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### Title

Popular Conceptions of the Meaning of Democracy: Democratic Understanding in Unlikely Places

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The Third Wave of democratization has steadily changed the political map of the world since the late 1980s. The transitions in the Philippines, South Korea and Taiwan preceded the dramatic collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the emergence of new democracies in their place. Democratization also spread in Africa and Latin America (Huntington 1991). These events generated Frances Fukuyama's (1992) well-known statement that democracy appeared to represent the endpoint in human history.

Simultaneously, a new wave of international public opinion surveys are describing striking support for democracy on a near global scale. Based on the findings of the World Values Survey, Ronald Inglehart (2003: 51) stated, "In country after country throughout the world, a clear majority of the population endorses democracy. This is the good news that emerges from the latest wave of the WVS/EVS surveys, covering over 80 percent of the world's population." The findings from comparable surveys in Eastern Europe, Africa and East Asia also describe broad support for democracy, even in some of the most unlikely places (Shin 2007; Dalton and Shin 2006; Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi 2004; Rose, Haerpfer and Mishler 1998). From a different perspective, Amaryta Sen (1999) argued that democracy is a universal human value, not limited to the affluent advanced industrial societies. Indeed, one of the most remarkable findings from this new wave of global public opinion research is the breath of public support for democracy (Mattes 2007).

Despite this evidence, there are frequent concerns that public expressions of support for democracy in many developing nations lack substance (Schaffer 1998; Seligson 2004; Canache 2006; Baviskar and Malone 2004; Schedler and Sarsfield 2004). Some skeptics argue that most residents in developing nations are preoccupied with their economic needs and have no reason to favor political modernization and democratization. Another argument maintains that these publics do not understand democracy. Democracy has supposedly become a vague referent that has positive connotations, but these publics lack any real understanding of the concept. Alternatively, other researchers claim that support for democracy implicitly means support for Western income levels and living standards, and not for democracy as a political system. Or, democracy itself is a term without meaning embraced even by non-democratic regimes because of its positive connotations. For instance, the communist East Germany was the German Democratic Republic and communist North Korea is formally the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

This paper addresses the question of how ordinary people understand democracy. Do contemporary publics display a reasonable understanding of the meaning of democracy, and what are the contents of their definitions? Do people focus on the procedural aspects of democracy—elections, democratic institutions, and processes—which are the main focus of democratization efforts. Alternatively, do they see democracy in economic or social welfare terms? We draw on a wide range of public opinion surveys that have recently been conducted to explore these questions in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America.

Our research proceeds in four stages. The following section discusses the theoretical literature on democracy to consider what classes of responses one might expect from the perspective of democratic theory. The next section presents citizen definitions of the meaning of democracy from nearly 50 nationally representative public opinion surveys that we have assembled. We then test for systematic cross-national patterns in the definitions of democracy. For a subset of nations, we also track how public perceptions of democracy change after a transition from an authoritarian state to a democratic regime. Finally, we close with a discussion of the implications of our findings for political culture research on democracy.

### **Theoretical Definitions of Democracy**

The current series of public opinion surveys that blanket the world and ask about public support for democracy lead to an inevitable question: what is the meaning of democracy to these respondents. What does the good democratic citizen mean when they say they favor democracy over other forms of government?

We might turn to democratic theory to identify the broad parameters of an appropriate answer, even if we recognize that average citizens are less sophisticated about politics and democracy. Collier and Levitsky (1997) point out that the most widely employed definitions of democracy focus on the procedures of governance. For example, Robert Dahl's writings (1971, 1989) provide a benchmark for defining the essential elements of democracy. In *Polyarchy*, Dahl (1971: 3) identified eight criteria in defining democracy: the right to vote; the right to be elected; the right of political leaders to compete for support and votes; elections that are free and fair; freedom of association; freedom of expression; alternative sources of information; and institutions that depend on votes and other expressions of preference. Like many other democratic theorists, Dahl is largely equating democracy with the institutions and processes of democratic government. If citizens can participate equally in free and fair elections, and if elections direct the actions of government, then this is the essence of democracy.

This institutional/procedural definition of electoral democracy is often accepted as a minimum measure of a democratic system. From Schumpeter (1943) to Przeworski et al. (2000), democracy is typically equated with the electoral process. Similarly, the democracy building activities of governments and the international NGO community often focus on the creation of electoral institutions as the defining element of democracy. From this perspective, we might expect that citizens identify democracy with the institutions and processes of democratic governance. These individuals would cite "free and fair elections", "responsive government", "multiparty competition", and "popular control" or "majority rule" as key elements in defining democracy.<sup>1</sup>

Second, in contrast to defining democracy in terms of its institutions and procedures, people might focus on its outcomes. In part, this is implicit in much of the democratic theory literature. For instance, Dahl's discussion of electoral democracy presumes the existence of freedom of speech, assembly and other rights essential to make electoral competition meaningful. Democracy includes an emphasis on freedom and liberty as its essential goals, with the institutions of democracy a way to achieve these goals. This has also been part of the political rhetoric of democracy, from the preamble to the Declaration of Independence to Franklin D. Roosevelt's articulation of the four democratic freedoms in his 1941 State of the Union address. Similarly, Larry Diamond (1999) lists political liberties, participation rights of citizens, equal justice before the law, and equal rights for women as four of the core democratic values. In principle, other forms of government might seek to achieve these same goals; but in practice, it is

contradictory for autocratic regimes to encourage and allow the liberties and freedom of the citizenry.

If people focus on the goals of democratic government, this would produce different definitions of democracy. Democracy might be defined in terms of the individual rights and liberties protected by a democratic form of government, such as freedom of speech, religion, and freedom of assembly. The protection of individual liberty and rights by the rule of law is essential to democracy. Even if individuals in developing nations might not understand the institutional procedures of democracy, the human desire for freedom and liberty may generate support for democracy as a means to these desired goals.

Third, while scholarly definitions of democracy focus on the political, there may also be a social dimension to public images of democracy—especially in developing nations. T. H. Marshall (1992) discussed a social dimension to democratic citizenship. In addition to civil and political rights, democracy can include social rights, such as social services, providing for those in need, and ensuring the general welfare of others. This approach argues that unless individuals have sufficient resources to meet their basic social needs, democratic principles of political equality and participation are meaningless (Huber, Rueschemeyer and Stephens 1997). Indeed, even one of FDR's four freedoms included the freedom from want.

