

Understanding The Quality of Democracy in Mongolia: The Role of Corruption, Resource Capture, And Media Freedom

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Abstract

The quality of democracy has become a critical concern in emerging democracies where formal democratic institutions coexist with persistent governance challenges. Mongolia represents a notable case in this regard, as democratic consolidation has been accompanied by public concerns over corruption, elite control of resources, and media freedom. This study examines how perceived corruption, resource capture, and media freedom influence the quality of democracy, and how democratic quality subsequently affects trust in democracy and political participation. Data were collected through a survey of 307 Mongolian citizens. Preliminary analyses were conducted using SPSS, and the proposed research model was tested using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) with Smart-PLS. The results indicate that perceived corruption and resource capture have significant negative effects on the quality of democracy, while media freedom exerts a significant positive effect. Furthermore, the quality of democracy positively influences both trust in democracy and political participation. The findings contribute to the literature on democratic quality by integrating governance-related risks and informational factors into a unified empirical framework. Practically, the results underscore the importance of anti-corruption efforts, limiting elite capture of public resources, and safeguarding media freedom to enhance democratic quality and strengthen democratic trust and citizen engagement in Mongolia.

I. Introduction

The quality of democracy has become a central concern in both political science and public governance literature, particularly in emerging and transitional democracies. Beyond the mere existence of electoral processes, democratic quality reflects how effectively democratic institution's function, how fairly power is exercised, and how citizens perceive accountability, participation, and trust within the political system (Diamond & Morlino, 2004; Norris, 2011). In this regard, democratic quality is increasingly understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing institutional performance, political freedoms, rule of law, and citizens' subjective evaluations of democratic governance (Merkel, 2014).

Mongolia presents a compelling case for examining the quality of democracy. Since its democratic transition in the early 1990s, Mongolia has maintained regular competitive elections and a pluralistic political environment. However, persistent challenges such as perceived corruption, elite dominance over public resources, and fluctuations in media freedom have raised concerns about the depth and sustainability of its democratic development (Fish, 2018; Freedom House, 2023). These challenges suggest that formal democratic institutions alone may not guarantee high-quality democracy, highlighting the importance of citizens' perceptions of how democracy actually functions in practice.

Among the factors undermining democratic quality, perceived corruption remains one of the most critical. Corruption erodes the legitimacy of democratic institutions by weakening the rule of law, distorting policy outcomes, and fostering public cynicism toward

political authorities (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016). Extensive research shows that when citizens perceive corruption as widespread, they are more likely to believe that political processes are unfair and unresponsive, leading to lower evaluations of democratic quality (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Seligson, 2002). In transitional democracies such as Mongolia, corruption perceptions can be particularly damaging, as democratic norms and institutional trust are still consolidating.

Closely related to corruption is the phenomenon of resource capture, where political and economic elites exert disproportionate influence over public resources and policymaking for private gain. Resource capture undermines democratic quality by skewing political competition, marginalizing ordinary citizens, and weakening accountability mechanisms (Hellman, Jones, & Kaufmann, 2000). When state resources are perceived to be controlled by a narrow group of actors, citizens may view democracy as serving elite interests rather than the public good, thereby reducing confidence in democratic governance (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). In resource-dependent and emerging economies, such dynamics pose significant risks to democratic quality.

In contrast, media freedom plays a vital role in strengthening democratic quality. A free and independent media enhances transparency, facilitates public oversight of political actors, and enables informed citizen participation (Norris, 2008). By exposing corruption, monitoring power holders, and providing diverse viewpoints, media freedom contributes positively to democratic accountability and institutional performance (Besley & Prat, 2006).

In societies where media freedom is constrained, citizens may lack reliable information necessary to evaluate democratic processes, which can weaken both democratic quality and public engagement.

The consequences of democratic quality extend beyond institutional assessments to citizens' political attitudes and behaviors. High-quality democracy is associated with greater trust in democracy, as citizens perceive political institutions as legitimate, fair, and responsive (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Trust in democracy, in turn, is essential for regime stability and democratic resilience. Additionally, democratic quality influences political participation, as citizens who believe that democratic institutions function effectively are more likely to engage in political activities such as voting, civic action, and public discourse (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011). Conversely, low democratic quality may lead to political disengagement or protest-oriented participation.

