International Journal of Public Opinion Research

doi:10.1093/ijpor/edaa012

RESEARCH NOTE

Does Knowing Democracy Affect Answers to Democratic Support Questions? A Survey Experiment in Indonesia

Aurelia Ananda and Damien Bol

Department of Political Economy, King's College London, Bush House NE, UK

Democratic support surveys are a staple of comparative politics. Yet, skepticism shrouds their validity. Poor public understanding of the concept of democracy has been singled out as a potential issue: Because the concept is neither understood nor experienced uniformly by everyone, the benchmark used to report levels of democratic support is often inconsistent or inaccurate (Dalton, Sin, & Jou, 2007; Kiewiet de Jonge, 2016). The issue is particularly acute in developing democracies, in which the application of democratic rules is often partial, with unequal scope and reach of its socialization (Fuchs & Roller, 2006; Kirsch & Welzel, 2018; Mattes & Bratton, 2007; Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007). In this article, we follow Dahl (1971) and consider that an accurate definition of democracy is at minimum procedural in the sense that it includes the organization of competitive, free and fair elections and the presence of independent media sources.

Scholars often assume that individuals who know what democracy is support it because it is the best system of government, or at least one that is superior to other nondemocratic alternatives (Canache, 2012; Cho, 2014). This is the interpretation that is given of the positive association between democratic understanding and democratic support that has been found in cross-national surveys. Yet, it may well be that other factors, such as socioeconomic status, are confounding this association. Alternatively, it may also be that the causal link between the two is reversed.

To provide further insight, we conducted a survey experiment in Indonesia, a developing democracy with a strong blend of authoritarian history and democratic experience, and where democratic understanding is low, similarly to other countries of the region. Like other studies conducted in geographically dispersed countries and with hard-to-reach populations (Boas, Christenson, & Glick, 2018; Samuels & Zucco, 2014),

All correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Damien Bol, PhD, King's College London, Bush House NE, Strand Campus, 40 Aldwych, London WC2B 4BG, UK. E-mail: damien.bol@kcl.ac.uk

we recruited respondents via Facebook and corrected for sample non-representativeness using a weighting strategy. For the experiment itself, we exposed at random half of the respondents to a short definition of democracy (treatment group), while the other half did not receive anything (control group). The aim was to induce democratic understanding among treated individuals, before asking democratic support questions. Our results indicate a sizeable treatment effect, but only among respondents with low education. Furthermore, in contrast with observational studies, we find that, in this group, exposure to a definition considerably *lowered* support for and satisfaction with democracy. An important implication of our study is that aggregate levels of democratic support found in cross-national surveys can be inaccurate because of the lack of a uniform understanding of the concept of democracy within and between countries.

Survey Research on Democratic Support and Understanding

Democratic support is usually measured via closed-ended survey questions intended to measure support for the principles of democratic governance. At the aggregate level, high public support is critical for the survival of democratic regimes (e.g., Claassen, 2020). A common question asks respondents whether democracy is preferable to other kinds of government; another equally common one asks respondents to rate their satisfaction with the way democracy works in the country (Canache, Mondak, & Seligson, 2001). In this article, we study both types of questions.

Are democratic support surveys valid? Validity refers to the correspondence of the measure to the underlying concept (Harkness, Van de Vijver, & Mohler, 2003). Threats to the validity of democratic support surveys include the difficulty in translating the questions across languages and cultures (Ariely & Davidov, 2011), and the presence of a social desirability bias in answers (Panel, 2019). Yet, a key issue has to do with how respondents understand the word "democracy" that usually appears in these questions (Kiewiet de Jonge, 2016). Not everybody has the same understanding of the concept. Furthermore, there are variations between and within countries (Dalton *et al.*, 2007). Some define it in procedural terms, some refer to its perceived outcomes; others are unsure of how to answer and respond "don't know" instead (Canache, 2012). The absence of a uniform understanding of the concept of democracy is thus a threat to the validity of democratic support surveys.