A social definition of democracy has some theoretical basis, and some analysts claim that contemporary expressions of support for democracy in developing nations are merely expressions of support for a higher standard of living. To the extent that democracy is identified with affluent, advanced industrial societies, the endorsement of democracy is presumed to mean a desire to achieve this same economic standard but not necessarily the same political standard. This debate over the political versus the economic basis of democracy has been an ongoing theme in the literature on the democratic transition in Eastern Europe (Hofferbert and Klingemann 1999; Fuchs and Roller 2005), and in discussions of other developing nations.<sup>2</sup> Thus, this orientation would lead citizens to cite economic improvement, social welfare, and economic security as key elements of their definition of democracy.

These three alternatives—procedures/institutions, freedom and liberties, and social benefits—constitute the primary theoretical choices in defining democracy. Certainly other responses will appear in mass opinion surveys. However, the extent to which democracy is defined in terms of these three broad choices provides a framework for assessing the high levels of public support for democracy and the implications of these democratic aspirations. Each alternative has different implications for the interpretation of public opinion toward democracy and the principles that guide the democratization process.

### **Prior Public Opinion Research**

For the past two decades, an increasing number of public opinion surveys have explored conceptions of democracy among ordinary citizens. We first review the evolution of these surveys, and then summarize their findings.

These national and multi-national surveys can be classified into two waves. The first wave surveys were mostly single country surveys that were conducted in Europe. The 1970 Dutch survey, 1978 and 1986 Allensbach Institute surveys, 1989 and 1990 Hungarian panel surveys, and a 1989 Spanish survey belong to this first wave. The second wave surveys followed the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, and they mostly focused on several countries within a region. This wave includes the Afrobarometer (Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi 2004), the East Asia Barometer (Chu et al. forthcoming), the Latinobarometer, and the Post-communist Citizen Project (Barnes and Simon 1998). Several other national surveys have also

adopted the question on the meaning of democracy (Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger 1997; Camp et al. 2001; Baviskar and Malone 2004; Canache 2006; Thomassen 1995). Although these regional and single nation surveys asked similar or nearly identical open-ended questions, this evidence has not been assembled together. This is the objective of our research.

## **Approaches**

Prior public opinion surveys have asked two types of questions, open-ended and closed-ended, to ascertain popular conceptions of democracy (Mattes 2006). The open-ended approach tries to address two specific questions. Do ordinary citizens have the capacity to understand the concept of democracy? If they do, how do they define it? The close-ended question, in contrast, structures the choices to determine what types of democratic conceptions are most and least popular among ordinary citizens.<sup>3</sup> Both closed-ended and open-ended questions are occasionally asked together (Simon 1998; Fuchs and Roller 2006).

We focus on the open-ended questions as more likely to tap what citizens spontaneously associate with the term democracy, and to provide a method allowing different interpretations of democracy across nations. For instance, the 1998 Hewlett survey directed by Roderic Ai Camp (2001) asked a pair of open-ended questions to compare popular conceptions of democracy in three Latin American countries. More recently, three regional barometers—the Afrobarometer, the Asian Barometer, and the Latinobarometer—asked a similar open-ended question. These multinational surveys similarly asked respondents to define democracy in their own words. Yet they were not all based on the same notion of democracy. The Hewlett survey, for example, treated democracy as a single dimensional concept, and allowed respondents to identify only one component. The three regional surveys, in contrast, treated it as a compound concept, and allowed respondents to name up to three components.

The 1992 and 1995 surveys conducted in Russia and the Ukraine, in contrast, allowed the samples of average citizens and elites to identify all the political and other values and practices they would associate with democracy (Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger 1997). The researchers counted the number of their responses to determine the public's cognitive capacity to understand democracy. This analysis presumed that "citizens who have more to say about the meaning of democracy has more fully developed cognitions of democracy than those who say little or nothing to say about it" (Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger 1997: 164). The Post-communist Citizen Project (Barnes and Simon 1998) asked both closed and open-ended questions in their surveys of five Central and Eastern European countries.

## **Levels of Awareness**

Are ordinary citizens capable of defining democracy in their own words? Prior surveys discussed above suggest that the public's ability to define democracy varies considerably across countries and different timeperiods. In the Russian and Ukraine surveys, for example, three-quarters of their mass samples gave at least one answer to the open-ended question, confirming the salience of democracy (Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger 1997: 166). In other post-communist countries, those who gave a definition of democracy varied from a low of 66 percent in Romania to a high of 87 percent in Czechoslovakia (Simon 1998). According to the two panel surveys conducted in Hungary during the 1989-1993 period, the percentage of citizens who offered a definition of democracy increased by 12 percentage points over a four-year period (Simon 1998: 105).

The Afrobarometer found greater variation than observed in Central and Eastern Europe. Those who are able to give a meaning for democracy range from a low of 58 percent in Lesotho to a high of 98 percent in Nigeria (Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi 2005: 66). The 1998 Hewlett study found that nearly nine-tenths of the publics in Chile, Costa Rica and Mexico could offer a definition of democracy. In contrast, a 2003 Mexican national survey found that “over 60 percent of respondents were unable or unwilling to produce an answer” (Schedler and Sarfield 2004: 2).

In summary, it appears that most citizens can offer a definition of democracy, even in nations with limited economic development and even limited experience with a democratic form of government. However, because researchers analyzed each of these survey projects individually, the broader patterns of cross-national similarity and differences is not apparent. And even more important than the percentage giving a response is the content of these responses—which we consider in the next section.

## **Types of Conceptions**

What particular properties do ordinary citizens associate with democracy? Previous studies have used several categories to classify responses to the meaning of democracy question: (1) procedural versus substantive; (2) political versus economic; and (3) liberal versus non-liberal. These partially overlap with the three criteria we have proposed, and thus a review of this literature provides a glimpse of what might be expected.

In surveying post-communist nations in the early 1990s, Simon (2001) found that “liberty and basic rights” was the first answer given by an average of a majority of the public in four of the five nations. Similar patterns emerged from a follow-up survey of 13 Eastern and Central European countries in 1998-2001 (Fuchs and Roller 2006: 78). The Afrobarometer and Latinobarometer surveys also revealed the prevalence of liberal political values in popular conceptions of democracy. In both barometer surveys, as in Europe, protection of political freedom and civil liberties were the most common responses in defining democracy. References to liberty, freedom and equality also accounted for the plurality of responses in the 1998 Hewlett survey of Chile, Costa Rica and Mexico (Camp 2001: 17).

