Adolescents' Conceptions of Democracy in Central/Eastern Europe and the United States

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Abstract: The term democracy has an overwhelmingly positive connotation for most people (Diamond & Plattner, 2008), yet it is a contested, fluid, and evolving concept that represents many different things to different people. This article presents our analysis of conceptions of democracy among groups of adolescents (n=2,848, ages 13-19) in the Czech Republic, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Ukraine, and the United States. This study focused on students' responses to one open-ended item on a written questionnaire. Our inquiry is significant because the ability to provide a meaningful definition of democracy has been shown to be associated with support for democratic institutions, and more complex understandings of democracy have been associated with greater political involvement and commitment to democracy (Bratton, Mattes, & Gyimah-Boadi, 2004; Miller, Hesli, & Reisinger, 1997). We found that the vast majority of the students gave acceptable definitions of democracy and that students were most likely to describe democracy in terms of freedoms and rights and least likely to mention civic equality as an aspect of democracy. Additionally, we found that demographic characteristics, students' level of political engagement, and students' perception of classroom climate sometimes impacted the complexity of the students' conceptions of democracy.

Keywords: civic education; adolescent civic knowledge; adolescent political knowledge; political socialization; conceptions of democracy

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Introduction

The term democracy has an overwhelmingly positive connotation for most people (Diamond & Plattner, 2008), yet it is a contested, fluid, and evolving concept that represents many different things to different people. This article presents our analysis of conceptions of democracy among groups of adolescents (ages 13-19) in the Czech Republic, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Ukraine, and the United States. Our inquiry is significant because the ability to provide a meaningful definition of democracy has been shown to be associated with support for

democratic institutions, and more complex understandings of democracy have been associated with greater political involvement and commitment to democracy (Bratton, Mattes, & Gyimah-Boadi, 2004; Miller, Hesli, & Reisinger, 1997).

The Central and Eastern European context is important because democracy is relatively new to these nation-states. Under the specter of a global economic crisis, democracy may be particularly fragile in these countries. Liaquat Ahamed, author of *Lords of Finance: The Bankers Who Broke the World,* observed that "The debt crisis in Eastern Europe is much more than an economic problem. The wrenching decline in the standard of living caused by this crisis is provoking social unrest" (2009, p. 12).

The U.S. context is significant because while the nation has been a democracy for over 200 years, it is experiencing a demographic shift characterized by increasing numbers of immigrants and non-European-Americans. The diversity of the populace presents challenges and opportunities for the country's democracy. The U.S. Census Bureau (2012, May) estimated that in 2010, nearly 13% of the U.S. population was born outside of the United States.

Conceptual Framework and Related Literature

Defining Democracy

The past 20 years has seen a dramatic increase in the number of democratic governments around the world. According to Freedom House (2009), the number of electoral democracies in the world increased from 69 in 1989 to 119 in 2008. Central/Eastern Europe, in particular, has seen the greatest increase in the number of democracies because of the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989. This dramatic rise in democracies begs the question: Exactly what makes a country a democracy? Clearly, not all democracies are the same.

In Ancient Greece, where the term was first used, democracy (*demos* means people, *kratos* means rule) in city-states such as Athens was defined by the direct rule of citizens. In Ancient Rome, on the other hand, the citizens of the republic ruled through representatives. After a long absence, democratic principles experienced a revival during the Renaissance. One of these positions, liberalism, developed in response to the rise of absolutist systems and religious intolerance in Europe during the Middle Ages. At its core is the idea that individuals should be free to pursue their own political, economic, and religious affairs, undeterred by the state (Held, 2006).

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Confusion often arises however, about the meaning of democracy because it is an idea that has been claimed by people and governments that seem to represent contradictory aims and practices. Political scientist Robert Dahl (1998) argues that a source of this confusion is because people understand it as both an ideal and an actuality (p. 26). Understanding democracy as an ideal is useful, Dahl argues, for identifying the standards against which we can measure progress, but because it is an ideal it cannot be found in the real world (p. 29). When understood as an ideal, Dahl suggests that a democracy provides opportunities for: (a) effective participation, (b) equality in voting, (c) gaining enlightened understanding, (d) exercising final control over the agenda, and (e) inclusion of adults (p. 38). These criteria point to the fact that democracies, in general, are defined by the degree to which all citizens are able to play a role in the governance of the nation. Unlike monarchies and other autocratic forms of government, democracies require a degree of political equality and participation.

Dahl further argues that in actuality, representative democracies require institutions that support democratic practices, including: (a) elected officials; (b) free, fair, and frequent elections; (c) freedom of expression; (d) alternative sources of information; (e) associational autonomy; and (f) inclusive citizenship (p. 85). Based on these criteria and basic principles are various types of governments to which the label democracy is applied.

Since 1973, Freedom House has issued an annual "Freedom in the World" report compiled by country experts that indicates the degree to which the civil liberties (e.g., freedom of expression, assembly) and political rights (voting, electoral choices) inherent in democratic institutions are supported in countries around the world. Ratings of the degree to which civil liberties and political rights are realized in countries around the world are developed and validated by country experts. The indicators (e.g., free and fair elections, protection of minority rights) largely correspond to the criteria developed by Dahl.

