. But I think this would be a foolish and historically false assertion . . . the people must be enlightened, at least to some degree (Robert Dahl 1989).[2]

South Korea (Korea hereafter) formally joined the third wave of democratization more than a decade after it began to spread from southern Europe in the mid-1970s. Since its transition to democracy in 1988, individual scholars and the news media have conducted numerous public opinion surveys.[3] According to these surveys, Korea has experienced a great cultural shift from authoritarianism to democracy since the demise of its military dictatorship. For example, the proportion of citizens professing that democratic changes are desirable and suitable

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for Korea dramatically increased from 28% under the Chun Doo Whan (1980–1988) authoritarian government to 71% under the first civilian Kim Young Sam government (1993–1998).[4] As in its Asian neighbours, avowed supporters of democracy constitute an overwhelming majority of ordinary citizens in Korea.[5]

Do these Korean supporters of democracy understand that democracy as government by the people is fundamentally different from all non-democratic systems of government in both structure and processes? Are they capable of distinguishing the structural and procedural characteristics of democracy from those of its alternatives? Does their understanding about democracy matter for the contours of democratic consolidation? The studies based on earlier public opinion surveys failed to address these questions concerning the most important *cognitive* dimension of democratic citizenship. Because those surveys focused exclusively on *affective* orientations to democracy-in-principle and *evaluative* orientations to democracy-in-practice, they provided little information about the extent to which ordinary people understand or misunderstand democracy and the patterns in which they structure their knowledge about democracy.

The purpose of this study is to systematically examine the democratic knowledge of ordinary citizens in terms of its content, structure, and distribution and to stress its necessity. Specifically, the study evaluates how well or poorly the Korean people are informed about democracy and how coherently they structure their democratic knowledge. It also identifies those who are the most and least informed about it and examines the impact of democratic knowledge on democratic consolidation at the individual level. Analysing the latest wave of the Korea Democracy Barometer survey conducted during the months of October and November 2010, this study seeks to offer a more comprehensive and balanced account of the cultural democratization unfolding in Korea. In addition, the study seeks to contribute to the process of improving the quality of democratic citizenship among the Korean people by identifying those who lack knowledge about democracy and examining the specific effect of democratic knowledge on support for democracy.

This article proceeds in seven sections. The section immediately following addresses how public knowledge about democracy affects the process of democratic development. The second section explicates the notion of democratic knowledge. The third section briefly describes how the Korea Democracy Barometer survey was conducted and how its items were designed to measure democratic knowledge. The fourth section examines the content and structure of democratic knowledge. The fifth section presents the demographic profiles of the most and least informed about democracy. The sixth section examines the impact of democratic knowledge on individual attitudes towards democracy. Finally, the conclusion highlights key findings and discusses their implications.

Citizen knowledge about democracy and democratic development

Does the knowledge ordinary citizens have about democracy affect the process of democratizing their political system? If so, how does it affect the process? These

two questions concerning the role of those citizens in democratization have, by and large, been overlooked in the existing large body of the literature on third wave democracies. In this literature, elites, not the masses, are recognized as ultimate determiners of democratic regime change.[6] To accurately understand why and how the masses react to democratization in the way they do, however, it is necessary to address both questions.

In the real world of democratic politics, moreover, political knowledge has been found to shape many beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors supportive of democratic political development.[7] For example, when ordinary citizens are informed about the political process and the various issues being debated in the process, the citizens participate in the process more actively from a critical perspective.[8] They become more reasonable with others and tolerant of opposing views, as well as a better judge of communal interests.[9] These findings make it clear that the growth of democratic knowledge among mass publics is crucial to the development of a democratic political system as well as a nation of democrats. As David Easton aptly noted, the quality of democratic governance depends on the quality of input from citizens, which, in turn, depends upon their knowledge about democratic politics.[10]

Furthermore, in the theoretical literature, political knowledge about democracy is known as a principal resource of democratic citizens and a keystone to other democratic requisites. In particular, the theory of democratic learning focuses on the role of democratic knowledge in orienting citizens to democracy and away from its alternatives. In the United States, for example, Herbert McClosky and John Zaller found that ordinary citizens are more likely to endorse the virtues of democratic politics when they are more informed about its principles and processes.[11] More recently, in sub-Saharan Africa, Michael Bratton and his colleagues found that an increasing number of ordinary citizens prefer democracy to its alternatives, when they are more accurately and fully informed about it. According to these researchers, "understanding of democracy is a top-ranked element explaining why some Africans demand democracy and others do not".[12] These empirical studies confirm the theory of democratic learning that public knowledge about democracy contributes to democratic development by improving the quality of democratic citizenship.

All in all, these theories and empirical studies echo Francis Bacon's old message implying, for this study, that democratic knowledge improves the quality of democratic citizenship and thereby contributes to democratic development.[13] Specifically, it fosters the democratization of authoritarian political orientations among ordinary citizens and enhances the democratic governance of their political system. Limited new democracies, therefore, can turn into well-functioning full democracies only when a majority of their citizens acquire conceptual and practical knowledge about democracy and are able to play a proper role in the political process.

Conceptualization of democratic knowledge

Democratic knowledge is a part of the political knowledge that ordinary people have in their long-term memories.[14] What constitutes democratic knowledge?

Does it vary in kind as well as in degree? How can democratic knowledge be effectively assessed? To address these questions, this section begins with the clarification of a term, *political knowledge*, and then conceptualizes democratic knowledge as a phenomenon with multiple dimensions.

In advanced democracies, scholars have indentified three general types of political knowledge: factual, procedural, and conceptual.[15] Of these types, factual knowledge is the least abstract and yet most fragmented. Factual knowledge refers to observable facts including the names of politicians and political parties, the dates and locations of political events, and so on. Some simple examples are that Chun Doo Hwan was a military dictator during the 1980s in Korea and Kim Jong Eun is a North Korean leader. Factual political knowledge is characterized by a low level of abstraction and stored in isolation because various political facts are not necessarily interrelated. For this reason, this knowledge is often called *political information* or *surveillance knowledge*.[16]

Procedural knowledge is knowledge about how to get something done.[17] This knowledge is so uniquely germane to a specific domain that it is often called *skills and techniques*. In the realm of politics, scholars who study bounded rationality and heuristics have emphasized the importance of this type of knowledge in the problem-solving of political tasks that ordinary citizens face on a regular basis.[18] Given that the political world is hard to understand and public political knowledge is always incomplete, ordinary citizens naturally develop heuristics or shortcuts (i.e., *learned procedural knowledge*) through repeated political experiences, such as voting, to compensate for their lack of political information and improve their performance. Such heuristics constitute an important procedural component of political knowledge.

