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GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

## 8 Rules of Political Demography That Help Forecast Tomorrow's World

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In a world rapidly churning out unpredictable political shocks, intelligence analysts occasionally need to clear their heads of the daily barrage of newsworthy events and instead work with simple theories that discern the direction and speed of trends and help predict their outcomes. Political demography, the study of population age structures and their relationships to political trends and events, has helped some analysts predict geopolitical changes in a world that, from time to time, appears utterly chaotic.

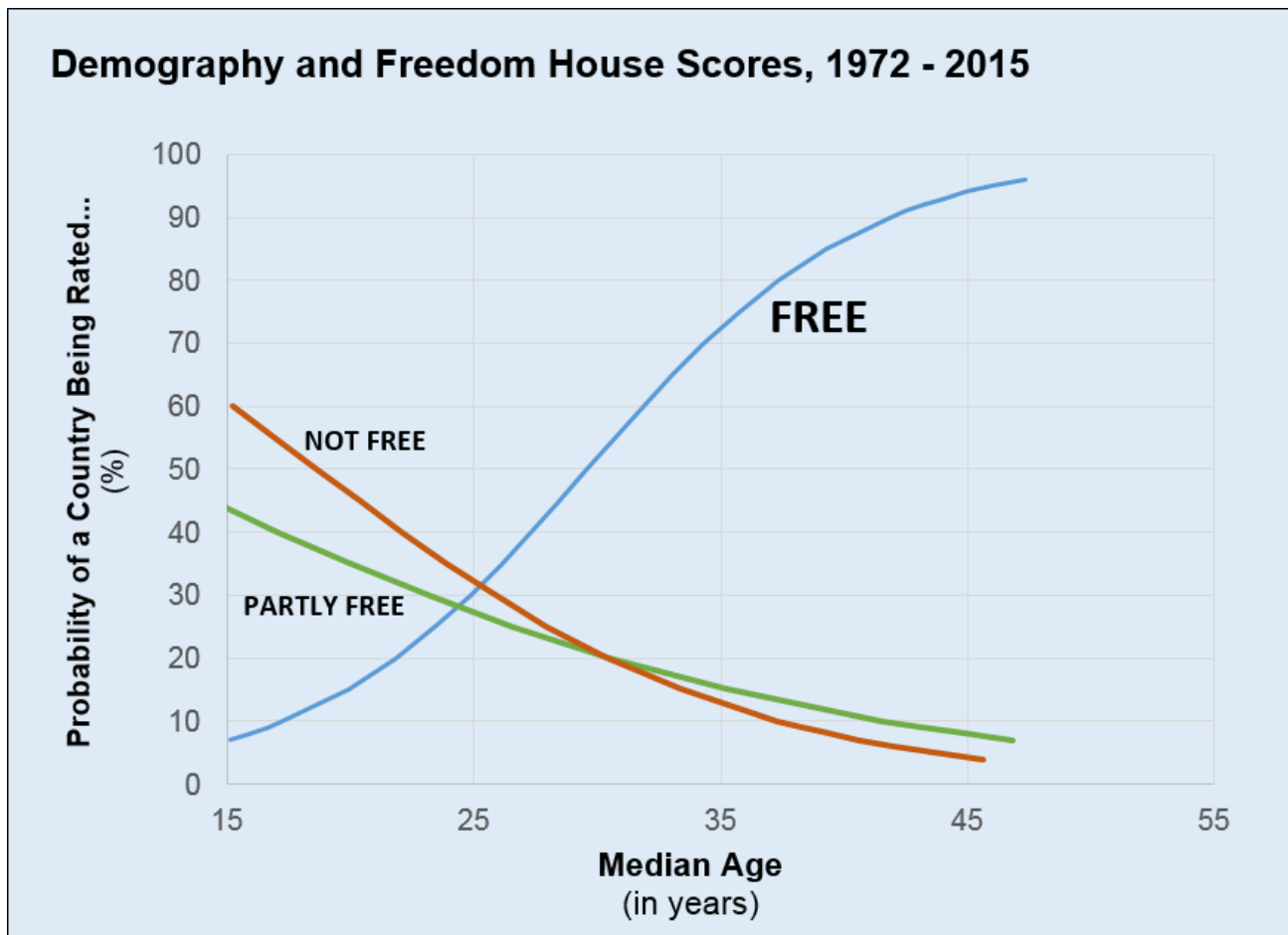
Much of my recent work has focused on democratic transitions and age structure – that is, what the median age of a country can tell us about its propensity to become a “liberal democracy” or remain either undemocratic (without free, fair, and politically meaningful elections) or illiberal (short on civil liberties and rule of law). There is, in fact, a strong correlation in recent history between increasing median age and increasing liberal democracy, and vice versa (the younger a population is, the less likely it is to be a liberal democracy). These and other age-structural

relationships have become so evident over the past three decades of research, that political demographers can now identify “rules” that link demographic characteristics to expected political outcomes.

On a new website that reviews the basic tenets of numerical political demography, I have uploaded seven regional forecasting tables. On these seven tables, the world of independent states, or at least those with more than 500,000 residents, is ordered by median age – the “middle person,” for whom precisely half the population is younger, and half older. In each region, this standard measure of age-structural maturity is used to sort the table from the most mature state (highest median age) at the top, to the least mature (lowest median age) at the bottom.