The literature on democratic understanding defines it as capacity to conceptualize fundamental democratic principles by correct identification of its characteristics, complemented by the discrimination of such characteristics from those that are authoritarian in nature (Cho, 2014). In surveys, this capacity is typically measured via open-ended meaning of democracy questions, where respondents can freely articulate personal associations of democracy (e.g., Canache, 2012; Dalton *et al.*, 2007). These studies reveal that democratic awareness is greater among individuals living in democracies (Dalton *et al.*, 2007; Zagrebina, 2019). In countries in which the democratic rule of law still competes with elements of authoritarian governance, there are important pockets of populations that are unable to define the concept (Canache, 2012; Fuchs & Roller, 2006; Schedler & Sarsfield, 2007). A key reason for this pattern is that the way democracy is understood evolves through greater exposure to the democratic process. It also depends on how the concept has been defined by political leaders (Kirsch & Welzel, 2018).

What is the relationship between democratic understanding and democratic support? Poor understanding is often accompanied by high rates of democratic satisfaction, which suggests that in developing democracies low expectations align with authoritarian principles of governance (Norris, 2011). Furthermore, individuals with poor understanding show lower support for democratic principles (Canache, 2012; Cho, 2014). A common interpretation of this finding is that if people knew what democracy was, they would be more supportive of it and be more critical of the ruling elites primarily because democracy would be perceived as superior to the system in place in their country.[1]

With our survey experiment, we seek to test the validity of democratic support questions by comparing the answers of respondents exposed to a definition of democracy—who thus would have a uniform understanding of the concept—to those not exposed to it, which is a similar condition found in most cross-national surveys on the topic. If we find differences between the two, this would increase doubts on the validity of democratic support surveys.

The Study

Case-Selection: Indonesia

In 1999, Indonesia held its first democratic election since 1955. The elections were preceded by a transition period called *Reformasi* (reformation) that ended with the deposition of Suharto's autocratic New Order regime. Two decades on, the country sees its rapid albeit unequal democratization efforts stagnate and even decline (Davidson, 2018). In 2013, the country fell from "free" to "partly free" on the Freedom House index due to lowered ratings in protection of ethnic minorities, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) communities, as well as religious freedom (Freedom House, 2018). The country also inherited systemic issues from the previous regime, such as deep-rooted corruption, clientelist political mechanisms, and non-independent media sources (Davidson, 2018).

Despite setbacks, support for democracy in Indonesia remains relatively strong and stable since democratization (Pietsch & Clark, 2015). At the same time, only half of Indonesians are able to correctly recognize pre-*Reformasi* Indonesia as authoritarian and their current system as democratic (Shin & Kim, 2018), and a large proportion of the population still express support for some authoritarian elements (Lussier & Fish, 2012).

Survey Data

To recruit respondents for our survey experiment, we used a Facebook advertisement that redirected participants to a web-based survey. Facebook is an increasingly common tool and method of recruitment, especially in geographically dispersed countries such as Brazil (Samuels & Zucco, 2014) or India (Boas *et al.*, 2018). In our case, Facebook was also chosen because the latest figures show that around 61% of Indonesia's 130 million are active users (Hootsuite Inc., 2019). However, recruitment via Facebook can obviously lead to sample bias, as Facebook users are younger and better educated than the rest

[1]Note that support for democracy can also be instrumental in the sense that individuals can support democracy because they believe they will benefit indirectly from the system, for example, because this is a system that will bring prosperity to people like them.

of the population. Despite this, a study does show that the sample bias can be corrected by using sociodemographic weights (Mellon & Prosser, 2017).