Conceptual knowledge is knowledge about abstract constructs and theories.[19] Unlike factual knowledge, conceptual knowledge deals with what political concepts refer to, how they are either interrelated with or differentiated from one another, and why the political world works the way it does. Two critical characteristics of conceptual knowledge are that it is, by and large, highly *abstract* and coherently *structured.* Just as each concept has its own distinctive properties and those properties are viewed as causing and being caused by the properties of other concepts, conceptual knowledge takes on an abstract form of cognitive reflection on all the important questions about political life, including those regarding what constitutes a political world and what should be done to improve it. For this reason, conceptual knowledge is often defined as *background* or *textbook knowledge*.[20]

More powerfully than factual and procedural knowledge, therefore, conceptual knowledge motivates, guides, and justifies human thinking and behaviours. To examine the contours and dynamics of conceptual knowledge, political scientists have recently proposed a variety of analytic frameworks, such as political sophistication,[21] integration in political thinking,[22] hierarchical organization in political schema,[23] and levels of ideological coherence.[24]

The three types of political knowledge, as discussed above, have distinctively different characteristics, but all these characteristics are alike in guiding the political lives of ordinary people. Factual knowledge constitutes the ingredients for political evaluations and decisions and serves to update existing conceptual knowledge. However, what enables people to meaningfully interpret political facts and affairs – and translate those into meaningful decisions, justifications, and evaluations – is conceptual knowledge. Conceptual knowledge also enhances the application of procedural knowledge to solve various problems that people face in the political world.[25] All in all, most of the rational behaviours, coherent thinking, and comprehensive evaluations that human beings can make are based on their conceptual knowledge, accurate or inaccurate. Therefore, conceptual political knowledge is of primary importance in the political lives of ordinary people.

Democratic knowledge clearly belongs to the category of conceptual political knowledge that enables citizens to reason, evaluate, and judge democracy as a system of government. Accordingly, *democratic knowledge* is defined in this study as conceptual knowledge about a system of government in which people are allowed to participate and compete in the political process.[26] Conceptual knowledge about democracy, therefore, is not just remembering some specific facts about democracy (e.g., South Korea is a new democracy and North Korea is not a democracy). Rather, conceptual knowledge about democracy involves the cognitive capacity for individual citizens to define it and distinguish it from its non-democratic alternatives in principle. In other words, the citizens who are able to distinguish the characteristics of a democratic regime from those of non-democracies are viewed as knowledgeable about democracy.

What constitutes democracy? What are its unique characteristics as a system of government? Because democracy often means different things to different people, the number and type of democratic regime characteristics vary considerably according to the way they conceptualize it. Whereas some define it minimally with a single characteristic, many others define it maximally with a large number of different characteristics. Analytically, however, it is not possible to identify all the characteristics every individual citizen associates with democracy. Nor is it necessary to consider all of those characteristics to assess citizen knowledge about democracy because they are not equally essential to the quality of democratic citizenship and the consolidation of nascent democratic rule. For the sake of analytic parsimony, this study selected the six most fundamental of those characteristics (three democratic and three non-democratic) to estimate the overall level and structure of democratic knowledge.[27]

The first of three democratic regime characteristics or properties refers to popular elections of political leaders. Only in democracy do people choose their leaders through free and competitive elections. The second and third characteristics concern freedom of expression and equal rights between the two genders. Only when citizens are allowed to express their views freely and exercise their voting and rights equally can they participate in the electoral and other political process effectively to become citizens of a democratic state. Holding free elections,

expressing political views freely, and granting equal rights are the three fundamental characteristics of democracy as government by the people.

Citizens in non-democracies, unlike their peers in democracies, are denied free access to information due to governmental censorship of the news media. They are also denied the freedom to form voluntary associations with other fellow citizens and engage in any demonstration against their government, which neither follows their will nor responds to their preferences. In non-democracies, moreover, the executive branch often proclaims new laws without the consent of the legislature elected by the people. These conditions are chosen for this analysis because they represent the three most fundamental characteristics of authoritarian rule.

Obviously, the list of the six regime characteristics is not an exhaustive list of democratic and authoritarian regime characteristics because it does not include everything citizens should know to distinguish democracy from authoritarianism. Nonetheless, the six on the list constitute the core elements of the two different regimes and thus allow for analysing democratic knowledge effectively and parsimoniously.

Data and method

The public opinion data for the present study were culled from the latest wave of the Korea Democracy Barometer (hereafter, KDB) surveys. During the months of November and December 2010, the KDB conducted personal interviews with a randomly chosen national sample of 1004 Korean citizens to tap their conceptions of democracy-in-principle and perceptions of democracy-in-practice. Table 1 lists six statements, three on democracy and three on non-democracy, that were asked for the purpose of evaluating respondents' knowledge about democracy.

Table 1. Measurements for democratic knowledge.

Characteristics	Statements	Correct answers
Free elections	Choosing political leaders in free elections.	Essential
Freedom of expression	Expressing political views freely.	Essential
Political equality	Allowing women to have the same rights as men.	Essential
Freedom of political action	Banning public rallies and demonstrations to maintain order.	Unessential
Media freedom	Keeping the news media from criticizing the government.	Unessential
Parliamentary law-making	Decreeing laws without the approval of parliament.	Unessential

Notes: Close-ended question: Many things may be desirable, but all of them are not essential characteristics of democracy. Please tell me for each of the following things whether it is a very essential, fairly essential, not very essential, or not at all essential characteristic of democracy?
Source: Korea Democracy Barometer Survey 2010.

