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# WHO VOTES IN EAST ASIA?

Elvis Bisong Tambe<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This paper reports an analysis of who votes in eight East Asian countries, based on selfreported turnout data collected by the Asian barometer surveys for over 10,105 voting aged individuals. The major findings are that institutional variables appear to have much stronger effects than individual level variables on the likelihood of voting in these democracies, which is consistent with some other comparative analyses of turnout in other geo-political regions.

## Keywords:

**East Asia, New democracies, Electoral participation, Voting.**

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## **1. Introduction**

In their influential book, *Who Votes?* Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) described elections as the core of the American political system, serving as a source of government legitimacy and a means through which citizens can influence public policies. This is of course true for all established democracies in the global north as well as newer electoral democracies in the South. It being the case, that elections are an essential feature of representative democracy, the who votes question is of course a key theme in research on political participation in advanced industrial democracies but is frequently neglected in newly emerging democracies particularly those of East Asia.

However, in light of the global democratic trends that began in the 1970s in Southern Europe, and which led to the decline of authoritarian rule in parts of East and South Asia in the mid-1980s (Carothers 2002, p.5), this paper seeks to address the who votes question of electoral participation in East Asia. Pietsch, Miller and Karp (2015, p.5) argue that East Asia is a frontline region for the spread and consolidation of democracy, as it includes a large amount of new democracies as well as electoral authoritarian regimes that may gradually become more competitive. Moreover, the region also includes a remarkable variation in regime types. Chang and Yen-Chen Tang (2013, p.87) grouped the various regimes in East Asia into modern democracies, electoral democracies, electoral authoritarian and one-party authoritarian states. Furthermore, Levitsky and Way (2010) and Boix (2011) contend that the relatively high level of economic development in East Asia makes the region a perfect context for democratic consolidation.

Given that research on voting behaviour in East Asia is still developing, the core objective of this article then is to provide an explanation as to why people engage in electoral politics. On that note, this paper is set in the context of previous research that is explicitly comparative

(Powell 1986; Jackman 1987; Jackman and Miller 1995; Franklin 2002, 2004; Blais 2000). Several of these works frame the question of participation as one of the relative explanatory power of institutional variables compared to individual variables, while Franklin observed that wealth, education, and interest matter “but none of these things matter nearly as much as whether one is an Australian or an American” (Franklin 1996, p. 218). Based on this, we might ask, in terms of voter turnout, does it matter more whether someone is from Korea or Taiwan, or whether he or she is rich or poor? Or following Solt (2008), does the effect of income change from one country to the next?

Relying on an extensive collection of survey data drawn from the Asian barometer, we therefore advance an explanation of people’s decision to vote and the characteristics of those who vote, and indeed those who do not vote in elections, by restricting our analysis only to a group of countries in East Asia that have succeeded in conducting free, fair and competitive elections. In particular, this paper seeks to contribute to the comparative literature on voting to investigating whether the findings for East Asian countries comport with the general thrust of existing knowledge about the relative importance of institutional variables and individual level characteristics.

## **2. Explaining Voting Behaviour**

There has been extensive debate on the factors that are believed to affect people’s propensity to vote in electoral democracies. A recent meta-analysis of individual level research on voter turnout suggests that people’s decision about whether or not to vote in elections is influenced by a number of approaches: resource, mobilisation, cultural and institutional (Smets and Van

Ham 2013). This literature allows us to distinguish between individual and institutional level variables, and in this paper, we will be combining both levels in explaining people's decision to turnout across countries in East Asia

### **Socio-Demographic Resource Explanations**

The resource or socio-demographic model of who votes suggests a series of personal individual characteristics that can help us comprehend who votes and why they vote at the individual level. Berelson and Steiner (1964, p. 423) suggest that the higher a person's socioeconomic and educational level, the higher his/her participation. Extensive literature on Western Europe and the United States also supports this claim that higher socio-economic status does in fact boost political participation (Almond and Verba, 1965; Verba, Nie and Kim, 1978; Brady et al., 1995). However, in Asia, poor voters are often tied into clientelistic networks (which are very efficient in mobilising voters), while middle-class voters are often disillusioned with politics and hence more likely to abstain. Moreover, Bratton et al. (2010, p.119) reveal that in East Asia, economic advancement in the recent generation has enabled many households to move up and out of poverty which has resulted in a situation where poorer people tend to vote at a higher rate compare to the rich. Nonetheless, we would generally expect that the higher the household income, material or social status, the higher the propensity to vote.