Our survey experiment was conducted between March 15 and March 25, 2019. The advertisement was set to target Indonesian citizens over the age of 17 (voting age) residing in five most populated Indonesian cities: Jakarta, Bandung, Surabaya, Bekasi, and Medan.[2] Together, the cities represented about 15% of the country's total population. In total, more than 3,000 unique respondents completed the survey, among which 2,545 gave enough answers to be included in the analysis.[3]

In Supplementary Appendix A, we show the distribution of key sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents compared to official population statistics of the targeted cities. We observed slight discrepancies in terms of age distribution and more substantially for education. Most importantly for the purpose of this study, we obtained a reasonably diverse sample for each sociodemographic category. We can thus correct the sample bias by adopting the weighting strategy explained in Supplementary Appendix A.

Experimental Design and Manipulation Check[4]

Respondents were randomly split into two groups to perform an A/B test: half were exposed to a short definition of democracy (treatment, $N = 1{,}284$), while the other half received no definition (control, $N = 1{,}261$). The definition was taken from a summary of Dahl's (1971) definition of democracy (Diamond & Morlino, 2004):

> "At a minimum, democracy requires: (a) universal adult suffrage; (b) recurring, free, competitive, and fair elections; (c) more than one serious political party; and (d) alternative sources of information."

We followed this treatment with democratic support questions.[5] We used three of the most commonly used questions in cross-national surveys. In the first one ("democracy vs. autocracy"), respondents were asked to report with which of the following statements they most agree: "(a) Under certain circumstances, an authoritarian government may be better, (b) Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government, or (c) For people like me, it does not matter the system of government." Second, we asked respondents to rate their satisfaction level with the way democracy works in their country on a 1–10 scale ("satisfaction with democracy"). Third, we asked them how important it is for respondents to live in a democracy on the same 1–10 scaling ("living in democracy important").

[2]We included screening questions at the beginning of the survey to exclude respondents who do not meet to these criteria. The questions are important because the Facebook targeting algorithm is not flawless. For example, uploading the new location of a user who moved from a city to another may take some time.

[3]To minimize attrition, which could have resulted in larger sample bias, we made sure that they survey was short. It took an average of 5.5 min to complete it.

[4]The survey experiment was approved by the Research Ethics Board of King's College London. Among other ethical precautions, we did not collect any information that would allow us or anyone to personally identify respondents in the dataset, made them sign a consent form presenting the topic of the study prior participation, and gave them the possibility to leave the study at any time. Note also that we did not deceive the respondents in the sense that the treatment consists in exposing them to a real academic definition of democracy.

[5]For the English translation of the treatment and democratic support questions, as well as descriptive statistics of the democratic support questions, see Supplementary Appendix B.

Before testing the hypotheses, we perform two tests to evaluate the rigor of our experimental design. Because the variable education is central to our analysis (see hypotheses below), we conduct the balance test on the entire sample, as well as on each education level, separately. Results show that the assignment of the treatment is indeed random and not associated to any sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents even within education levels.

Second, we conduct a manipulation check to see whether the treatment-induced democratic understanding among respondents. Right after the treatment (and before asking the support for democracy questions), we asked respondents to answer an open-ended meaning of democracy question. We find that low-education respondents were about 11.3 percentage points less likely to respond "don't know" when treated, and 5.2 points less likely to provide a meaningless definition of democracy. This means that once treated, low-education respondents provided (meaningful) definitions of democracy at the same rate as other respondents. By contrast, the probability of providing a (meaningful) answer did not increase with the treatment for mid- and high-education respondents because they already had a clear idea of democracy prior to being treated. Details of the coding and test can be found in Supplementary Appendix D.

Hypotheses

In line with the theoretical framework discussed above, we expect that the exposure to a definition of democracy increases respondents' democratic understanding, and subsequently, their democratic support. Our first hypothesis is thus the following:[6]

H1: An exposure to a definition of democracy increases support for democracy.

However, we acknowledge that individuals with a good understanding make up a significant portion of the population even in new democracies. Not only is democratic knowledge more common after democratization (Dalton *et al.*, 2007), greater degree of modernization also gives rise to higher proportion of well-educated individuals—a strong predictor of democratic understanding (Canache, 2012). We thus hypothesize that the treatment is less likely to have a sizable effect among higher educated individuals, because they already hold a clear idea of democracy. This leads to the second hypothesis:

H2: An exposure to a definition of democracy increases support for democracy, especially among citizens of low-education background.