In evaluating each statement, they were allowed to choose one of four verbal categories ranging from "very essential" to "not at all essential". In addition, they were allowed to express "Don't know". To simplify the process of measuring democratic knowledge, the four categories have been collapsed into two broader categories, essential and unessential, in order to determine whether three democratic regime characteristics were viewed as essential to democracy and three non-democratic characteristics viewed as unessential to it. All "Don't know" answers were kept as an independent category because although respondents failed to give a correct answer they did not give an incorrect one.[28]

Assessing democratic knowledge among Korean publics

This study distinguishes between the content and structure of democratic knowledge.[29] This distinction is important both analytically and substantially. The content of such knowledge depends merely on the extent to which individual citizens understand democratic regime characteristics as essential to democracy and non-democratic regime characteristics as unessential to it. In other words, counting the number of the six regime characteristics rated correctly reveals the overall level of the content of democratic knowledge. As a result, such a content-based analysis is unable to determine whether democratic knowledge is structured in a coherent fashion. To evaluate coherence in the structure of democratic knowledge, it is necessary to determine whether individual responses to the six regime characteristics, when considered together, form a qualitatively distinct pattern, such as being *informed, partially informed, misinformed*, or *ignorant*. By considering both its content and structure, this study offers a more comprehensive and balanced account of democratic knowledge than the studies conducted in other countries.

Content: levels of democratic knowledge

To what extent do Korean citizens know about democracy? Are they fully informed about it, evidenced by their accurate identification of the three democratic characteristics as essential to democracy and the non-democratic characteristics as unessential to it? Which regime characteristics are they most and least informed about? To address these questions, this section first examines how responses to each of the six characteristics are distributed across three broad categories – essential, unessential, and don't know – and compares their distribution across the six characteristics. Then I estimate the content or overall level of democratic knowledge by summing accurate answers to the six questions.

Table 2 reveals that Korean understanding of each regime characteristic substantially varies. Of the six, Korean people are most accurately informed about free elections (90%), followed by political equality (82%) and freedom of expression (81%). Of the three authoritarian regime characteristics considered, Koreans are far more accurately informed about the non-democratic practices of excluding the parliament from the process of legislation (77%) and of censoring

Table 2. Descriptive patterns of evaluating the six statements.

Statements	Essential	Unessential	D/K
Choosing political leaders in free elections	**90%**	9%	1%
Expressing political views freely	**81**	17	2
Allowing women to have the same rights as men	**82**	17	1
Banning public rallies and demonstration to maintain order	45	**54**	1
Keeping the news media from criticizing the government	20	**77**	3
Decreeing laws without the approval of parliament	20	**77**	3

Note: Bold indicates correct evaluation. D/K = Don't know.
Source: Korea Democracy Barometer Survey 2010.

the news media (77%) than of banning political assembly and demonstrations against the government (54%). When these figures are compared, it is evident that Koreans are most and least informed about the free elections of political leaders and the banning of anti-governmental activities, respectively.

Of the two sets of regime characteristics, the Korean people are significantly better informed about the three in the democratic set than those in the authoritarian set. Specifically, large majorities of more than four-fifths ranging from 81–90% of the KDB respondents accurately evaluated the three democratic regime characteristics as essential to democracy. In contrast, significantly smaller majorities of less than four-fifths, ranging from 54–77%, accurately assessed the three non-democratic ones as unessential to it. By substantial margins running up to more than 27 percentage points, accurate assessments of the democratic regime characteristics outnumber accurate assessments of the non-democratic regime characteristics.

Inaccurate assessments of the former as unessential to democracy, on the other hand, are outnumbered by inaccurate assessments of the latter as essential to it by larger margins running up to 35 percentage points. These two contrasting patterns of assessments make it clear that the Korean people are far better informed about the characteristics of a democratic regime than those of the non-democratic alternatives. These two patterns, which indicate a significant imbalance in assessing the two different types of regime characteristics, also suggest that information about democracy is not well structured in the minds of many Korean people.

How well or poorly are they informed about democracy? To measure the overall level of their democratic knowledge, this study followed the standard practice in the literature of political knowledge that when people know about something, they must sort out its core characteristics from those violating it.[30] By counting the number of accurate answers to the six questions, I constructed a seven-point scale from zero (completely ignorant) to six (fully knowledgeable).

As shown in Figure 1, among the Korean people, the fully informed, who understand the six characteristics accurately, are the most numerous, yet they constitute only a small plurality of less than one-third (30%). They are followed by

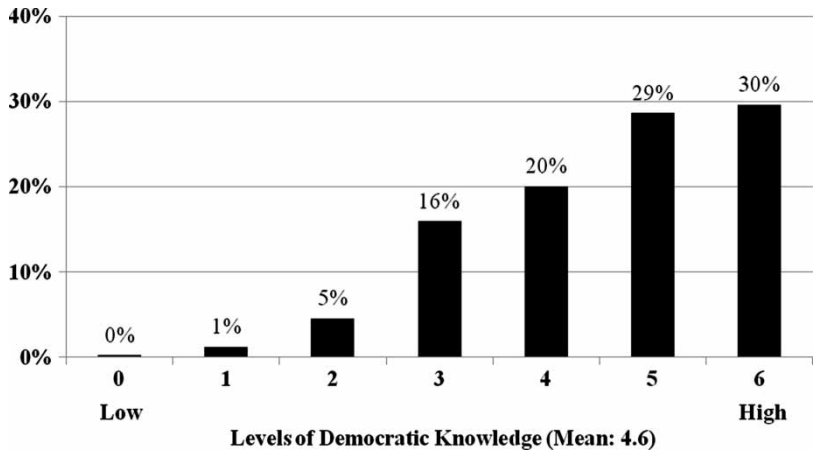

Figure 1. Levels of democratic knowledge.
Source: Korea Democracy Barometer Survey 2010.

those misunderstanding one characteristic (29%) and those misunderstanding two (20%). The remaining 22% misunderstand at least three of the six characteristics, suggesting there is a substantial deficiency in their understanding of democracy. On average, Korean people are accurately informed about 4.6 out of the six regime characteristics, which is 1.4 below the level of being fully informed.[31]

The most notable of these findings is that a large majority (more than two-thirds) is not fully capable of discriminating democratic characteristics from non-democratic ones. It suggests that when Korean political leaders engage in non-democratic practices to promote their own interests, a majority of the Korean people does not have the cognitive capacity to appreciate the manipulative attempt. Because they do not know that such practices are not democratic, they are not willing to challenge those actions. Instead, they are likely to support them, misunderstanding the practices as essential to democratic politics. Elected presidents in Korea have abused their power and violated civil rights in the name of social order and national security during the last two decades of democratic governments; the continuity of such practices might be attributed to the fragile foundation of democratic knowledge among Korean people.