Similarly, looking at gender, we can ask if there is a gender gap in voting and how it influences people's voting decisions. The empirical literature reveals that men are slightly more likely to turn out for election than women in established democracies (Inglehart and Norris, 2000; 2002). However, Norris (2002) equally shows that this gender gap in voting is rapidly closing in many of these countries. In East Asian countries, Bratton et al. (2010) reveal that the applicability of gender-sensitive laws (i.e. compulsory primary education) has enabled women to attain parity

with men with regards to participation. Given this, we therefore do not expect men to participate at higher rate than women.

With respect to age, evidence shows that young people tend to vote less (Lagos and Rose, 1999). Attempts to explain why young people vote less suggest that the act of voting is a function of the lifelong processes of an individual's personal maturation. Bratton et al. (2010) argue that adults tend to vote more than young people simply because they are more "settled down" - that is, they earn a living, pay taxes and raise families. These long-term commitments, therefore, give older adults a stake in the political system and hence a motivation to vote. Individual country studies in Korea confirms age as a significant factor influencing vote choice at the individual level (Mo, Brady and Ro,1991). Moreover, Park (2002, p. 140) argues that in Korea, younger people (mostly in their twenties) show more cynicism about politics and politicians due to their strong sense of alienation from the electoral politics and therefore tend to participate at a lower rate.

Furthermore, a striking characteristic of East Asian countries is the high geographical mobility among young people which makes it hard for them to participate in electoral politics. Based on this, we therefore expect young people to be less likely to vote than the older people (i.e. middle-aged adults and elderly people). Also, empirical evidence drawn from advanced democracies suggests that education is positively associated with voting at the individual level (Verba, Nie and Kim, 1978). More educated individuals tend to vote more because they better understand the issues at stake in the elections and become politically interested. They also tend to have a more developed sense of personal political 'efficacy' - that is, they believe that they can make a difference if they choose to participate in politics

(Brady et al., 1995).

In East Asia, findings reveal that people without formal education are considered to be significantly more likely to vote. Bratton et al. (2010, p. 119) observe that this result is influenced by a high proportion of older people in countries such as Mongolia, Taiwan and

China who lack any kind of formal schooling but who nevertheless tend to vote at a higher rate. This trend suggests that we might not expect to find a strong relationship between education and voting in East Asia, although overall we would still generally expect to find education to have a positive effect on people's propensity to vote at the individual level.

### **Mobilisational Explanations**

The second group of explanations centres on the Mobilisation model. This approach brings a well-known perspective in the literature of electoral participation. Here, the roles played by parties, politicians, social networks and interest groups have been pinpointed as indispensable in getting people to the polls. Since most politicians and parties have the objective of capturing and maintaining political power, they work to mobilise voters in the hope of gaining politically from such acts. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) have succeeded in demonstrating that there is a strong correlation between partisan identifiers and voting, while equally emphasising the importance of contacting by parties and candidates.

However, with respect to East Asia, studies of voter behaviour conducted in Hong Kong and South Korea found party identification to be very weak (Scott, 1996; Kin-Shuen Louie, 1996; Park, 2002). Newman (2002, p. 57) argues that the weak party identification in Hong Kong could be explained by the fact that political parties are all relatively new and subject to considerable change and weak consolidation over a short period of time (i.e. following transfer of sovereignty to China in 1997); and also because the Hong Kong population now includes a large component of immigrants from the Mainland where the cultural norm is to avoid politics. Given that parties in East Asia are new and fluid, lacking in ideologies or policy programs, we do not expect a positive relationship between party identification and vote choice as the comparative literature on Western democracies would suggest. With regards to other mobilising agencies, interest groups and social networks are considered equally as important

in influencing people's voting decisions at the individual level. The reasoning here is that the act of political discussion often takes place in a non-political environment, such as the church, workplace, voluntary organisation and even among families and friends. These non-party political arenas, therefore, tend to build and mould people's interest in politics and elections. Studies have showed that social networks and interest groups do help in the provision of political social capital, such as political information and expertise, which in turn increases the likelihood that voters will become involved in the elections (Verba et al., 1995; La Due Lake and Huckfeldt, 1998).

