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The Pragmatic Case for Electoral Assistance

The previous books in this trilogy have analyzed why electoral integrity matters and how elections can be derailed through numerous types of flaws and failures. In some contests, opponents are disqualified. District boundaries are gerrymandered. Campaigns provide a skewed playing field for parties. Independent media are muzzled. Citizens are ill-informed about choices. Balloting is disrupted by bloodshed. Ballot boxes are stuffed. Vote counts are fiddled. Opposition parties withdraw. Contenders refuse to accept the people's choice. Protests disrupt polling. Officials abuse state resources. Electoral registers are out of date. Candidates distribute largesse. Votes are bought. Airwaves favor incumbents. Campaigns are awash with hidden cash. Political finance rules are lax. Incompetent local officials run out of ballot papers. Incumbents are immune from effective challengers. Rallies trigger riots. Women candidates face discrimination. Ethnic minorities are persecuted. Voting machines jam. Lines lengthen. Ballot box seals break. Citizens cast more than one ballot. Legal requirements serve to suppress voting rights. Polling stations are inaccessible. Software crashes. "Secure" ink washes off fingers. Courts fail to resolve complaints impartially. Each of these diverse problems can generate contentious elections characterized by lengthy court challenges, opposition boycotts, public protest, or, at worst, deadly violence.[1] In some cases, failures are intentional; elsewhere they arise through technical accident and human error, although it is difficult to nail down which is which. These challenges make democratic institutions more vulnerable and undermine electoral legitimacy in the United States and Europe. They heighten the threat of authoritarian resurgence in countries around the world.

Earlier volumes used comparative evidence from countries around the globe to diagnose the underlying causes of these problems and to demonstrate how flawed contests undermine democracy.[2] Like the fish rotting from the head, any corrosion of public confidence in elections can gradually spread to weaken trust in the core representative institutions of political parties, parliaments, and

governments, to erode civic engagement and voting turnout, and to encourage losers to reject the fairness and legitimacy of the outcome. The role of elections should not be exaggerated; even free and fair contests by themselves are not sufficient for liberal democracy to work well by any means. Many other institutions need to be effective as well – robust parliaments, independent courts and rule of law, good governance, pluralistic news media, and active civil society organizations. But elections are the concrete and steel foundations upon which democracies rest.

If elections are often deeply flawed or even broken in many countries around the world, as widely recognized, what can be done to fix them? Here we confront some tough and tricky issues. This book evaluates the effectiveness of several practical remedies, including efforts designed to reform electoral laws, strengthen women's representation, build effective electoral management bodies, promote balanced campaign communications, regulate political money, and improve voter registration. Numerous other solutions have often been tried. This list is incomplete, but these represent some of the most common approaches widely used to strengthen electoral integrity. In each case, chapters address three questions:

(i) *In general, how effective are these programs, judged by whether these strengthen electoral integrity, the institution at the heart of liberal democracy*?
(ii) *In turn, how can we evaluate the general impact of programs of electoral assistance offered by the international community, and what are the appropriate benchmarks and measures for assessing success or failure*?
(iii) *And finally, using the SWOT analysis model, what are the Strengths and Weaknesses of each of these programs when seeking to improve the performance of elections, and what Opportunities and Threats do actors face in achieving these goals in different contexts*?

It is important to address these issues because the contemporary mood today among scholars and policymakers is one of widespread skepticism, and even fatalistic cynicism, about the value of the democracy agenda. In the West, public impressions about processes of regime change have been heavily colored by headline events in a few states: the prism of instability and corruption following military intervention against the Taliban in Afghanistan; heightened sectarian conflict and the metastasizing of ISIS in Iraq; the downfall of Mubarak but replacement by Sisi in Egypt; the erosion of democracy in Venezuela, Poland, the Philippines, and Hungary, the civil war and humanitarian crisis in Bashir's Syria; the repression of human rights in Turkey; and bloody tribal conflict and chaos following Gaddafi's fall in Libya. Many revolutionary upheavals seeking to overturn repressive regimes have failed to generate peaceful and stable states, let alone democratic institutions.

Moreover, a tidal wave of populism has risen within many Western societies, symbolized in 2016 by the outcomes of the United Kingdom's Brexit referendum deciding to withdraw from the European Union and the election

of President Trump in the United States. Populist authoritarians in the West directly threaten liberal democracy at home, by challenging the core values of pluralism, social tolerance, rule of law, human rights, and freedoms. They also threaten Western efforts at supporting democracy abroad by doing business with authoritarian leaders, advocating disengagement from the institutions of global governance, and cutting development budgets.[3] Overall, the mood of the international community towards opportunities for democracy promotion shifted from the predominantly sunny optimism that prevailed in the late 1980s and early 1990s (around the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall) to reflect more pessimistic expectations in an increasingly chilly climate.

