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DEMOCRACY AS A LESSER EVIL: TESTING THE CHURCHILLIAN NOTION OF DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH AFRICA AND SOUTH KOREA

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Democracy as a Lesser Evil: Testing the Churchillian Notion of Democracy in South Africa and South Korea

Abstract

Winston Churchill asserted in 1947 that "democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." To date, this lesser-evil notion of democracy has been tested only in the post-communist societies of Eastern and Central Europe. As a result, little is known about how useful, or valid, this notion of democracy as a lesser evil is for analysing the popular perceptions of democracy among the mass publics of new democracies in other regions. To fill this gap in existing literature, this study analyses public opinion data from South Africa and South Korea. Our analysis of these data reveals that the Churchillian notion of democracy as a lesser evil is of limited use as an alternative paradigm for the study of democratisation, especially from the perspective of ordinary citizens in the midst of that political experience.

> "… democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."
>
> Winston Churchill, 1947

Why do ordinary citizens prefer to live in a democracy? Why do these citizens continue to support their democratic political systems even when those systems fail to function to their satisfaction? For the past decade, political scientists have proposed and tested a variety of theoretical models to address these and other related questions regarding mass reactions to the democratisation of authoritarian rule (Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi 2004; Camp 2001; Gibson, Duch, and Tedin 1992; Haerpfer 2001; Klingemann and Fuchs 1995; Linz and Stepan 1996; McDonough, Barnes, and Lopez Pina 1998; Norris 1999; Pharr and Putnam 2000; Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998; Shin 1999). The most unassuming of these models is derived from Winston Churchill's eloquent assertion that "democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

To Churchill, democracy was a form of government that performs badly but not as badly as non-democratic forms of government. In this conceptualisation, democracy no longer represents the ideals of freedom, equality, and justice that appear in the works of such political philosophers and theorists as John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, and Robert Dahl (for a review of this literature, see Mueller 1999 and Powell Jr. 1982). Nor does it even represent a "kinder and gentler" form of government, which both ordinary citizens and political leaders in new democratic states have sought to establish since the current wave of global democratisation began three decades ago (Lijphart 1999). Democracy is viewed merely as **a lesser evil**, a view that directly challenges the idealistic or positive notion that has long been accepted in the theoretical and empirical literature on democracy (Bratton and Mattes 2001; Miller, Hesli and Reisinger 1997; Chu, Diamond, and Shin 2001).

Moreover, the Churchillian notion that democracy constitutes a lesser evil directly challenges a growing body of literature on democratic consolidation. The existing literature emphasises the importance of the mass public embracing democracy for the consolidation of nascent democratic rule (Alexander 2002; Diamond 1999; Linz and Stepan 1996). In this literature, citizens are assumed to embrace democracy as "the only game in town" when they judge it to perform to their satisfaction. Rejecting this prevailing wisdom linking positive perceptions of a new democratic political system to popular support for democracy, the Churchillian notion of democracy offers an alternative approach to the study of democratic consolidation, as noted by Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi (2004) and Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub, and Limongi (2000).

For Churchill's quote to hold any truth, citizens must compare their own experiences of political life under democratic and undemocratic systems. The recent surge in democratic transitions in the various regions of the world has made this comparison possible, thereby making an empirical evaluation of this notion of democracy possible as well. To date, however, this proposition has been tested exclusively within the context of post-communist societies in East and Central Europe (Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998; Shin and Wells 2001). As a result, little is known about the validity of this lesser-evil notion for categorising perceptions of democracy in new democracies in other regions or about how much the lesser-evil perception shapes support for democracy.

To address this gap in the literature, this study examines survey data from South Africa and South Korea, two new democracies that represent the most successful examples of democratisation in their respective regions. We use this data to ask, and answer, a series of empirical questions about democracy as a

lesser evil. First, we determine the extent to which citizens in these new democracies actually support democracy. Second, we ask what percentage of the mass publics in South Africa and South Korea perceive their newly formed democratic systems to be less evil than, more evil than, or equally evil to the regime they knew prior to their recent transitions to democracy. After answering these questions, we ask if those who do perceive the current government to be a lesser evil continue to embrace democracy as the preferred form of government. Finally, we ask whether in these two countries, the perception of democracy as a lesser evil stimulates public support for democratisation more or less than other views of democracy.