Previous Empirical Research

Adults' ability to define democracy

There has been a strong interest among political scientists in examining popular support for democratic values and institutions in the post-Soviet countries. The assumption is that broad support is necessary to sustain democratic regimes. Several studies have specifically examined adults' definitions of democracy. In 1992, for example, Miller, Hesli and Reisinger (1997)

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surveyed over 2300 political elites (legislators and government officials) and ordinary citizens in Russia and Ukraine. In face-to-face interviews, respondents were presented with the following question: "There is considerable argument concerning the meaning of democracy. What does democracy personally mean to you?" (p. 164). Responses were sorted into nine categories, the most prevalent of which included freedom, rule of law, responsibility, and majority rule. The researchers found that most adults were able to give a reasonable definition of democracy. Although elites were more likely to provide definitions than were ordinary citizens, 71 and 75% of the mass public in Russia and Ukraine, respectively, were able to respond to the question. Elites were more likely to define democracy as rule of law; ordinary citizens were more likely to define democracy as freedom, and to ascribe negative characteristics to democracy. Number of responses (an indicator of complexity in our study) was associated with elite status, education, political involvement, and a greater commitment to democracy.

Dalton, Shin, and Jou (2007a, 2007b), researchers at the Center for the Study of Democracy at the University of California-Irvine, compared popular definitions of democracy given by adults from surveys conducted in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America between the early 1990s and early 2000s. Although the surveys varied in terms of exact wording, in general, adults were asked how they would define democracy through an open-ended question. Dalton et al. coded responses according to three categories: freedoms, civil liberties, and citizens' rights (freedom of expression); democratic institutions or political processes (voting, majority rule); and social benefits (prosperity, jobs).

The researchers found that most people were able to give an acceptable definition of democracy regardless of whether they lived in established or new democracies, or in nations that have little or no experience with democracy. The ability to define democracy increased as a country developed more democratic institutions (tracking at various points in the Central/Eastern European countries post-1989 showed an increased awareness of the tenets of democracy). Across 49 countries, adults were most likely to associate democracy with rights and freedoms, and least likely to associate democracy with social benefits. In countries that had transitioned to democratic forms of government in the past 20 years, freedom and rights were initially overwhelmingly associated with democracy, but within a few years, adults also cited institutional or political processes.

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Adolescents' conceptions of democracy

Relatively few studies have documented young people's understanding of the term *democracy*. The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) CivEd study (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001), conducted in 1999 in 28 countries, surveyed 14-year-olds' conceptions of democracy by asking whether particular conditions would be very good, good, bad, or very bad for democracy. The results suggested that there was a fair amount of consensus across countries that the right to elect political leaders freely and to have the opportunity to belong to various types of organizations was good for democracy, and that when one company owns all newspapers or wealthy people have more influence on government than average citizens, it is bad for democracy. On items which suggested more conflict (e.g., people demanding their social and political rights), there was little consensus. The more recent International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS), conducted in 2008-09 in 38 countries, again indicated very strong support for most democratic values, particularly the right to express one's opinions freely (Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, Losito, 2010).

Only two studies and two national assessments were located in which students were asked for the definition of democracy in an open-ended format. The U.S. National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) in Civics typically asks questions about students' knowledge of political processes (e.g., the length of a U.S. Senator's term of office) as opposed to assessing conceptual understanding. However, in the 1976 and 1988 assessments, twelfth graders were asked in an open-ended format to define democracy. The majority of seniors (84.3% in 1976 and 88.4% in 1988) were able to provide "acceptable" responses (the criteria for "acceptable" was not disclosed; as cited in Flanagan et al., 2005, p. 194).

Over 30 years ago, Sigel and Hoskin (1981) asked twelfth grade students from Pennsylvania to explain democracy to someone unfamiliar with the concept. Over 85% of the students interviewed (n = 992) were able to give an acceptable response, and the most frequent responses involved individual freedoms. However, the majority of responses were considered "simplistic," and despite probing, most students were unable to elaborate beyond the "slogans of democracy."

Constance Flanagan and her colleagues (Flanagan, Gallay, Gill, Gallay, & Nti, 2005) studied the correlates of a sample of 701 Midwestern youths' conceptions of democracy. In 1995, the researchers asked students from six schools in grades 7-12 to respond to the open-ended question: "In your own words, what does democracy mean to you?" A slight majority of students (53%) accurately defined democracy; not surprisingly, the students' age (older) and

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their parents' level of educational attainment (higher) were associated with more correct responses. There were no differences between males and females. The lower percentage in comparison to the Sigel and Hoskin (1981) and NAEP 1988 and 1996 assessments may be attributable to the wider age span (grades 7-12 as opposed to grade 12 only).

Responses were coded inductively, which resulted in three categories of responses: individual rights and freedoms, representative democracy and majority rule, and civic equality. Although a single student response could include references to one, two, or all three categories, the researchers assigned each response to one category based on theme salience (e.g., the initial response, or the prevalence of ideas associated with one category). On that basis, of the students who responded to the item, 30% defined democracy in terms of individual rights, 40% mentioned representative rule, and 30% identified aspects of civic equality.

The two NAEP assessments and the Sigel and Hoskin and the Flanagan et al. studies differ from other work in this area in that the students were allowed to give their own definition of democracy as opposed to selecting from a list of definitions or identifying traits of democracy. Presumably, this format is less prone to students guessing. This format also does not limit students' responses by presenting them with the researcher's predetermined categories. Both of the studies (Sigel & Hoskin, 1981; Flanagan et al., 2005) were conducted during relatively stable political, economic, and social times. Each study also involved relatively small samples of students from one state in the United States.