To these seven tables, analysts can apply the following set of eight rules:

1. Expect states at the top of the list, the most age-structurally mature, to experience the best chance of being a liberal democracy – that is, to be assessed as FREE in Freedom House’s annual *Freedom in the World* global survey (most analysts consider FREE status to be synonymous with liberal democracy).
2. Expect states that have a youthful age structure (below a median age of 25.5 years) to be the least likely to be assessed as FREE and the most likely to be engaged in intra-state conflict of either low or high intensity, as measured by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program.
3. Where a revolution occurs in a state with a youthful population, expect either the authoritarian regime to remain in power or to be replaced by another authoritarian regime (typically NOT FREE or low-level PARTLY FREE, as measured by Freedom House).
4. Expect states that achieve FREE while youthful to lose this rating within a decade. There is a long history of this effect; Mali is a recent example.
5. Expect states with a population of less than 5 million to be the most likely to break rules 1, 2, 3, and 4 (see the UN Population Division for population data).
6. Expect states that are ruled by an ideological single-party regime or another type of ideological political monopoly – for example, Iran’s theocracy – to mature without liberalization. China and North Korea are other prominent examples.
7. Expect states led by a revolutionary leader (Cuba under Castro, Venezuela under Chavez) or a charismatic reformer (Russia under Putin, Turkey under Erdogan, Singapore under Lee Kwan Yu) to resist attaining FREE.
8. Expect a state ruled by a military junta/ruler or absolute monarch to yield to a more democratic regime before the population attains a mature age-structure (before a median age of 35.5 years).



These rules yield several notable observations. First, most of the countries that one expects to be assessed as FREE, already are – and that includes Tunisia, near the top of the Middle East-North Africa table. Indeed, an early version of this analysis in 2008 predicted “at least one, maybe two” liberal democracies in North Africa by 2020.

These rules also indicate that we are unlikely to witness liberal democracy emerging and stabilizing in Egypt, Pakistan, Iraq, Jordan, Yemen, or any of the Sahelian states any time soon. The UN Population Division projects that, even by 2040, none of these countries will have attained an age structure that resembles Tunisia’s in 2010. For these states, the right time – or more accurately, the right age structure – has yet to come.

Next, the short-term pessimism of many democracy advocates is warranted. Many of the states near or nearing the FREE<sub>50</sub> mark – around a median age of 29 years, when there’s an even chance of being assessed as FREE – are under the thumb of resilient political monopolies (Iran, Vietnam), are dealing poorly with intra-state conflicts (Myanmar, Libya), or are hamstrung by popular illiberal political actors (Hezbollah in Lebanon, the AKP in Turkey).

Age structural maturity both affects and reflects multiple aspects of society and state capacity

The forecasts suggest that analysts should look optimistically, however, on the near-term chances for liberal democracy emerging among the three-state cluster of Colombia, Ecuador,

and Venezuela (Colombia is the most likely contender of these), and perhaps on the longer-term chances for Algeria or Morocco (before 2025).

The Central and South Asia region is the most difficult to interpret. Whereas the list's most youthful states – Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, and Tajikistan – have behaved as political demographers might expect, those assessed as FREE – Mongolia and India – are not among the most mature. Instead, much of the top of the table is populated by former-Soviet republics. As Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan move near the FREE<sub>50</sub> mark, which the UN Population Division projects will be around 2022-23, the region will become statistically ripe for some sort of political change. A Central Asian Spring, perhaps?

Europe, the most mature region, is a testing-ground for hypotheses concerning advanced population aging, the outcomes of which are still poorly understood. So far, most states with median ages over 40 years seem to be constrained to low levels of per-capita economic growth and vulnerable to mounting debt. In these same countries, immigration and the growth of ethnic minorities appear to trigger political populism and, in a few recent cases, have precipitated some decline in Freedom Scores (Freedom House's 1.0 to 7.0 annual assessment system).

## **An Analytical Tool**

Why do political demography's rules work as well as they do? Because age structural maturity both affects and reflects multiple aspects of society and state capacity. After all, the past century's dramatic age-structural changes, where the world experienced tremendous growth in population followed by steep declines in fertility rates in many countries, are the result of many changes, including higher educational attainment (particularly women's education), gains in wealth, advances in sanitation and health care, and access to modern contraception.

Why aren't these rules used more often? While political demography's forecasts have become a fixture in the National Intelligence Council's Global Trends publications (see the latest addition to the series, *Paradox of Progress*), we still seem far from the day when young intelligence analysts routinely consider political demography's "eight basic rules" as essential analytical tools. Perhaps the answer is familiarity, or lack thereof. The use of these rules requires analysts to put aside perceptions that have been shaped by real-time political events and instead trust in demographic concepts that few have been exposed to before.

Recent efforts to build and maintain PoliticalDemography.org are intended to help overcome the novelty of these concepts. The website provides those interested in foreign affairs analysis and forecasting with a close-up view of political demography's research history, its basic concepts, models, and predictions. And it invites them to put political demography's analytical tools to work.

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*Sources: Freedom House, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, PoliticalDemography.org, United Nations Population Division, Uppsala Conflict Data Program.*

*Photo Credit: Protest in Caracas, Venezuela, February 2014, courtesy of flickr user MARQUINAM. Figure: Used with permission courtesy of Richard Cincotta.*

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