This paper has six sections. In the section that follows immediately, we review efforts to test the Churchillian notion of democracy. In the next section, we develop the lesser-evil notion as a concept and distinguish it from other forms of so-called "evil"-government concepts. Next, we highlight the most notable features of democratisation in South Africa and South Korea. We then discuss the measurement of the independent and dependent variables used to empirically test the Churchillian conceptualisation of democracy developed in section two. In the fifth section, we present the results of various empirical analyses. The final section summarises the key findings of our research and discusses their implications for the study of democratic regime change.

1. Previous Research

Over the past decade, a great deal of survey research has investigated the sources and consequences of divergent perceptions and understandings of democracy. In Europe, Richard Rose and Christian Haerpfer regularly conducted the New Democracies Barometer Surveys, Russia Barometer Surveys, and Baltic Barometer Surveys. In Southern Europe, Jose Montero and Leonardo Morlino conducted several waves of national sample surveys in Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Greece. In Latin America, Marta Lagos has recently begun conducting annual Latino Barometer surveys in Spain and fifteen Latin American countries. In Africa, Michael Bratton and Robert Mattes have launched the Afrobarometer surveys. In addition, James Gibson and many other scholars from Asia, Europe, and the United States have conducted numerous single-country surveys in new democracies. As effective as these previous studies are in helping scholars to understand popular support for democracy, their usefulness in explaining and testing the Churchillian notion of democracy as a lesser evil is limited in two key ways.

First, most of this research has been designed to uncover popular conceptions of democracy as a series of political ideals rather than popular perceptions of democracy as a political reality (Gibson, Duch, and Tedin 1992; Miller Hesli and Reisinger 1997; Simon 1994). Instead of examining the actual reactions citizens in new democracies have had to divergent regimes, these studies tapped the value citizens attach to the idea of democracy. From such idealistic conceptions, it is difficult to infer realistic assessments of democratic governments in action. There is always a wide gulf between what people aspire to and what they experience in their daily lives (Mueller, 1999; Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998).

Second, the bulk of the existing survey research has been conducted from an absolute perspective that does not involve comparisons with alternative government forms (Anderson and Guillory 1997; Cusack 1999; Fuchs, Guidorossi and Svensson 1995; Klingemann 1999). The satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the current democratic system, for example, offers no basis for a discussion on whether it performs better or worse than its authoritarian predecessors. To date, only a very limited number of studies have analysed respondents' direct comparisons of the non-democratic and democratic regimes they have experienced (Bratton and Mattes 2002; Rose 1995; Shin 1999). Although it is possible for these studies to determine which political system, democratic or undemocratic, is seen as performing better, these studies have been unable to determine whether the current democratic system is preferable to its authoritarian predecessor in a positive sense or in a negative sense. The direct comparisons that these survey-based studies employ merely allow researchers to indicate the extent to which the former is more or less preferable to the latter without specifying the exact nature of such preference, i.e., positive or negative.

To overcome these two key limitations of previous research and properly test the theory that a country's people will support a malfunctioning democratic regime so long as they perceive the alternative to be worse, we must ask them to make separate assessments of each of the authoritarian and democratic regimes that have ruled over them so we can compare their past and present political experiences. This comparison allows for determining accurately whether the current regime is either negatively or positively preferable to the past one.

In their New Democracies Barometer surveys, Richard Rose, William Mishler, and Christian Haerpfer (1998) pioneered this type of survey work by asking respondents to make separate assessments of the Communist and post-Communist systems (they did not ask about the experience of transitioning from

communism to a democratic regime). Individual respondents' separate ratings of each system were compared to estimate the proportion of people who prefer the post-Communist regime to the Communist regime. More than half the mass publics in Central and Eastern Europe were found to have such a preference (Rose and Mishler 1996, 36). This finding was interpreted to support the Churchillian notion of democracy as a lesser evil. In testing this notion, however, Rose and his associates mistakenly equated being a lesser evil with being **relatively preferable**. In reality, a new regime must be judged to perform badly or negatively to be rightly called an evil democratic regime, and for an evil democratic regime to be called a lesser evil, it must be viewed as undesirable but less undesirable than any non-democratic alternatives.