Although we located only two studies and two assessments that directly asked adolescents to define democracy, other studies—both U.S.-based and international—have shown that political knowledge among adolescents is positively related to age and socioeconomic status (Lutkus & Weiss, 2007; National Center for Education Statistics, 2011; Schulz et al., 2010; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Older students are more likely to have been exposed to more coursework related to history and politics, and are more likely to have developed a higher level of cognitive sophistication. Higher socioeconomic status students are more likely to have access to a wide range of resources and experiences that expose them to political ideas (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Although studies conducted more than 20 years ago were likely to find males demonstrating greater political knowledge than females (Sigel & Hoskin, 1981; Torney, Oppenheim, & Farnen, 1979), more recent studies of political knowledge among adolescents both in the United States and in other countries have been mixed, with some suggesting a slight advantage for females (Lutkus & Weiss, 2007; Shulz et al., 2010; but see Torney-Purta et al., 2001). In the study that follows, we examine some of these demographic variables in relation to students' ability to give more complex conceptions of democracy.

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We also explore the impact of two additional variables: students' level of political engagement and their perceptions of an open classroom climate. There has long been a strong association between political knowledge and engagement (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Galston, 2001). In general, a higher level of political knowledge provides an individual with the resources to participate politically, while political participation—whether in the form of voting, discussing issues with others, contacting a public official, or protesting, for example—tends to increase one's political knowledge.

Open classroom climate is defined by Torney-Purta et al. (2001) as the "extent to which students experience their classrooms as places to investigate issues and explore their opinions and those of their peers" (p. 137). In the IEA CivEd study (2001), the construct was measured by six items,[1] and is grounded in a conception of discussion that is issues-based, involves perspective-taking, and fosters respectful disagreement. In over two-thirds of the countries involved in the IEA CivEd study, students' report of an open classroom climate was a significant predictor of their civic knowledge and their stated expectation that they would vote as adults (Torney-Purta et al., 2001, pp. 151-155). The ICCS Report, which used a slightly modified version of the classroom climate scale, found that in 27 of the 34 countries students' perception of an open classroom climate was a significant predictor of civic knowledge (Schulz et al., 2010, p. 225). From a theoretical perspective, the more open the classroom climate, the more likely the class has formed a "community of practice" (Wenger, 1998) in which students observe models of the teacher and perhaps other students searching for and weighing evidence, formulating and stating positions, and listening to those with whom they disagree. At another level, we reason that more open classroom climates tend to be more democratic because they foster an environment characterized by respect for divergent views. Students who not only learn about democracy but also experience aspects of it may be more likely to articulate more complex definitions of democracy.

The Present Study

The surveys of adults in Central/Eastern European countries and in the United States suggest that most people are able to give acceptable definitions of democracy. We did not know whether these findings would apply to adolescents. The questions that guide our inquiry are:
1. Are young people able to give acceptable definitions of democracy?
2. How do young people define democracy?

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3. To what degree do students' definitions of democracy demonstrate a level of complexity?
4. Within countries, to what degree are students' demographic characteristics, level of political engagement, and perception of classroom climate predictors of a more complex understandings of democracy?

The study was conducted in the United States and the Central and Eastern European countries of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Ukraine.

Country Context

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the world has witnessed the democratization of countries in Eastern Europe and Central and Western Asia that had been under communist rule, in some cases for almost 80 years. Civic education, and education in general during the communist era was highly centralized, emphasizing loyalty and conformity to the communist system rather than enlightened, engaged citizenship. Social scientist Martina Klicperová-Baker (2008) said: "Instead of fostering civic virtues, the [totalitarian] regimes suppress the notion of citizenship, provoke a sense of learned helplessness, suppress individuality, etc." (p. 162). Today a new generation of young people, born since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, represents the future of democracy in these new post-communist republics.

Although there is currently a great deal of interest in citizenship education in the former communist countries, research suggests that, at least in some countries, schools are struggling to create educational systems that promote democratic values and participatory citizenship (Mason, 2005). Many of the teachers are those who have known communist rule for most of their lives, and the transition from teaching under an authoritarian regime to teaching in a transitioning democracy is difficult. This transition has implications for content and pedagogy, as well as the roles of the teachers and students. Moreover, there is a concern that overall levels of interest and participation in politics are in decline in post-Soviet republics (Piattoeva, 2005).

Structure and content of education.

Students in the United States, regardless of race or ethnicity, can attend public comprehensive schools from grades K-12. In most states, attendance is compulsory until age 16. Although tracking by achievement level within schools and within classes exists, students generally

attend schools with students who demonstrate a wide range of achievement levels. The Central and Eastern European countries in our study generally follow the traditional European model: School is compulsory through 8th or 9th grade, after which examination scores determine whether a student attends the gymnasium or a vocational/ technical school.

The United States has long had a tradition of local and state control on matters related to education. Although the trend in the past decade has been toward more federal mandates, state and local governments make decisions about required coursework, curriculum, and assessments. In contrast, in the post-communist countries education policies are centrally controlled by Ministries of Education, and as such, teachers are generally required to follow a national curriculum.