It appears that most citizens do not think of democracy primarily in procedural or institutional terms, as the literature on democratic theory would suggest. Less than a quarter mentioned these factors in the post-Communist Citizens survey (Simon 2001: 108). For instance, 58% of Polish respondents cited freedoms or liberty as a definition of democracy, but only 8% mentioned some aspect of government or the electoral process. A modest percentage cited institutional or procedural factors in most of the Afrobarometer nations, but these responses normally trailed far behind definitions based on freedoms and liberty. Similar results emerged from the 1998 Hewlett study.

Finally, previous studies provide a mixed view of the importance of social and economic factors in defining democracy. The USIS surveys conducted in Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria in 1991-93 asked people to choose between three political and three economic values that they considered most important to their country’s democratic development (McIntosh and MacIver 1993). Their responses equated democracy mostly with the economic values of prosperity, equality, and security.<sup>4</sup> The 1993 Korea Barometer survey confirmed this pattern with two-thirds of the masses choosing economic rights over political rights (Shin 1999: 60).

However, most surveys that use an open-ended framework find that social and economic definitions of democracy are very infrequent. In four of the five nations of the Post-Communist Citizen project, less than a sixth of the public mentioned socio-economic factors despite the

severe economic hardships East Europe was facing at the time (the exception was Hungary, where nearly a third cited socio-economic definitions) (Simon 2001). In the Afrobarometer survey, only a small percentage mentions economic equality, social justice or other such factors as elements of democracy.

In summary, the ability to describe democracy in reasonable terms appears more common than what we might have initially presumed. Moreover, although the evidence is mixed, it appears that definitions based on conceptions of freedom and liberty are more prevalent than definitions based on democratic procedures/institutions or the potential socio-economic benefits of democracy. However, by combining these previous studies, and adding new evidence from the East Asia Barometer, Latinobarometer and other surveys, we can develop a much broader and more definitive assessment of how contemporary publics understand democracy.

### **Measuring Public Understanding of Democracy**

How do contemporary publics understand the meaning of democracy? Even in established democracies, there are long-standing debates about whether citizens possess the political knowledge and sophistication to understand basic political concepts (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). In addition, democracy is a complex concept especially for those who might not know specific civics book facts about government or follow politics closely. The previous section also noted that democracy has multiple potential meanings. Therefore, the public's knowledge and understanding of democracy remains an open question.

To address this topic, we compiled data from the major cross-national surveys that have used a common open-ended question on the meaning of democracy. The *Post-communist Citizen Project* adopted the question in surveying several newly democratized East European nations (Barnes and Simon 1998). The Afrobarometer introduced a slightly different version of this open-ended question in surveying eleven African nations in the early 1990s (Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi 2004). The East Asia Barometer and the Latinobarometer adopted a version of this question in their regional surveys (Chu et al. forthcoming; Latinobarometer 2002; also see Camp 2001).<sup>5</sup> We also rely on these projects because we were able to acquire the individual level survey data to facilitate future analyses of the correlates of responses. Our goal was to expand the cross-national breadth of the empirical evidence by merging data from these separate projects, which yields results from nearly 50 democracies. In addition, in a few instances we have responses from citizens in established democracies (the United States, Austria, Japan and Spain) to provide a reference to the other new democracies and developing political systems in our study.

Before presenting the data, we want to acknowledge the limitations. Comparing responses to open-ended questions across nations is methodologically challenging. Even in established democracies, there is an active debate about the political knowledge and sophistication of mass publics. Furthermore, it is difficult to ask open-ended questions in a comparable manner, because they are subject to different interpretations by respondents and answers are often imprecise and must be recorded by interviewers. Question order effects may also influence open-ended responses, especially when combining different survey projects. The administration of the interview by different survey research firms can affect the extensiveness of responses and the number of responses to open-ended questions. Then, the replies must be coded, which can add further variability into the data as different projects use different coding systems. In our case, the stem question was similar—but not identical—across nations. However, each project independently coded the responses. Therefore, we used the available codings to construct comparability between these different coding systems. The resulting cross-national data are

admittedly imprecise (although they are probably more comparable within projects than between projects). However, these data provide valuable insights into public thinking, and the results do present a surprisingly consistent view of how ordinary people think about the meaning of democracy. We therefore focus on broad cross-national patterns rather than the specific percentages in any single nation.

Table 1 displays the responses to the survey question grouped into five categories.<sup>6</sup> The first column includes responses that define democracy in terms of *civil liberties and citizen rights*. For instance, freedom of speech, political liberty, protection of individual rights, or freedom to participate. The second column includes a variety of responses coded under the heading of the *political process*. This includes definitions of democracy as rule by the people, elections, majority rule, or open and accountable government. The third column presents responses that are broadly classified as *social benefits*, which includes social and economic development, references to equality or justice, or peace and stability. The fourth column presents miscellaneous responses that cannot be coded under another heading. Often this category reflects the different coding schemes used in the separate projects, so it becomes a residual category for responses that do not fit the first three groupings.<sup>7</sup> The fifth column presents the percentages who do not offer any substantive definition. To those individuals, democracy is a concept largely devoid of meaning.

One of the most striking findings is that most people in most nations do offer some definition of democracy. In the four established democracies in this set—the United States, Austria, Japan, and Spain—about a quarter of the public did not provide a definition (26%). Even in these nations, some members of the mass public have limited political knowledge or engagement, so they do not offer any response. However, the average percentage who responds with a definition of democracy is not significantly different for the other nations that are not established democracies (27%). The citizens in ten Afrobarometer nations are more likely to offer a definition of democracy than are Spaniards or Japanese. A large majority in several Asian and Latin American nations also offer definitions. Indeed, even in Mainland China—with very low income levels, a large peasantry, and limited democratic experience—two thirds of the public define what democracy means to them. Only in Brazil in 2001 did a majority of the public fail to register a response; but several other Latin American nations also score relatively low in democratic awareness, which seems to be a persisting aspect of the Latin American political experience (Latinobarometer 2002).

The simple awareness of the term ‘democracy’ and the willingness to express a definition is a first indication of the meaningfulness of this concept to contemporary publics. More important, of course, is the content of these definitions. Especially striking is the broad definition of democracy in terms of rights and civil liberties in Table 1. This is significant for several reasons. First, this implies that people think about democracy more in terms of its intended outcomes—freedom, liberty and rights—than its means. Definitions of democracy in terms of elections, majority rule and other democratic procedures are about half as frequent as definitions citing freedom and liberty. In other words, people understand that electoral and constitutional democracy is not enough; to most people the real meaning of democracy is in what it produces. Second, the breadth of freedom/liberty responses across a wide array of nations is impressive. We might expect such rights consciousness in the United States, and it clearly appears in the American responses. However, even in poor nations like Zambia and Malawi—with modest literacy levels, low living standards, and limited access to media and other information sources—the average citizen primarily gives examples of rights and liberties when asked what democracy means to them. It is, perhaps, a testament to the democratic ideal that citizens in even the most unlikely national circumstances express such an understanding of the concept.