Clearly, Rose and his associates distorted the notion of democracy as a lesser evil by suggesting that any current regime, whether perceived as a democracy or a non-democracy, is a lesser-evil democracy so as long as its citizens find it preferable to the old regime. Under this definition, even a positively functioning current regime would be considered a lesser evil if it performs better than the old Communist regime. Obviously, this definition constitutes a classic example of a stretched concept (cf. Collier and Levitsky 1997); thus *Democracy and Its Alternatives* cannot be accepted as a robust test of Churchill's original notion of democracy as a lesser evil, as the authors claim (Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998, 85).

2. Conceptualising Democracy as a Lesser Evil

As this review of existing literature has suggested, the Churchillian notion of democracy as a lesser evil is a complex concept that involves much more than a mere description of a single political entity. It requires the evaluation and comparison of divergent political systems. In making a comparative evaluation of those systems, it emphasises their frequent failures to satisfy the citizenry and thus prescribes a negative perspective to the evaluation. Conceptually, therefore, the Churchillan notion constitutes a framework for evaluating the failings of democratic and non-democratic political systems from a comparative perspective.

Empirically, the notion rejects the popular view that democracy is the ideal form of government. Instead, it holds first that democracy, like its non-democratic alternatives, is a bad or undesirable political system. Second, it further holds that democracy is merely less undesirable as a political system than its

undemocratic alternatives. Referring to a system of government that does not dissatisfy its people as much as did a previous non-democratic government, democracy is appraised as a lesser evil. Accordingly, the notion of democracy as a lesser evil becomes valid only when the assessments of both the democratic and non-democratic systems by individual citizens are negative and the assessments of the former are less negative that those of the latter.

Theoretically, the Churchillian notion offers a hypothesis linking the negative perceptions of a new democratic political system to popular support for democracy. According to this hypothesis, individual citizens in a new democracy tend to support their current democratic political system so long as they view the system as less evil than all its predecessors (Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998). This hypothesis also suggests that those who perceive the system as a lesser evil are more supportive of democracy than those who view the system as an evil greater than or equal to preceding systems. A current democratic regime becomes a **lesser evil** when its citizens view it as less undesirable than old systems, and it becomes a **greater evil** when they view it as more undesirable. The current system becomes an **equal evil** when citizens view it and preceding systems as equally undesirable. Only when a significantly higher level of democratic support corresponds with the category of lesser evil can we argue that the hypothesis holds true and that Churchill's statement offers a practical perspective for studying democratisation in progress.

In short, the notion of democracy as a lesser evil embodies two new noteworthy ideas, which contrast sharply with those underlying the prevailing paradigm that emphasises positive conceptions of democracy among the mass public as a cultural foundation for the consolidation of nascent democracies. Conceptually, this notion offers a tool for empirical observation by focusing on democracy-in-action rather than democracy-in-principle. Specifically, it offers a realistic perspective that provides insight into how individual citizens of newly democratising countries perceive and understand their regime even when they have no knowledge of democratic theory and little experience in democratic politics. Theoretically, this vantage point offers an untraditional explanation of why those citizens continue to support a new democratic regime, even when it fails to perform to their satisfaction. To empirically investigate this conceptualisation of Churchill's vision of democracy, we examine recently collected survey data from South Africa and South Korea, which serve as prime examples of new democracies that have emerged outside of Eastern and Central Europe.

