Half a Chance: Youth Bulges and Transitions to Liberal Democracy

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Is it over? Has democracy's "third wave"—the virtually uninterrupted uptick in the number of democracies since the early 1970s described by Samuel Huntington (1991)—finally spent all of its momentum? Some analysts contend that it has, and that a reverse wave of neo-authoritarianism is already on the rise (Diamond, 1996; Carothers, 2002). In this article, I argue that the recent leveling-off in measures of global democracy is temporary, and that as youthful demographic profiles mature, new and more stable liberal democracies are likely to arise before 2020 in Latin America, North Africa, and Asia.

Why such optimism? Because my analysis of recent demographic and political trends shows that countries with a large proportion of young adults in the working-age population (referred to as a "youth bulge") are much less likely to attain a stable liberal democracy than countries with a more mature age structure. If fertility continues to decline and age structure continues to mature in many of the world's current youth-bulge countries, analysts should expect most of these states to ultimately attain and maintain liberal democracy. Of course, there will be exceptions; since the early 1970s, charismatic authoritarian leaders and single-party ideological elites have demonstrated a capacity to resist democratization, persisting even as their countries' age structures matured.

In my analysis, I compared two measures: (1) the youth-bulge proportion—defined as the proportion of young adults (ages 15 to 29) in the working-age population (ages 15 to 64)—which is derived from estimates and projections published by the UN Population Division (2007); and (2) liberal democracy, which is identified by a rating of "Free" in Freedom House's (2008) annual evaluations of political rights and civil liberties (from 1972 to 2007).[1]

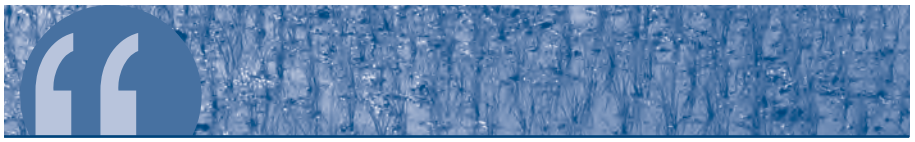
The Youth Bulge: Constraining Liberal Democracy?

Clues to the relationship between the youth bulge and liberal democracy can be seen in the wake of demographic changes that swept through much of East Asia and Latin America in the late 1980s and 1990s. In response to declines in women's fertility, the proportion of young working-age adults in about a dozen countries dropped steeply, to between 0.36 and 0.42. When it did, liberal democracies evolved in most of these countries, with little of the military preemption and backsliding that previously typified their regions—with the recent notable exception of Thailand (see Fig. 1).

In contrast, where liberal democracy emerged before a large youth bulge declined—

as in Colombia, Ecuador, Fiji, India, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Venezuela, and numerous others—regimes failed to stabilize, retreating to less democratic practices and institutions of governance. In some cases, deliberalization occurred periodically, as in Turkey and India. In others, such as Malaysia and Fiji, the preemption has lasted for decades.

The Youth Bulge and the Hobbesian Bargain



Countries with a large proportion of young adults in the working-age population (referred to as a "youth bulge") are much less likely to attain a stable liberal democracy than countries with a more mature age structure.

Why should a youthful age structure influence political regimes? Numerous studies have concluded that countries with a large youth-bulge proportion experience a high risk of political violence and civil strife (Leahy et al., 2007; Urdal, 2006; Mesquida & Wiener, 1996). Assuming, as Thomas Hobbes did in the middle of the 17th century, that citizens are willing to relinquish liberties when faced with threats to their security and property, it is not surprising that support for authoritarian regimes should rise—especially among the commercial elite—during a large youth bulge, when much of the population is young and jobless. Youth bulges tend to give rise to youth cultures that coalesce around distinctive identities and untempered ideologies, and find expression through experimentation and risk-taking. Such conditions, some theorists argue, facilitate the political mobilization and recruitment of young adults—particularly young men—by non-state and state-supported organizations capable of political or criminal violence (see Goldstone, 1991; Moller, 1967/68).