Structure: types of democratic knowledge

How well are accurate and inaccurate pieces of information about democracy as a distinct system of government structured in the minds of the Korean people? To reveal the structure of their democratic knowledge, a typology of democratic knowledge is constructed by focusing on two categories of cognitive abilities: *recognition* and *evaluation*. *Recognition* addresses the question of whether citizens are able to recognize the six democratic and non-democratic characteristics. *Evaluation* refers to whether

they are able to identify them correctly. In short, recognition checks whether the six characteristics exist in the knowledge systems of mass citizens and evaluation verifies whether they are correctly organized or assessed inside their memories.

Analytically, recognition focuses merely on whether citizens fail to answer the given questions. Those who did not answer a given question tapping democratic knowledge indicate a lack of recognition power for it. Those who offered any answer, either accurate or inaccurate, on the other hand, show they are capable of recognizing the existence of a relationship between the regime characteristic mentioned and democracy. Not all such recognitions turn out to be accurate, indicating respondents are misinformed about the relationship between the two. Accurate evaluation requires citizens to categorize democratic characteristics as essential to democracy and non-democratic ones as unessential.

By considering together the capacities to recognize each of the six regime characteristics surveyed and to evaluate them accurately, the present paper identified citizens falling into four distinct types of democratic knowledge: *the ignorant, the partially informed, the misinformed,* and *the informed* (see Figure 2). *The ignorant* are those who did not answer all six questions or who answered only a few questions inaccurately. *The partially informed* are those who did not answer all the questions but answered the chosen questions accurately. *The misinformed* are those who answered all six questions but answered them inaccurately by evaluating either non-democratic characteristics as essential to democracy or democratic ones as unessential to it. *The informed* are those who answered all the questions and answered each of them accurately.

The proposed fourfold typology is a conceptually simple tool, yet it provides crucial information about how the Korean people structured their knowledge about democracy. *The partially informed* and *the misinformed*, for example, may have the same or similar levels of accurate information about democracy, but their democratic information is qualitatively different. Being *the misinformed* about democracy implies that a large amount of information about democracy is formed but much of it is not accurately organized in the knowledge system. Being *the partially informed*, in contrast, means that the amount of information about democracy is not large, but the information acquired is coherently structured in the cognitive memory.

		Evaluation	
		Correct	Incorrect
Recognition	Full	*Informed*	*Misinformed*
	Partial	*Partially informed*	*Ignorant*

Figure 2. Typology of democratic knowledge.

Being *the ignorant* implies that information about democracy is neither acquired nor stored in the knowledge system. Consequently, when these individuals are required to choose some options for a given question, their answers are made on a random basis. Being *the informed*, in contrast, suggests that information about democracy is formed fully and accurately into a schematic concept of democracy, which can allow for assimilating further knowledge into the existing knowledge system by discriminating democratic elements from non-democratic ones. The schematic concept, once structured and organized, can serve as a container capable of accumulating necessary meanings and distinguishing them from those of other related concepts and ideas.[32] Consequently, the informed are the only ones who have a flawless concept of democracy in their knowledge system. People classified as one of the other three types have failed to achieve such a concept formation.

That type of democratic knowledge is prevalent among the Korean people? Figure 3 reports the distribution of Korean citizens across the four types in the previous paragraphs. The misinformed are most numerous and constitute a substantial majority with 63%. They are followed by the informed (30%), the partially informed (6%), and the ignorant (1%). Even after more than two decades of democratic rule, the fully informed constitute a small minority of less than one-third and they are outnumbered by the misinformed by a large margin of more than two to one.

The prevalence of the misinformed is the most notable feature of the way the Korean people have structured a variety of information about democracy. This makes it clear that in their cognitive world, democratic regime characteristics are not yet completely sorted out from non-democratic ones. In other words, two decades of democratic experience have implanted pieces of knowledge about democracy into citizen cognitions, but most of the pieces are not coherently structured in their knowledge system. Consequently, a majority of Korean people

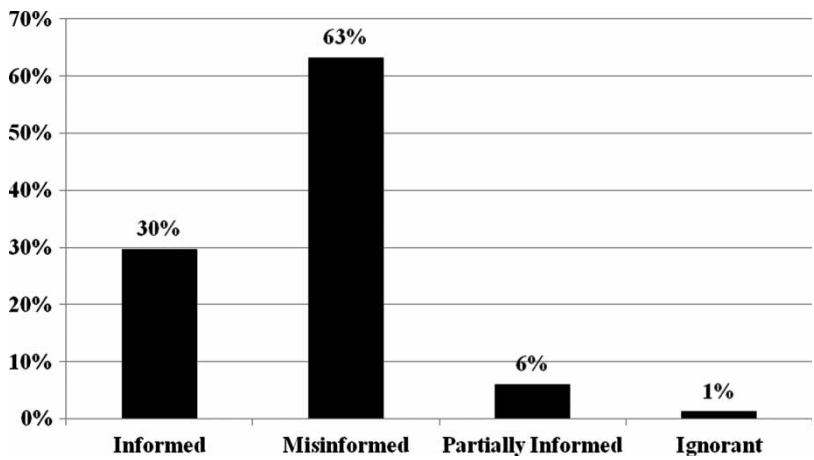

Figure 3. Distribution of democratic knowledge types.
Source: Korea Democracy Barometer Survey 2010.

remain confused about the characteristics of democratic and authoritarian regimes. Being confused about those, they are incapable of reasoning and deliberating meaningfully in the democratic political process. This finding suggests that Korea is yet to become a nation of enlightened democratic citizens.

Who are the most and least informed about democracy?

The findings presented in the previous section suggest that informed understanding about democracy has not spread to every segment of the Korean population. These findings, however, offer no accurate information about the particular social segments that are most and least informed about democracy. Earlier survey based studies on citizen attitudes towards democracy, though, have revealed that some demographic characteristics significantly affect democratic political learning among ordinary citizens.[33] Following this finding, I chose the four demographic characteristics of gender, age, education, and income and compared the level and structure of democratic knowledge across 12 population groups according to these characteristics.