3. Democratisation in South Africa and South Korea

South Africa and South Korea are widely known as two great success stories from the "third wave" of democratisation. In 1994, after sixty years of rule by a white minority, South Africa held its first non-racial national election. Since this first election, South Africa has moved to erase the discriminatory legacy of Apartheid and to create a political arena that is open to all parts of society (Wines and LaFraniere 2004). Although the results of these reform efforts have been mixed — the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that worked to unearth and resolve Apartheid era injustices has been widely criticised and much of the public remains disillusioned with government — all parts of society are able to shape government through the ballot box and no unlawful challenges to the post-Apartheid government have occurred (Gibson and Gouws 1999).

To date, South Africans have voted in three national elections (1994, 1999, and 2004) and numerous regional and local elections. In a region known for political instability (sub-Saharan Africa has had more military coups than any other region), these regular, free and fair elections are clear signs that democracy has begun to take root. It is important to note, however, that opposition parties have had little success in national elections (in the last elections the African National Congress won a two-thirds majority in parliament). Even so, in light of the relative smooth transfer of power from the white minority to the black majority and continued economic development, South Africa's prospects for consolidation may be brighter than any other new democracy in Africa.

South Korea's transition to democracy has likewise been noteworthy. Since its transition from decades of military rule in the wake of the 1987 "founding elections," South Korea has maintained a constitutional democracy. To date, the electorate has chosen four different governments through democratic elections. These governments successfully implemented a large number of electoral and other reforms designed to transform the institutions and procedures of military-authoritarian rule into those of representative democracy. Unlike counterparts in Latin America and elsewhere, South Korea has fully restored civilian rule by extricating the military from power (Diamond and Kim 2000; Diamond and Shin 2000).

Furthermore, South Korea is the only new democracy in East Asia that has not only transferred power peacefully to an opposition party but has also fully transformed its age-old crony capitalism into a competitive and transparent

market economy. South Korea has also attracted attention for using Internet information technology in presidential elections to an extent not yet observed in even more advanced democratic countries, including those in Western Europe and North America (Choo 2002). In the latest presidential election held on December 19, 2002, the South Korean people elected for the first time a relatively young and liberal candidate to lead their nation — a nation where age has long played an important role in political and all other aspects of life (Choo 2002; Lee and Baik 2002). As a result of all these accomplishments, South Korea is widely regarded as one of the most vigorous and analytically interesting third-wave democracies in East Asia (Kim 2003; Shin 1999).

4. Measurement

Do the South African and South Korean people actually perceive their political systems as a lesser evil, consistent with Churchill's characterisation of more than half a century ago? To address this question properly, the perception of democracy as a lesser evil should be differentiated from the perception that the current system is generally preferable to the old system. The perception must be that the existing system creates an undesirable situation but a less undesirable situation than the preceding system. To compare the current and old systems in terms of their undesirability and thereby test the notion of a lesser evil takes three steps.

In both South Africa and South Korea, respondents were asked to evaluate, on a separate basis, the overall quality of the past and present regimes on a numeric scale in which the lowest and highest scores (0 and 10 in South Africa and 0 and100 in South Korea) mean, respectively, the worst and best systems of government (for the methodology of these surveys, see Bratton and Mattes 2001 and Shin 1999). We first collapsed the original numeric ratings of the present regime into the two general categories of **evil and non-evil** regime perceptions on the basis of whether or not those ratings were lower than their scale's midpoint. From the ratings of the present regime, we then subtracted those of the past regime and collapsed the resultant scores of this operation into three subcategories, negative, neutral, and positive. These three subcategories were considered indicative of individuals' perceptions of the nature of the regime change.

In the case of negative evaluations of the current regime, positive perceptions of the regime change indicate the existing regime creates a less undesirable state

than the preceding regime. These scores were, therefore, collapsed into the subcategory of **lesser evils**. Negative evaluations of the change, on the other hand, indicate the existing system creates a more undesirable state than the preceding system and thus were collapsed into the category of **greater evils**. Neutral evaluations indicate the existing and preceding systems create an equally undesirable state and thus were collapsed into the category of **equal evils**. By distinguishing perceptions of lesser evils from those of other evils and non-evils, this scheme of classification allows us to determine the proportions of ordinary people in South Africa and South Korea who subscribe to the Churchillian notion of democracy.