Despite growing international literature on democratic quality, empirical research that simultaneously examines corruption, resource capture, and media freedom as antecedents of democratic quality and links democratic quality to trust and participation remains limited, particularly in the Mongolian context. Existing studies often focus on institutional indicators or single explanatory factors, leaving a gap in understanding how citizens' perceptions of structural governance problems collectively shape democratic quality and its outcomes.

To address this gap, the present study proposes an integrated research model in which perceived corruption, resource capture, and media freedom are examined as key determinants of the quality of democracy, which in turn influences trust in democracy and political participation. By focusing on citizens' perceptions, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of democratic quality in Mongolia and offers empirical insights relevant for policymakers, civil society actors, and scholars concerned with democratic consolidation in emerging democracies.

II. Theoretical Background

2.1 Quality of Democracy

The concept of the quality of democracy extends beyond the procedural definition of democracy as regular and competitive elections, emphasizing instead how democratic institutions function in practice and how citizens experience democratic governance. According to Diamond and Morlino (2004), democratic quality reflects the degree to which a political system ensures freedom, equality, accountability, and responsiveness to citizens. Similarly, Norris (2011) argues that democratic quality should be evaluated through both institutional performance and citizens' subjective perceptions, as public evaluations play a crucial role in democratic legitimacy and stability. In this sense, democratic quality represents not only formal rules but also the effectiveness, fairness, and inclusiveness of democratic processes as perceived by citizens. In emerging and transitional democracies, perceptions of democratic quality are particularly important because democratic norms and institutional trust are still consolidating (Merkel, 2014). Citizens' evaluations of corruption, elite influence, and information transparency often shape their overall assessment of whether democracy functions as intended. Consequently, democratic quality serves as a critical mediating construct linking governance conditions to democratic outcomes such as trust and participation.

2.2 Perceived Corruption and Democratic Quality

Perceived corruption refers to citizens' beliefs about the extent to which public officials misuse power for private gain. Extensive

literature suggests that corruption undermines democratic quality by weakening the rule of law, distorting public policy, and eroding accountability mechanisms (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016). When corruption is perceived as widespread, citizens are less likely to believe that democratic institutions operate fairly or in the public interest, leading to negative evaluations of democratic performance.

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate a negative relationship between corruption perceptions and democratic legitimacy. Anderson and Tverdova (2003) find that higher perceived corruption reduces citizens' satisfaction with democracy, while Seligson (2002) shows that corruption erodes regime support in developing democracies. In transitional contexts, corruption perceptions can be especially damaging because they signal institutional weakness and unequal application of democratic rules. Therefore, higher levels of perceived corruption are expected to reduce the perceived quality of democracy.

2.3 Resource Capture and Democratic Quality

Resource capture describes a condition in which political or economic elites exert disproportionate control over public resources, policymaking, and state institutions for private benefit. This concept is closely related to elite capture and state capture theories, which emphasize how concentrated power undermines democratic accountability and political equality (Hellman, Jones, & Kaufmann, 2000). Resource capture weakens democratic quality by limiting fair political competition and marginalizing ordinary citizens from meaningful influence over public decisions.

From a theoretical perspective, democratic quality depends on the principle of political equality: citizens should have relatively equal opportunities to influence political outcomes (Dahl, 1971). When resources are captured by elites, this principle is violated, leading citizens to perceive democracy as serving narrow interests rather than the public good. Prior research suggests that perceptions of elite dominance and unequal access to resources are associated with lower democratic satisfaction and trust (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Accordingly, resource capture is expected to negatively affect the perceived quality of democracy.

2.4 Media Freedom and Democratic Quality

In contrast to corruption and resource capture, media freedom functions as a key institutional safeguard that enhances democratic quality. Media freedom refers to the extent to which media organizations operate independently of political and economic control and are able to provide accurate, diverse, and critical information to the public. A free media strengthens democratic accountability by monitoring power holders, exposing wrongdoing, and facilitating informed public debate (Norris, 2008).

Theoretically, media freedom improves democratic quality by reducing information asymmetry between citizens and political elites (Besley & Prat, 2006). When citizens have access to reliable information, they are better equipped to evaluate government performance and hold officials accountable. Empirical studies show that higher levels of media freedom are associated with stronger democratic institutions and higher public confidence in democratic processes (Aalberg & Curran, 2012). Thus, greater media freedom is expected to positively influence the perceived quality of democracy.

