Diffuse Support for Democracy

The indicator "satisfaction with democracy" suffers from a blurred distinction between, in the terminology of Easton's seminal model, diffuse and specific support. Thus, increasing dissatisfaction with a given democracy may well, but need not, imply renunciation of democracy as a normative order. The strong correlation between an individual's evaluation of the current economic situation and his or her level of satisfaction with democracy is reflected in highly volatile trends of opinion, as is the manifest interaction between political dissatisfaction and periods of intense domestic conflict and crisis. Time sequences of the indicator "satisfaction with democracy" show, at least for Western and Southern Europe, "that this indicator of perceived efficacy is sensitive to short term economic and other conditions and is therefore much more volatile than are attitudes of diffuse legitimacy" (Morlino and Montero, 1995: 238).

While the level of satisfaction with democracy informs us about perceived functional deficiencies in any political process, it ignores questions relating to the broader, diffuse support for democracy as a form of government. Yet this question is central to empirical research on consolidation: "Attitudinally, a democratic regime is consolidated when a strong majority of public opinion, even in the midst of major economic problems and deep dissatisfaction with incumbents, holds the belief that democratic procedures and institutions are the most appropriate way to govern collective life, and when support for antisystem alternatives is quite small or more or less isolated from prodemocratic forces" (Linz and Stepan, 1996a: 16). Whether or not democratic rules and norms are accepted as "the only game in town" by the majority of the population may be established by applying the following indicators of diffuse legitimacy over a stipulated time period:
1. preference given to democracy over dictatorship
2. preference given to a multi-party system over a single-party system
3. rejection of a dissolution of parliament or any existing party
4. spread of antidemocratic and/or antipluralist orientations.

6.1. Support for Democracy as a Form of Government

Compared to the fluctuating levels of satisfaction with democracy, data on diffuse support for democracy as a form of government primarily indicate stability. In the Czech Republic, the share of respondents who prefer democracy to any dictatorial regime under any circumstances has exceeded 70 percent since 1990, with only slight variations. Worsening economic conditions and the exacerbated political conflicts associated with them caused diffuse support for democracy to fall from 74 percent in 1995 to a mere 66 percent in 1997. In the Slovak Republic, 68 percent of respondents explicitly favor democracy as the best form of government even though, at the same time, 57 percent are dissatisfied with the current realities of the political process. In Hungary, political dissatisfaction has increased steadily during the period examined, but has had no affect on diffuse system support. Thus, 65 percent of Hungarians prefer democracy to any form of dictatorship under any circumstances. In contrast, the dramatic decline of system support which Poland experienced between 1991 and 1992 was directly related to the economic and domestic upheavals taking place at the time. But support has increased since 1994 and has exceeded the 1991 figures continuously since 1995.¹ (see Table 9)

The "hard" core of antidemocratic respondents giving preference to dictatorship over democracy amounts to roughly 13 percent in the Czech Republic. In Hungary, 17 percent expressed antidemocratic preferences in 1997, whereas 18 percent did so in both Poland and Slovakia. There has been very little fluctuation in this segment over the time period surveyed. Pronounced antidemocratic attitudes prevail mainly among (former) members of the Communist party, but also among the unemployed and/or those who are pessimistic about their economic situation and prospects. Between 21 percent (CZ) and 12 percent (H) of interviewees react with indifference or despondency when asked to specify the form of government they