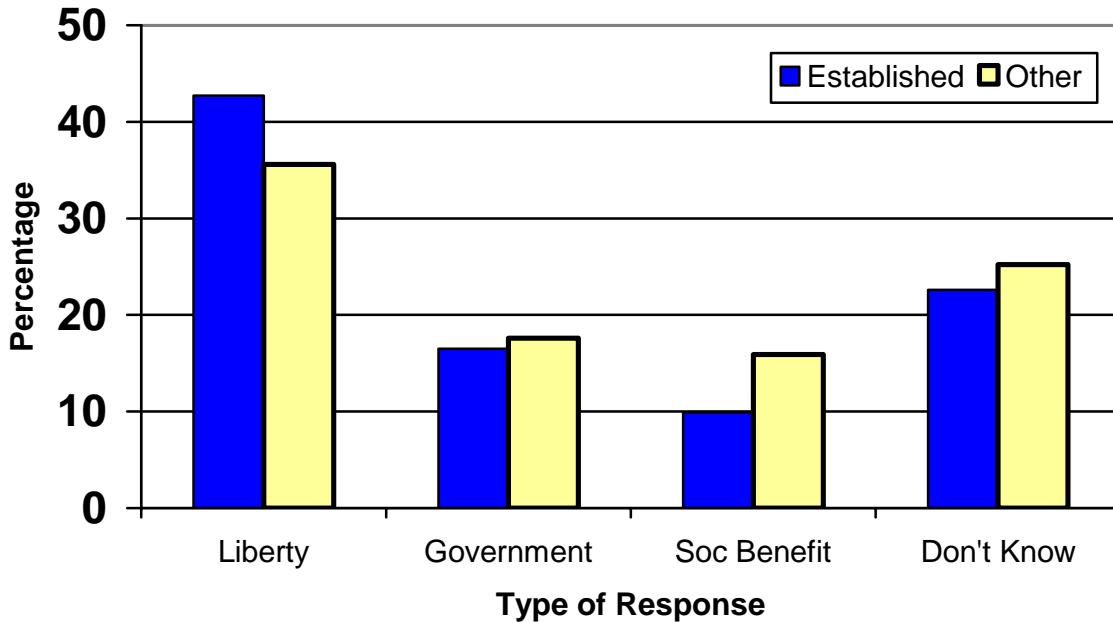
**Table 1. The Meaning of Democracy for Contemporary Publics (in percent)**

<b>Nation</b>	<b>Freedom, Rights, Liberty</b>	<b>Political Process</b>	<b>Social Benefits</b>	<b>Other Response</b>	<b>Don't Know</b>	<b>Total Responses</b>
Afghanistan	50.3	21.9	19.1	10.3	32.6	117.5
Argentina	51.6	23.4	23.7	19.6	11.2	129.5
Austria	37.4	34.8	3.5	10.4	13.0	99.1
Bolivia	46.2	27.1	18.3	8.9	22.4	123.0
Botswana	28.5	43.6	28.7	1.6	28.8	131.2
Brazil	25.4	7.6	12.6	4.0	56.4	106.0
Chile	43.1	15.3	33.0	22.1	15.6	129.1
China	23.2	53.3	7.0	16.8	34.6	134.9
Colombia	6.7	38.0	10.1	9.8	44.5	109.1
Costa Rica	58.9	12.9	27.4	6.9	20.7	126.8
Czech Rep	60.9	11.3	11.3	3.5	13.0	100.0
Ecuador	45.7	19.8	18.6	12.9	30.1	127.0
El Salvador	27.7	5.0	21.6	7.9	49.8	112.1
Ghana	29.1	35.5	10.9	1.9	25.0	102.4
Guatemala	33.4	7.4	24.1	8.5	39.6	113.0
Honduras	43.5	18.2	22.9	10.6	23.9	119.1
Hong Kong	36.5	20.3	13.9	17.0	21.3	109.0
Hungary	24.5	13.7	25.9	7.9	28.0	100.0
Indonesia	9.0	5.0	33.0		63.0	110.0
Japan	30.6	15.3	25.0	20.9	35.5	127.3
Korea	59.5	16.4	54.9	26.0	1.5	158.3
Lesotho	17.0	24.4	9.7	7.0	42.2	100.3
Lithuania	55.1	3.4	4.1	1.4	33.0	97.0
Malawi	78.7	21.8	11.7	9.8	8.2	130.2
Mali	23.9	15.7	23.0	35.8	28.6	127.0
Mexico	42.1	33.2	25.5	11.8	14.0	126.6
Mongolia	68.2	26.6	42.6	23.4	31.4	192.2
Namibia	67.2	13.1	17.6	1.4	34.2	133.5
Nicaragua	49.9	24.3	26.7	11.0	16.4	128.3
Nigeria	13.8	56.3	8.7	18.3	6.2	103.3
Panama	38.9	15.2	17.8	22.2	29.5	123.6
Paraguay	47.4	5.1	20.9	13.9	20.7	108.1
Peru	46.5	22.2	23.2	4.0	25.0	120.9
Philippines	48.3	8.7	13.3	12.4	26.7	109.4
Poland	57.5	8.9	13.0	1.6	19.0	100.0
Romania	44.9	4.0	15.2	1.5	34.0	99.6
South Africa	68.8	33.6	36.7	2.9	10.0	152.0
Spain	41.3	14.0	10.5	4.2	30.0	100.0
Taiwan	39.9	36.6	11.3	26.1	17.0	130.9
Tanzania	46.0	28.4	23.1	18.0	15.2	130.7
Thailand	49.3	24.9	22.1	28.4	20.2	144.9
Uganda	22.0	28.8	20.9	4.7	29.3	105.7
Uruguay	48.9	30.1	27.2	10.4	11.1	127.7
USA	68.0	5.0	6.0	9.0	12.0	100.0
Venezuela	73.7	9.1	18.3	17.3	14.8	133.3
Zambia	61.9	20.6	4.8	2.8	21.4	111.5
Zimbabwe	30.0	43.8	19.4	4.1	19.1	116.4

*Sources:* Afrobarometer (I), East Asia Barometer (I), Latinobarometer 2001. Post-communist Citizens Survey (plus Austria and Spain); USA: Camp survey; Afghanistan and Indonesia: The Asia Foundation surveys.