One of the primary purposes of schooling in the United States is ostensibly to prepare students for their role as citizens in a democracy. In terms of civic education coursework, most states in the United States require students to complete separate courses in either civics or government. In some of the Central and Eastern European countries, the term "civic education" can carry a negative connotation, a reminder of indoctrination classes during the communist era. The European Union, however, has played a central role in bringing citizenship education to the forefront in trying to foster a European identity (see European Commission, 2005). In the Czech Republic, Macedonia, and Romania, students are required to take a separate course in civics; notably, the Czech Republic and Romania are members of the European Union (which encourages civic education). Macedonia received full candidate status in the EU in 2005, and Serbia received full candidate status in March 2012. In Serbia and Ukraine, civic education classes are optional. Across all sites, civic-related content is integrated into other courses such as history, geography, law, and ethics, to varying degrees.

Methodology

Students and Settings

Secondary students (N = 2,848) from six countries were asked to complete a survey as part of an evaluation of an international civic education project.[2] The students ranged in age between 13 and 19; the mean age of participants was 17.1 years. Approximately 45% of the students were male, and 54% female. Table 1 presents students' demographic information by country.

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Table 1: *Student Demographics by Country*

Site	Number of Students	Mean Age of Students (Range)	Gender[a]	
			F	M
Czech Republic	261	18.0 (13-19)	59.0%	41.0%
Macedonia	97	16.6 (14-18)	60.8	39.2
Romania	163	17.3 (13-19)	52.8	47.2
Serbia	170	17.4 (16-19)	39.4	60.0
Ukraine	94	15.7 (13-19)	55.3	44.7
United States	2063	17.0 (13-19)	53.5	46.3
TOTAL	**2848**	**17.1 (13-19)**	**53.8**	**45.4**

[a]The total number of students is more than the number of students who identified themselves on the questionnaire as male or female, because some students chose not to indicate their gender.

U.S. students were from various sites across the country, including: Bloomington/Evansville, Indiana; Chicago Metro; Columbia, South Carolina; Denver; Fairfax County, Virginia; Los Angeles Metro; Montgomery Country, Maryland; and New Jersey. Schools in the United States represented a diverse range of settings and student populations, including urban, suburban, and rural schools; schools with ethnically homogenous and ethnically heterogeneous student populations; and schools surrounded by affluence and those engulfed in poverty.

Data Collection

We collected data on students' conceptualizations of democracy, demographic characteristics, levels of political engagement, and perceptions of classroom climate. All surveys were conducted in the spring of 2008.

Conceptualizations of democracy.

This study focused on students' responses to one open-ended question (previously developed by Flanagan et al., 2005):
People have different ideas about what it means for a society to be a democracy. In your own words, what does democracy mean to you?

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We chose this open-ended format as opposed to students checking those characteristics they most associate with democracy from a prescribed list for several reasons. First, democracy is a complex and contested concept. There is disagreement among political scientists and theorists as to the most salient characteristics of democracy (Miller et al., 1997). Any prescribed list would likely be inadequate in accounting for the complexity of the concept. Second, this format allows us to explore the meanings *students* bring to the concept of democracy. If we had presented students with a prescribed list of definitions and/or characteristics of democracy, we might have limited their responses and students would have been more likely to guess due to the low effort associated with marking predetermined options. Along these same lines, we are more likely to uncover their misconceptions about democracy through this format. Third, as previously noted, to our knowledge only two previous studies and two assessments have used the open-ended format with students. If we had multiple studies over time that showed a relatively limited number of similar responses, we might be comfortable using a checklist. Finally, that the study was conducted in multiple nations, each with different political histories and cultures, suggests that responses might be quite varied, and in ways that we as European-Americans might not have anticipated.

Demographic information.

We collected information on gender because its impact on civic knowledge has been mixed over the years. In general, while past studies have shown males to be more knowledgeable than females, more recent studies show either no differences or a female advantage. The CivEd study (data collected in 1999) showed males significantly outperformed females in 11 of 28 countries (though differences were small), with no differences in the remaining countries. Conversely, the ICCS study (data collected in 2008-09) revealed that in 31 of 38 countries, females significantly outperformed males, with some countries showing substantial differences. In the United States, neither of the most recent two NAEP studies showed significant differences in civic knowledge among adolescents by gender (Lutkus & Weiss, 2007; National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).

Across countries, we collected students' self-report of the number of books in their home, a proxy for socioeconomic status used by the CivEd study. Students were asked to estimate the number of books in their home, with response options including: none, 1-10, 11-50, 51-100, 101-200, 200+. In the United States, we asked students to report their typical grades in social

studies (mostly As, Bs, Cs, or Ds). We did not collect this information in the post-communist countries due to the different types of evaluation systems.

Political engagement

Students' level of political engagement was reflected by the mean response to four items: *I know more about politics than most people my age; When political issues or problems are being discussed, I usually have something to say; I am able to understand most political issues easily*; and *I am interested in politics*. For each item, students could respond on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha, an indicator of reliability, ranged from .697 in Ukraine to .809 in Macedonia.

Open classroom climate
The six-item scale from the CivEd Study was used to measure students' perception of an open classroom climate. This measure was used at an individual level, that is, we used students' individual perceptions as opposed to an average classroom score. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for the classroom climate scale ranged from .734 in Macedonia to .874 in Serbia.

Students were given the survey in their native language; all surveys were translated and then back-translated. To limit the possibility of students' statements being mistranslated, paraphrased, or summarized, all translators were instructed to translate all responses as literally as possible.