The influence of a youthful age structure on regime type can be understood as a two-stage process.[2] Countries with a large proportion of young adults find themselves in the first stage: They are saddled with a social environment where the regime's legitimacy is strained and the political mobilization of young men is relatively easy. The resulting politics tend to be fractious and potentially violent. In this stage, regimes typically concentrate resources on preserving their position by limiting dissent and maintaining order, a focus that engenders the support of commercial elites and other propertied segments of society.

States can make democratic gains during this stage, and are sometimes pressured into political reforms by youth-led democracy movements. Yet countries with large youth bulges do not usually attain a high level of civil liberties and political rights. When they do—when enlightened authoritarians impose a "democratic legacy" under youth-bulge conditions, or when democratic institutions are imposed at independence or as part of a treaty—these gains face unfavorable odds. Countries that sustained a liberal democracy over periods of youth-bulge conditions (such as Costa Rica, India, Jamaica, and South Africa) have shown extraordinary dedication to maintaining democratic institutions under the stresses of ethnic violence, intense criminal activity, or external threat.

In the second stage, the dissipation of a large youth bulge tends to yield relative political calm and a "demographic dividend": a decline in the number of children each working adult has to support and a bulge in the middle-aged section of the working-age population, which relieves pressure on child health and educational services, stimulates savings, contributes to productivity, and facilitates increased human capital investment and, ultimately, wage growth (see

A woman in Liberia holds up her inked finger indicating she voted in the first democratic elections in Liberia following 14 years of civil war. According to the "half a chance" benchmark, Liberia's democracy is one of the most fragile. (© 2005 Omar Eid, courtesy of Photoshare)

Bloom et al., 2002; Lee & Mason, 2006).

With much of society's political volatility depleted, authoritarian executives tend to lose the support of the commercial elite, who find the regime's grip on communication and commerce economically stifling and the privileges granted to family members and cronies of the political elite financially debilitating. As both Huntington (1991) and Schmitter (1980) have noted, political calm and improved economic and social conditions—which usually advance hand-in-hand with the maturing of age structures—provide authoritarians with opportunities to make a deal for a safe exit.

The Probability of Liberal Democracy: A Schedule

By dividing the world into five regions and analyzing data every five years beginning in 1975, I found (with surprising consistency) that as the regional average of the proportion of young adults declined, the number of liberal democracies grew.[3] Averaging all countries, I found that a youthfully structured country has a 50 percent chance of being rated a liberal democracy once its young-adult proportion drops to about 0.40.[4]