To test the Churchillian-based hypothesis that a lesser-evil perception of democracy can coexist with and even foster support for democratisation, we constructed a separate measure of the extent to which individuals support democracy and use this measure as a dependent variable. This allows us to ask if the people in these two countries tend to support democracy when they see the current democratic regime as a lesser evil and if people who view democracy as a lesser evil are more supportive of democracy than those who view it as a greater or equal evil.

To answer these questions, we selected two pairs of items tapping both pro-democratic and antiauthoritarian dimensions of democratic support. The first pair concerns the extent to which respondents are favourably oriented toward democracy as a political system and as a method of governance. The second pair focuses on the extent to which they are unfavourably oriented toward non-democratic political systems, including the one in which they lived prior to democratic regime change, the apartheid regime in the case of South Africa and military regime in the case of South Korea.

Pro-democratic and antiauthoritarian responses to these two pairs of items were dichotomised and combined into a 5-point index estimating the overall levels of democratic support among South Africans and South Koreans. Antidemocratic responses to both questions in the first pair and pro-authoritarian responses to both questions in the second pair would merit a score of 0 (no democratic support); pro-democratic responses to both questions in the first pair and antiauthoritarian responses to both questions in the second pair would merit a score of 4 (full democratic support). Only those who score higher than the index midpoint of 2 are considered supporters of democracy (both national samples had a mean of 2.6). Once calculated, supporters' proportions were compared across all four categories of regime-change assessments: non-evils, lesser evils, equal evils, and greater evils.

5. Democratic Support in South Africa and South Korea

Before we determine the extent to which citizens view democracy as a lesser-evil system and ask how such views influence support for democracy, we must measure our dependent variable and determine the extent to which the mass publics in these new democracies are attached to democracy. Table 1 reports the percentage of respondents in each country that embraces democracy and rejects authoritarianism. It also reports the distribution of these respondents across the 5-point index measure of overall democratic support.

Table 1. Measuring Support for Democracy

A. Pro-democratic and Antiauthoritarian Orientations

Political Orientations	*South Africa*	*South Korea*
Rejection of authoritarian reversal	65.3%	80.7%
Rejection of civilian dictatorship	69.1	81.4
Preference for democratic regime	59.6	68.9
Attachment to democratic governance	54.1	33.3
(N)	(2,016)	(1,058)

B. Overall Levels of Democratic Support (summative index)

Index Score	*South Africa*	*South Korea*
0 (no support)	4.3%	3.2%
1	13.4	11.7
2	18.2	22.3
3	23.7	35.3
4 (full support)	26.8	24.4
(No answer)	(13.5)	(3.0)

Sources: 2000 South Africa Democracy survey and 1997 Korea Democracy Barometer survey.

As Table 1, Panel A indicates, majorities in each country support democracy by preferring it to its predecessors. In both South Africa and South Korea, more than three-fifths of the population rejects the idea of authoritarian reversals and civilian dictators. Likewise, sixty percent of those in both countries also state a preference for democracy. In addition, just over half of all South Africans have

an attachment to democratic governance. The one exception to this overwhelming support for democracy is that about one-third of all South Koreans reported an attachment to democratic governance. Many South Koreans appear to remain nostalgic for the authoritarian method of governance, which freed themselves from decades of poverty and unemployment.

When responses to all four questions are considered together in Table 1, Panel B, it is evident that a majority in each country chooses democracy over its alternatives. By embracing democratic rule fully while rejecting authoritarian rule at least to some extent or embracing democracy at least to some extent while rejecting authoritarian alternatives fully, 51 percent of South Africans and 60 percent of South Koreans prefer to live in a democracy. Moreover, a quarter of the population in each country (27% for South Africa and 24% for South Korea) expressed unconditional commitment to democracy with fully pro-democratic and antiauthoritarian responses to the four questions. These findings suggest that, whatever citizens' views of democracy may be, large percentages of those who live in both countries support democracy.

Now that we know the extent to which individuals support democracy, we can ask how various perceptions of the current political system affect democratic support.