2.5 Democratic Quality, Trust in Democracy, and Political Participation

Democratic quality has important implications for citizens' political attitudes and behaviors, particularly trust in democracy and political participation. Trust in democracy reflects citizens' belief that democratic institutions and processes are legitimate, fair, and capable of representing public interests (Levi & Stoker, 2000). When democratic quality is perceived as high, citizens are more likely to trust democratic governance and support the political system.

Similarly, democratic quality influences political participation by shaping citizens' perceptions of political efficacy and system responsiveness. According to participatory democratic theory, citizens are more willing to engage in political activities when they believe their participation can make a meaningful difference (Dalton, 2004). Empirical research confirms that positive evaluations of democratic performance are associated with higher levels of voting, civic engagement, and political expression (Norris, 2011). Conversely, low democratic quality may lead to political apathy or disengagement.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that governance conditions such as corruption, resource capture, and media freedom shape citizens' evaluations of democratic quality, which in turn influence trust in democracy and political participation. This framework provides a coherent theoretical foundation for examining democratic quality and its consequences in the Mongolian context.

III. Research Model and Hypothesis Development

3.1 Research Model

Building on the theoretical perspectives on democratic quality and governance, this study proposes an integrated research model that explains how citizens' perceptions of corruption, resource capture, and media freedom shape the quality of democracy, and how democratic quality subsequently influences trust in democracy and political participation. Prior research suggests that governance failures weaken democratic legitimacy, while information transparency strengthens democratic accountability (Diamond & Morlino, 2004; Norris, 2011). However, existing studies often examine these factors in isolation and rarely connect them to both attitudinal and behavioral democratic outcomes, particularly in emerging democracies. Addressing this gap, the proposed model conceptualizes quality of democracy as a central evaluative mechanism linking governance conditions to citizens' democratic trust and engagement. Based on this framework, the following hypotheses are developed.

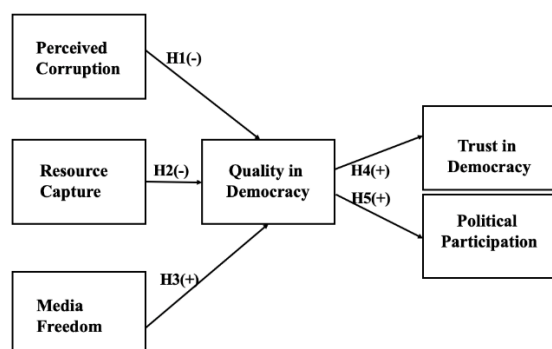


Figure 1. Research model

3.2 Hypotheses Development

Conceptual Definitions

Perceived corruption refers to citizens' perceptions of the prevalence of corruption, abuse of power, and unequal enforcement of laws within political and governmental institutions. Resource capture denotes citizens' perceptions that natural resources particularly in the extractive sector are controlled by political and economic elites rather than serving the public interest. Media freedom reflects citizens' evaluations of the independence of the media and its ability to scrutinize political power without undue interference. Quality of democracy is conceptualized as citizens' overall evaluation of how well democratic institutions, processes, and outcomes function in practice (Diamond & Morlino, 2004). Trust in democracy represents citizens' confidence in democratic institutions and the democratic system as a whole. Political participation refers to citizens' engagement in electoral and non-electoral political activities.

Hypotheses

Corruption undermines the rule of law, political accountability, and equality before the law, thereby eroding citizens' evaluations of how well democracy functions in practice (O'Donnell, 2004; Norris, 2011).

- H.1 Perceived corruption has a negative effect on citizens' perceptions of the quality of democracy.
When citizens perceive that natural resources are disproportionately controlled by elites, democratic responsiveness and fairness are weakened, leading to lower evaluations of democratic quality.
- H.2 Perceived resource capture by political and economic elites has a negative effect on citizens' perceptions of the quality of democracy.
Independent and free media enhance transparency, facilitate public scrutiny of power holders, and strengthen democratic accountability, thereby improving citizens' evaluations of democratic quality.
- H.3 Perceived media freedom has a positive effect on citizens' perceptions of the quality of democracy.
When democratic institutions and processes are perceived to function effectively and fairly, citizens are more likely to develop confidence in democracy as a governing system (Diamond & Morlino, 2004).
- H.4 Citizens' perceptions of the quality of democracy have a positive effect on trust in democracy.
Higher perceived democratic quality increases citizens' motivation to engage in political activities, both electoral and non-electoral, as participation is viewed as meaningful and consequential.
- H.5 Citizens' perceptions of the quality of democracy have a positive effect on political participation.
This hypothesis reflects the argument that democratic quality enhances political participation indirectly by fostering trust in democratic institutions and processes (Norris, 2011).
Drawing on the literature on democratic governance and citizen-based evaluations of democracy, this study proposes that perceived corruption, resource capture, and media freedom shape citizens' perceptions of the quality of democracy. In turn, the quality of democracy is expected to enhance trust in democracy and encourage greater political participation.
- H.6 Trust in democracy mediates the relationship between the quality of democracy and political participation.