The results in table 1 are also different from what many of the skeptics have assumed. Definitions of democracy in terms of social benefits are fairly low in most nations—averaging about a sixth of all responses. Furthermore, often the most common answers coded under this heading are responses about social equality, justice, and equality of opportunities, rather than blatant economic benefits such as finding a job, providing social welfare or economic opportunities. For instance, a relatively large percentage of the public in Korea, Mongolia, South Africa and Chile are coded as defining democracy in terms of social benefits, but in each case more than three-quarters of these responses involve social justice and equality, and only a small percentage are listed under the subheading of social and economic development. These results thus undercut claims that supporters of democracy really mean they want higher living standards and other benefits. Figure 1 compares the four established democracies in our data to the other forty-five nations, and what is most striking is the small gap between the definitions of democracy across these two sets of nations.

**Figure 1. Meaning of Democracy in Established and New Democracies**



These results suggest that an understanding of democracy has diffused widely around the globe. Instead of assuming that democracy is a Western concept, understood only by affluent and well-educated citizens in established advanced industrial democracies, these patterns imply that democracy embodies human values whose broad principles are understood by most citizens in developing nations.<sup>8</sup> Thus, when people say that democracy is the best form of government, they are thinking in terms of the freedoms and liberty it provides, rather than its political processes.

## The Correlates of Democratic Understanding

What shapes public understanding of democracy? In broad terms, the literature offers two explanations. First, a *logic of diffusion* suggests that democratic norms and aspirations spread across nations because of the innate appeal of democratic principles (Rohrschneider 1999). The shopkeeper in Cincinnati knows what it means to have freedom and liberty to live one's own life, and a peasant in China can also understand this ideal even if it is unrealized in his nation. Moreover, confronting a life without freedom and rights, the Chinese peasant might be even more aware of the autocratic alternatives to democracy, and the advantages of democracy in providing rights and freedom that are human values. If this logic is correct, then public understanding of democracy should be only weakly related to national conditions, such as the democratic experience or affluence of the population.

Alternatively, a *logic of learning* suggests that democracy is a concept derived from democratic experience. For instance, Rohrschneider (1999) found that East German political elites expressed as much support for democracy as western elites, but deeper democratic values such as political tolerance were apparently derived from democratic experience. Fuchs (1999) found that the mass publics of East and West Germany were equal in their overwhelming support of democracy-in-principle, but East Germans were significantly lower than West Germans in their support for democracy-in-practice. Similarly, it might be that the mass publics of other emerging democracies generally express democratic aspirations when asked whether they support democracy as a regime form, but their understanding of the meaning of democracy requires some degree of democratic experience (Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998; Mattes and Bratton 2007). If this logic is correct, then definitions of democracy should be clearly related to national conditions such as democratic experience.

To test these theories, we linked responses to the meaning of democracy question to the economic and political characteristics of the nation.<sup>9</sup> One of the most obvious predictors is the socio-economic development of a nation. Affluent societies with better-educated publics should be better able to discuss concepts like democracy, and thus be less likely to give 'don't know' responses to this question. In addition, national affluence may be related to the content of democratic definitions. For instance, the popular lore presumes that equating democracy with social benefits and a higher living standard is more common in less developed nations. Similarly, we might expect that a rights/liberties consciousness is more common in affluent societies. In other words, if there are economic boundaries to the diffusion of democratic understanding, these should be apparent in a relationship between affluence and survey responses. We measure national affluence with GNP/capita and the Human Development Index for the year in which the survey was conducted.

Democratic experience is potentially even more relevant to public understanding of democracy. We might naturally assume that the citizens in more democratic nations are better able to define democracy—and perhaps hold images of democracy that focus on freedom/liberties and the political process, rather than social benefits. This is the logic of learning explanation of democratic knowledge. We test this theory in two ways. First, we measure current democratic conditions through the Freedom House scale of democracy (transposed so that high values are more democratic). Second, since learning may not be immediate and many of the nations in Table 1 had undergone recent democratic transitions, we also measured cumulative democratic experience—the level of democracy over the 10 or 20 years previous to the survey.

Table 2 presents the correlations between these national characteristics and four categories of response from Table 1. The first two rows display the relationship between economic development and public responses about the meaning of democracy. Affluence (GNP/capita) and higher levels of Human Development (HDI) slightly decrease the percentage of the public who gives ‘don’t know’ responses; but these are not statistically significant relationships. At the same time, affluent publics are slightly less likely to define democracy in terms of its social benefits (-.10); but again these are not statistically significant differences. The only significant effect of national affluence is to increase the emphasis on freedom and liberty as definitions of democracy (.29). These patterns reaffirm the general impressions from Table 1; the understanding of democracy is not strongly conditioned by the socio-economic development of a nation. Poor nations are almost as likely to express some definition of democracy as affluent publics, and even the content of understanding is only weakly associated with national affluence.

**Table 2. The Correlates of Responses to the Meaning of Democracy**

National Characteristic	Meaning of Democracy			
	Don't Know	Freedom, Liberty	Procedures, Institutions	Social Benefits
GNP/capita (ppp)	-.19	.29*	-.22	-.10
Human Development Index	-.08	.22	-.34*	.03
Freedom House democracy score	-.24	.31*	-.30*	.16
Polity Democracy (10 years)	-.11	.08	-.19	.15
Polity Democracy (20 years)	-.10	.07	-.09	.12

Source: Meaning of democracy percentages adjusted from table 1 (see note 4); GNP/capita (ppp) from World Bank; Freedom House democracy scores (high scores=more democratic); and cumulative democracy scores from the Polity database. Ns range from 45 to 48.

