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# Following the Paths of Progress of New Democracies

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# Following the Paths of Progress of New Democracies

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feature article

## Following the Paths of Progress of New Democracies

—Aniela Pietrasz, *Inquiry* Editor (Edited by Jennifer Lee)

The concept of democracy seems to have grown more flexible of late, bending and widening to accommodate a broader range of pluralistic governments. The 1980s saw the decline or ruin of many autocratic regimes, and since then a number of nascent democracies have risen from their rubble. Often these nations have little democratic tradition to build on. Instead, they are burdened by a legacy of cruel dictatorship and atrocity. For these states, it is a long and arduous process to establish a government truly of, for, and by the people.

In the summer of 2007, three undergraduates at the University of New Hampshire explored this process of democratization in four countries. The researchers received UNH Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowships, which funded their projects. Amanda Diegel, now a senior majoring in sociology and international affairs, spent the summer in Montevideo, Uruguay and Cordoba, Argentina, studying the political atmosphere of high school classrooms and its correlation to public support for democracy. A senior majoring in political science and philosophy, Trevor Mauck traveled to Morocco to observe the democratic development of an Islamic state. (Both Trevor and Amanda have written about their experiences in this issue of *Inquiry*.) Meanwhile in the United States, Colleen Flaherty, a junior majoring in political science and Spanish, explored the necessity of citizen participation in a democracy, using Chile as a model.

Each researcher looked at a different aspect of a developing democracy. They conducted research at UNH and on the internet. Two projects also involved research performed on site. For all, this was an opportunity to test whether political theory coincided with the realities of modern democratic development beyond the boundaries of the United States.

### Social Capital and Chile

While working with her mentor, Dr. Mary Malone, assistant professor of political science at UNH, Colleen encountered the term social capital, defined and made popular by Robert Putnam, a Harvard political scientist. Social capital, according to Putnam, is a collective measure of the strength of a community, which means the participation of citizens in civic and political activities, and their level of trust and overall engagement in society. This citizen involvement, he argues, strengthens and enhances democracy: when citizens believe they have power to affect change in the community, they are more likely to realize that power on a national scale. However, not all agree with this theory, and much debate has arisen about it.



*Colleen Flaherty takes a break from research.*

Intrigued by the disagreements, Colleen sought to determine whether such social capital is essential to a successful democracy. She chose to examine Chile, a state in which civic participation is low, yet the government is highly rated in terms of political freedoms. Working with Spanish and English resources at UNH and on the internet, she examined the linkage between social capital and democracy in Chile.

Freedom House, a private nongovernmental organization, provided her with a working definition of democracy as an entity that respects the political rights of the citizenry and works in their interests. That organization gave Chile a high rating for its political rights and civil liberties. Data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project, however, convinced her of the low level of social capital in the country. Chileans have not taken an active role in their government despite having the rights and liberties to do so.

This general apathy may be, Colleen suggests, the conditioned compliance and inactivity persisting from the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990). His ghost lingers there in the lives of his former subjects. "He depoliticized the people," Colleen says, and allowed them participation only within a church, encouraged fear and isolation, discouraged connections within communities, and ordered political opponents to be "disappeared." "Participation is particularly low in Chile," she states; it is low in civic and community activities, and it is low in the political process. Yet Freedom House rates its current government highly in terms of political rights and freedoms, essential to a democracy. So can a democracy survive without the participation of its citizens?

Colleen answers yes, a strong democracy can exist with little citizen input or participation, and Chile is that example which questions the necessity of social capital. She believes the democracy to be strong since the elites in power are committed to democracy. "Political and individual rights are protected; there are free and fair elections, reduced military oversight, and the government has been judged to be transparent," she says. All this is achieved with little citizen involvement, and so, she concludes, the active and concerned citizen is not always necessary for the success of a democracy.

However, Colleen admits, there are some concerns. A particular concern is that there is very little vertical accountability within Chile's government. This may allow for future power abuse, or at least inefficiency, within the nascent democracy.

## **The Influence of the Classroom on Attitudes toward Democracy**

Amanda Diegel found the similarities and differences between two South American nations intriguing. Argentina and Uruguay are similar in many ways: Their democracies were re-established in the 1980s following military dictatorships; the populations are predominantly of European extraction and Roman Catholic; and the economic conditions are roughly equal on a per capita basis. However, popular support levels for their emerging democracies differ by nearly 30 points. According to the *Latin Barometer 2005*, a public opinion survey from the Global Development Network, 63% of Uruguay's citizens support the government compared with only 34% of Argentineans.