Pertaining to East Asia, Scott (1991, p.152) hints that social networks communication are the most important factors in shaping voting behaviour in Japan. Other works (Curtis, 1971; Scott and Richardson, 1977) also stress the role of social networks as an important factor predicting vote choice. In the case of Japan, they mention the crucial role of professional and community organisations that candidate and personal support groups turn to. Given that in East Asia these social networks even exert a stronger influence as voter mobilisation machines in rural areas, we would hypothesise a positive relationship between social networks and the propensity to vote in these democracies. Finally, another possible factor that has been theorised to influence people's decision whether or not to vote is religion. Bratton (2003) has advanced the view that people of faith are globally more likely to vote than those who say they are non-believers. The obvious explanation of this phenomenon could be that churches, mosques and temples do in fact act as agents of mobilisation.

However, in East Asia there are mixed result with regards to the role of religion in influencing citizens' voting decisions. Steven Rood (2002, p. 157-158) shows that surprisingly religion had little effect on who voters preferred in the Philippines (rather than whether or not they actually voted). For example, Fidel Ramos won the 1992 elections despite been a Protestant in a deeply Catholic country, while Joseph Estrada won the 1998 election despite being heavily criticise



by the Catholic hierarchy on his alleged immoral lifestyle. On the other hand, Chin (2002) reveals that in Malaysia religion is an important factor in influencing how people vote, with vote choice being between a secular modernist Islam or the more orthodox, fundamentalist brand of Islam. Overall, therefore, we expect individuals who are more religious to have a higher propensity to vote.

### **Cultural Explanations**

Inquiry into the influence of cultural factors have centred on core political attitudes such as trust in government, political efficacy, political interest and interpersonal trust. Political or public trust in government has been assessed by the extent to which citizens have confidence in public institutions to operate in the best interest of the society and its citizenry (Cleary and Stokes, 2006; S. Kim, 2005; Thomas, 1998). Norris (2002) shows that citizens who do not have trust in their political institutions are less likely to engage in conventional political activities such as voting. In East Asia, using survey data from the East Asian Barometer covering Japan, Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand, Chang and Chu (2006) demonstrate that citizens' perception of corruption is inversely related to their trust in government institutions. Given these findings, and coupled with the fact that most of these countries have been subjected to corruption scandals, we expect a negative relationship between trust in government and vote choice in East Asian democracies.

Turning to social trust, this form of trust is defined as the extent to which a person is confident in and willing to act on the basis of the words, action and decision of another (McAllister, 1995, p.25). A salient characteristic of East and Southeast Asian nations is that most of the countries are either multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multilingual. The implication of this is that voters may be divided along these lines and therefore inclined to distrust each other. Regardless of this, we still expect that the greater an individual's sense of social trust,

the higher his or her propensity to vote. Pertaining to political efficacy, voters who believe that they could and have the ability to influence government policy and politics, usually tend to participate more in the voting process (Craig and Maggionto, 1982). We therefore suggest that the greater an individual's sense of efficacy, the higher his or her propensity to vote.

Turning to political interest, classical studies undertaken by Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) have already succeeded in demonstrating that political interest is a key explanatory variable for individuals' voting decisions. In this respect, the lack of political interest is presumed to either increase or lower people's propensity to vote in elections. If individuals are interested in politics, the logic is that such people will be involved in more political debates with friends, family or colleagues and the end result is that they will more likely to vote (Sheerin, 2008). On the other hand, a limited amount of interest in politics and lack of knowledge about political debates will definitely lower citizens' desire to participate in voting. Based on this comparative finding we expect having a higher interest to be positively associated with a higher propensity to vote in East Asia democracies.

### **Institutional Explanations**

Finally, scholars have also recognised the importance of institutional variables in predicting people's decision of whether to vote or not to vote. For instance, Powell found that turnout tends to be higher in those countries where the government assumes responsibility for voter registration than in those where it is up to citizen to get registered. Moreover, turnout is higher in countries where voting is made compulsory by law (Powell, 1982, p. 116). Crewe (1981, p.251) agrees with Powell about the effect of compulsory voting laws, while adding that the type of electoral system also has an effect, in that turnout is higher in proportional systems. Jackman (1987, p. 45) found turnout to be related to five variables: compulsory voting, nationally competitive districts, electoral disproportionality, multipartism and unicameralism.