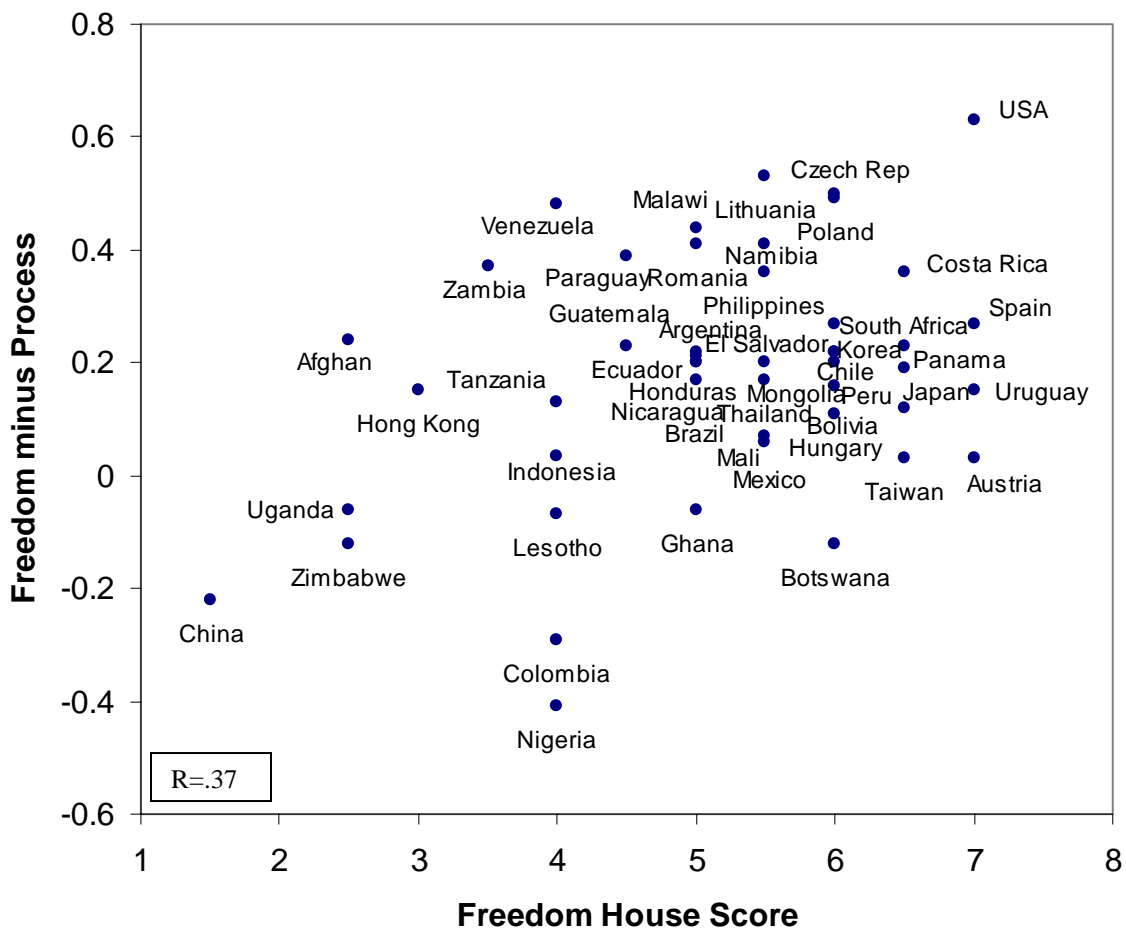
Note: Coefficients significant at .10 level denoted by an asterisk.

It also seem likely that democratic understanding is related to the democratic experience of a nation. Again, the evidence in Table 2 presents only muted effects. For instance, neither the level of democracy in a nation at the time of the survey (Freedom House score) or the democratic history of a nation (cumulative Polity scores) are significantly related to the percentage of ‘don’t know’ responses. This is persuasive evidence that awareness of democracy has broadly diffused around the globe, and is not simply a function of living within democratic political system. There is, however, some evidence that the content of understanding changes with democratic experience. Higher levels of democracy (Freedom House score) increases the emphasis on freedom and liberty as definitions of democracy (.31). At the same time, the level of democracy significantly decreases responses about the political process as definitions of democracy (-.30). Figure 2 graphically summarizes this shift by comparing the difference between freedom/liberty and political process responses, as a function of democracy. Citizens in the least democracy nations in our study—such as China, Uganda and Zimbabwe—think of democracy in terms of political processes such as majority rule, free and fair elections. These are the procedures of

democracy. However, with increasing democratic experience the emphasis changes to freedom and liberties as the meaning of democracy. For instance, Americans were asked only for a single definition of democracy, and 68% cited freedom and liberties, compared to only 23% of Chinese who had the opportunity to give three definitions.

The last two columns of Table 2 present the relationship between cumulative democratic experience and popular understanding of democracy. All but one of these relationships are statistically insignificant. This implies that democratic learning if it occurs as seen in Figure 1, is a rapid learning process, such that current democratic conditions are more important than a nation's democratic history.

**Figure 2. Freedom House Scores and Relative Emphasis on Freedom/Liberty versus Political Process as Definitions of Democracy**



Source: Freedom House scores for year of survey and a measure of the difference between those defining democracy in terms of freedom/liberty minus those defining it in terms of political process.

Early studies of political culture and political development often discounted the ability or the willingness of the public in developing nations to understand or embrace democracy (e.g., Almond and Verba 1965; Pye and Verba 1965). Our results provide a more positive picture of

the level of awareness of democracy, and the breadth of citizen responses. Even if individuals do not fully comprehend the exact details of the factors they cite in defining democracy, the fact that they cite broad principles of liberal democracy is a positive finding. Moreover, the identification of democracy with greater freedom and liberty has broadly diffused across the globe, articulated by publics in even unlikely political and economic circumstances. This reinforces Sen's (1999) claim that democracy represents a human value that is relatively easily understood, and these sentiments apparently strengthen further with democratization.

### **Examples of Democratic Learning**

Citizens' understanding of democracy may change over time, especially in reaction to events such as a democratic transition or a fundamental regime change. One mechanism of change is individual conversion, by which citizens adjust to values under a new political system. That is, citizens learn the meaning of democracy by experiencing a new democratic order. For example where "circumstances may force, trick, lure, or cajole non-democrats into democratic behavior" (Rustow 1970). Incentives and public education efforts created under new institutions may also influence citizens' attitudes (e.g. Higley and Gunther 1992; The Asia Foundation 2003). According to this view, understanding of democracy should be a cumulative individual experiences, since throughout life "bits and pieces of cognitive, affective, and evaluative learning form a consistent whole" (Eckstein 1988). Similarly, Rohrschneider (1999) proposes an institutional learning approach, arguing that a nation's institutional framework changes citizens' understanding of democracy.

We assembled time-series data on public understanding of democracy from seven nations that have recently undergone a democratizing regime change: Afghanistan, Indonesia, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland and Romania.<sup>10</sup> Because of the recent democratic transitions, they provide fertile ground for examining whether public understanding of democracy changes in response to regime change. These data allow us to compare responses between the period immediately following democratization (T0) and a few years thereafter (T1).