Iv Results

4.1 Sample Characteristics

The study is based on survey data collected from 307 Mongolian citizens. Prior to hypothesis testing, the data were screened using SPSS to assess missing values, outliers, and normality. The analysis revealed no critical issues affecting the estimation of the model. The proposed measurement and structural models were subsequently analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) with Smart-PLS.

Table 1. Demographic variables of participants

Factors	Data	Numbers	Percentage
Age	20-30	100	32.5%
	31-40	107	35%
	41-60	100	32.5%
Gender	Man	107	35%
	Woman	200	65%
Education	Secondary school	84	27%
	Bachelor	203	66%
	Master	100	32.5%

4.2 Measurement Model Assessment

Table 2 presents the results of the measurement model assessment, including indicator loadings, internal consistency reliability, and convergent validity. Indicator reliability was first evaluated by examining standardized factor loadings. All indicators exhibit loadings above the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating that each item adequately represents its corresponding latent construct (Hair et al., 2022).

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR). As shown in Table 2, Cronbach's alpha values range from 0.871 to 0.889, while CR values range from 0.921 to 0.931. These values exceed the minimum recommended level of 0.70, demonstrating satisfactory internal consistency reliability across all constructs.

Convergent validity was evaluated using the average variance extracted (AVE). The AVE values for all constructs range between 0.796 and 0.819, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.50. This indicates that each construct explains more than half of the variance of its indicators, confirming adequate convergent validity.

Overall, the results indicate that the measurement model meets the established criteria for indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, and convergent validity.

Table 2. Measurement Model Assessment: Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Indicator	Loading	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Media Freedom	EA1	0.880	0.880	0.926	0.807
	EA2	0.906			
	EA3	0.908			
Resource Capture	CA1	0.898	0.874	0.922	0.798
	CA2	0.915			
	CA3	0.866			
Perceived Corruption	PC1	0.870	0.872	0.922	0.798
	PC2	0.916			
	PC3	0.893			

	PC3	0.893			
Quality in Democracy	Dem1	0.907	0.889	0.931	0.819
	Dem2	0.922			
	Dem3	0.886			
Trust in Democracy	TD1	0.893	0.883	0.927	0.809
	TD2	0.902			
	TD3	0.903			
Political Participation	PP1	0.885	0.871	0.921	0.796
	PP2	0.899			
	PP3	0.892			

4.2 Structural Model

The structural model was evaluated to examine the hypothesized relationships among the latent constructs. The assessment was conducted using the path coefficients obtained from the PLS-SEM analysis. Table 3 summarizes the standardized path coefficients and hypothesis testing results.

The results indicate that perceived corruption has a statistically significant effect on quality in democracy ($\beta = 0.137$), supporting H1. Resource capture also shows a significant relationship with quality in democracy ($\beta = 0.257$), providing support for H2. In addition, media freedom exhibits a significant effect on quality in democracy ($\beta = 0.344$), supporting H3. Among the three antecedents, media freedom demonstrates the strongest association with quality in democracy.

Furthermore, quality in democracy is found to have a strong and statistically significant effect on trust in democracy ($\beta = 0.678$), supporting H4. Similarly, quality in democracy shows a significant effect on political participation ($\beta = 0.674$), providing support for H5. All hypothesized paths in the structural model are supported by the data.