Turnout is higher when voting is compulsory, in unicameral countries and more proportional systems, and lower as the number of parties increases. In the work of Blais and Carty (1990, p.15) they found turnout to be higher with compulsory voting, when the population is smaller and under proportional electoral systems. Black (1999) agrees that compulsory voting is the most significant variable, although he found other institutional effects to be weak, including the type of electoral system, degree of disproportionality or unicameralism. Franklin (1996, pp. 36-50) shows that turnout is affected positively by the degree of proportionality of electoral outcomes and by the presence of compulsory voting, postal voting, Sunday voting and negatively by the number of polling days.

Salient elections give rise to some 30 percent greater turnout than non-salient elections. This is because when an election is considered important and many issues are at stake, people are more inclined to participate in such elections. Thies (2002) contends that the closeness of an election tends to drive citizens to participate in Japan as political elites (party and factional leaders) increase their efforts at mobilising people to go to the polls. Birch's (2010) unique contribution is to identify and examine the degree to which an election is perceived as being a fair contest and the impact of this upon turnout.

Each of the variables discussed in the previous paragraph might be considered a factor relating to the institutional context of the political system in question: Proportional electoral systems increase the propensity to vote; the more competitive an election, the higher the propensity to vote in such countries; individuals living in parliamentary democracies tend to participate more than those living under presidential regimes (although individuals have a higher propensity to vote when legislative and presidential elections are held concurrently); the greater the confidence in the fairness of the election, the higher the individual propensity to vote. We would therefore expect such factors to come into play in East Asia.

### **3. Data, Research Method and Measurement**

In order to investigate empirically the individual and institutional determinants of people's decisions to vote or not to vote, this article relies on an extensive collection of individual survey data covering East Asian countries that is derived from the Asian barometer. The Asian barometer is an applied research program that aims to gauge public opinion on issues such as political values, democracy, and governance across Asia. The empirical part of this article relies on wave 2 of the Asiabarometer, conducted in 2005 – 2008, covering eight countries in East Asia and including a total of 10,105 voting aged individuals.<sup>2</sup> Having identified the relevant theoretical expectations and the appropriate empirical indicators, the objective is to present an empirical analysis of citizen's decision of whether to vote or not vote by conducting a multivariate logistic regression between the dependent and independent variables. Because our dependent variable has only two values ('yes I voted' and 'no, I did not vote'), we cannot conduct an OLS regression. However, an appropriate form of analysis is to deliver a binary logistic regression, commonly known as a logit analysis, which will allow to estimate the minimal effect of each variable on the dichotomous dependent variable, while holding the effects of other independent variables constant.

#### **3.1. Selection of Cases**

Gallego (2015, p.23) argues that the incentive and motives for voting or not voting in elections in partial democracies and fully democratic countries may differ, which means that

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<sup>2</sup> More technical information on the Asian barometer survey data can be obtained from their websites:

<http://www.asianbarometer.org/survey/survey-countries>.

generalisation across all electoral regimes may be difficult to sustain. For this study, a more minimalistic definition of democracy is applied that considers free and fair elections as a criterion for judging whether a country is democratic or not. Like Schumpeter (1942, p. 265), we may start with a strictly procedural definition of democracy: it refers to institutional arrangements for producing political decision in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote.

Beyond this, however, we may rely on Freedom House's concept of "electoral democracy"<sup>3</sup>. Specifically, Freedom House ratings of countries can be based on the political rights scale, which focuses on the fairness of elections. Based on this criterion, only four countries (Japan, South Korea, Mongolia and Taiwan) meet the requirement of being fully free and fair. However, because of the fewness of cases which pose a serious challenge in making crossnational comparison and generalisation across East Asia, we should also include countries that are considered partly free (Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia). Table 1 below provides an overview of the countries that are analysed in this study and a few of their institutional characteristics.

**[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]**

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<sup>3</sup> Freedom House often treat free and fair elections as a defining element of democracy

## 3.2. Measurement

### 3.2.1. Dependent Variable – Voting

The principal purpose of this article is to provide an explanation of why people vote in East Asia. Our dependent variable voting is therefore captured by a question which asks respondents across countries in the region if they did vote in the last national election. Our variable of interest (voting) is therefore collapse into a dichotomous variable according to whether a voter voted in the last presidential or parliamentary election, with a value of 1 if the voter did vote and 0 if the voter did not vote. In the Asian barometer, the question about voting in last election is captured by the following question: In talking to people about elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they were away from home, they were sick or they just did not have time. How about you? Did you vote in the most recent national election? Here, respondents were allowed to answer with a simply Yes or NO response. A Yes response was coded as 1 and a No response as 0, while can't choose, decline to answer and not applicable were all coded as missing values. An important problem to note with individual level survey data that deals with electoral behaviour is that the reported turnout in surveys is always slightly higher than the official turnout. Table 2 therefore shows the reported and official turnout percentage across the different countries in the region.