As in Table 1, we calculated five categories of responses from the responses to the open-ended questions on the meaning of democracy: freedom/liberties, political process, social benefits, other responses, and "don't know". Looking at Table 3, citizen understanding of democracy does generally increase with democratic experience. The percentage of "don't know" responses signifies whether democracy has become rooted in the popular consciousness. This question is particularly pertinent in newly democratized countries, where democracy may be no more than one of several alternative regime types (Rose, Mishler, Haerpfer 1998). Comparing the percentage of respondents citing "don't know" between T0 and T1 offers evidence of democratic learning. Except in Poland, where the change was small, all other countries witnessed significant decreases in the "don't know" responses. Moreover, many of these T0 surveys were done a few years after the democratic transition, which implies that democratic learning would be even greater if we could do a true pre/post transition comparisons. The increased awareness of democracy is most salient in Afghanistan, suggesting that even populations that are least likely to have been socialized into democratic principles are nevertheless capable of learning within a short space of time.

In terms of the substance of definitions of democracy, one notable change is the increase in the percentage of respondents who refer to the political process as the defining feature of democracy. This phenomenon is even more striking because it occurs across all seven countries.

This is contrary to our prior expectation that, as citizens acquire greater experience of democracy, they will emphasize freedom and liberty rather than the processes of democracy. At the same time, one should note that, while there is no uniform pattern in how citizens' propensity to define democracy in terms of liberties and freedoms changed over time, a plurality of citizens in every country except Indonesia fall into this category.<sup>11</sup>

**Table 3. Changes in the Meaning of Democracy (in percent)**

		<i>Freedom, Rights, Liberty</i>	<i>Political Process</i>	<i>Social Benefits</i>	<i>Other Responses</i>	<i>Don't know</i>	<i>Total Responses</i>
Afghanistan	2004	50.3	21.9	19.1	10.3	36.2	137.8
Afghanistan	2006	75.8	42.8	53.9	16.5	4.0	193.0
Czechoslovakia	1990	60.9	11.3	11.3	3.5	13.0	100.0
Czech Rep	2001	65.8	15.2	8.9	5.7	4.4	100.0
Hungary	1989	22.3	17.8	25.9	6.0	28.0	100.0
Hungary	1990	24.5	13.7	25.9	7.9	28.0	100.0
Hungary	1993	36.1	13.4	27.7	6.8	16.0	100.0
Hungary	1999	25.1	20.2	23.6	11.9	19.3	100.1
Indonesia	1999	9.0	8.0	25.0		61.0	103.0
Indonesia	2004	29.0	20.0	7.0		53.0	109.0
Lithuania	1991	55.1	3.4	4.1	4.4	33.0	100.0
Lithuania	2001	42.7	22.7	11.5	5.5	17.6	100.0
Poland	1991	57.5	8.9	13.0	1.6	19.0	100.0
Poland	2000	37.9	19.1	13.8	11.0	21.0	102.8
Romania	1991	44.9	4.0	15.2	1.9	34.0	100.0
Romania	1998	42.4	11.2	13.6	19.3	13.6	100.1

*Sources:* For Eastern European nations, Post-communist Citizens Survey, Central and Eastern Europe: Post-communist Citizens Survey (only one response was coded in both waves); Afghanistan: The Asia Foundation Survey 2004 and 2006; Indonesia: The Asia Foundation, National Voter Education Survey Report (1999); Democracy in Indonesia - A Survey of the Electorate (2003).

Furthermore, one may also look for differences in patterns of change between countries at different stages of economic development. Countries with the highest levels of GDP/capita and Human Development Index, namely the Czech Republic and Hungary, saw relatively minor changes over time, while countries ranking lowest on both indices, Afghanistan and Indonesia, witnessed larger changes. The differing rates of change may occur because citizens in more affluent countries are more highly educated and have more opportunities to receive information about, or even interact with, democratic societies, which foster familiarization with the concept (if not the practice) of democracy. These conditions do not apply to most citizens in less economically developed countries that are experiencing democratization.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusions

Our research yields three generalizations about popular conceptions of democracy. First, most citizens of new democracies are capable of defining democracy in their own words. This is a striking finding, because it includes a range of poor and non- or semi-democratic nations where one might expect knowledge of democracy is limited. Levels of awareness in many developing

nations even rivals public awareness in established, advanced industrial democracies, even if the understanding of these concepts may differ in some degree.

Second, and most important, most of those cognitively capable citizens think of democracy in terms of the freedoms, liberties and rights that it conveys, rather than procedural and institutional conceptions of liberal democracy. This implies that the popular appeal of democracy does not lie in its procedures for elections and governance, but in the freedom and liberty it provides. A comparison of our cross-sectional and time-series results provides an intriguing contrast. The cross-section results suggest that perceptions of freedom and liberty grow with democratization; the cross-temporal results are ambiguous on this point. It may be that democratization strengthens public emphasis on liberties and rights, but it also may be that democratization has a more fertile ground for development when the publics are more conscious about the liberties and rights that are embedded in a democratic political order.

Third, equating democracy with social benefits emerges as a minor theme, even in the poorest of nations. These patterns were evident in prior research on the meaning of democracy in separate regional studies in East Europe, Africa, East Asia and Latin America, but they become even more apparent when all these surveys are combined.

Several consequences follow from these results. In the most general terms, our findings imply that broad popular support for democracy displayed in contemporary public opinion surveys should be accepted as meaningful responses (e.g., Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Shin 2007). Our data show that these endorsements of democracy are typically paired with reasonable definitions of the meaning of democracy. Indeed, one might suggest that democratic aspirations reflect deeper human values for control over one's life and individual freedom that are more readily understood than the prior political culture literature would have implied (Almond and Verba 1963). The concepts of freedom and liberty are easily diffused across most national boundaries.

The emphasis on freedom and liberty also holds implications for how democratization may be promoted. Governments and international agencies often focus their democracy building activities on the procedural elements of democracy, while the average citizen is more aware of the freedoms that democracy may provide. This suggests that public education efforts might not focus on procedural definitions of democracy as their primary goal. Rather, democratic procedures are probably better understood as a means to gains the freedoms and rights that these citizens already understand and desire. And as democratization progresses, the emphasis on rights and liberties also strengthens. In simple terms, the respondents in these surveys are telling us that democracy is more than a form of government, and these political benefits are most salient to them.