Test

To test *H1*, we estimate a series of regressions in which the treatment predicts democratic support. To analyze the treatment effect on the variable "democracy vs. autocracy", we estimate two logit regressions predicting the probability of providing: (a) a stated preference for either democracy or autocracy vs. "doesn't matter"; and (b) a

[6]Note that although we did not formally pre-register the study, we defined the hypotheses in grant proposals sent to both funding bodies. Upon request, the approved proposal can be provided.

stated preference for democracy or autocracy (excluding "doesn't matter").[7] The aim is to grasp the full complexity of the treatment effect. However, we also reproduce the analysis with a multinomial logit regression in Supplementary Appendix F. The results are essentially similar. We use Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions on the other two continuous democratic support variables.

Table 1 reports the treatment effects as estimated by these regressions with and without sociodemographic control variables (full results in Supplementary Appendix E). We find that inducing democratic understanding by exposing respondents to a definition of democracy *decreased* the probability of preferring democracy over autocracy. The effect size is large: between 8 and 12 percentage points. Second, we also find that once treated, respondents were less satisfied with the way democracy works in Indonesia. Both effects are statistically significant at $p < .001$.[8]

We then test *H2* by repeating the regressions for *H1* and adding an interaction term between treatment and education, along with control variables (full results in Supplementary Appendix G).[9] The interaction is statistically significant at a level of $p < .001$ for all of the outcome variables except for "living in democracy important".

To offer an easy interpretation for the results, we plot the value of the treatment effect as education level varies for each of the outcome variable. Figure 1 reports the results for the variable "democracy vs. autocracy". It shows that the treatment effect is sizeable and statistically significant at a level of $p < .05$ for low-education respondents, and small and not statistically significant at a similar level for mid- and high-education respondents. Firstly, low-education respondents were slightly more likely to state a preference when treated (by about 7.5 percentage points). Secondly, they were less likely to prefer democracy over autocracy in this situation by about 20% points. This last finding is important, as it is in stark contrast with observational studies that find a positive association between democratic understanding and democratic support.[10]

Figure 2 reveals the same pattern for "satisfaction with democracy", and to some extent, "living in democracy important" (interaction effect is not statistically significant for the latter). The treatment effect is greater and statistically significant at a level of $p < .05$ among low-education respondents compared to mid- and high-education

[7]Note that it was possible to answer "don't know" to this question. We exclude those respondents from the main analysis. Yet, we also estimate logit regressions predicting the probability of providing an answer vs. a "don't know" in Supplementary Appendix E and observe a small treatment effect. We decided not to emphasize this finding in the main text as it seems less interesting than the rest. Note that respondents were not given the possibility to respond "don't know" for the two other democratic support questions ("living in democracy important" and "satisfaction with democracy").

[8]We perform two extra tests. First, we reproduce the regressions with the non-weighted sample. Supplementary Appendix E shows that the treatment effects are very small and not statistically significant. This is most likely due to the over-representation of mid- and high-education respondents in the sample. Second, we reproduce the regressions using bootstrapped confidence intervals (1,000 repetitions) as an alternative to calculate the uncertainty of the point estimates. Supplementary Appendix I shows that the results remain statistically significant at a level of $p < .05$.

[9]For the regressions presented in the main text, we consider education as a continuous variable ranging from 1 = Low education to 3 = High education. In Supplementary Appendix H, we also replicate the analysis in considering it as a categorial variable. The results are essentially similar: The treatment has no effect for individuals with a high-education background, but it has one (in the expected direction) for individuals with a mid- or low-education backgrounds.