Coding Procedures

We began by tentatively using Flanagan et al.'s system of coding, testing it first with a small number of responses from each of the countries. We were aware that the categories might not be appropriate, particularly for the European context. However, all but a very small percentage of responses could be categorized using Flanagan's framework. Only 2.7% of the students' responses were those that characterized democracy as ineffective, prone to corruption, or generally a bad form of government (e.g., "different name for a totalitarian regime" and "democracy is the worst form of dictatorship," and "because it's hypocritical and insincere, it doesn't mean much to me") and 1.6% of the students referred to economic issues (e.g.,

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"Democracy means the ability for people to have the chance to prosper through hard work and competition"); the former were coded *negative* and the latter *economic*. A total of 150 of the students' responses, evenly divided across sites, were categorized by all three coders. Interrater agreement ranged from 91 – 94%. Disputes were resolved through discussions among the three raters.

Typical responses in the *freedoms and rights* category included "freedom of speech and choice," "we have the right to freely express our ideas," and simply "freedom." Examples of responses in the *representative government* category included "power of the people," "democracy is government of the people," and "the people rule the country." Responses representative of the *civic equality* category included "everyone is treated equally," "guaranteed rights for minorities," and simply "equality." Responses categorized as *vague/incorrect* included "a form of government," "joy – like a Pepsi," and "the government works as a service industry."

Results

Young People's Definitions of Democracy

Acceptable responses

As shown in Table 2, with the exception of the Serbian students we surveyed, the vast majority of the students gave acceptable definitions of democracy. The percentages are similar, if not higher, to those found in surveys of adults.

Table 2: *Percentage of Acceptable Definitions of Democracy by Country*

Country	Acceptable Definitions	No Response, "Don't Know," Vague, or Incorrect
Czech Republic	86.2%	13.8%
Macedonia	85.6	14.4
Romania	85.3	14.7
Serbia	41.2	58.8
Ukraine	85.2	14.8
United States	77.7	22.3

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Less than half of all the Serbian students we surveyed offered acceptable definitions of democracy; the majority of Serbian students did not respond at all. The Serbian context is interesting because there has been (and is) intense political conflict in the country. A strong and vocal minority of the populace supports the ultranationalist policies of the Milosevic era. With the backing of NATO and the United States, Kosovo (predominantly Muslim and ethnic Albanian) declared independence from Serbia in the spring of 2008. This action is of particular interest to this study, as it occurred concurrently with our data collection. Therefore, the intense emotions of the time may have impacted students' survey responses. This is a highly volatile and contentious issue among many ethnic Serbians. The Serbian government has sought to have Kosovo's declaration of independence invalidated in the International Court of Justice.

The United States led NATO's bombing of Belgrade in the spring of 1999, a bombing campaign that lasted almost three months. Combined with the U.S. stance on Kosovo, we wonder if some of the Serbian students reacted negatively because this was a survey conducted by a U.S. institution. Alternatively, these students have likely seen a high level of political conflict during their lives. "Democracy" may be such a muddled concept for them, or may hold such negative connotations, that they simply did not attempt to respond to the question. Fully 12.8% of the Serbian students offered negative definitions of democracy, a far higher percentage than students from any other country (in comparison, the next highest percentages of negative responses were from Ukrainian students—6.8%—and U.S. students—2.8%). One 17-year-old Serbian male wrote: "The term democracy does not exist to me. Behind the word - democracy - mild fashism [sic] and nacism [sic] is hiding."

Since 2001, students in Serbia may elect to take either a course in religious education or civic education. The choice, according to two Serbian civic education experts, "shows the existing division with the society between the modern, progressive Serbia and the traditional, conservative Serbia. The latter see civic education as something imposed and imported from abroad" (Stevic & Dudic, personal communication, February 2009). They went on to say, however, that although they support civic education, the course has been poorly conceptualized and teachers are ill prepared to teach it. A major revision of the civic education curriculum for the high school is currently in progress.

With the exception of the Serbian students, however, students from all other countries demonstrated an understanding (albeit often a simplistic one) of democracy. Regardless of whether students lived in a more established or a more recent democracy, or the degree to

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which political rights and civil liberties were supported in their country, the vast majority of students were able to offer a valid definition of democracy.

Categories of Responses

Across countries, students were most likely to describe democracy in terms of *freedoms and rights,* and least likely to mention *civic equality* as an aspect of democracy (see Table 3).

Table 3: *Students' Conceptions of Democracy by Country and Category*

Country	Rights, Freedoms	Representative Democracy	Civic Equality
Czech Republic	76.2%	58.2%	15.3%
Macedonia	63.9	37.1	26.8
Romania	73.0	21.5	8.6
Serbia	24.7	20.0	14.7
Ukraine	60.6	27.7	21.3
United States	46.4	46.0	8.9

Except in the United States, students were also more likely to mention *freedoms and rights* than *representative democracy*. The results are consistent with surveys of adults, which show that rights and freedoms are foremost in the minds of the citizens when they think of democracy, and particularly so in recent democracies (Dalton et al., 2007a).

U.S. students were almost equally as likely to define democracy in terms of rights and freedoms as they were in terms of representative democracy. There are several ways to interpret this finding. First, other research suggests that after a strong emphasis on rights and freedoms, the more experience a society has with democracy, the more likely citizens will also associate democracy with its procedural aspects. Second, the survey was conducted in spring 2008, a time when the Presidential primaries were receiving an unprecedented amount of media coverage in the United States. This factor could have prompted students to give more process-oriented responses. Finally, many of the U.S. students who completed the survey were in civics or government classes, courses that tend to emphasize the procedural aspects of democracy.