Finally, divergent democratic conceptions likely shape the particular roles ordinary citizens and political leader choose to play in the process of democratic transition or consolidation. The current literature suggests that the way in which citizens conceptualize democracy matters significantly in shaping pro-democratic attitudes and behavior. According to Bratton and his associates (2004), the cognitive capacity of Africans to define democracy has a significant independent effect on their demand or support for democracy. It shapes such support more powerfully than formal education and positive evaluations of regime and government performance. Procedural conceptions orient Africans toward democracy more powerfully than any other factor considered, including educational attainment. In their words, "a procedural understanding of democracy is a top-ranked element explaining why some Africans demand democracy and others do not" (Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Bodi 2004: 274). In Latin American



countries, those who conceive of democracy procedurally in terms of elections and the rule of law are more likely to express opposition to military coups than those who do it in substantive policy and its outcomes (Baviskar and Malone 2004: 14). Procedural democrats are also more satisfied with the performance of the existing democratic regime than substantive democrats. Respondents with multiple conceptions of democracy are also more politically active than those who associate democracy with a single property. According to Canache (2006), however, neither procedural nor substantive conceptions are associated with the greatest level of voting; it is multiple conceptions.

One might be cautious in placing too much emphasis on broad categories of response coded from open-ended questions, and some caution is warranted. One expects that when an American or Austrian discusses the meaning of democracy, this draws upon greater understand and experience than available to residents in a newly democratizing nation. Yet, there is a surprising awareness of democracy, even in unexpected places. And the stress on freedom and liberty suggest that the value of democracy is readily recognized by those who aspire to such principles.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> In established Western democracies citizens might give an expanded definition to include a broader view of democratic participation and the role of the citizen, including civil society activity and a wider definition of engagement beyond elections (Warren 2000; Dalton 2007).

<sup>2</sup> In fact, we hear this comment frequently when presenting data on the remarkable level of support for democracy in many autocratic or transitional political systems. For instance, when 72% of the Vietnamese public say democracy is the best form of government, the critics claim that this means they want to have the higher standard of living they identify with the United States but not the American system of government.

<sup>3</sup> The best example of the closed-ended approach is the USIS-commissioned surveys conducted in Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria between early 1991 and early 1993 (McIntosh and MacIver 1993). The 1993 Korea Barometer survey also included a close-ended question comparing economic rights to political rights (Shin 1999, 60).

<sup>4</sup> In contrast, citizens in Britain, France, and West Germany emphasized the political values of political freedom, party competition, and a fair justice system (McIntosh and MacIver 1993).

<sup>5</sup> The Postcommunist Citizen project was conducted in 1990; it asked: “There is considerable argument concerning the meaning of democracy. What is your opinion about this question? What is for you the meaning of democracy?” The survey data are available from the Zentralarchiv für empirische Sozialforschung, Cologne (ZA3218). However, this dataset does not include the open-ended responses; we received these marginals from Hans-Dieter Klingemann and Janos Simon. The 2000-01 Afrobarometer question reads: “What, if anything, do you understand by the word “democracy”? What comes to mind when you hear the word?” These data are available from the project website: [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org). The nations in the 2001 East Asia Barometer used one of two different questions that overlap with the wording of the Post-communist Citizen project and the Afrobarometer: “To you, what does “democracy” mean? What else?” or “What for you is the meaning of the word “democracy”? What else?” These data are available from the EAB website: [eacsurvey.law.ntu.edu.tw/](http://eacsurvey.law.ntu.edu.tw/). The 2001 Latinobarometer used the wording “To you, what does “democracy” mean? What else?” The Latinobarometer was acquired from the project website: [www.latinobarometer.org](http://www.latinobarometer.org). The US data are from Camp (2001, 17) and the Spanish and Austrian data are from Barnes and Simon (1998, 105-08).

Most of these surveys coded up to three responses. However, table 1 notes that in some nations only a single response or two responses were coded. We appreciate access to all these surveys, and the analyses presented below are the responsibility of the authors.

<sup>6</sup> Each project used its own categories in coding responses. To the best of our ability generated comparable broad categories from the specific codes. Using the Afrobarometer as an illustration, freedom and liberties includes: civil liberties, personal freedoms, group rights, and group freedoms; governmental processes includes: voting, electoral choice, multiparty competition, government by the people, government effectiveness and accountability, majority rule; social benefits includes: socioeconomic development, personal security, equality and justice, peace, and unity. Other responses, such as general positive or negative comments about democracy or other responses were coded as ‘other’.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, the East Asian Barometer and Latinobarometer included categories of ‘other positive terms’ and ‘other negative terms’, without further information we included these in the other category. In addition, this included miscellaneous responses such as “national independence”, “change government”, and references to individual politicians or political parties.

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<sup>8</sup> We recognize that the literature on advanced industrial democracies debates the sophistication of contemporary publics, and the average citizen's political information and knowledge is limited. Thus, we are not implying that responses citing freedom or liberties reflect a full philosophical understanding of these terms. We are suggesting that citizens in developing nations have an understanding of the key tenets of democracy that is greater than many scholars have presumed, and the patterns are not dramatically different from the responses offered by citizens in established Western democracies..

<sup>9</sup> Table 1 presents the percentage of all responses across each category. However, because the surveys asked for a different number of responses, it is problematic to compare the specific percentages in substantive categories across nations. For instance, if Americans could only give one response, they could not give multiple definitions as could respondents in the East Asian Barometer, and thus Americans might look low in most categories.

To adjust for this difference, we compare substantive responses in table 1 as a percentage of all the total responses. Thus, if 59.3% of Koreans mentioned freedom and civil liberties, this is divided by the total responses (158.3%), so that 37.% of the total Korean responses deal with freedom/liberties.

<sup>10</sup> The Afghanistan and Indonesia data are from surveys conducted by The Asia Foundation; the five East European nations were included in the first wave of the Post-communist Citizen Project (Barnes and Simon 1998) and a second wave conducted around 2000. These data were provided by the Zentralarchiv für empirische Sozialforschung (ZA4054). Figures for the Czech Republic at T1 may not be entirely comparable with the Czechoslovak responses at T0, since the latter covered not only what latter became the Czech Republic but also Slovakia. We thank The Asia Foundation and the Zentralarchiv for making these data available for our analysis.

<sup>11</sup> For the five central and eastern European countries, whereas the first wave of the Post-Communist Citizens survey contained a "rights" category, the second wave did not. From 6% to 17% were coded as giving a rights response in wave 1. This may result in a lower percentage of respondents in the liberties/freedom column at T1.

<sup>12</sup> We should also note that there are some time-series data available from the Latinobarometer, but the time-series is short and lacks the dramatic pre/post democratization comparisons of the seven nations in Table 3. Thus, the time changes in the results across waves of the Latinobarometer tend to be smaller and less systematic.