For each of these groups, Table 3 shows the content and structure of democratic knowledge in terms of its level and types. The first column of the table reports levels of democratic knowledge and the next two columns list the percentages of the fully informed and misinformed.[34] Comparing the quantitative and qualitative differences in the data, this study seeks to determine how democratic knowledge is evenly or unevenly distributed across the various segments of the Korean population.

Table 3 shows little quantitative and qualitative difference among the groups defined by gender and income. Men and women are very similar in the overall level of democratic knowledge and the types of the informed and misinformed. The rich and the poor are also more similar to than different from each other. Regardless of their gender and income characteristics, less than one-third is, for example, fully and accurately informed about democracy.

Across the six groups defined by age and education, Table 3 shows significant differences in both the overall level and types of democratic knowledge. Of three age cohorts, the young are nearly one-and-a-half times more fully informed that their old counterparts (34% versus 24%). Likewise, of the three groups defined by education level, the fully informed are also one-and-a-half times as many among those with a college education than those without a middle school education (38% versus 25%). More notably, increases in age are always accompanied by steady decreases in the overall level of democratic knowledge and the percentage of the informed about democracy and by steady increases in the percentage of the misinformed about democracy. Increases in education, in contrast, are always accompanied by steady increases in the overall level of democratic knowledge and the percentage of the informed and by steady decreases in the percentage of the misinformed about democracy. These findings make it clear that age and education are the two most powerful influences on the way the Korean people acquire and store information about democracy.

Table 3. Demographic differences in democratic knowledge.

	Content levels	Structure	
		Informed	Misinformed
Education			
High school	4.46	25%	66%
College	4.54	31	62
University	4.88	38	58
Income			
Low	4.64	29	59
Middle-low	4.48	27	67
Middle-high	4.60	32	59
High	4.61	30	67
Gender			
Male	4.63	31	63
Female	4.55	28	63
Age			
35 and under	4.64	34	61
36–50 years	4.61	32	62
51 and over	4.51	24	67

Source: Korea Democracy Barometer Survey 2010.

In Figure 4, I consider these two demographic variables together to identify the most and least knowledgeable about democracy. It is evident that the most informed citizens about democracy are young people with a college education and the least informed citizens are old people with little formal education. The fully informed are nearly twice as many among the former group than the latter (40% versus 23%). Based on these findings, it is reasonable to conclude that knowledge about democracy has emerged in the young and educated generations.

Does it matter? The political consequence of democratic knowledge

Political culture refers to a variety of political attitudes, beliefs, and values. They are causally related to one another and influence citizens' political lives. Yet, to consolidate new democracies including South Korea and anchor democratic legitimacy in a society, scholars agree that one component is clearly more crucial than the rest: the committed support for democracy that proclaims it is preferable to any of the alternatives.[35]

Following this consensus, scholars in Korean democracy relate lack of committed support for democracy among ordinary people to sluggish democratic progress. For example, Shin and his colleagues reported that only a small minority of Koreans are authentic and committed democrats who are fully detached from authoritarianism and deeply attached to democracy in terms of political ideals and governance.[36] They concluded that Korean attitudes towards democracy are

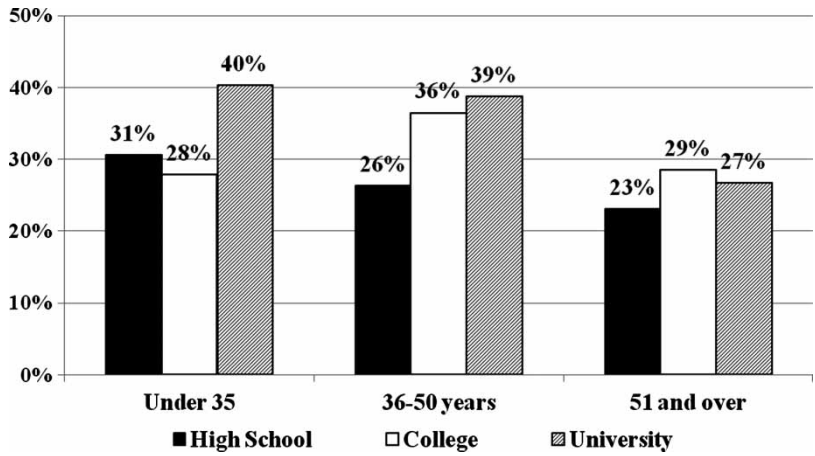

Figure 4. Demographic characteristics of the fully informed about democracy: education and age.
Source: Korea Democracy Barometer Survey 2010.

still ambivalent about its further progress despite two decades of democratic experience and that the ambivalence is a crucial obstacle to democratic consolidation.[37]

Why do Koreans express ambivalence towards democracy rather than commitment? In other words, why has democracy failed to be fully anchored in the minds of the Korean people? Although citizen support for democracy depends on many factors such as democratic performance, socioeconomic modernization, and social capital, I contend that one crucial factor is that people do not know what democracy means. As McClosky and Zaller aptly pointed out, political attitudes including democratic support are likely to be most effectively accepted by people who are able to comprehend them.[38] Thus, this study argues that knowing democracy causally precedes accepting it.

Recent studies on political psychology and institutional legitimacy have provided a credible explanation for this relationship. Most political psychologists agree that knowledgeable citizens develop consistent political attitudes because they have a wide and deep cognitive capability to reason and judge an attitude object.[39] For example, relying on the spread activation theory of cognitive psychology, Krosnick stated that "more knowledge could be associated with more elaborate storage structure in memory",[40] which means there is more cognitive power to hold new information about the attitude object and process it. On the other hand, those with lack of knowledge are not likely to hold and process information about political objects because their limited cognitions do not allow the process of structuring and restructuring their attitudes. These psychological theories suggest that citizens knowledgeable of democracy are likely to hold information

about democracy and process it to develop committed support for democracy over its alternatives.