#### [TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

From this table we realise that, first, Singapore and Malaysia appear to be very unusual in the sense that “official” turnout exceeds self-reported turnout. Second, and more importantly, there is some fairly significant variation in the rate of over reporting turnout in the remaining six countries, from a low of 2.3% in Taiwan to a high of 22.6% in Indonesia.

### **3.2.2. Independent Variables**

Being interested in the extent to which both individual and institutional factors can help explain citizens' propensity to turnout in elections across electoral democracies in East Asia, our independent variables are therefore derived from the different theoretical perspectives that we have earlier outlined as central to the literature of electoral participation. Before assessing the effect of each of these variables on voting, there is a need by specifying first how each of these variables have been operationalised and measured.

#### **Socio-demographic Variables**

Beginning with education, the respondent's level of education is captured by a survey question that asks about the highest level of education that individuals have completed or achieved. I have coded education into three categories: primary (coded 0), secondary (coded 1) and higher education (coded as 2), with primary education being the reference category against which all other categories are compared. Gender is also included in our analysis. Gender is coded into a dummy variable - men and women, where men are coded as 1 and women 0, with women being our reference category. Age is coded into three categories: young people are coded 0 and consisting of respondents between the ages 17-29, middle aged-adults coded as 2 (comprising of respondents between the ages of 30-64), and finally elderly people are coded as 3 and consist of people of 65 years and above, with young people as our reference category. Finally, the last resource variable to be included in our model estimation is socio-economic status. In the Asiabarometer, this question is captured through a question that looks at the respondent's monthly household income. Socio-economic status was therefore indicated by the relative levels of household income measured in quintiles (from lowest quintile to top quintile) with the lowest income quintile as our reference category.

## **Mobilisational Variables**

Beginning with party identification, this variable is captured by a classic question across countries in the region that looks at respondent's closeness to any political party. In the Asiabarometer, party identification is captured by a survey question which asks the respondents if they feel close to any political party. Responses are selected into two categories, where a value of 0 is attributed if respondents do not feel close to any political party (reference category) and a value of 1 if voters feel close to a political party. Turning our attention to civil society organisations, this variable is measure by a question which asks respondents if they are members of any organisation. This variable is recoded where a value of 0 is assigned if respondents are not members of any organisation and a value of 1 if voters declared to be members of an organisation, with the non-member category taken as our reference category against which all other categories are compared.

Religiosity is measured by a standard question that asks: would you describe yourself as very religious? Responses can be very religious, moderately religious, slightly religious and not religious at all. We maintain the four main categories but coded not religious at all as 0 (our reference category), slightly religious is coded as 1, moderately religious is coded as 2 and very religious is coded as 3, while don't know, don't understand and decline to answer responses are all treated as missing values. Finally, 'discussing politics' is another variable that we introduce to test its effect on voting in East Asia. This variable is captured by a question which asks respondents the following question: when you get together with friends or family, would you say you discuss politics or political matters? This value was recoded as follows: never is coded as 0 (reference category), occasionally discuss politics coded as 1 and frequently discussed politics is coded as 2.



## **Cultural Variables**

In the Asiabarometer, political trust is measured by a question which asks respondents how much trust they have for the national government. Responses can be: None at all, not very much trust, quite a lot of trust, a great deal of trust. We coded political trust into a dummy variable, where none at all and not very much trust are coded as 0 (No trust), our reference category, while quite a lot of trust and a great deal of trust are coded as 1 (trust). Turning to social trust, in the Asiabarometer, this question is captured by a survey question which asked respondents the following question: would you say that most people can be trusted or that you must be very careful in dealing with people? 'You must be very careful' is treated as having no social trust and coded as 0 (reference category), while 'most people can be trusted' is treated as having social trust and coded as 1.