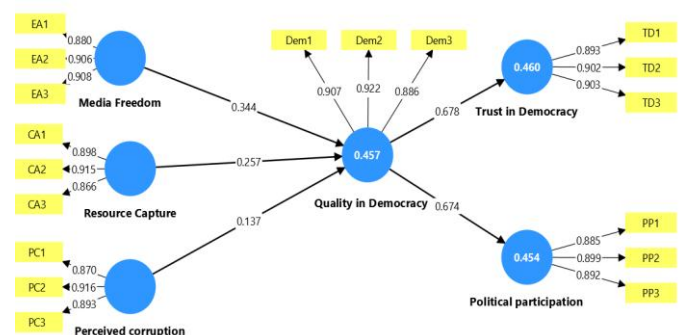


Figure 2. Structural model

Table 3. Structural Model Results and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	β	Result
H1	Perceived Corruption $\rightarrow$ Quality in Democracy	0.137	Supported
H2	Resource Capture $\rightarrow$ Quality in Democracy	0.257	Supported
H3	Media Freedom $\rightarrow$ Quality in Democracy	0.344	Supported
H4	Quality in Democracy $\rightarrow$ Trust in Democracy	0.678	Supported
H5	Quality in Democracy $\rightarrow$ Political Participation	0.674	Supported

4.3 Predictive Power of the Model

Explanation for Table 4 (Coefficient of Determination, R^2)

Table 4 reports the coefficients of determination (R^2) for the endogenous constructs. The R^2 value for quality in democracy is 0.457, indicating that media freedom, resource capture, and perceived corruption jointly explain 45.7% of the variance in this construct. The R^2 value for trust in democracy is 0.460, suggesting that quality in democracy explains 46.0% of its variance. Similarly, the R^2 value for political participation is 0.454, indicating that quality in democracy accounts for 45.4% of the variance in political participation.

Overall, the R^2 values demonstrate moderate explanatory power for the endogenous constructs, in line with recommended benchmarks for PLS-SEM in social science research (Hair et al., 2022).

Table 4. Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

Endogenous Construct	R^2
Quality in Democracy	0.457
Trust in Democracy	0.460
Political Participation	0.454

V. Discussion

This study set out to examine how key governance-related factors—perceived corruption, resource capture, and media freedom—shape citizens' perceptions of the quality of democracy, and how democratic quality, in turn, influences trust in democracy and political participation in Mongolia. The empirical results provide strong support for the proposed model, with all hypothesized relationships being statistically significant.

First, the findings show that perceived corruption significantly affects the quality of democracy. This result aligns with a substantial body of literature arguing that corruption undermines democratic legitimacy by weakening the rule of law, distorting public decision-making, and eroding accountability (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016). In the Mongolian context, where corruption perceptions have remained persistently high despite democratic reforms, this finding suggests that citizens evaluate democratic quality not only based on electoral procedures but also on everyday experiences of fairness and integrity in governance (Freedom House, 2023). The result reinforces the view that corruption represents a structural threat to democratic consolidation in post-socialist democracies.

Second, resource capture emerges as a significant determinant of democratic quality. This finding is consistent with elite capture and state capture theories, which argue that when political and economic elites dominate public resources and policymaking, democratic institutions lose their representative character (Hellman et al., 2000; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). In Mongolia, debates surrounding mining revenues, public procurement, and elite influence over state assets have frequently raised concerns about unequal access to political power. The present results suggest that citizens are highly sensitive to such dynamics and perceive elite dominance as incompatible with high-quality democracy. This supports the argument that democratic quality depends not only on formal institutions but also on the perceived fairness of resource distribution and political influence.

Third, media freedom demonstrates the strongest relationship with the quality of democracy among the antecedent variables. This

finding highlights the critical role of independent media in enabling transparency, accountability, and informed public debate (Norris, 2008; Besley & Prat, 2006). In Mongolia, media freedom has experienced both progress and setbacks, with concerns about political and economic pressures on media organizations. The strong effect observed in this study suggests that citizens view media freedom as a central pillar of democratic functioning, particularly in a context where investigative journalism plays a key role in exposing corruption and elite capture. This finding underscores the importance of safeguarding media independence as a mechanism for improving democratic quality.

Beyond governance conditions, the study also demonstrates that quality of democracy has a substantial impact on trust in democracy and political participation. Consistent with democratic legitimacy theory, citizens who perceive democracy as functioning effectively are more likely to trust democratic institutions (Levi & Stoker, 2000). In the Mongolian context, where public trust in political institutions has fluctuated over time, this result suggests that improving democratic quality may be essential for strengthening regime support and democratic resilience.