Moreover, Gibson and his colleagues have developed a theory of positivity bias in explaining public support for national high courts in advanced and new democracies.[41] According to the theory, the development of public support for high courts begins as citizens understand that high courts are different from other democratic institutions. Once citizens acquire some level of knowledge that enables them to recognize the difference, the knowledge base functions as a source of positive bias in the cognitive process of perceiving or evaluating high courts. Theoretically, those who know more about courts are likely to expose themselves to court-related messages and selectively update some of the messages confirming their knowledge while abandoning others disconfirming it. This expectation has been verified by experiments and cross-national surveys in both developing and developed countries. Building upon the attitude theories of social psychology, Gibson and Caldeira concluded that "to know courts is to love them, or at least to respect them".[42] As a result, both approaches suggest that knowledge about democracy breeds committed democratic support.

To test the theoretical expectation, this study conducts a regression analysis of democratic knowledge on democratic support by including control variables. Because this study views democratic support as a dynamic phenomenon, committed support for democracy requires citizens to be both attached to democracy and detached from authoritarianism.[43] Following this analytical convention, committed support for democracy is constructed in three sequential steps. First, this article measures support for democracy by summing individual support for three statements: (1) Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government. (2) Whatever its faults may be, the democratic form of government we have now is still the best for us. (3) Citizens are willing to take part in any citizen movement to protect the current democratic system of government if it faces a serious crisis.[44] Second, it measures a respondent's rejection of three prominent authoritarian regimes: military rule, one-man rule, and one-party rule. Third, this study sums both endorsement of democracy and rejection of authoritarianism, which yields a composite index of democratic support, ranging from zero (authoritarian support) to six (democratic support).

On the right side of the equation, democratic knowledge level is the core independent variable. In addition, this study includes 12 control variables from four models of democratic support: modernization/demographic, social capital, political learning, and performance evaluation. First, education, income, life satisfaction, female dummy, and age are controlled for theories of the modernization/demographic approach contending that democratic political learning is enhanced as citizens gain resources.[45] Second, theories of social capital argue that vibrant civic activities and high levels of interpersonal trust provide a social foundation for democratization and democratic governance.[46] Thus, this study controls for effects of social capital on democratic support by including membership of civic organizations and interpersonal trust. Third, recent theories of political learning

assert that as citizens pay attention to democratic politics and political affairs, their democratic learning is enhanced.[47] This study includes three factors to represent the model of political learning: political interest and offline and online media use. Finally, two control variables are identified by theories of performance evaluation in democratization: satisfaction with democracy and perceived extent of democracy.[48] According to this model, citizens orient themselves towards or away from democracy and its alternatives depending on how they judge the performance of their democratic regime.

The results are reported in Table 4 and lend strong support to the theoretical expectation that knowledge about democracy raises democratic support. Democratic knowledge exerts a positive effect on committed support for democracy and reaches statistical significance. Its impact is the strongest (0.21), followed by that of political interest (0.19), formal education (0.16), and satisfaction with democracy (0.14). On the other hand, committed support for democracy does not appear to be different across gender, generations, life satisfaction, and income levels. Moreover, social capital has little impact on committed support for democracy among the Korean people; membership in civic organizations and interpersonal trust do not reach statistical significance.

This result suggests that committed support for democracy is better adopted by those citizens who understand democracy than by those who misunderstand it. Those informed citizens are cognitively capable of developing and adjusting their attitudes towards democracy. Furthermore, the knowledge that informed citizens have about democracy directs them to adopt positive messages about democracy and negative ones about non-democratic rules. These cognitive processes enable them to organize their attitudes fully attached to democracy and deeply detached from authoritarian rules. By the same token, citizens with a lack of democratic knowledge are not able to fully accept democracy. Support for democracy by informed citizens who are clear on its meaning is more solid or authentic than support by those uninformed individuals who are not.

The findings reported in this article are consistent with recent studies of democratic political learning in other regions in that an increase in knowledge about democracy leads to more committed support for it. For example, Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger reported that people in post-communist countries who are able to project proper meanings onto a concept of democracy hold more highly consistent pro-democratic beliefs than those who are not able to do so.[49] More recently, Mattes and Bratton found that Africans with better awareness of democracy are attitudinally more detached from various forms of authoritarianism and more attached to democratic reforms than those with less awareness.[50] This study showed that Korea is not an exception but instead lends strong support to this general pattern.

Scholars of political culture and democratization agree that public support for democracy constitutes a political reservoir that endures and consolidates new democracies.[51] Experts on Korean democracy attribute one of the critical problems in the consolidation of Korean democracy to lack of committed support for

Table 4. Relation between democratic knowledge and committed support for democracy.

Variables	Unstandardized coefficient (b)	Standardized coefficient (beta)
Democratic knowledge	0.21 (0.03)***	0.21
Modernization/demographic		
Education	0.16 (0.05)***	0.16
Income	−0.02 (0.04)	−0.02
Life satisfaction	0.01	0.01
Female dummy	0.04 (0.08)	0.02
Age	0.00 (0.00)	0.03
Social capital		
Membership in civic organizations	−0.05 (0.05)	−0.03
Interpersonal trust	0.10 (0.08)	0.04
Political learning		
Political interest	0.29 (0.05)***	0.19
Offline media use (TV/radio/paper)	0.05 (0.06)	0.03
Online media use (internet)	0.02 (0.06)	0.01
Performance evaluation		
Satisfaction with democracy	0.10 (0.03)***	0.14
Perceived extent of democracy	0.02 (0.03)	0.03
Constant	1.27 (0.38)*	
N	845	
R-square	0.14	

Notes: Significance level: $^{*}p < 0.1$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{***}p < 0.01$.
Source: Korea Democracy Barometer Survey 2010.

democracy.[52] The general picture drawn from Table 4 is that democratic support among Korean citizens cannot develop in a vacuum. Committed support for democracy begins and grows among Korean citizens who become knowledgeable of democracy. However, committed democratic support is difficult to develop among those uninformed about democracy.