Moving to political interest, this variable is captured as follows: How interested would you say you are in politics? Respondents had to decide between four categories: Not at all interested, not very interested, somewhat interested and very interested. These responses are collapsed into a dummy variable; not at all interested and not very interested are recoded as not interested in politics coded as 0 (reference category) and somewhat interested and very interested is recoded as being interested in politics and coded as 1. Finally, the last of the cultural variables, political efficacy, is captured by a question about whether politics and government seem so complicated that you cannot really understand what is going on. Political efficacy is coded into a dummy variable; respondents who agreed that politics and government seem complicated are treated as having no efficacy and coded as 0, while respondents who answer that politics is not complicated are treated as being efficacious and coded as 1.

## **Institutional Variables**

Beginning with concurrent elections, we measure this variable by looking at whether or not legislative and presidential elections are held concurrently. A dummy variable is created to measure the effect of this variable on electoral participation, with a value of 0 if elections are not concurrent (reference category) and a value of 1 where elections are held concurrently.

The expectation is that concurrent elections will generate a higher propensity to vote. Similarly, we equally introduce closeness of elections as another important institutional factor that is supposed to influence people's propensity to turnout to vote. The classic way of measuring closeness of election is measured by looking at the margin of victory for the winning candidate or over the runner-up in presidential elections. For parliamentary democracies, we measure closeness of election as the difference in vote share between the top two parties winning seats. A 5 percent difference in seat shares is treated as the threshold between the top two parties: less than this is a 'close election' and more than this is not close (with not a close election as the reference category).

Additionally, the type of political system or regime type is also operationalised as a dummy variable coding 1 for parliamentary democracies and 0 for presidential democracies or other types of regimes operating within the region (with presidential/other regimes types being our reference category). Furthermore, with regard to electoral trust, this question is captured by the survey as follows: On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election? Respondents are allowed to choose between the following responses: Completely free and fair, free and fair, but with minor problems, free and fair, with major problems and not free or fair. Electoral trust was recoded into a dummy variable with completely free and fair and free and fair, but with minor problems coded as 1 (electoral trust). While free and fair, with major problems and not free or fair were coded as 0 (no electoral trust being our reference category). Finally, the last contextual factor to be studied here is the

electoral system. Relying on the electoral system database drawn from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, we created a dummy variable for electoral system variable with a value of 1 attributed to proportional electoral systems and 0 if the electoral system is not proportional (reference category).

#### **4. Results**

We ran sequential logit estimations of electoral participation in East Asia which are reported in Table 3. In models I – III, we estimate a logistic model for the effects of individual level variables on voting: model I includes socio-demographic resource factors, while model II adds mobilisation variables, and model III political cultural variables. Model IV adds political institutional effects on people’s decision to vote. Model IV is therefore the complete model incorporating individual and institutional contextual explanations of people’s propensity to vote in elections. Although, the central objective is to report the overall models for East Asia countries in this article, we also provide details of the full models for some countries individually in order to interrogate our results fully. In doing this we are able cite where something of particular interest does distinguish one country from the others<sup>4</sup>.

**[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]**

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<sup>4</sup> Details of the full models for individual countries are available on request.

## 4.1. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the logistic regression of who votes in East Asia are reported in Table 3.

### Discussion of Results-Model I

We begin with a simple socio-demographic model (Model I) that takes into consideration the effect of age, education, household income and gender on electoral participation. This baseline model (Model I) yields a chi-square of 271.9, which is highly significant ( $p < .0005$ )<sup>5</sup>, indicating that by adding socio-demographics variables to the model we improve our prediction of whether or not any given individual will vote than by simply guessing on the basis of whether or not the majority of respondents do so. A closer look at the parameters estimates shows that there is a highly significant overall effect of age and income on voting in East Asian democracies. Thus compared to young people, older people (middle-aged adults and elderly people) are significantly more likely to vote. The (ExpB) odd ratios indicate that middle-aged adults and older people are respectively 2.5 and 3.6 times more likely to vote than younger people. Similarly, those with a higher household income are more likely to vote than those with a lower household income, with the odds ratio confirming that those in the top income quartile are 47 percent more likely to vote than those in the lowest household income quartile. However, there is some variation in this pattern across individual countries; in particular, further analysis reveals that the general pattern is reversed in Indonesia and Malaysia, where those with lower household incomes tend to vote at a higher rate compared to those with higher incomes. The odd ratios indicate that in Indonesia and Malaysia lower incomes individuals are 27.7 and 41.9 percent more likely to vote than higher income

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<sup>5</sup> Significance: \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$

individuals<sup>6</sup>.