Is the more pessimistic zeitgeist well founded? This book considers pragmatic arguments about the value of international efforts at democracy promotion and presents empirical evidence to assess the effectiveness of several common types of programs providing electoral assistance. Today these types of programs have been supported by Western donors and implemented by aid workers in most developing countries, working in partnership with local stakeholders. This has become established as a multibillion dollar sector of development. Contrary to the prevalent mood of skepticism, successive chapters in this book suggest where international organizations and bilateral donors support the efforts of local stakeholders, effective programs commonly do have the capacity to achieve their goals. The evidence demonstrates that the recommendations in electoral observer reports published by the OAS are often implemented by member states; well-designed gender quotas laws advocated by UNWomen usually do boost the number of women in elected office; professional training supported by UNESCO shapes how journalists see their roles; regulations supported by integrity NGOs like Transparency International make campaign finance more transparent; and more convenient electoral procedures implemented by electoral management bodies generally improve turnout.

At the same time, the success of many common types of electoral assistance programs should not be exaggerated. We need to be cautious in assessing their more diffuse impacts on electoral integrity and the broader quality of democratic governance, as this remains indeterminate. For example, it is far easier for quota laws to increase gender equality in elected office and the number of female legislators than it is to ensure women's empowerment in leadership roles. It is more straightforward to lower the procedural and administrative barriers to registration and voting than it is to deepen political trust and civic engagement. It is simpler to pass new campaign finance disclosure laws than it is to enforce them. It is easier to provide professional training for journalists than it is to alter the deeply ingrained cultural practices of newsrooms, and so on. The challenge facing any evaluation of development programs is to develop credible evidence-based assessments, which do not encourage cynicism by specifying impossibly ambitious goals, while avoiding Panglossian happy talk that everything works, which is both implausible and unconvincing. Where common programs of electoral assistance usually achieve their specific goals,

however, then their cumulative long-term effects are likely to strengthen the overall integrity of elections and liberal democracy.

Not everything works, by any means. Chapters suggest that electoral assistance has proved most effective where the strengths and weaknesses of international agencies and programs match the threats and opportunities facing each society. International programs supporting free and fair elections are commonly used as part of peace-building initiatives in some of the most challenging contexts around the world – war-torn Iraq, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, and Afghanistan – all contexts carrying the highest risks of failure. Expectations about what can be achieved are often exaggerated where glossy reports by aid agencies make inflated claims to potential donors. Researchers need far more credible independent evidence to evaluate a range of programs – and organizations need to be open to learning from the results of successes *and* failures to improve their strategic plans. But this does not mean that international attempts to strengthen elections should be reduced or even abandoned, as transactional realism suggests. Since the end of World War II, and especially since the early 1990s, the United Nations and the broader international community have been committed to supporting the values and principles of electoral rights and freedoms through responding to requests for assistance. The transactional "America first" foreign policy advocated by the Trump administration, and populist forces in Europe, threaten to overturn principles that have supported building electoral democracies around the globe for around seven decades. It would be a tragedy to undermine the progress that has been achieved by slashing international support for electoral assistance and democratic governance and downplaying people's right to self-determination, thereby capitulating to authoritarian forces at home and abroad. Failing to support democratic elections at home and abroad is a betrayal of human rights and Western values.

To develop the foundations for this argument, the first part of this chapter discusses why it is important and timely to assess the role and impact of electoral assistance programs. To counter critical skeptics, this sector faces strong pressures to demonstrate aid effectiveness and justify its work. The second part describes how to assess the effectiveness of electoral assistance and unpacks the core arguments. The final part summarizes the plan for the rest of the book.

WHY ASSESS ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS?