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Complexity of Responses

We identified complexity of responses by adding the number of separate categories mentioned in a student's answer. Students received one point for each valid response in terms of individual rights, representative rule, and civic equality, as well as other reasonable responses which fell outside these three categories (e.g., economic issues). The higher the number of categories in which we could place a single student's response, the higher her or his score in terms of complexity. Complexity scores could range from 0 to 3+ (see Table 4). Zero indicates a student didn't answer the question or gave only an incorrect or vague response.

Table 4: *Complexity of Students' Conceptions of Democracy by Country*

Country	0 (no response, vague, incorrect, "don't know")	1	2	3+ (more complex)
Czech Republic	13.8%	25.3%	54.4%	6.5%
Macedonia	14.4	49.5	28.9	7.2
Romania	14.7	69.9	12.9	2.5
Serbia	57.6	25.3	15.9	1.2
Ukraine	14.9	62.8	19.1	3.2
United States	21.9	55.7	20.5	1.9

Overall, the Czech and Macedonian students demonstrated the highest levels of complexity (the mean age of the Czech students was 18, the highest of the six countries, but Macedonian students were the second youngest group with a mean age of 16.6). Several students' responses from the Czech Republic and Macedonia illustrate the relatively complex nature of their conceptions of democracy.

> Democracy means to have a democratic regime in the country; basic freedoms and rights for all citizens; a right to participate through the politicians in the governance of the state. (Czech male, 17 years old)

> The freedom of speech and movement within the existing rules, which have been set by a democratic process. (Czech female, 18 years old)
>
> Democratic society is one that allows its citizens to express themselves freely their ideas and opinions in all areas regardless of their age, sex and ethnic group. (Macedonian male, 16 years old)
>
> Democracy, for me, means everybody to have the same rights and privileges and be able to express his opinions and ideas. (Macedonian male, 15 years old)

Each of these responses includes more than one aspect of democracy (i.e., rights and freedoms and/or representative government and/or civic equality). That the students from the Czech Republic and Macedonia should score higher in terms of the complexity with which they define democracy might be attributed to their countries' requirement that students complete a course specifically devoted to civic education. Young people in Macedonia are required to pass an examination that includes civics in order to advance and/or graduate; Czech students may choose to take civics as one of their standardized exit exams. Additionally, after the Velvet Revolution in 1989, a wide range of civics education projects were implemented in the Czech Republic, such as Civitas, Street Law, and Project Citizen, providing teacher in-service training and curriculum resources. Klicperová-Baker (2008), a Czech scholar in political psychology, describes the Czech political culture as a "robust civic culture characterized by relative sophistication, loyalty without blind devotion and realistic levels of trust in democratic institutions" and notes further that "the manifestations of post-communist syndrome, alienation or disaffected egalitarianism were less prominent than in other countries in the region" (p. 167). The Czech Republic also leads the other post-communist countries in our study on a number of dimensions, such as educational attainment and gross domestic product per capita.

Predictors of Complexity

For each country's group of students, we explored whether demographic characteristics, students' level of political engagement, and students' perception of classroom climate impacted the complexity with which they defined democracy. In Romania and Ukraine, none of the variables were significantly correlated with the complexity of students' definitions. There

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were no differences by age or gender, and neither political engagement nor classroom climate was associated with the complexity of students' definitions of democracy.

Among the Czech students, those who reported a higher level of political engagement were also more likely to offer more complex definitions of democracy (p<001). Classroom climate was a statistically significant predictor of complexity in both Macedonia and Serbia, but in different ways. Among the Macedonian students, those who reported a more open, supportive classroom climate were likely to give more complex responses when defining democracy (p=.014). This is the relationship between classroom climate and complexity that we had expected. But among the Serbian students, the result was the opposite: Students who reported more closed classroom climates were more likely to give complex definitions of democracy (p=-.029).

In the United States, students' self-report of grades and ethnicity were added to the model.

Table 5: *Descriptive Statistics for U.S. Students*

	Percentage
Ethnicity	
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1.4%
Asian or Pacific Islander	8.5
Black or African American	16.1
Latino or Hispanic	28.9
White	37.1
Multiracial or Multiethnic	5.6
Other Race or Ethnicity	2.4
English Language Most Often Spoken at Home	
Yes	74.2
No	25.8
Born in United States	
Yes	86.1
No	13.9
	Mean (SD)
Classroom Climate (1 = closed, 4 = open)	3.50 (.50)
Political Engagement (1 = low; 4=high)	2.73 (.62)
Average Grades (1 = Ds, 4 = As)	3.13 (.80)

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Table 6 shows the results of the analysis. Females and younger students were more likely to give complex responses. Students' reported level of political engagement (high) and perception of classroom climate (positive) were statistically significant predictors of complexity. Students who reported higher average grades in school were more likely to offer complex definitions of democracy. The only differences in terms of ethnicity were between African Americans and Whites; the former offered less complex definitions of democracy than did the latter. None of the following were statistically significant predictors of complexity: reported number of books in the home (a proxy for socioeconomic status), immigrant status, and language spoken at home. Note, however, that our model accounts for only 7.5% of the variance in scores. Thus, many of the factors that impact students' understanding of democracy are unaccounted for. For example, we did not include political discussion at home in our analysis, nor did we assess students' political knowledge per se. The variable Number of Books in Home may not be as accurate a proxy for socioeconomic status that it once was, given that books are increasingly downloaded in electronic format. Further, lower income students may use the library more frequently than their counterparts, and thus don't have an accumulation of books in the home. The overall results certainly point to the need for greater exploration.

