ABSTRACT. In this paper, we examine the political consequences of quality of life, focusing on the link between perceived well-being and people’s support for democratic government. We make two key distinctions. First of all, with regard to quality of life, we distinguish between assessments of personal, or household, quality of life, and assessments of collective (national, community) quality of life. Secondly, we follow David Easton in distinguishing between specific support (attitudes about specific leaders, parties and policies) and diffuse support (attitudes toward the political system in general). We find that personal quality of life is only weakly and inconsistently connected to specific or diffuse support. Perceptions of collective quality of life, however, are strongly related to both specific and diffuse support. Thus, South Africans are holding their government accountable to their perceptions of national well-being. Of greater concern, however, is that they also appear to be holding the democratic system accountable to such developments. Teaching people to distinguish between their evaluations of a specific government and their evaluations of the larger system of democratic government appears to be a key challenge confronting the development of a democratic political culture in South Africa.

KEY WORDS: democracy, diffuse support, political culture, quality of life, South Africa

Past research has investigated the components of South Africans’ evaluations of their quality of life (see Møller, 1992a, 1996). However, so far as we can determine, the political consequences of quality of life have remained largely unexplored. Of specific concern to us are the possible consequences of quality of life for the consolidation of democracy in South Africa. The consolidation of a new democracy is intimately tied to citizens’ support for and commitment to the democratic process, and these factors may be linked to their quality of life.

We assume that it is citizens’ perceptions of well-being which ultimately matter politically and, thus, focus on subjective quality of life. Our first research question concerns the extent to which
popular support for South Africa’s fledgling democratic system is tied to the new government’s ability to deliver material improvements which will improve perceived quality of life. With one of the highest GINI coefficients in the world, quality of life in South Africa is highly unequal.² Unsurprisingly, the new government, led by the African National Congress, has made development, growth and redistribution its principal focus. Its 1994 campaign was a positive, issue-oriented and forward-looking one centered around the slogan of “A Better Life For All” and focused largely on the benefits of its proposed Reconstruction and Development Programme. Thus, material improvements to quality of life and redressing inequality have become the centrepiece of the democratic government’s political agenda. It is possible, therefore, that evolving citizens’ evaluations of quality of life could play an especially important role in shaping their attitudes about the new government. More importantly, they could shape their evaluations of democracy in general.

If perceptions of quality of life do indeed shape evaluations of leaders, government and democracy, a second important research question concerns the relevant criteria which people use to form those evaluations. Do they link them to their own, immediate circumstances, and thus tie the personal directly to the political? Or, do they tend to look beyond their immediate circumstances and focus on broader social conditions? Thus, we distinguish between perceptions of personal quality of life (based on assessments of personal and household well-being) and collective quality of life (based on assessments of community and national life).

This article represents a preliminary investigation into the political consequences of subjective perceptions of quality of life. Using data from the South African version of the 1995 World Values Study (conducted by the Centres for International and Comparative Politics, and Interdisciplinary Studies, both at the University of Stellenbosch), we examine the political consequences of peoples’ subjective perceptions of personal quality of life. Then, making use of data from a separate 1995 study conducted by the Institute for Democracy In South Africa, we examine the political impact of collective quality of life and compare it with that of personal quality of life (see Appendix 1 for a discussion of these surveys).