As electoral assistance is under growing challenge, it is timely and important to assess the overall impact of these activities in strengthening electoral integrity. Many claims about these activities are common when implementing agencies report to donors. To demonstrate the impact of their work, aid workers typically highlight "best practices" in the field; for example, in their 2015

annual report, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) emphasized their role in providing electoral assistance to many African states:

> UNDP's goal is to ensure that elections are carried out fairly, credibly and transparently in an atmosphere of peace and security, and with a commitment to social and political inclusion.
>
> In Guinea-Bissau, that assistance helped achieve a voter turnout of 88 percent in the first round—the highest in the country's history. In Malawi, UNDP helped to register 7.4 million people to vote. In Sao Tome and Principe, UNDP assisted the National Electoral Commission with new biometric technology to enroll thousands of voters, many of them women who had never previously cast ballots. In Mali, where UNDP helped authorities to restore public services and reopen courthouses and town halls in the recently turbulent Timbuktu region, our local election specialists also helped to lay the groundwork for the next cycle of municipal elections—a key step towards restoring public trust and security . . . UNDP worked with the AU's Democracy and Elections Assistance Unit to train and deploy AU election observers in countries throughout the continent . . . In Nigeria, UNDP helped to organize training programmes for more than 100 first-time women candidates at the state and national levels. And in Addis Ababa, UNDP convened a pan-African gathering of prominent women parliamentarians to discuss challenges they face in the region.[4]

But is there credible evidence that the UNDP programs did indeed serve to boost turnout in Guinea-Bissau, strengthen public trust in Mali, or empower women in elected office in Nigeria? In general, are agencies and programs designed to strengthen electoral integrity both at home and abroad effective in meeting their goals? Which types of interventions are most successful? And which fail to deliver?

The Retreat from Democracy Promotion Among Western Aid Donors

We need to reexamine the evidence for these issues because doubts about democracy's promise have deepened in recent years, with new vulnerabilities apparent in many Western states and authoritarian resurgence around the globe.

Over a century ago, on April 2, 1917, during a speech asking Congress to declare war on Germany, Woodrow Wilson delivered one of the most resonant lines in the history of the presidency: "The world must be made safe for democracy."[5] In 1941, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill issued the Atlantic Charter, committing the World War II allies to protect "the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live."[6] The United Nations endorsed the rights to self-determination and fundamental freedoms in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Since then, Western leaders have expressed commitment to the value of fostering the spread of the institutions and ideals of liberal democracy and human rights abroad.[7] In 1961, John F. Kennedy's inaugural issued his stirring call that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans "unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has

always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world."[8] In the most famous passage, Kennedy called for American self-sacrifice to promote these ideals: "Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty." The promotion of democracy and human rights abroad has often proved more rhetorical than real in numerous cases of US foreign policy where these values have clashed with other economic or military priorities, especially in Latin America.[9] The United States has lagged behind other democracies in endorsing several major human rights treaties, such as CEDAW, and used double standards by claiming exemption from bodies such as the International Criminal Court, as well as dismissing UN criticisms of its own record.[10] Nevertheless democratic ideals have been articulated in speeches by successive presidents as diverse as Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. For example, in his inaugural address in 1981, President Ronald Reagan spoke to "those neighbors and allies who share our freedom, we will strengthen our historic ties and assure them of our support and firm commitment." The end of the Cold War ushered in the so-called "end of history" era; during the 1990s, it was commonly assumed that democratic forces would eventually triumph worldwide and authoritarianism would crack and crumble like the concrete Berlin Wall.[11]

The legitimacy of state-building and democracy promotion efforts were undermined when the Bush administration adopted this rhetoric as a post-hoc justification of military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, and these wars generated further instability, terrorism, and conflict within the region and elsewhere in the world.[12] By the time of the Obama administration, more sober and cautious assessments about the role of democracy promotion in US foreign policy priorities had come to prevail. During the Arab uprising, events in Tunisia in 2010/11 initially gave grounds to believe that the Middle East and North Africa might emulate the developments in Central and Eastern Europe when overthrowing entrenched leaders a decade earlier. But these expectations were quickly dashed by subsequent bloodshed, disorder, and turmoil in the MENA region, with resurgent dictators and further repression in many states following the upheavals in Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, and Syria.[13] Even Tunisia suffered from poor economic performance, weakening confidence in democracy. The events have triggered chaos and insecurity in the Middle East and North Africa, heightened terrorist risks within the region and in the rest of the world, and catalyzed the massive humanitarian crisis and the flood of refugees and migrants across borders.[14]