Conclusion

Democracy, unlike its alternatives, is government by the people. Its growth and stability, therefore, depend mostly upon the quality of its citizenship. To assess the quality of democratic citizenship in Korea, this study examined the content, structure, and distribution of democratic knowledge among its mass citizenry. In terms of the overall content of democratic knowledge, the fully and accurately informed constitute a small minority of less than one-third. In terms of its structure, the misinformed about the characteristics of democratic and authoritarian regimes are more than twice as many as the fully informed. The prevalence of the former over the latter indicates that even after two decades of democratic rule, Korea is

yet to become a nation of enlightened democratic citizens. It also explains why democratically elected political leaders have been able to engage in non-democratic political practices on a continuing basis.

In terms of the distribution of democratic knowledge, the misinformed about democracy are most numerous among old people with little education and least numerous among young people with a university education. Those fully and accurately informed, in contrast, are least numerous among the former and most numerous among the latter. These demographic differences in democratic knowledge suggest that Korea is likely to become a nation of more informed democrats with the replacement of older and undereducated generations by younger and more educated ones. Nonetheless, it should be noted that a majority of even university-educated young people are neither fully nor accurately informed democratic citizens. This indicates that a lack of democratic knowledge is so pervasive throughout the entire Korean population that no segment can play the role of propagating democratic knowledge effectively.

According to the theories of political socialization and democratic learning, the democratization of attitudes and values among citizens who have lived all or most of their formative years in authoritarian regimes, takes several decades of effort.[53] Such cultural democratization must be facilitated by structural forces of socioeconomic modernization as well as actions of the governing elites. It also requires sustained experience with well-functioning democratic political institutions and frequent exposure to civic education, whose curricula introduces the values and norms of democratic politics and emphasizes the importance of participation in the political process.

The socioeconomic environment in which ordinary Koreans have lived since the democratic regime change in 1988 has not encouraged them to shift their priorities away from materialism to post-materialism, which features the democratic values of freedom, equality, and participation. In the aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the Korean legislature adopted labour laws that allow the *Chaebol* and other companies to hire a large number of temporary workers, who are paid minimum wage.[54] The 2008 global economic crisis has placed a further burden on the middle class and has marginalized the lower class. These economic problems have discouraged many Koreans from exposing themselves to the political process and experiencing democratic politics.

Politically, government and opposition leaders have also deprived ordinary Koreans of the valuable opportunity to learn the norms and values of democratic politics. These leaders have not dissociated themselves from the practices of the authoritarian past. Many of them often engage in illegal campaign practices in order to get elected. Once they are elected, they often rely on informal rules rather than following formal laws, and they refuse to compromise with their political rivals, which often leads to legislative deadlock. The nationally elected president, like members of Parliament, has put the interests of his own region ahead those of the country. These non-democratic political practices have made it difficult

for Korean voters to learn what truly distinguishes democracy from its alternatives in the real world of politics.

Educationally, school-age children in Korea are not provided with an opportunity to learn the principles and practices of democratic politics. Many elder Koreans were educated under the curricula of Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), which emphasized the authoritarian values of deference and loyalty to the authorities. Many of their younger cohorts, on the other hand, were educated under the curricula of the military regime (1961–1988), which emphasized the basic skills for economic development. Mainly concerned with college entrance examinations, the current version of the Korean school curricula does not treat democratic or civic education as an important educational goal, which can produce democratic citizens who value the norms of participation, competition, and tolerance. In short, many Koreans have not lived in the kinds of environments – socioeconomic, political, and educational – which would encourage them to learn and experience democratic politics.

Besides evaluating the democratic knowledge of the Korean electorate, this study sought to examine whether such knowledge matters in the process of democratization taking place among individual Koreans. Theories of political psychology and institutional legitimacy have long held that democratic knowledge breeds democratic support. As in other countries, voters in Korea are more committed to democracy when they are fully informed about what distinguishes it from authoritarianism. This finding renders unambiguous support for the psychological theories linking democratic knowledge to commitment to democratic politics.

Both empirically and theoretically, this study indicates that the broadening of democratic knowledge among the mass public is essential to the further development of limited new democracies, like the one in Korea, into fully functioning democracies. Institutional reforms, which are carried out in new democracies on a regular basis, are nothing more than attempts at fixing "the hardware" of democratic politics. New institutions, like old ones, require congruent "software" known as democratic political culture.[55] Citizen knowledge about democracy constitutes a crucial component of this software. The findings of this study confirm the importance and urgency of civic education for the building of democratic citizenship in new democracies.

Notes

1. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 676.
2. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, 111.
3. See Korea Barometer (www.koreabarometer.org); Asian Barometer Survey (www.asianbarometer.org).
4. Shin and McDonough, "The Dynamics of Popular Reactions to Democratization in Korea."
5. Chu et al., *How East Asians View Democracy.*
6. Huntington, *The Third Wave*; O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule.*

7. Delli Carpini, "The Psychology of Civic Learning"; Diamond, "Cultivating Democratic Citizenship."
8. Norris, *Critical Citizens*.
9. Fishkin, *When the People Speak*.
10. Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*.
11. McClosky and Zaller, *The American Ethos*, Chapter 8.
12. Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi, *Public Opinion, Democracy, and Market Reform in Africa*, 274.
13. Bacon, *Meditations Sacrae and Human Philosophy*.
14. Delli Carpini and Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*.
15. Eveland and Hively, "Political Knowledge"; Prior and Lupia, "Money, Time, and Political Knowledge."
16. Delli Carpini and Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters*.
17. Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter*.
18. Lupia and McCubbins, *The Democratic Dilemma*; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, *Reasoning and Choice*.
19. Recently, scholars have distinguished two types of memories on which political knowledge is based: procedural and declarative. Procedural memory stores procedural knowledge and declarative memory holds factual and conceptual knowledge. Although some scholars use the term *structural knowledge*, *conceptual knowledge* is a popular term among learning scientists; see Eveland and Hively, "Political Knowledge"; Prior and Lupia, "Money, Time, and Political Knowledge." For a general taxonomy of human knowledge, see Anderson et al., *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing*.
20. Jennings, "Political Knowledge Over Time and Across Generations."
21. Luskin, "Measuring Political Sophistication."
22. Neuman, *The Paradox of Mass Politics*.
23. Lau and Sears, *Political Cognition*.
24. Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics."
25. Popkin and Dimock, "Political Knowledge and Citizen Competence."
26. Dahl, *Polyarchy*.
27. The six characteristics of democracy are based on Dahl's definition of *democracy*. Dahl identified and elaborated six criteria of a modern representative democracy: (1) elected officials; (2) free, fair, frequent elections; (3) freedom of expression; (4) alternative sources of information; (5) associational autonomy; and (6) inclusive citizenship. The measurements of democratic knowledge for this study intend to reflect these six criteria. See Dahl, *On Democracy*, 85–91.
28. For example, when a person answers "Don't know" (D/K) for free elections, that characteristic does not exist in his knowledge system because that reply indicates he does not know its relationship with democracy. Therefore, the person answering D/K does not recognize the relationship but is not misinformed about it. On the other hand, a person providing an incorrect answer (unessential) for the characteristic recognizes its relationship with democracy but is misinformed. This state of democratic knowledge indicates that the characteristic does exist in his knowledge system but is not correctly organized in relation to democracy. See Mondak, "Reconsidering the Measurement of Political Knowledge."
29. McClosky and Zaller, *The American Ethos*, 258–60.
30. Ibid., 12.
31. Cho ("What People Know about Democracy and Why It Matters") reported that Korea is not unique but is located between advanced democracies and authoritarian countries in terms of understanding about democracy. His study showed that Korean understanding about democracy is lower than those of Western advanced democracies and Taiwan. Using the latest World Values Survey, Cho examined whether citizens