She decided to determine whether a relationship exists between the relative freedom of the high school classroom and the political perceptions and attitudes of the greater population. Amanda hypothesized that the school system in Argentina, compared with that of Uruguay, had not fully transitioned from the days of dictatorship. Used as a political agent by prior dictators, the system had delivered propaganda, ensured compliance, and instilled fear. "The institution of the educational system has survived many autocratic regimes, each of which imposed its doctrine upon the classroom. It may be that those within the system, such as teachers, still maintain the old authoritarian attitudes," Amanda says.



Much of her work is based on the theory of the Democratic Classroom Climate (DCC), which gauges the democratic support in the classroom by measuring such conditions as the degree to which students are allowed to engage in democratic dialogue, whether diverse viewpoints are addressed, and the openness of the classroom—in effect, the political atmosphere of the classroom. The DCC scale seeks to determine relationships between classroom variables and political attitudes that contribute to support for democracy, such as political trust, interest, confidence, and social integration.

*A resident explains the history of Argentina to Amanda Diegel.*

Fluent in Spanish after spending a prior year studying abroad, Amanda conducted her summer research at four high schools in Cordoba and five in Montevideo. In the classrooms she distributed surveys adapted from the DCC scale. These included questions aimed at exposing relationships between the students' assessments of the classroom atmosphere and of the national government. She wanted to determine if classrooms in Uruguay, with higher popular support for the government, were more open than those in Argentina: "A transition to freer classrooms with fewer restrictions, where students are allowed to think for themselves and speak freely, may encourage greater support for democracy and positive views of pluralism."

Amanda is still processing the data from her surveys and cannot come to a formal conclusion, but she can offer observations about the many people she talked with outside the classrooms. In both cities conversations with inhabitants revealed frustration, pessimism and general skepticism about the current government. The people of Argentina, in particular, have seen many governments rise and fail. A history of autocracy and atrocity has bred cynicism, and the public is wary. It seemed to Amanda that they await the inevitable, though recent governments seem more open to democratic reforms. In conversations with Uruguayans, however, she heard more acceptance of democracy, which may be due to their current strong, social democracy and paternalistic government. It seems that, in addition to the influence of antiquated educational systems, the countries' political histories contribute to their relatively low citizen support of and participation in government.

## **Suspended Expectations: Morocco**

Morocco, an ally of the United States, has restructured its government into a parliamentary monarchy, a move hoped by many in the United States to be a step on the road to a full democracy. Trevor Mauck dedicated his summer to the study of this democratization, especially the dynamic between the legislature and the monarchy. However, he found no such democracy when he arrived in the country. The monarch seemed to have no intention of relinquishing any power; reports of real democratic progress were merely outside speculation.

With little democracy to study, Trevor instead examined the actual powers of the legislative branch of the government, continuing research begun at UNH. He found the legislative branch to be greatly subordinate to that of the executive, the king. Opposition voices and parties are actively discouraged by the palace.

As Amanda did in South America, Trevor spoke with local citizens about their views of the government. In Morocco the language of business and politics is French, which Trevor spoke. The majority of Moroccans, however, speak standard Arabic. This may partly contribute to the prevalent attitude that politics are for somebody else—someone in the city, educated and multilingual. It's not for them. "For the most part," Trevor says, "they avoid conflict and any discussion of their government." But warily, at the inquiry of a foreigner speaking French, they approve of the king and praise him. It is not their place to comment upon or criticize the workings of the monarchy. Trevor believes real democracy will remain elusive for some time.



*Trevor Mauck in a canyon–oasis, Merzouga, Morocco.*

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### ***Author Bio***

*Aniela Pietrasz is a sophomore in the Honors Program here at UNH. From nearby Hampstead, New Hampshire, Aniela is dual–majoring in Economics and Art History. She has already experimented with several other majors but thinks (right now) that these make the right fit for her. Aniela's passion is horseback riding, but she hasn't been able to ride for over a year. She is a peripheral member of the Horseman's Club, though, to keep herself connected to that part of her life. Aniela likes to keep herself busy; she is involved in the Honors Student Advisory Board and is a volunteer in the Art Gallery as well as being a member of the Inquiry student editorial board. She would love to travel to an exotic country; and, like many (or at least some) of us, believes life would just be that much better with a British accent.*