Similarly, the positive relationship between democratic quality and political participation supports participatory democratic theory, which emphasizes that citizens are more willing to engage politically when they believe the system is responsive and meaningful (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011). Rather than fostering apathy, higher perceived democratic quality appears to encourage citizens to participate in political processes, reinforcing democratic accountability. This finding is particularly relevant for Mongolia, where voter turnout and civic engagement have shown signs of decline in recent years.

Taken together, the findings suggest that democratic quality functions as a critical linking mechanism between governance structures and democratic outcomes. Corruption, resource capture, and media freedom shape how democracy is experienced by citizens, and these evaluations directly influence trust and participation. This integrated perspective contributes to a more nuanced understanding of democratic consolidation in emerging democracies.

Vi. Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature on democratic quality by empirically examining the governance-related determinants and democratic consequences of democratic quality in Mongolia. By integrating perceived corruption, resource capture, and media freedom into a unified framework, the study moves beyond procedural definitions of democracy and highlights the importance of citizens' subjective evaluations of democratic performance.

The findings demonstrate that corruption and elite control of resources undermine democratic quality, while media freedom strengthens it. Moreover, democratic quality is shown to play a central role in fostering trust in democracy and encouraging political participation. These results reinforce the argument that democratic consolidation depends not only on institutional design but also on the perceived fairness, transparency, and inclusiveness of governance processes (Diamond & Morlino, 2004; Merkel, 2014).

From a practical perspective, the results offer important implications for Mongolia. Efforts to improve democratic quality should prioritize anti-corruption reforms, reduce opportunities for elite capture of public resources, and protect media independence. Strengthening these areas may not only enhance the functioning of democratic institutions but also rebuild public trust and stimulate greater citizen engagement in political life.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. The use of cross-sectional survey data restricts causal inference, and future research could employ longitudinal designs to examine changes in democratic quality over time. Additionally, comparative studies across post-socialist or resource-dependent democracies could further clarify the generalizability of the findings. Future research may also explore additional mediating or moderating variables, such as political efficacy or social trust, to deepen understanding of the mechanisms linking governance conditions to democratic outcomes.

In conclusion, this study highlights the central role of governance quality and information transparency in shaping democratic experiences. By focusing on Mongolia, it provides context-specific insights while contributing to broader debates on democratic quality and consolidation in emerging democracies.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire

Construct	Measurement Item	Source
Perceived Corruption	Corruption is widespread among political leaders in Mongolia.	Anderson & Tverdova (2003); Norris (2011)
	Public officials often abuse their power for personal gain.	Transparency International (2019)
	Laws are not enforced equally because of corruption.	O'Donnell (2004); Norris (2011)
	Political connections matter more than rules in government decision-making.	Anderson & Tverdova (2003)
Resource Capture	Natural resources in Mongolia mainly benefit political and economic elites.	Ross (2015); Humphreys et al. (2007)
	Mining companies have excessive influence over government decisions.	Ross (2015)
	Revenues from natural resources are not distributed fairly among citizens.	Humphreys et al. (2007)

	Resource-related policies prioritize elite interests over public welfare.	Ross (2015)
Media Freedom	The media in Mongolia can freely criticize the government.	Dahl (1971); Freedom House (2023)
	Journalists can investigate corruption without fear of retaliation.	Norris & Grömping (2019)
	News media provide unbiased political information.	Freedom House (2023)
	Media outlets operate independently from political and business interests.	Dahl (1971)
Quality of Democracy	Democratic institutions in Mongolia function effectively.	Diamond & Morlino (2004)
	Political decisions generally reflect the will of the people.	Linde & Ekman (2003)
	Democratic rules and procedures are applied fairly.	Diamond & Morlino (2004)
	Democracy works well in Mongolia.	Norris (2011)
Trust in Democracy	I trust democratic institutions in Mongolia.	Easton (1975); Norris (2011)
	Democracy is the best form of government for Mongolia.	Catterberg & Moreno (2006)
	I have confidence in the way democracy works in Mongolia.	Norris (2011)
	Democratic institutions can be relied upon to act in the public interest.	Easton (1975)
Political Participation	I intend to vote in future national elections.	Verba et al. (1995); Dalton (2008)
	I discuss political issues with others.	Dalton (2008)
	I am willing to participate in lawful political activities (e.g., petitions, protests).	Norris (2002)
	I follow political news and public affairs closely.	Verba et al. (1995)