of 43 countries are able to discriminate civil liberties and free elections from military takeover and religious interference into politics in relation to democracy. According to his study, about half of the Koreans failed to correctly categorize these four regime characteristics, whereas only a quarter of the citizens in advanced democracies did so. It means that most of the citizens in advanced democracies are fully informed about democracy but half of the Koreans are informed, when the four questions are given to evaluate.

32. Learning scientists make the same argument that conceptual knowledge constitutes the building blocks of further knowledge acquisition. See Jonassen, Beissner, and Yacci, *Structural Knowledge*.
33. Dalton, "Communists and Democrats."
34. The percentages of the partially informed and the ignorant vary little across different social segments. So, these types were dropped and this study focused on the informed and the misinformed.
35. Diamond, *Developing Democracy*; Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation.*
36. Shin, *Mass Politics and Culture in Democratizing Korea*; Chang, Chu, and Park, "Authoritarian Nostalgia in Asia."
37. Shin, Park, and Jang, "Assessing the Shifting Qualities of Democratic Citizenship."
38. McClosky and Zaller, *The American Ethos*, 12–15.
39. Zaller, "Political Awareness, Elite Opinion Leadership and Mass Survey Response."
40. Krosnick, "Is Political Psychology Sufficiently Psychological?," 204.
41. Gibson and Caldeira, *Citizens, Courts, and Confirmations*; Gibson, Caldeira, and Baird, "On the Legitimacy of National High Courts."
42. Gibson and Caldeira, *Citizens, Courts, and Confirmations*, 122.
43. Inglehart, "How Solid Is Mass Support for Democracy"; Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer, *Democracy and Its Alternatives*.
44. The first two statements represent positive orientations for democracy over its non-democratic alternatives and Korea's past authoritarian governments and the third indicates willingness to defend democracy. As Gibson and his colleagues stressed, political support reflects more than positive and negative orientations toward political objects. Thus, this study assumes that political support for democracy becomes committed when someone expresses conative willingness to defend it from any non-democratic changes. See Gibson and Caldeira, *Citizens, Courts, and Confirmation*.
45. Lipset, *Political Man*.
46. Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work.*
47. Mattes and Bratton, "Learning about Democracy in Africa."
48. Whitefield and Evans, "Political Culture versus Rational Choice."
49. Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger, "Conceptions of Democracy among Mass and Elite in Post-Soviet Societies."
50. Mattes and Bratton, "Learning about Democracy in Africa."
51. Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer, *Democracy and Its Alternatives*.
52. Shin, *Mass Politics and Culture in Democratizing Korea*.
53. Finkel, "Can Democracy Be Taught?"
54. Shin, "Globalization and the Working Class in South Korea."
55. Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer, *Democracy and Its Alternatives*.

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Appendix. Survey questions

Democratic knowledge (a composite index)

Many things may be desirable, but all of them are not essential characteristics of democracy. Please tell me for each of the following things whether it is a very essential, fairly essential, not very essential, or not at all essential characteristic of democracy?

1. Choosing political leaders in free elections.
2. Banning public rallies and demonstration to maintain order.
3. Decreeing laws without the approval of parliament.
4. Expressing political views freely.
5. Keeping the news media from criticizing the government.
6. Allowing women to have the same rights as men.

Committed support for democracy (a composite index)

Support for democracy

Which of the following statements do you agree with most?

1. Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government.
2. Under certain situations, a dictatorship is preferable.
3. For people like me, it does not matter whether we have a democratic government or non-democratic government.

Do you agree or disagree with the statement that "Whatever its faults may be, the democratic form of government we have now is still the best for us"?

Do you agree or disagree with the statement that "Citizens are willing to take part in any citizen movement to protect the current democratic system of government if it faces a serious crisis"?

Rejection to authoritarianism

How much do you agree or disagree with their views in favor of each of the following?

1. The army should govern the country.
2. Better to get rid of parliament and elections and have a strong leader decide everything.
3. Only one political party should be allowed to stand for election and hold office.

Education

How much education have you had?

Income

What is the average monthly total income for your household these days?

Life satisfaction

To what extent are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your life as a whole?

Membership in social capital organization

Please, tell for each one: are you an active member, inactive or are you not a member of these organizations?
Sports club or club for outdoor activities/Organization for cultural or hobby activities/ Social club for the retired, the elderly, or women/Charity or social services organization/ Civic associations or groups/Organization for environmental protection.

General trust

Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you have to be very careful in dealing with people?

Political interest

How much are you interested in politics?

Offline media use

How often do you follow politics in the news on television, on the radio, or in the daily papers?

Online media use

How often do you follow political news online?

Satisfaction with democracy

On the whole, how much are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way democracy works in our country?

Perceived extent of democracy

Here is a scale ranging from a low of 1 to a high of 10. On this scale, 1 means complete dictatorship and 10 means complete democracy. The closer to 1 the score is, the more dictatorial our country is; the closer to 10 the score is, the more democratic our country is. Where do you think our country stands now?