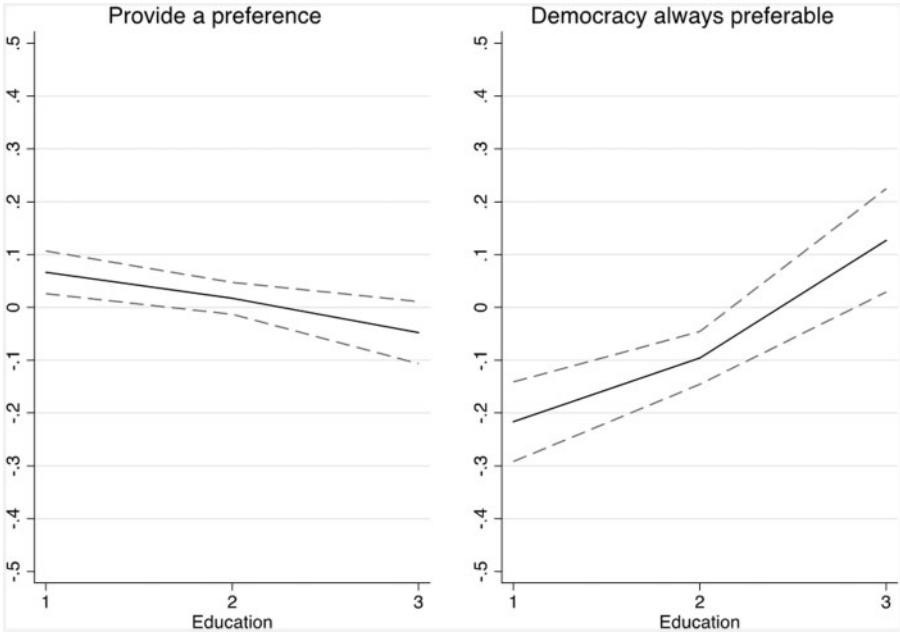
[10]Note that the last panel of Figure 1 also shows that the treatment has a small positive effect on democratic support for high-education respondents ($p < .05$). Since the manipulation check presented above show that the treatment does not induce greater levels of democratic understanding among high-education respondents, we interpret this as a priming effect of the treatment that made this group of respondents even more favorable to democracy (Zaller & Feldman, 1992).

Table 1
Treatment Effects

	Democracy vs. autocracy				Living in democracy important		Satisfaction with democracy	
	Provide a preference		Prefer democracy					
Treatment	0.03 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	−0.12*** (0.02)	−0.08*** (0.02)	0.00 (0.10)	−0.15 (0.12)	−0.47*** (0.13)	−0.40** (0.15)
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
City FE	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Obs.	2,161	1,622	1,838	1,388	2,545	1,879	2,545	1,879

Note. Entries are marginal effects estimated with logit regressions (provide a preference, prefer democracy) and coefficients estimated with OLS regressions (satisfaction with democracy, living in democracy important). The sample is weighted by socio-demographics. Standard errors are in parentheses.
***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$.

Figure 1.
Treatment effects as education varies ("democracy vs. autocracy"). Solid lines are the treatment effects estimated with regressions presented in Supplementary Appendix G. Dashed lines are 95% confidence interval. Education: 1 = Low, 2 = Mid, and 3 = High