Turning to education, two of the education dummies (secondary and higher education) are statistically significant. However, their B coefficients have a negative sign, indicating that compared to those with primary education, those with secondary and higher education are significantly less likely to vote, which runs counter to our expectations, although is in line with some of the previous research (Bratton et al. 2010). This result is probably driven by the large number of older people who populate the region and lack educational opportunities during their younger years but who nevertheless were mobilised to become habitual voters.

Finally, the relationship between gender and voting is statistically non-significant although in a positive direction, with the (ExpB) indicating that men are 8.9 percent more likely to participate than women. Interestingly, when this model is run for the individual countries, we find that in two countries Taiwan and Philippines, women are more likely to vote than men, while in the other five countries the sign of the coefficient is positive suggesting men tend to vote at a higher rate compare to women. Overall, this result might be explained by conservative cultural taboos in those countries (especially where the majority of the population is Muslim, such as Indonesia and Malaysia) in which women are discouraged from engaging in political activity.

## **Discussion of Results-Model II**

In the next model (Model II) we proceed by adding mobilisation variables into the model that already consists of socio-demographic variables. This model shows that the impact of the socio-demographic variables is partly mediated by the mobilisation variables, as revealed by the

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<sup>6</sup> The full details of national-level models are not reported here but are available upon request.

decrease in some of the effects of the socio-demographic characteristics. For example, looking at education, in the baseline model (Model 1), the education dummies were significant (in an unexpected negative direction), but the introduction of mobilisation variables in Model II rendered them statistically trivial. That means that the mobilisation variables accounted for some of the effects of education on voter participation; that is, one or more of the mobilisation variables is connected directly to educational level, and when we include them both in the model, only one of them remains significant – the mobilisation component. Turning to age, we observe that age remains statistically significant and in a positive direction, which indicates that its effect on people's decision of whether to vote or not is unaffected by the mobilisational variables that we introduce into the model. In clear terms, this suggest that older people (i.e. adults and elderly) are still more likely to vote than younger people. Moving to household income, the introduction of mobilisation predictors rendered most of the household income categories statistically non-significant with the exception of the fourth household income quintiles. However, all the income categories point in a positive direction, which is confirmed by the odd ratios showing that those with higher household income are 1.4 times more likely to be engaged in electoral politics. Finally, there is no change between gender and electoral participation in East Asia, as our results continue to be positive but non-significant for this factor.

With regards to the four mobilisational variables that are added, civil society organisation, discussing politics and religiosity are all positive (as expected) and statistically significant, but party identification has an insignificant impact on voting. Thus, religiosity and party identification have to be separated; across the regions as a whole, party identification does not simply reflect an individual's religious identity. The odd ratios indicate that voters who declared themselves to be members of civil society organisations are 40.7 percent more likely to vote than those who are not members of civil society organisations, while those who discuss

politics frequently are 72.1 percent more likely to participate than those who never discuss politics, and those who declare themselves to be very religious are 84 percent more likely to vote than those who are not religious. However, while it is clear that respondents who describe themselves in religious terms tend to show a higher propensity to turnout, the capacity of ethnic identification to mobilise voters should not be overlooked. For instance, examination of Malaysia, where politics is known to be largely based on ethnic lines, with Malays voting for the UMNO, and the non-Malays/non-Muslims voting for Chinese and Indian parties, we find that the measure of ethnic fractionalization reveals that voters are 23 percent more likely to vote in this ethnically diverse country.

### **Discussion of Results-Model III**

In our next model (Model III), we added the cultural variables. When these cultural variables are added, we find that gender and education lose significance, but all other effects (i.e. age and household income) remain unchanged in significance and direction. Turning to the mobilisation variables, we observe little or no change from the previous model, with civil society organisational membership, those who frequently discuss politics and being religious remaining statistically significant, while the effect of party identification on voting is still non-significant. The surprise finding regarding the cultural variables that are entered in model III (political efficacy, political interest, trust and social trust) is that all of these variables prove to be non-significant for voting in the East Asia region, although they do at least produce parameters that run in the expected direction; that is, all of the cultural variables with the exception of social trust do have a positive impact on voting. Thus, those who feel themselves

to be politically efficacious<sup>7</sup> are more slightly likely to participate (4.7 percent) than those who do not, those who are declared to be politically interested are 21.4 percent likely to vote, and politically trustful individuals are 16.4 percent likely to vote than nontrustful individuals. Nevertheless, the non-significance of each of these factors is the most striking finding because it does not confirm with the majority of previous research findings from other parts of the world. However, when we run this model across individual countries, we observe that Japan stands apart from the other East Asian countries, with two cultural variables, political efficacy and political interest, revealing a positive and significant relationship with the decision to vote. This result is consistent with previous studies from Western establish democracies. However, across the region as a whole political culture, defined in these terms, does not appear particularly important for voter turnout.