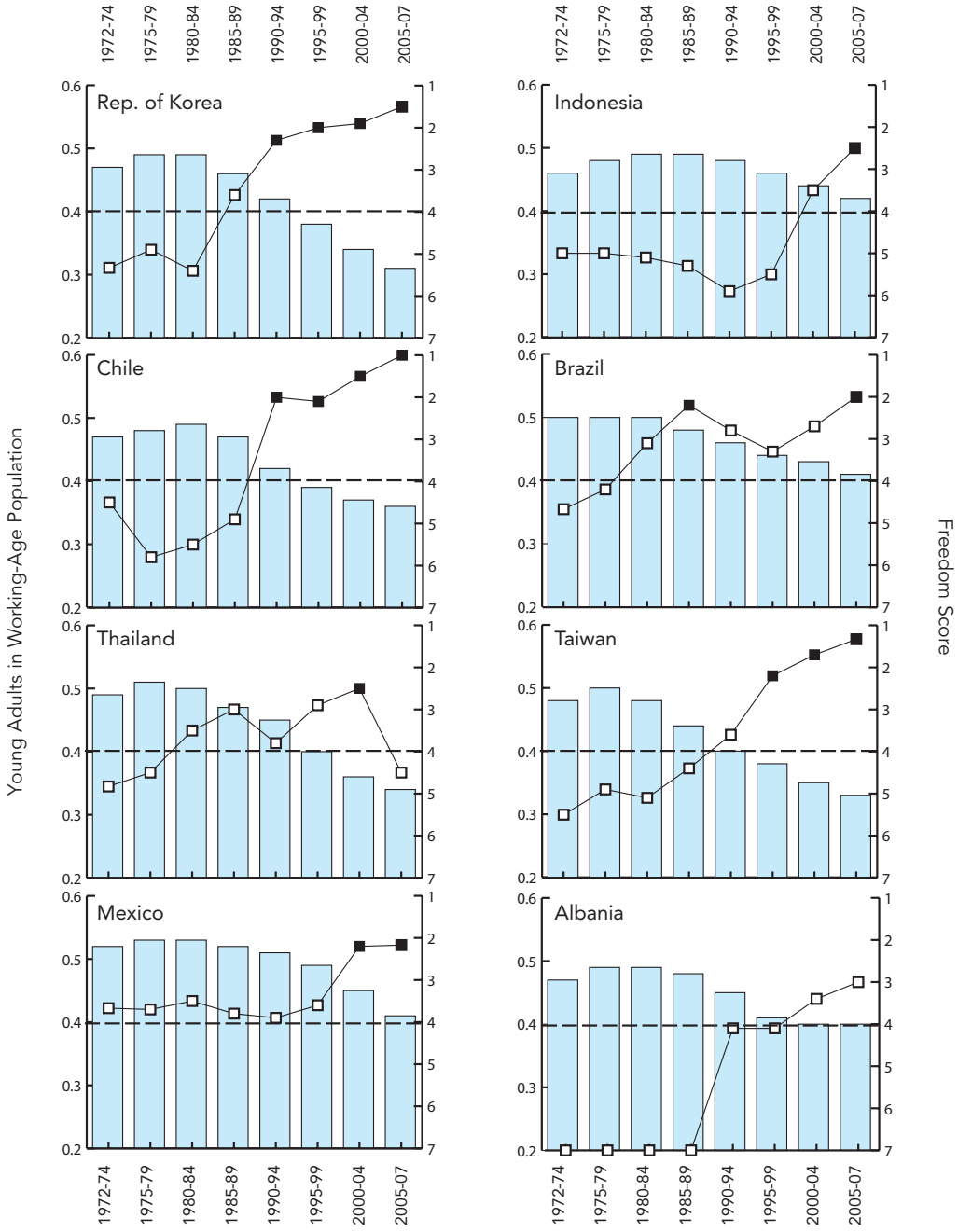
This "half-a-chance benchmark" has, in the recent past, provided a fair indication—plus or minus a decade—of when a country will become a stable liberal democracy. Equipped with this basic statistic, as well as population estimates and projections, I arranged a timetable identifying each country's current probability of liberal democracy and the year in which each youth-bulge country passed, or is projected to pass, the half-a-chance benchmark. The map (Fig. 2) highlights five categories of interest to analysts:

- Fragile liberal democracies (probability of liberal democracy is 40 to 60 percent);
- The most fragile liberal democracies (probability less than 40 percent);
- Other regime types projected to have more than 50 percent probability of attaining stable liberal democracy before 2030;
- Other regime types with a less than 50 percent probability of attaining stable liberal democracy before 2030; and
- Other regimes that are demographically long overdue for liberal democracy (probability is greater than 70 percent)—this category includes, and helps define, neo-authoritarian regimes.

Outliers: Resistant Authoritarians and Persistent Liberal Democracies

How well does this timetable work? It performed most accurately when forecasting liberal democracy among states ruled by military "caretaker" regimes, weak personal dictatorships, or partial democracies. However, a close inspection of this method's failures suggests that the demographic changes (and associated social and economic changes) it tracks are too weak to undermine regimes dominated by a strong and charismatic authoritarian, such as Russia's Vladimir Putin, Cuba's Fidel Castro, or Singapore's Lee Kwan Yew; or by a unified ideological elite deemed synonymous with the state, such as the Chinese Communist Party. Interestingly, these regimes'

Figure 1: Freedom Scores and the Proportion of Young Adults in the Working-Age Population



Young adults: average proportion of young adults (15 to 29 yrs) in the working-age population (15 to 64 yrs).

