How food affects political regimes
26 October 2016, by Andrey Shcherbak

Apparently, a richer diet is associated with an increase in the middle class, which tends towards economic and political independence and democracy-fostering values, according to Andrey Shcherbak, senior research fellow at the Laboratory for Comparative Social Research of the Higher School of Economics.

He has found, based on a cross-country comparative study using data on 157 countries, that a change in people's eating habits can serve as a predictor of impending political change. His findings are published in the working paper "A Recipe for the Democracy? The Spread of the European Diet and Political Change" and were presented during the regional conference of the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR), which was held on September 15-17 in Moscow, Russia.

Diets drive politics

According to Shcherbak, the recipe for democracy is fairly simple: Above all, people should be able to eat well. The researcher uses a series of statistical models to prove this (the study uses OLS, factor analysis and SEM).

His focus is on a type of diet common among western Europeans, with plenty of meat, dairy products, confectionery, alcohol, and other foods available in sufficient quantities to most people.

Contrary to what established literature often suggests, Shcherbak has found that improved nutrition precedes democracy rather than the other way around. According to Shcherbak, once people start consuming a wide variety of foods with an emphasis on animal protein instead of mostly bread and cereals, democratic change is likely to follow.

Another conclusion that runs counter to conventional wisdom is that improved nutrition is even more important for political change than economic factors such as income growth and liberalisation of trade.

To prove his point, the author compares the effects of income, trade and diet on democratization. He measures income in U.S. dollars as a function of per capita GDP and purchasing power parity; trade as a sum of exports and imports expressed in proportion to the GDP, and diet as daily per capita consumption of calories, proteins and animal products based on the FAOSTAT database. Democracy was measured by the Freedom House index data for years 1992 to 2011.

Shcherbak's findings demonstrate that increased consumption of calories, proteins and animal products has a higher statistically significant correlation with democracy than income growth and trade liberalisation. People in democracies tend to consume more animal protein—i.e., meat and dairy products.

New Foods Lead to New Lifestyles

Logically, higher income should lead to better nutrition. In addition, Shcherbak points out an association between nutrition and globalisation—open markets favour food imports, new food items become available, and people switch to eating out or to buying food in large retail chains rather than small shops and farmer's markets. While diet, income and trade are interrelated factors, the effect of people's dietary habits on political change is so significant as to merit a separate study.

Special dietary preferences are integral to a middle-class lifestyle. "Once you have more money, you will not just buy more of the same cheap sausages or frozen dumplings. Instead, you might switch to sirloin steak, jamon, parmesan and virgin olive oil. A demand for these products is driven by new lifestyles," Shcherbak explains.

Research has shown that a long-term improvement in diet leads to economic growth, and also that the availability of high-quality foods can promote
modernisation. However, until now, a relationship between diet and democratic reforms has not been considered, and the common assumption has been that better nutrition is a consequence rather than predictor of democracy.

**For the poor, food more important than money**

There are a few reasons why diet is associated with political change. First, consistent availability of high-quality food contributes to a sense of existential security; indeed, having enough good food—rather than just having more money—is the No. 1 reason why societies begin to feel safer. "People in many cultures pray before meals, giving thanks to God for the food, but there are virtually no societies where people pray before payday," Shcherbak notes.

Once people start feeling safe, the entire society tends towards emancipative values, making it more likely to stand up for individual rights compared to a society concerned with survival.

Second, food security makes people less dependent on politicians and power hierarchies. In contrast, politicians in poorer countries often buy public votes in exchange for food.

And third, according to Shcherbak, good nutrition is essential for good health, and thus can have important social and biological implications. Healthier populations tend to be better educated and more active in terms of political engagement.

According to Shcherbak, these findings may have important implications for development assistance—if good nutrition is key to establishing democracy, then perhaps humanitarian aid may be preferable to financial assistance for poorer countries.

**More information:**
publications.hse.ru/en/preprints/185617057

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