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Table 6: *Predictors of Complex Definitions of Democracy Among U.S. Students:*
Test of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	129.093[a]	15	8.606	11.090	.000
Intercept	7.087	1	7.087	9.132	.003
Gender	11.495	1	11.495	14.813	.000
Birth Country	.762	1	.762	.981	.322
Ethnicity	12.976	6	2.163	2.787	.011
English Spoken at Home	.241	1	.241	.310	.578
Age	3.991	1	3.991	5.143	.023
Political Engagement	15.724	1	15.724	20.262	.000
Classroom Climate	8.982	1	8.982	11.575	.001
Average Grades	29.459	1	29.459	37.961	.000
Books	.833	1	.833	1.074	.300
Error	1441.846	1858	.776		
Total	8410.000	1874			
Corrected Total	1570.939	1873			

R Squared = .082 (Adjusted R Squared = .075)

Note. Gender (1=Male, 2=Female), Birth Country (1 = U.S., 2 = Other), English Spoken at Home (0 = No, 1 = Yes), Political Engagement (1 = low, 4 = high), Classroom Climate (1=closed, 4=open), Average Grades (1=D, 4=A).

Discussion

Similar to previous studies (Sigel & Hoskin, 1981; Flanagan et al., 2005), the majority of students surveyed in the present study were able to give acceptable definitions of democracy, regardless of whether they lived in an established or more recent democracy, and regardless of the degree to which their country exhibits strong support for political rights and civil liberties. Students from Serbia were the one exception; we suspect that these students have received many mixed messages about the nature of democracy as an ideal and as practiced, and thus had conflicting beliefs as they attempted to respond to the question. Their responses (and non-responses) may be reflective of the political tensions within the country.

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Students across countries were most likely to define democracy in terms of rights and freedoms, and least likely to define it in terms of civic equality. This is consistent with Sigel and Hoskin's (1981) findings, which found that adolescents associate democracy with the expected outcomes for individuals, and less so with the procedural aspects of democracy (representative government), or equal protections for all (civic equality). It was clear from our coding of the responses that the right to freedom of expression is a dominant theme among the adolescents. One might have expected more references to economics, particularly among students in the Central/Eastern European countries. But similar to Dalton et al.'s findings among adults (2007b), few students mentioned economics (the highest percentage was in the United States—4%).

In the United States, the difference between the percentages of students mentioning rights and freedoms and representative government was negligible. These themes reflect the focus of civics and government courses. Analyses of history and civics textbooks and standards in the United States indicate a strong emphasis on individual rights (Gonzales, Riedel, Avery, & Sullivan, 2001). Civics and government courses also tend to be very much oriented toward democratic processes and institutions. Indeed, critics often claim that the procedural focus is so overwhelming that the potential excitement of civic and political life is all but extinguished (Niemi & Junn, 1998).

In the Central/Eastern European countries, few of the experiences and demographic characteristics we had thought would be associated with complex definitions of democracy were statistically significant. Only in the Czech Republic was the complexity of students' responses associated with their reported level of political engagement. Perhaps this is because the Czech Republic has a stronger history of a democratic civic culture. Klicperova-Baker (2008) writes:

> Despite political turmoil and economic crisis in 1930s Czechoslovakia remained democratic even when all its neighbors became authoritarian. The pride of the First Czechoslovak Republic and love for President Masaryk survived almost half a century of Nazi and Communist propaganda. The collective memory of it is for the Czechs a reference point of a golden age, a role model of a progressive, prosperous liberal democracy. (pp. 159-160)

In Romania and Ukraine, none of the demographic characteristics or students' levels of political engagement and perception of classroom climate was associated with complexity of definitions. We need to know more about the ways in which civic education is enacted in these

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Website: *http://www.iajiss.org*

countries to develop an understanding of the results. One possibility is that democracy is taught as a term to be memorized and not deeply understood. In Misco's (2008) study of Romanian education, he found:

> To some extent, the communist pedagogy still prevails within Romanian education. The system of didactic instruction with a primary focus on recitation and recall is the stuff of authoritarian and totalitarian education, but it is also a current thread that weaves throughout many of today's schools….National exams and communist-era teaching still emphasize the value of acquiring content knowledge at the cost of skills and dispositions. (p. 81)

If democracy is yet another term to be memorized, then there is little reason to think students' definitions would be associated with greater political engagement. This possibility may also account for the negative association between complexity and classroom climate in Serbia. A strong pedagogical focus on memorization is more likely to engender a closed classroom climate, but might also result in students being able to offer "standard" definitions of democracy. In essence, in only two countries—Macedonia and the United States—did classroom climate have the expected effect on understandings of democracy. It is perhaps worth remembering that in the two major international studies on civic education (CivEd and ICCS), analyses showed that in approximately 20% of the countries, open classroom climate did *not* have a statistically significant, positive impact on civic knowledge. Our understanding of classroom climate would be significantly enhanced if we probed more deeply into these cases. That is, why and in what contexts is an open and supportive classroom climate in which students feel free to express their opinions not predictive of students' civic knowledge or understandings of democracy? We might also ask how these items are interpreted by students in various contexts. Country context may shape how actions such as "presenting several sides of an issue" and "disagreeing openly with teachers" are interpreted by youth.