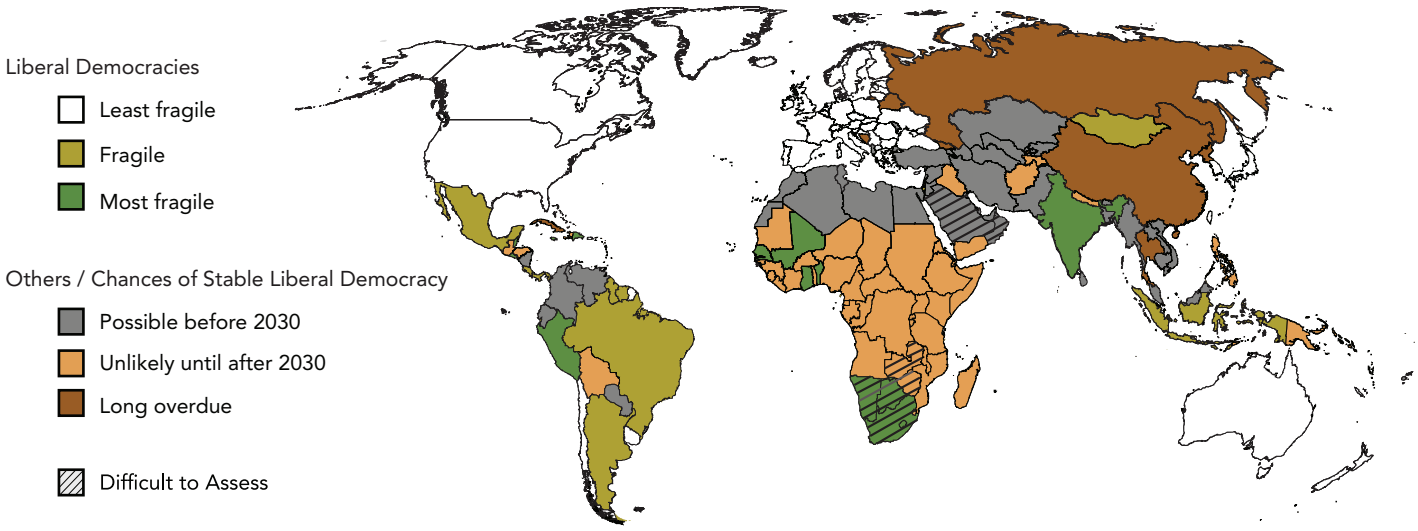
Half-a-chance benchmark: proportion of young adults associated with a 50-percent probability of liberal democracy.

Freedom score: averaged political rights and civil liberty scores.

■ Free (1.0 to 2.5) [assumed as liberal democracy]

□ less than Free (>2.5 to 7.0)

Figure 2: Demographically Derived Categories (2008)



Source: Data from Freedom House (2008); UN Population Division (2007). Map produced by Esther Akitobi, research assistant at Population Action International.

Note: The age structures in countries marked "difficult to assess" are heavily impacted by HIV/AIDS or immigration.

The dissipation of a large youth bulge tends to yield relative political calm and a "demographic dividend."

institutions and policies may have evolved, and may continue to evolve, to withstand and counter the liberalizing side-effects of demographic and socio-economic changes.

The method also identifies states that became liberal democracies far ahead of schedule. Latin American countries have tended, as a group, to embrace liberal democracy while hosting a large youth bulge, which may partly explain why 60 percent of these states have flip-flopped between a liberal democracy and a less democratic regime at least once since the early 1970s, far more than any other region.

A Test: Eastern Europe and Former Soviet States

The youth-bulge method can be tested by predicting regime patterns among the Eastern Bloc states: the former-communist states of Eastern Europe and their ex-Soviet neighbors. While these 28 states are quite different, their collective experience as single-party autocracies provides some common starting points.[5] To prove useful, the method I have outlined should predict, with reasonable accuracy, the proportion and distribution of liberal democracies among these states, with some allowance for delays and complications due to the persistence of Soviet-era political institutions and instabilities.

Does the youth-bulge method pass this test? Yes; by 2007, the average young-adult proportion among the Eastern Bloc countries had declined to 0.36. Meanwhile, the region's proportion of liberal democracies plodded upward to 46 percent since the early 1990s—close, but still short (by three liberal democracies) of the 57 percent that was predicted. Better yet, the distribution of regimes that emerged is consistent with the method's expectations: Liberal democracies dominate the category with the lowest young-adult proportions (Fig. 3).

