

## EarthTrends Featured Topic: More Democracy, Better Environment?

Source: *World Resources 2002-2004* (Box 2.3, p.32-33)  
 Author: Emily Matthews and Gregory Mock  
 Date Written: June 2003

The political structure of nations—whether they have a democratic or autocratic style of government—is an important factor in their social and economic development. In the last half century, the world has moved steadily away from autocratic regimes that concentrate power in the hands of one or a few people, and toward democracies that grant broad civil liberties and freedoms of political participation. From 1950–2003, the number of electoral democracies—nations where governments were elected by popular vote—almost tripled from 43 to 121 (Freedom House 1999:1–2; 2003:5).

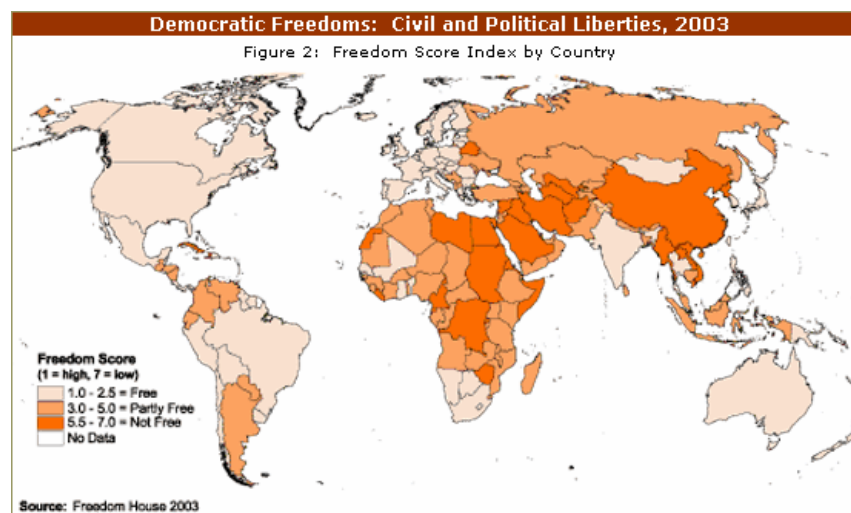
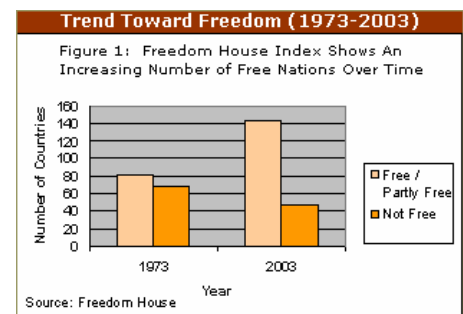
However, democracy is measured by more than simply the right to vote, and not all electoral democracies extend full democratic rights to their citizens. *Full democracies* are defined as granting a range of rights and institutions, such as elections, competitive political parties, the

rule of law, independent media, limits on the power of government officials, and an independent judiciary. These mechanisms allow citizens to communicate and organize among themselves, choose their leaders freely, and participate in government decisions (Esty et al. 1998:9; Freedom House 2003:1).

*Partial democracies* have more limited respect for political rights and civil liberties. They share some of the characteristics of full democracies—such as elections—but also some of the characteristics of *autocracies*, such as an overly powerful chief executive, suppressed or restricted political parties, a state-controlled press, or a cowed judiciary (Esty et al. 1998:9; Freedom House 2003:1).

The nongovernmental organization Freedom House uses these definitions to rate countries as “Free” (full democracy), “Partially Free” (partial democracy), and “Not Free” (autocracy), based on the

level of civil and political freedoms they grant their citizens. Freedom House’s analysis (in Figure 1) shows impressive growth in the number of nations extending democratic freedoms over the last three decades, with those nations rated “Free” and “Partially Free” increasing from 81 in 1973 to 144 in 2003 (Freedom House 2003:2). (See Figure.) The map in Figure 2 shows the current distribution of full democracies, partial democracies, and autocracies.



## Democracy and Environment

Is there a causal connection between democracy and improved environmental quality? Between political freedoms and environmental sustainability? Assessing the influence of political liberties and civil rights on the environment is not straightforward. There is little empirical evidence of a direct link, and research is hampered by a lack of national-level data on environmental conditions outside industrialized countries.

Proponents of global democratization have asserted that such a connection exists (Gore 1992:179–180, 276–277), and a growing literature supports the idea that political freedoms may be as important as economic factors in improving environmental quality, particularly in poorer nations (Barrett and Graddy 2000:455). For example, one recent analysis found that greater political and civil liberties were associated with improvements in air and water quality, such as reduced levels of sulfur dioxide and particulates in air, and lower coliform and dissolved oxygen levels in water (Torrás and Boyce 1998:155).