US Foreign Policy During the Obama Years

By the time that President Obama was elected in 2008, these developments had spurred a general mood of pessimism about the broader enterprise of

democracy promotion and deepened skepticism in the public mind about the general effectiveness of attempts to provide electoral assistance in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world. The Obama years saw a counterreaction in American foreign policy to the Bush era, embracing a more cautious approach than under the neoconservatives, with the State Department rejecting reckless military adventures and displaying growing reluctance to engage overseas – notably in the bloody and disastrous civil war in Syria.[15] Grandiose dreams of democracy promotion, regime change, and state-building by force under the neoconservatives sank in the bloody sands of Iraq, the mountain caves of Afghanistan, and the streets of Aleppo in Syria. The spread of ISIS terrorist risks to Western countries reinforced doubts and weariness about the whole enterprise of state-building and democracy promotion. Thus during his first term in office, President Obama acknowledged the importance of human rights in several major speeches, but he also downplayed the inflated rhetoric of promoting democracy and freedom in US foreign policy that characterized the previous administration of George W. Bush.[16] In practice, realism often prevailed in the State Department. For example, substantial military aid was channeled to repressive regimes in Egypt, Ethiopia, and Pakistan, and American power was not consistently used to advance opportunities for democracy abroad.[17] As one important indicator of changing priorities, the total amount of foreign assistance allocated for democracy, human rights, and governance dropped by half under the Obama administration, from US$3.52Bn in 2010 to $1.92Bn in 2015, before recovering slightly to $2.72Bn in Obama's final year of office.[18] At home as well, the US record of complying with international treaties and protecting human rights fared poorly compared to many other liberal democracies on issues of national security, criminal justice, social and economic rights, and immigration policy.[19]

Growing American doubts about the broader enterprise of democracy promotion, before Trump's presidency, reflected shifts in foreign policy among other Western donors who had previously championed this cause. Major bilateral donors, including the United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden, and France, reallocated a large proportion of their development assistance budget, with spending priorities shifting in 2015 from supporting democracy to programs designed to support the reception of refugees, border controls, and the fight against terror.[20] States in the Nordic region had previously been at the forefront of championing human rights, but development aid was also diverted to dealing with the domestic influx of refugees and migrants in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, leading to major cuts in the global funds available for the United Nations work on good governance, democracy, and human rights.[21] European priorities shifted to tackling major challenges at home: protecting citizens from terrorist threats, coping with floods of migrants and refugees, dealing with the loss of manufacturing jobs, mitigating the risks arising from climate change, maintaining the European Union, and maintaining NATO as the bulwark against threats from a newly assertive Russia. Western

governments also adjusted their priorities in part to reflect a popular mood of growing isolationism among their citizens. There is a growing feeling that, despite well-meaning international attempts to support democracy abroad, and the continued importance of democratic ideals, most of the programs done in this name may prove wasteful, inefficient, unappreciated, or even damaging.[22] In America, the public (especially Republicans) have increasingly favored nationalism and isolationism, according to the polls, where the United States focuses on its own problems with many wary of global humanitarian engagement.[23]

The Trump Era of American Foreign Policy

Democracy promotion therefore slowed under Obama. After the election of President Donald Trump, however, there are reasons to believe that, after a century, the Wilsonian commitment to America's leadership role in defending human rights and promoting democracy around the world is under serious threat of being swept away. The 2016 US Presidential election campaign highlighted a marked shift questioning America's continued engagement in the post–World War II foreign policy architecture, including within NATO, NAFTA, and the UN. In his campaign speeches, Trump criticized America's historical mission to promote democracy abroad, calling attempts to build democracy from Iraq to Egypt to Libya a dangerous mistake that has triggered instability and chaos.[24] Trump's rhetoric challenges basic principles of human rights and international law, such as the obligation to accept refugees fleeing from civil wars and to refrain from the use of torture. He praised authoritarian leaders abroad with a track record of repression, including Russia's Vladimir Putin, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte, Saudi Atabia's King Salman, and Egypt's Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Indeed, Trump continued to defend President Putin ("doing a great job") long after the US intelligence community concluded that Russian hacking and disinformation had threatened cybersecurity and spread disinformation during and after the 2016 elections. By contrast he has been tepid towards America's allies, like Angela Merkel, for example, hectoring NATO leaders about defense spending.

Populist authoritarians advocate abandoning attempts to expand democratic freedoms around the world in favor of a narrow transactional realism approach to allies and foes; in any relationship with another country, Trump asks not what advances values of freedom, democracy, and human rights, but what's in it for American interests, defined narrowly as jobs and security. His inaugural address was silent about the core values that have guided America's vision of its ideal leadership role in the world for more than a century by promoting freedom and democracy.[25] After Kennedy's inaugural speech, the concept of freedom has been key not only to the America's conception of itself but also to its view of the wider world and what the United States has tried to achieve in its global role.