5.1 The Notion of a Lesser Evil as a Political Phenomenon

Viewing democracy as a lesser-evil form of government requires individual citizens in new democracies to perceive the current democratic political system as negative but preferable to the old authoritarian system. The present analysis compares separate perceptions of the current and old political systems among the South African and South Korean mass publics and identifies four distinct categories of evil and non-evil perceptions. These categories include: (1) non-evil; (2) lesser evil; (3) equal evil; and (4) greater evil. In Table 2 we report the percentage of respondents in each country who are placed in each of these categories.

Strikingly, a relatively large percentage of ordinary citizens in both of these countries reported seeing the newly installed political system as evil. In South Africa, fully one-quarter of the population (25%) perceived the existing democratic system in a negative light and more than half of the respondents in South Korea (54%) classified democracy as an evil regime. However, most of

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the respondents who perceived the current regime negatively do not see it as a lesser evil. Instead, of the South Africans and South Koreans who see the current democratic regime as an evil regime, a majority (58% in South Africa and 77% in South Korea) see it as a greater evil, a system that performs worse than the system they knew in the past. Only a small minority of South Africans (7%) and South Koreans (5%) view their new democratic regimes as lesser evils, or less undesirable systems.

Table 2. Popular Assessments of Democratic Regime Change

Various Assessments	*South Africa*	*South Korea*
A. Evil Regime	(24.8%)	(54.1%)
1. more unattractive	14.4	41.8
2. equally unattractive	3.0	7.5
3. less unattractive	7.4	4.8
B. Non-Evil Regime	(75.2%)	(42.9%)
1. less attractive	10.4	15.7
2. equally attractive	5.4	9.5
3. more attractive	59.4	17.7
(N)	(2,016)	(1,058)

Sources: 2000 South Africa Democracy survey and 1997 Korea Democracy Barometer survey.

Obviously, most citizens of South Africa and South Korea do not view their current democratic political systems as lesser evils. Nonetheless, this analysis empirically validates the notion of a lesser evil as one of the conceptual devices some citizens of new democratic states use to appraise their current system of governance. Thus, Churchill's notion of democracy as a lesser evil is not a political fabrication but a concept referring to an observable phenomenon in the real world of democratic politics. Yet the results do not support the inference that citizens of a new democracy would tend to see their government as a lesser evil. In South Africa and South Korea, therefore, the Churchillian epigram fits the views of only a small minority of citizens experiencing democratisation in progress.

5.2 The Notion of a Lesser Evil as a Hypothesis

The Churchillian notion of democracy as a hypothesis holds that a new democratic regime can remain preferable to its citizens even when they view it negatively, or as evil, so long as they view it as lesser evil than all the other forms of government they have previously experienced. This hypothesis also implies that people who perceive the new democratic system as a lesser evil are more supportive of democracy than those who view the system as an equal or greater evil. Table 3 shows how the levels of democratic support vary across the four categories of evil and non-evil perceptions of the existing political system.

Table 3. A Bivariate Test of the Churchillian Model of Democratic Support

Types of Assessments	South Africa	South Korea
(entire sample)	(58.4%)	(62.0%)
A. Evils	38.5%	56.2%
1. Greater evil	29.2	53.3
2. Equal evil	43.1	65.5
3. Lesser evil	53.1	67.1
B. Non-evil	64.5%	69.1%
1. Less attractive	37.7	64.6
2. Equally attractive	44.9	67.2
3. More attractive	69.8	74.6
(eta)	(.29)	(.19)

Note: entries are percentages of democrats among those in each category of regime assessments.
Sources: 2000 South Africa Democracy survey and 1997 Korea Democracy Barometer survey.

In both South Africa and South Korea, a majority of ordinary citizens tend to choose a democracy over its alternatives when they perceive the existing political system as a lesser evil. When the current system is perceived to perform poorly but less poorly than its non-democratic predecessors, 53 percent of South Africans and 67 percent of South Koreans support democracy by embracing democratic rule fully while rejecting authoritarian rule at least to some extent or by embracing democratic rule at least to some extent while rejecting authoritarian rule fully. In each country, perceptions of the current democratic regime as a lesser evil appear to motivate a majority of the citizens who view democracy negatively to support democracy.

