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On The Relationship between Regime Approval and Democratic Transition

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INTRODUCTION

Democratic transition scholars find a large number of factors associated with the likelihood of non-democratic regimes transitioning to democracy. Of these, three factors appear to be among the most potent: economic development, economic crisis, and the type of non-democratic regime.² However, these structural types of analyses beg the question of how public opinion affects national transition to democracy. In other words, these three factors may affect popular attitudes that can create dynamics that foment democratization. One type of attitude that may be especially important is the public's approval of non-democratic regimes. The chief limitation that prevents scholars from addressing this question is the absence of data. However, we have access to the largest repository of international public opinion data that is comparable for all

¹ The authors would like acknowledge Phil Ruhlman, Gale Muller, Jesus Rios, Johanna Godoy and Todd Johnson of the Gallup Organization for their assistance in making the Gallup World Poll data on Cuba available through a Research Consultant Agreement.

² Barbara Geddes 1999. "What do we know about Democratization after 20 Years?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 2: 115-144; Jason Brownlee 2009. "Portents of Pluralism: How Hybrid Regimes Affect Democratic Transitions." *American Journal of Political Science* 53 (3): 515-32.

nations – the Gallup World Poll.³ The Gallup organization began the World Poll in 2006, and now has surveyed approximately 500,000 people in over 150 nations, with a sample intended to be representative of 95% of the world’s population. This allows us access to measures of regime approval, as well as other relevant variables, for most non-democratic nations during this time.

Because five years has passed since the World Poll began, we can consider the relationships between regime approval and levels of democratization. We restrict our analysis to a set of 24 nations that were non-democratic in 2005, and we use regime approval to predict pro-democratic movement in those nations’ institutions. We use the Polity IV Democracy Score as our index of democratization. The Polity IV Democracy Score is a conceptual scheme that is unique in that it examines *concomitant qualities of democratic and autocratic authority* in governing institutions, rather than discreet and mutually exclusive forms of governance. This perspective envisions a **spectrum** of governing authority that spans from *fully institutionalized autocracies* through *mixed, or incoherent, authority regimes* (termed "anocracies") to *fully institutionalized democracies*. The "Polity Score" captures this regime authority spectrum on a 21-point scale ranging from -10 (hereditary monarchy) to +10 (consolidated democracy).⁴

³ The Gallup World Poll (Gallup Organization 2006) is a public opinion survey of human well-being conducted in over 150 countries. We first utilized this dataset to ascertain the extent to which the Cuban people approved of the regime, and the extent to which those attitudes influenced the trajectory toward democratic governance in the post-Fidel environment. Utilizing this Cuban public opinion data, we estimated structural equation models (SEMs) to evaluate the possibility of Cuban regime stability and transition. Specifically, we found that collective esteem increased satisfaction with the government. While we allow that there may be a rise of expectations on behalf of the Cuban people for more changes, because of the nature of collective esteem in Cuba, it does not necessarily imply a demand for regime change. See, J. Benjamin-Alvarado and G. Petrow, “Stability, Transition and Regime Approval in Post-Castro Cuba.” *Political Science Quarterly*, (Forthcoming Fall 2011).

⁴ For more information of the methodology for the Polity IV Democracy Score see, <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm>.

In this paper we utilize an ordinary least squares regression analysis to ascertain the relationship between regime approval and the polity measure of democracy. This is a preliminary analysis for a larger research project in which we will incorporate “structural” explanations for democratization and democratic transition by estimating structural equation models in which we will incorporate several explanations for democratic transition – international integration,⁵ economic growth,⁶ repression,⁷ and regime type.⁸ This paper represents the initial exploration of this topic.⁹ Controlling for regime type, we expect that lower levels of regime approval lead to a greater transition to democracy.

METHODOLOGY

The dependent variable in our analysis is the change in the polity score from 2005 to 2010 among nations that were non-democratic in 2005. Negative values of the polity score reflect non-democratic nations, and we selected nations that in 2005 ranged from moderately

⁵ J. Ulfelder 2008. “International Integration and Democratization: An Event History Analysis.” *Democratization* 15 (2): 272-296.

⁶ Barbara Geddes 1999. “What do we know about Democratization after 20 Years?” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2: 115-144

⁷ Christian Davenport 2007. “State Repression and Political Order.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 10: 1-23.

⁸ Jason Brownlee 2009. “Portents of Pluralism: How Hybrid Regimes Affect Democratic Transitions.” *American Journal of Political Science* 53 (3): 515-32.

⁹ In future analyses, we seek to demonstrate the degree to which those structural factors operate by influencing individual-level factors, such as social capital, personal income, and evaluations of the national economy. In other words, the model may allow us to capture how structural factors affect individual-level factors, with both predicting regime approval, and in turn, democratization. This study will open the black box of how mass politics and public opinion affects democratic transition, addressing the question of how structural factors impact the masses to encourage, or inhibit, transitions to democracy.

non-democratic (at -3) to strongly non-democratic (at -10). We found 24 such nations. We use the regime approval measure from the Gallup World Poll in those nations to predict the degree to which their institutions became more democratic.

The regime approval variable is a scale composed of four questions from the World Poll. The respondents indicated whether or they not had confidence in: the national government, the military, and the courts. They also indicated if they approved or disapproved of their national leaders. This resulted in a five-point scale, and the alpha was above .60 for all nations.

RESULTS

We turn now to the results in Table 1. In Table 1 we report the results of an OLS Regression in which change in the polity score from 2005 to 2010 is the dependent variable. Positive values of this dependent variable indicate nations transitioning in a more democratic direction, zero indicates no change at all, and negative values reflect nations transitioning in a less democratic way. We bold the result for our theoretical variable of interest – that for regime approval.