The assertion that greater democratic rights can, in the right circumstances, result in better environmental policy and performance has been given powerful support in the aftermath of the terrible environmental abuses revealed in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union after the fall of Communist regimes in 1989–1990. Environment was a rallying cry of reform movements in the region, and stricter environmental legislation has been rapidly enacted under new democratic governments.

The link between citizen rights and improving environmental trends has much

to do with the power that democracies give to citizens to affect decision-making processes and hold government officials, corporate authorities, and other individuals accountable. Democratic freedoms encourage access to information—such as planning documents, budgets, reports on local environmental conditions, or pollution records—that can help citizens protect their environmental interests (Petkova and Veit 2000:3–5).

A strong correlation also exists between democracy and wealth. High-income countries are, with few exceptions, liberal democracies. Rising wealth, in turn, is associated with clear improvements in some environmental indicators. However, experts caution against interpreting these results to mean that rising wealth *automatically* delivers improvements in environmental quality (Torrás and Boyce 1998:147–160).

Rather, democratic institutions, levels of wealth, and citizen demands for environmental quality all appear to interact. The correlations among these three factors and better environmental policy appear strong (Grossman and Kruger 1995:353–377). However, it is important to distinguish among different environmental issues. The environmental benefits resulting from concerned citizens acting in a free society, and from investments made possible by rising wealth, tend to be local in nature. The first issues to be tackled are sanitation infrastructure, water and air quality, risks associated with toxic releases, and local habitat protection. Environmental problems that are more distant in space or time, such as biodiversity loss, overfishing, and climate change, have high awareness in democracies, but that awareness has not yet been translated into

effective action (Max-Neef 1995:115–118).

Still more sobering is the fact that liberal democracies, as the richest nations on earth, are themselves responsible for a disproportionate share of global resource use and waste generation. Democratic countries are built around the concepts of individual liberty, freedom of choice, and the necessity of economic growth. The very success of liberal democratic and free market ideology has created a mighty engine of consumption. While there is no empirical evidence of a causal link between democracy and consumption, as opposed to the clear relationship between wealth and consumption levels, the three variables are strongly correlated. If developing countries replicate the Western model of liberal democratic governments and free market economies, environmental quality will likely improve in some respects but worsen in others.

A further consideration is that the transition from autocracy to democracy is often marked by political instability, rapid internal change, and even civil conflict. In many cases, political crises cause newly established democratic regimes to fail. In fact, during the second half of the twentieth century, about one quarter of all newly established democracies lasted for less than 5 years (Esty et al. 1998:viii). The environment is particularly vulnerable during times of transition and may suffer worse damage than occurred under autocratic rule. For example, eyewitness reports from Indonesia suggest that deforestation has dramatically increased since the fall of President Suharto in 1998 (FWI and GFW 2002:xi).

## REFERENCES

- Barrett, S., and K. Graddy. 2000. "Freedom, Growth, and the Environment." *Environment and Development Economics* 3:433–456.
- Esty, D., J. Goldstone, T. Gurr, B. Harff, M. Levy, G. Dabelko, P. Surko, and A. Unger. 1998. "State Failure Task Force Report: Phase II Findings." McLean, VA: Science Applications International Corporation.
- Forest Watch Indonesia (FWI) and Global Forest Watch (GFW). 2002. *The State of the Forest: Indonesia*. Bogor, Indonesia: FWI and Washington, DC: GFW.
- Freedom House. 1999. "Democracy's Century: A Survey of Global Political Change in the 20th Century." Press Release. Cited 15 May 2003. On-line at: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/reports/century.html>.
- Freedom House. 2003. "Liberty's Expansion in a Turbulent World: Thirty Years of the Survey of Freedom." *Freedom in the World 2003: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties*. Cited 12 May 2003. On-line at: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/freeworld/2002/webessay2003.pdf>.
- Gore, A. 1992. *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Grossman, G., and A. Kreuger. 1995. "Economic Growth and the Environment." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 110:353–377.
- Max-Neef, M. 1995. "Economic Growth and Quality of Life: A Threshold Hypothesis." *Ecological Economics* 15:115–118.
- Petkova, E., and P. Veit. 2000. *Environmental Accountability Beyond the Nation-State: The Implications of the Aarhus Convention*. Environmental Governance Note. Washington, DC: World Resources Institute.
- Torras, M., and J. Boyce. 1998. "Income, Inequality, and Pollution: A Reassessment of the Environmental Kuznets Curve." *Ecological Economics* 25:147–160.
- World Resources Institute (WRI) in collaboration with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the World Bank. 2003. *World Resources 2002-2004: Decisions for the Earth: Balance, Voice, and Power*. Washington, DC: WRI.