Is this evidence sufficient to claim that a youthful age structure is the sole constraint to greater political liberalization in the lagging Eastern Bloc states? No, not at all; the countries that, so far, have not attained liberal democracy show geographic affinities and similarities in their per capita income and urbanization—factors that are also associated, to some degree, with the pace of demographic transition. Because income measures are difficult to predict, they do not provide a simple means to project a timetable for liberal democracy.

Hindu pilgrims protest against the local government. According to the "half a chance" benchmark, India's democracy is one of the most fragile. (© 2007 Arup Haldar, courtesy of Photoshare)

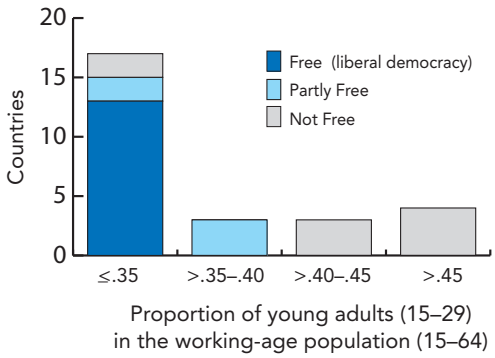
Forecasting Liberal Democracy

If this relationship continues to hold, demographic projections could help analysts identify regions, and states within regions, that in the near and medium term are likely to experience population age structures that are conducive to liberal democracy—and those where liberal democracy is at risk. Nearly all of the countries in two geographical sub-regions are projected to pass the half-a-chance benchmark by 2020: those along the northern rim of Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt) and along the northwestern rim of South America (Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador). None of these North African states has previously attained liberal democracy, while Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador reached these heights early, and then retreated. Analysts should expect one or more liberal democracies arising in each of these sub-regions by 2020 or before. Other countries, which are not currently liberal democracies, that are projected to pass the half-a-chance benchmark before 2020 include Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Myanmar, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and Vietnam.

Admittedly, several of these states face daunting impediments to completing their democratic reforms. For Colombia, Algeria, and Lebanon, further liberalization is unlikely while non-state actors threaten lives and property, control territory, and operate state-like institutions and militias. Yet the age-structural clock is ticking; as fertility declines and populations mature, recruitment will likely become more difficult and more expensive, helping diminish the already-dwindling field strength of insurgencies, whittling them to a small criminalized core, or pressuring them to focus their resources on electoral politics (as in the evolution of Northern Ireland's "Troubles").

In several states, regimes will be able to stall or resist. For example, Vietnam's communist party and Iran's clerical non-elected leadership bear similarities to other state elites that have withstood the tide of age-structural change. On the other hand, Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez, having lost a constitutional referendum in November 2007 that would have augmented

Figure 3: Freedom Ratings of 28 Former Communist Eastern European and Asian States



Data sources: Freedom House (2008); UN Population Division (2007).

his constituency by lowering the voting age to 16, is left with only non-electoral means to dismantle checks on his own authority—a heavy-handed tactic that, when previously applied by Chávez, has alienated influential supporters.

Beyond Prediction: Southern Africa, the Gulf States, and the Future of Europe

Two clusters of countries with extraordinary age structures were omitted from this analysis: (1) the seven most seriously AIDS-affected countries (Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe), where premature adult mortality buoys a high proportion of young adults; and (2) the six oil-rich Gulf States (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates), where large populations of foreign workers mask more youthful indigenous populations. This demographic method provides little insight about governance in either of these clusters.

For example, highly elevated death rates among people 20 to 55 years old and the persistence of very youthful age structures in the most seriously AIDS-affected states—while the source of great suffering among individuals, families, and communities—has not led to the state failures that analysts once feared, but instead to a confusing mélange of outcomes. Four states are rated liberal democracies (Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, and South Africa), while two others are among the most autocratic (Swaziland and Zimbabwe). In the oil-rich Gulf States, the composite age structure—the sum of a foreign-worker population overlaid on a much younger, socioeconomically and ethnically separate age structure of citizens—produces misleading indications of age-structural maturity, and therefore overlooks both the political volatility of Arab youth culture in the Gulf States and grievances arising among foreign workers (Henderson, 2006).