Equally notable is that individuals who perceive the current regime as a lesser evil are more supportive of democracy than those who perceive it as a greater or even equal evil. In South Africa, for example, more than half (53%) of those who see the current system as a lesser evil support democracy, as compared to the 43 percent who saw the current regime as an equal evil and the 29 percent who saw it as a greater. In South Korea, more than two-thirds of lesser-evil perceivers (67%) support democracy, as compared to just under two-thirds (66%) that saw the current regime as an equal evil and just more than one-half (53%) that saw it as a greater evil. In essence, the less unfavorably South Africans and South Koreans compare the current system with the old system, the more strongly they are in favour of democracy. This finding from both countries, which were ruled by the authoritarian regimes of divergent natures, confirms the Churchillian hypothesis linking improving political experiences with a commitment to democracy.

Nonetheless, a careful scrutiny of the data reported in Table 3 reveals that in both South Africa and South Korea, the strongest support for democracy does not occur among those who view their current democratic system as a lesser evil, a system that performs badly but less undesirably than its authoritarian predecessor, but among those who view their current system as a non-evil that performs much better than the system of their authoritarian past. This finding suggests that a new democratic system would have the greatest support from its citizens when they believe the end result of democratisation is a non-evil, well-functioning system of governance that performs better than the evil, malfunctioning system they had previously. The Churchillian notion of democracy, however, touches only on how a negative perception of democracy could coexist with support for democracy in the wake of regime change; it offers no basis for understanding how a positive perception of democracy would affect citizen support. Substantively, therefore, the Churchillian notion of democracy as a lesser evil cannot fully unravel the cultural dynamics of democratisation.

6. Summary and Conclusions

What does democracy mean to ordinary people with little experience in democratic politics and no knowledge of democratic theory? When do they decide to embrace democracy as the most preferred system of governance, and why do they do so? These questions, which focus on the practical experiences of individual citizens in new democracies, must be fully answered for us to

unravel the process of democratisation taking place right now in countries around the world. Believing he could offer insight into why democratisation succeeds, Winston Churchill offered the notion of democracy as a lesser evil, saying, "… democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried form time to time."

In emphasising that a new democratic regime does not have to be positively attractive to become the only political game in town, the Churchill notion constitutes a clear and meaningful alternative to the idealistic or positively oriented paradigm that has guided the study of third-wave democracies for the past two decades. Nonetheless, until now, this notion of democracy as a lesser evil had neither been explicated fully nor tested outside post-Communist Europe. This paper has sought to explicate and test Churchill's notion of a lesser evil systematically with two sets of public opinion data recently collected from South Africa and South Korea.

These data were analysed to determine whether ordinary people actually perceive democracy as a lesser evil and whether or not lesser evil perceptions motivate them to support it to a greater extent than other perceptions. Empirically, it was found that at least some South Africans and South Koreans do perceive democracy as a lesser evil, indicating that the notion of a lesser evil can help differentiate the various negative sentiments ordinary people experience with the newly installed democratic rule. Theoretically, lesser-evil perceptions of the existing democratic system were found to lead to greater support for democracy than other evil perceptions. Obviously, these findings seem to validate the lesser-evil notion as a concept as well as a hypothesis.

Nonetheless, vast majorities in both of these countries do not see their current democratic regime as a lesser evil, as did Churchill. In fact, most people do not see democracy in a negative light, or as an evil, at all. The notion of democracy as a lesser evil is applicable only to very small minorities of the South African and South Korean populations. Moreover, these minorities of lesser-evil perceivers are not supportive of democracy as strongly as those who perceive that the malfunctioning regime of the authoritarian past has been transformed into the well-functioning regime of the democratic present. On the basis of these findings, we conclude that the Churchillian notion of democracy as a lesser evil is of limited use as an alternative paradigm for the study of democratisation, especially from the perspective of ordinary citizens in the midst of that complex political experience.

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