Western Europe has fully embraced this commitment. Following President Trump's election, Angela Merkel, the de facto leader of Europe, said Germany looked forward to cooperating with America based on common values: "democracy, freedom and respect for the rule of law and the dignity of man."[26] After the first NATO meeting which Trump attended, however, Merkel's tone changed, and this ever-cautious leader commented to Europeans: "The times when we could completely rely on others are, to an extent, over."

Trump's bleak and dark inaugural address was silent about the value of protecting freedoms, democracy, and human rights; instead, he said, America would not "impose our way of life on anyone," while declaring "From this moment on, it's going to be America first. Every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs, will be made to benefit American workers and American families."[27] Trump's "America First" rhetoric, his early diplomatic initiatives with world leaders, and the executive actions his administration has prioritized, signal a radical break from the past, which threatens the long-standing commitment of the West to defend and advance human rights, to provide development assistance to help poorer nations, to maintain security through the NATO alliance, to stand up against abuses by dictators, and to collaborate diplomatically with member states through the United Nations and the agencies of global governance. Instead, he has expressed willingness to lift sanctions imposed on Russia after their annexation of Crimea, to refuse Syrian refugees and ban Muslims in several countries from entry into the United States, he praised repressive strongman rulers, and he has signed the executive order to build a wall on the US-Mexican border. In speeches, he has disparaged African Americans, Mexican Americans, women, and people with disabilities.

So far Trump's foreign policies largely reflect the realist rhetoric, and it seems likely that the legitimacy of the postwar world order will come under strong challenge in the next few years. For example, in January 2017, several House Republicans proposed a bill terminating US membership of the United Nations. Trump's speeches reflect the principles of transactional realism guiding his philosophy of foreign affairs while his Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, displays little awareness of the need for America to defend human rights. Time will tell how the State Department acts under the Trump administration, and how words translate into foreign policies. But as America has been one of the leading actors promoting democracy and human rights worldwide, Trump's rhetoric sends damaging diplomatic signals about America's priorities, downgrading the protection of human rights and liberal democracy abroad.[28] The foreign policies of the new administration are not yet clearly established but they are expected to accelerate a new reverse wave, indicated by declining numbers of democratic regimes around the world and the resurgence of authoritarianism, encouraging a newly assertive Russia.

Populist Threats to Western Liberal Democracies

The Trump presidency has also deepened widespread concerns about how well American democracy is performing at home and whether the future of liberal democracy is under serious threat from the spread of populist authoritarianism in Western countries. The 2016 Economist Intelligence Democracy Index reported that America slipped from a "full" to a "flawed" democracy in 2016, largely due to declining trust in political institutions. Evidence continues to be gathered and carefully sifted, but anxieties are reinforced by bitter party polarization over major policy issues, mass protests against the Trump inauguration mobilized across America (and in countries worldwide) on a scale never witnessed before in a single event, historically record-breaking low approval ratings of an incoming president, and eroding confidence in political institutions, especially Congress and the media.[29] During the campaign, and even after his victory in the Electoral College, President Trump repeatedly falsely alleged widespread electoral fraud involving "millions of people who voted illegally," launching an official investigation by the Justice Department. Despite the lack of any systematic evidence supporting these claims, the Trump administration's arguments help to justify longstanding efforts by Republican state lawmakers to suppress minority voters by purging voting rolls, imposing onerous identification requirements, and curtailing early voting.[30] The President's repeated claims have potentially damaging consequences for American faith and confidence in the legitimacy of their electoral process.[31] If public skepticism about the US government and politics is gradually curdling into deep cynicism, this can be expected to have a major impact, not least by further weakening levels of voting turnout and civic engagement, eroding feelings of political legitimacy, and undermining public perceptions of how well democracy works in America.

European societies are also now feared to be under serious threat of sliding into authoritarianism due to the populist challenge at home, and a crisis of legitimacy challenging the authority of the established institutions at the heart of liberal democracy. This includes an erosion of public confidence in established parties on the left and right, the belief that elected leaders and members of parliament are out of touch with ordinary people, lack of trust in information provided by traditional mass media, experts, scientists, and intellectuals, and a backlash against the European Union.[32] Populist authoritarianism is nothing new. On April 21, 2002, Jean-Marie Le Pen defeated France's socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in the first round of the French presidential elections. That shocked Europe. One of the best-known radical right leaders, Le Pen dismissed the Holocaust as a "detail of history." All over France, millions of people protested at massive anti- National Front demonstrations. His mantle was taken up by his daughter Marine Le Pen, contesting the 2017 French presidential elections. She was defeated by Emmanuel Macron but she still managed to double her share of the second