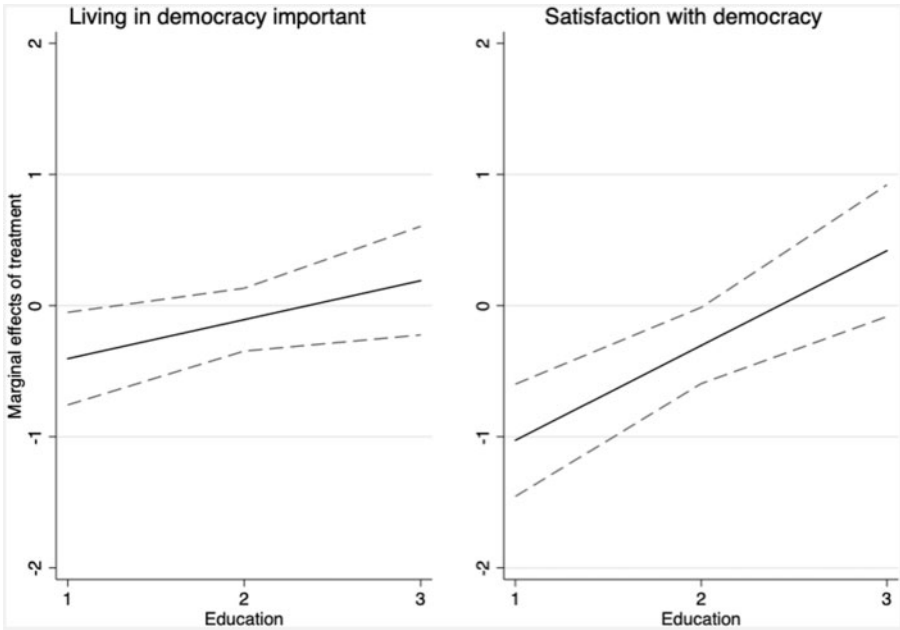
respondents. At the lowest level of education, exposure to a definition of democracy reduced the importance of living in a democracy by 0.5 points, and reduced satisfaction rates by a full point. This last effect is considerable, as it corresponds to 40% of the standard deviation of the variable in the raw sample (see descriptive statistics in Supplementary Appendix B).

Discussion and Conclusion

Public support for democracy is a key factor in maintaining the stability of democratic regimes. Yet, individual-level answers to democratic support surveys are wrought with a key issue that threatens their validity, particularly in new and developing democracies: Not all respondents are familiar with democracy. To offer new insights on the topic, we conducted a survey experiment in Indonesia, in which we exposed the treatment group with a short list of characteristics that define democracy and then asked all respondents to answer three democratic support questions. The aim was to test if having a uniform definition of democratic changes respondents' support for it.

Our results both confirm and contrast some previous findings. First, we find that greater democratic understanding altered democratic support only for individuals with low-education background, while those with higher education levels were not affected by the treatment. This is an important finding as it shows that even in flawed

Figure 2.
Treatment effect as education varies ("living in democracy important" and "satisfaction with democracy"). Solid lines are the treatment effects estimated with regressions presented in Supplementary Appendix G. Dashed lines are 95% confidence interval. Education: 1 = Low, 2 = Mid, and 3 = High



democracies like Indonesia, there is still a sizeable portion of 40–50% of citizens who have sufficient understanding of democracy to provide informed responses to democratic support questions. Yet, it also means that many of them provide poorly informed answers, particularly in developing democracies. This is problematic for cross-national studies that rely on aggregate levels of democratic support.

Second, we find that inducing democratic understanding did not lead to greater support for democracy. Instead, it *decreased* the probability of reporting a preference for democracy over autocracy. This means that knowing democracy does not necessarily imply loving it. Furthermore, our results also challenge the assumption that individuals with low democratic understanding report higher satisfaction rates: The treatment instead *decreased* satisfaction with democracy in our sample.

Future research could benefit from larger studies covering more countries, and therefore, greater diversity in democratic understanding as well as socioeconomic composition. Furthermore, this study pursued the most cost-efficient strategy, with the use of Facebook as a recruitment strategy. It is thus limited in scope, as a large portion of Indonesians are without access to internet. Yet, we believe that, if anything, our treatment effect is underestimated—the effect would have been larger if the sample were representative of the population. Without internet access, many have no access to online media and international news coverage. We however encourage further comparative

studies to use representative samples that could then enrich our study of the link between democratic understanding and democratic support in a developing democracy.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary Data are available at *IJPOR* online.

References

Ariely, G., & Davidov, E. (2011). Can we rate public support for democracy in a comparable way? Cross-national equivalence of democratic attitudes in the world value survey. *Social Indicators Research*, *104*, 271–286.

Boas, T. C., Christenson, D. P., & Glick, D. M. (2018). Recruiting large online samples in the United States and India: Facebook, mechanical turk, and qualtrics. *Political Science Research and Methods*. *8*, 232–250.