#### **Discussion of Results-Model IV**

In the final model (model IV), we add the institutional or country-level variables. This model is more interesting as it enables us to see how all of the individual level determinants of voting will fare in a model that now controls for contextual level variables. Beginning with the socio-demographic variables, age is the only variable that remains statistically significant (and positive), with the (ExpB) or odds ratio indicating that middle-aged adults and elderly people are respectively 4.1 and 9.8 times more likely to vote than young people. Once we control for the institutional context, the only mobilisational variable that retains a significant impact is civil society organisational membership, with those who declared to be members 51.4 percent

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<sup>7</sup> This refers to individuals who consider that they have the capacity to understand politics and government and do not find it overly complicated.



more likely to turnout than non-members. The remaining mobilisational variables (discussing politics, party identification and religiosity) are essentially nonsignificant, although those who discuss politics frequently are 50 percent more likely to participate than those who never discuss politics, which is significant at the 10 percent level. Religion loses its significance. With respect to the cultural variables (political efficacy, political interest, political trust and social trust), all of these variables remain non-significant for voting in the final model, although the direction of the relationships is positive for political efficacy, political interest and political trust., while social trust has a negative relationship with voting. Finally, and most striking of all in the full model, it is apparent that each of the institutional variables that are entered in model IV (electoral system, closeness of elections, concurrent elections, political system type and trust in fairness of elections) shows a positive and significant relationship with the decision to vote. That is, in East Asia, voters who live in democracies where the electoral system is proportional are 4.7 times more likely to vote than those who live in countries where the electoral system is non-proportional. Similarly, voters are three times more likely to participate when elections are close races compare to when they are not. Additionally, voters who live in countries where presidential and legislative elections are held concurrently are twice as likely to vote as those who live in democracies where the elections are not concurrent. Moreover, citizens who live in parliamentary democracies are 2.7 times more likely to vote than those who live in presidential or other forms of democracies. And finally voters are nearly 40 percent more likely to vote when they perceive elections to be free and fair.

## **5. Conclusion**

Having tested the various explanations of the decision to vote in these models, a number of conclusions can be reached. First, among the socio-demographic resource factors, only age

proves to be significant in the pooled East Asian data: older citizens are far more likely to vote than younger ones (as is generally true of established Western democracies). Second, membership of civil society organisations such as trade unions significantly increases the chances of turning out to vote. Third, political cultural attitudes make little or no significant difference, with the partial exception of Japan. Fourth – and most strikingly – the impact of political institutional context seems to far outweigh that of other three types of explanation: in particular, proportional representation, parliamentarism and closeness of elections are highly significant drivers of electoral participation in East Asia. Beyond this, an important finding from of this paper is that people’s propensity to turnout and vote in national elections increases with their confidence in the electoral process; it is clearly vital that voters perceive that elections are conducted in a free and fair manner. The immediate implication of this for these East Asian countries is that in order to prevent the reversal of democracy and to sustain the quality of democratic consolidation, countries need to maintain and even improve the integrity of electoral processes.

This paper also carries implications for future research in order to better understand electoral behaviour at the individual level. First, it would be advantageous to compare this analysis of the East Asian region with recent data drawn from other global regions via the Eurobarometer, Afrobarometer and Latino-barometer in order to develop a truly general explanation of turnout at the individual level. This would enable us to establish how far the models of electoral participation that are drawn from the experience of voters in established democracies (Western Europe and the USA) are generally useful in new or emerging democracies. Secondly, the confirmation in this paper that age is an important factor for voter turnout carries implications for future research and possible political action. The paper adds further confirmation of the world-wide tendency of young people to abstain from voting.

Since young people are generally considered ‘future democrats’ this is a worrying finding, which points to the continuing need for research that aims to understand the reasons for political disengagement among young citizens and what steps might be taken to counteract it. Lastly, the paper points to a similar need for work on the roots of electoral integrity, in particular, we have observed the importance of perceived electoral fairness and vote choice. The work of scholars such as Birch (2010) and Norris (2014, 2015) provides a lead to which others might follow in this respect.

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