As age structures have matured, the speed of ethnic shifts has quickened. The list of these relative shifts is long, including: increased proportions of indigenous populations in Latin American states; growing numbers of Arabs and ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel; and larger populations of Muslims in Western Europe. How will democracies respond to the emergence of ethnic groups who previously have been political outsiders? Will the liberal democracies of European welfare states retain their suite of liberties and generous social programs as they undergo dramatic ethnic shifts? On these weighty topics the youth-bulge method is unresponsive.

Summary

By focusing exclusively on the institutional reforms and changes in political leadership that precede political liberalization, analysts have overlooked the influence of population age structure on the timing and stability of liberal democracy. My analysis provides evidence suggesting that a youthful age structure—indicated by a large proportion of young adults in the working-age population—can constrain liberal democracy and destabilize it. This research also

shows that the calculation of a country's youth-bulge proportion can be used to assess a liberal democracy's fragility, identify uncommonly persistent authoritarian regimes, and generate reasonable and testable expectations for the advent and stability of liberal democracy.

Notes

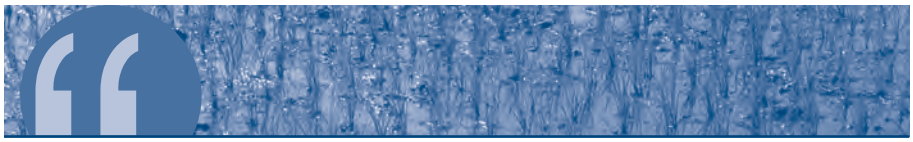
1. This analysis includes countries with a minimum 2020 population of 500,000 people and uses Freedom House composite scores, which are the average of political rights, "PR" (scaled 1 to 7, with 1 being the maximum realization of political rights), and civil liberties, "CL" (similarly scaled 1 to 7). The category "Free" is assigned to assessments where the average of PR and CL scores ranges from 1.0 to 2.5.

2. The theoretical breakdown of this process was first presented by Jack Goldstone at a seminar on democratization processes sponsored by the National Intelligence Council, March 2008.

3. The five regions are: North and South America, Europe (including Russia), Middle East-North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and other Asia-Oceania. This analysis omits two sets of countries with irregular (non-transitional) age structures: the seven countries with high rates of HIV/AIDS and the six Gulf States with a large immigrant population.

4. This analysis employs weighted least-squares regression to determine regression coefficients and intercepts for linear models generating the proportion of liberal democracies expected in a region (Y) from the average proportion of young adults (X) among countries in that region (not the regional young-adult proportion). Seven regressions were generated, one for each five years, from 1975 to 2005. None of the regression parameters from these were statistically different. The regression equation for these composite data are: LD = -0.033(YA*100)+1.83, where LD is the expected proportion of liberal democracies in a regional grouping of countries and YA is the proportion of young adults, age 15 to 29, in the working-age population, 15 to 64. This analysis also has been performed using Polity IV data, assuming liberal democracy as polity scores from +8 to +10, with very similar results.

5. The former Eastern Bloc states are Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Serbia, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Romania, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.



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REPORT ONLINE

Two graphics accompanying Richard Cincotta's *Foreign Policy* magazine article, "How Democracies Grow Up," are available online:

A map of "The Young World" indicates the year when each country is projected to pass the "half-a-chance" benchmark based on the proportion of young adults in the working-age population: www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4199

"Where Youth and Freedom Collide" illustrates the likelihood of liberal democracy at various youth-bulge proportions: www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4174

Freedom House rates countries as "free," "partly free," or "not free" based on assessments of their political rights and civil liberties: www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/FIWAllScores.xls

Map of Freedom in the World, 2008 edition: www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=363&year=2008

Along with fellow *Report 13* author Jack Goldstone, Cincotta assessed the evidence for "the security demographic" at the Wilson Center in June 2006: http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1413&fuseaction=topics.event_summary&event_id=205876

Two previous *ECSP Report* articles by Cincotta analyze different aspects of the links between age structure and conflict:

"Population Age Structure and Its Relation to Civil Conflict: A Graphic Metric" (coauthored by Elizabeth Leahy): http://www.wilsoncenter.org/topics/pubs/PopAgeStructures&CivilConflict12.pdf

"Demographic Security Comes of Age": http://www.wilsoncenter.org/topics/pubs/ecspr10_C-cincotta.pdf

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