In the United States, complexity was associated with a higher level of political engagement and students' perceptions of a more open and supportive classroom climate. These are relationships that have been demonstrated with political knowledge in previous studies (Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin, & Keeter, 2003; Torney-Purta et al., 2001), i.e., students who report a more open classroom climate and those who are more politically engaged demonstrate higher political and civic knowledge (in these studies, the relationship between engagement and knowledge is quite strong, between classroom climate and knowledge more moderate).

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Not surprisingly, U.S. students who reported higher grades also demonstrated greater complexity. We had not expected, however, that younger students' responses would be more complex than older students' responses. A closer inspection of the data showed that 14- and 15-year-olds gave the most complex responses. Two possibilities may explain the results. First, this age group was most likely to be enrolled in civics classes at the time of the study. Presumably there would be congruence between what they were studying at the time and a question about democracy. Responding to a question about the nature of democracy would be aligned with the broader content of their class. Students in history or geography classes, however, might find the item less aligned with their class curriculum, and thus devote less time to it. Second, given that the surveys were voluntary and completed in the spring, seniors might have been nonchalant about responding to the item.

Females were likely to give more complex responses than were males; as mentioned previously, other research shows that the male advantage in political knowledge that used to be standard in surveys 15-20 years ago has given way to a slight female edge, particularly among adolescents. We were heartened to find no difference by socioeconomic status, at least as measured by the number of books in the home, but question whether this item is still a valid measure of socioeconomic status. That there were no statistically significant differences by immigrant status (born in the United States versus born in another country) is another positive finding, and bodes well for democracy in the United States. There was a difference, however, between African American and White students' complexity scores, a difference that is similar to the civic achievement gap found in other surveys (African Americans score lower than Whites) (Lutkus & Weiss, 2007; National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).

Implications and Conclusions

The students we surveyed are not necessarily representative of the students in their countries, i.e., these were samples of convenience and not representative. But country is a part of the context in which the students learn about and experience democracy, just as demographic factors such as gender and immigrant status provide a lens through which we see, the experiences we have, and the way in which we interpret those experiences.

Civic educators may be gratified to know that most students can give definitions of democracy, albeit often simplistic ones. Country context does make a difference. In the nation with the highest level of political conflict (Serbia), students were least likely to respond to the item. This

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may represent lack of knowledge, disaffection with the concept of democracy, or distrust of the United States (the origin of the survey). Perhaps most disconcerting was a response from one 17-year-old Serbian male, who wrote: "Democracy here didn't even visit, let alone stay."

Students in the newer democracies were most likely to define democracy in terms of individual outcomes--rights and freedoms. Students in the most established democracy (United States) were just as likely to associate democracy with rights and freedoms as they were the procedural aspects of democracy. Studies suggest that adults who associate democracy with institutions and processes (representative democracy) are more likely to support democratic practices and oppose practices antithetical to democracy (see Dalton et al., 2008a). It is therefore noteworthy that 60% of Czech students mentioned representative government in their definitions of democracy (the highest percentage of students), and that the Czech Republic has arguably made more progress in terms of re-establishing institutions that support democratic practices than the other Central/Eastern European countries in our study.

The relatively low identification of democracy with civic equality across sites, but particularly in Romania and the United States, suggests the need for more attention to the ways in which democracies guarantee equal protection under the law for all members of society. Young people were quite likely to associate democracy with the right to freedom of expression, but we wonder if they appreciate that the right extends to all persons, and particularly to minority groups and those with whom one disagrees. This, of course, is one of the core principles and challenges of today's democracies—respect for and protection of minority rights.

We envision future work exploring in more depth students' understandings of democracy and the conflicts inherent in democratic principles, and how they make sense of the inevitable tensions between democracy as an ideal and as practiced. The ways in which curriculum and pedagogical practices convey the meaning and practice of democracy in established and newer democracies is an area of critical import. This study gives a broad, general picture of the ways in which students define democracy; much work remains to be done to uncover the meanings and significance of that picture for students and their democracies.

Notes

[1]The responses to this question provided contextual information for our evaluation of the *Deliberating in a Democracy (DID) Project* (www.deliberating.org), but were not directly

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related to the civic education project. The sample is a sample of convenience, determined by the countries and teachers who chose to participate in the project. (We served as the evaluators for the project, and thus were not involved in project implementation.) It is possible that the teachers who volunteered to participate in the project may have been more interested in the promotion of democratic practices both within their societies and their classrooms. Because they chose to engage in professional development, they may represent a more effective and committed group of teachers. However, we assume that whatever effect this may have had on students' responses to the question, the effect would be similar across the population.

[2]The items are: Students are encourages to make up their own minds about issues, Teachers respect our opinions and encourage us to express them during class, Teachers present several sides of an issue when explaining it in class, Students feel free to express opinions in class even when their opinions are different from most of the other students, Students feel free to disagree openly with their teachers about political and social issues during class, and Teachers encourage us to discuss political or social issues about which people have different opinions. Response options include Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, and Strongly Agree.

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