[Table 1 about here]

We find that higher levels of regime approval lead to less of a transition toward democracy among non-democratic nations ($b = -.88, p < .02$). We include a basic set of controls in this model. We control for the demographic characteristics of the national polities. Considering these controls, only age is related at the $p < .05$ level to democratic transition, with older people tending to live in nations that transitioned away from democracy ($b = -.02, p < .02$). We also controlled for regime type with a series of dummy variables. The excluded regime type category is for nations with democratic institutions. The only statistically significant result is for the theocracy of Iran, with the coefficient indicating that this regime type had a negative influence

on democratic transition, once the other variables in the model are accounted for ($b = -2.07$, $p < .01$). Finally, the control variables for time are not statistically significant.

To confirm that the dependent variable is reflecting transition toward democracy, we report Table 2. We defined a non-democratic nation as one with a polity score of -3 or lower in 2005. We then created the difference variable, and we find that most of the nations we count as non-democratic in 2005 either did not transition, or they changed in a more democratic direction. Three nations moved in a slightly less democratic direction (with a score of -1): Bahrain, Iran and Rwanda. A host of nations did not change. However, Sudan and Togo became somewhat more democratic (with a +2 change), and Mauritania even a bit more so (with a +3 change). Two nations changed dramatically: Pakistan (+11) and Nepal (+12). One may be concerned that there is little variation on the polity change variable, but we can see that the variance is pretty evenly distributed across the categories.

[Table 2 about here]

Finally, we depict our result for regime approval from Table 1 in an intuitive form – the change in the predicted polity score. We report this result in Figure 1. The vertical axis is the change in the Polity score from 2005 to 2010 among all of the non-democratic nations. The horizontal axis reflects the categories of the regime approval scale, with higher values indicating higher levels of regime approval. All values of the regime approval scale indicate a positive polity score, showing that the average movement of the non-democratic nations from 2005 to 2010 was in a democratic direction. Of course, one notices that the slope is negative, indicating that higher levels of approval corresponded with less positive polity change scores. In other words, nations with higher regime approval transitioned less to democracy than nations with lower regime approval scores. All decreases in the average polity score are statistically

significant at the $p < .05$ level, two-tailed. The bars reflect how the sample divided up among the categories of the regime approval scale. About 40% of the cases clustered at the most positive end, while about a third were at the bottom end, with the rest at various points in between.

CONCLUSION

We began by laying out our expectation that approval of regimes in non-democratic nations would affect whether or not those nations transitioned to democracy. One might have reason to expect that there wouldn't be such a relationship. Perhaps people who disapprove of their non-democratic leaders don't necessarily want democracy. There is some evidence, however, that people in non-democratic regimes do see democracy as something to turn to. For example, one scholar finds that the Chinese who distrust their leaders also have stronger preferences for democratic elections.¹⁰

Even if non-democratic regime members do support democracy more as regime disapproval rises, these types of regimes still lack any formal institutions through which public sentiment can affect the regime. Perhaps, then, these sentiments lack any way to affect democratization. However, even without formal mechanisms, rulers can still be subject to the public will. There are a myriad of informal ways that approval, or disapproval, can manifest itself. One example is public protest. Another is that the individuals who participate in governance may disapprove of the leadership themselves.

¹⁰ Lianjiang Li 2011. "Distrust in Government Leaders, Demand for Leadership Change, and Preference for Popular Elections in Rural China." *Political Behavior* 33(2): 291-311.

Table 1. Regime Approval Predicts Democratic Transition among Non-Democratic Nations, 2010-2005

Independent Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	T-statistic	P-value
Regime approval	-.88	.35	2.52	<.02
<i>Demographic Controls</i>				
Female	-.07	.04	1.4	<.20
Age	-.02	.01	2.65	<.02
Married	.56	.30	1.90	<.10
Standard of living	-.10	.30	.32	<.80
Entrepreneur	-.20	.40	.50	<.70
<i>Regime types</i>				
Dictatorships	2.15	2.23	.97	<.40
Monarchies	-.77	.55	1.4	<.20
One Party	-.88	.52	1.68	<.15
Theocracy (Iran)	-2.07	.65	3.18	<.01
Transitioning	3.31	3.82	.87	<.40
<i>Controls for time</i>				
2007	.88	.57	1.55	<.15
2008	-.72	.80	.9	<.40
2009	-.33	.45	.74	<.50
2010	.27	.71	.38	<.75
<i>Intercept</i>	1.92	.80	2.41	<.05

$R^2 = .26$

N = 79,375

Standard error adjusted for 25 clusters

Table 2. Distribution of the Change in the Polity Score from 2005 to 2010 among Non-Democratic nations

Polity Direction	Survey cases*	Percent of all survey cases
-1	8,386	10.6
0	45,297	57.1
2	4,735	6.0
3	5,683	7.2
5	4,795	6.0
11	6,023	7.6
12	4,456	5.6
	79,375	100.1

* -1 = Bahrain, Iran and Rwanda

*0 = Azerbaijan, Belarus, Cameroon, China, Congo Brazzaville, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Laos, Morocco, Qatar, Syria, Tajikistan, Tunisian, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam

*2 = Sudan and Togo

*3 = Mauritania

*11 = Pakistan

*12 = Nepal

Figure 1. Higher Values of Regime Approval lead to Less Democratic Transition in Non-Democratic Regimes