Canache, D. (2012). Citizens' conceptualizations of democracy: structural complexity, substantive content, and political significance. *Comparative Political Studies*, *45*, 1132–1158.

Canache, D., Mondak, J. J., & Seligson, M. A. (2001). Meaning and measurement in cross-national research on satisfaction with democracy. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *65*, 506–528.

Cho, Y. (2014). To know democracy is to love it: A cross-national analysis of democratic understanding and political support for democracy. *Political Research Quarterly*, *67*, 478–488.

Claassen, C. (2020). Does public support help democracy survive? *American Journal of Political Science*, *64*(1), 118–134.

Dahl, R. A. (1971). *Polyarchy: Participation and opposition*. Yale, CO: Yale University Press.

Dalton, R. J., Sin, T. C., & Jou, W. (2007). Understanding democracy: Data from unlikely places. *Journal of Democracy*, *18*, 142–156.

Davidson, J. S. (2018). *Indonesia: Twenty years of democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Diamond, L., & Morlino, L. (2004). The quality of democracy: An overview. *Journal of Democracy*, *15*, 20–31.

Freedom House. (2018). Freedom in the World, Indonesia profile. Retrieved May 26, 2019, fromhttps://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/indonesia

Fuchs, D., & Roller, E. (2006). Learned democracy? Support of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. *International Journal of Sociology*, *36*, 70–96.

Harkness, J. A., Van de Vijver, F. J. R., & Mohler, P. P. (2003). *Cross-cultural survey methods*. New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons.

Hootsuite Inc. (2019). The global state of digital in 2019. Retrieved May 26, 2019, from https://hootsuite.com/resources/digital-in-2019

Kirsch, H., & Welzel, C. (2018). Democracy misunderstood: Authoritarian notions of democracy around the globe. *Social Forces*, *98*(1), 59–92.

Kiewiet de Jonge, C. P. (2016). Should researchers abandon questions about "democracy"? Evidence from Latin America. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *80*, 694–716.

Lussier, D. N., & Fish, M. S. (2012). Indonesia: The benefits of civic engagement. *Journal of Democracy*, *23*(1), 70–84.

Mattes, R., & Bratton, M. (2007). Learning about democracy in Africa: Awareness, performance, and experience. *American Journal of Political Science*, *51*(1), 192–217.

Mellon, J., & Prosser, C. (2017). Twitter and facebook are not representative of the general population: Political attitudes and demographics of British Social Media Users. *Research & Politics*, *4*, 1–9.

Norris, P. (2011). *Democratic deficit: Critical citizens revisited*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Panel, S. (2019). Is popular support for democracy underreported? Evidence from 32 African Countries. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *31*, 753–766.

Pietsch, J., & Clark, M. (2015). Critical citizens: Attitudes towards democracy in Indonesia and Malaysia. *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, *16*, 195–209.

Samuels, D. J., & Zucco, C., (2014). The power of partisanship in Brazil: Evidence from survey experiments. *American Journal of Political Science*, *58*(1), 212–225.

Schedler, A., & Sarsfield, R. (2007). Democrats with adjectives: Linking direct and indirect measures of democratic support. *European Journal of Political Research*, *46*, 637–649.

Shin, D. C., & Kim, H. J. (2018). How global citizenries think about democracy: An evaluation and synthesis of recent public opinion research. *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, *19*, 222–249.

Zagrebina, A. (2019). Concepts of democracy in democratic and nondemocratic countries. *International Political Science Review*. *41*, 174–19.

Zaller, J., & Feldman, S. (1992). A simple theory of survey response: Answering questions versus revealing preferences. *American Journal of Political Science*, *36*, 579–616.

Biographical Notes

Aurelia Ananda is a PhD candidate in Politics at the Department of Political Economy at King's College London.

Damien Bol is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Economy of King's College London. This work is supported by funding from the Department of Political Economy, King's College London and the Indonesian Endowment Fund for Education.