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978-1-107-06964-0 - The Taming of Democracy Assistance: Why Democracy Promotion
Does Not Confront Dictators

Sarah Sunn Bush

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Part I

Introduction and argument

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1 Introduction

*I do have an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. These are not just American ideas; they are human rights. And that is why we will support them everywhere.*¹

The global spread of democracy was among the most remarkable transformations in world politics of the twentieth century. Democracies represented a small minority of the world's states in 1900. Owing to the spread of European fascism, the number of democracies declined further during the interwar years. Although the Allied victory in World War II bolstered democracy once again, the century's largest sustained period of global democratization began in Portugal in 1974. The "third wave" of democratization swept across states in every region of the world other than the Middle East.² As of 2014, over half the world's states are electoral democracies.³

The third wave of democratization coincided in part with the end of the Cold War and a stunning shift toward democracy promotion in the foreign policies of the world's advanced democracies. The United States led the charge. Presidents since at least Woodrow Wilson have proclaimed the United States' commitment to aiding democracy abroad. For years, however, the *realpolitik* of security and foreign economic interests overwhelmed *idealpolitik*. Cold War worries encouraged the United States to ally with autocracies and even support the overthrow of democratically elected governments in a few ignominious instances. Today, the United States continues to prize its relationships with certain dictators, especially in the "war on terror." But although the United States is far from a universal or selfless advocate of democracy, the rise of

¹ Obama (2009).

² Huntington (1991).

³ Freedom House (2014).

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democracy promotion has fundamentally altered how American leaders make foreign policy in many countries.⁴ The rationales for that change of heart are varied and include the beliefs that democracies are linked to economic development, peaceful transfers of power, and pacific relations with other democracies.⁵

The European Union (EU) has also been a powerful democratizer. Some of the earliest roots of democracy promotion lie in Germany, where political parties aided their counterparts abroad through foundations after World War II. More recently, the tantalizing benefit of EU membership has encouraged Central and East European states to embrace liberal democracy after the fall of communism.⁶ Democracy promotion is so prevalent in Europe that even newly democratized European states, such as Poland and Slovakia, now sponsor programs aiding democracy in Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia.⁷

Democracy promotion takes many forms, including economic sanctions and rewards, diplomatic pressure, and military intervention. Although each tool has its place, democracy assistance, which I define as aid given with the explicit goal of advancing democracy overseas, is one of the most visible facets of post-Cold War democracy promotion. Indeed, it is the tool of democracy promotion used most regularly, being implemented on a daily basis in more than one hundred countries.⁸ Today, Western states spend billions of dollars annually with the aim of advancing democracy, human rights, and good governance abroad, whereas they spent virtually nothing on that goal in 1980. They do so through programs that, among other things, teach civics, support civil society groups, train the media, and encourage women to run for political office.

Although democracy aid continues apace, it is under fire. Fraught wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, backlash against foreign organizations in Egypt and elsewhere, setbacks to democracy in the former Soviet states despite considerable foreign aid, the rise of Islamist parties – all those events have led policy-makers to question democracy promotion's efficacy and even desirability. The lively debate about the ethics and efficacy of international democracy promotion rages among practitioners and scholars alike. In response, democracy assistance organizations in the United States and Europe have rushed to document their positive influence and justify their existence.

⁴ Cox, Ikenberry, and Inoguchi (2000).

⁵ McFaul (2010, ch. 2).

⁶ Kelley (2004); Vachudova (2005).

⁷ Petrova (2014).

⁸ Carothers (2009b).

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Yet the ongoing debate often rages in a vacuum, without a strong understanding of what democracy assistance actually does. In contrast, this book dives directly into how democracy aid works on the ground. It reveals that many “democracy assistance” efforts today in fact do not confront dictators. In the 1980s, prominent donors such as the United States’ National Endowment for Democracy frequently challenged autocrats by supporting dissidents, political parties, and unions overseas via the majority of their programs. Now they are more likely to support technical programs, such as efforts to improve local governance, that do not disturb the status quo in other countries. Despite the overall growth of democracy assistance, the confrontational programs of yesterday have been replaced – even in countries that have remained authoritarian – by international programs that conform more closely to their host environments. Why has democracy assistance been tamed over time? In posing that question, I do not seek to understand why democracy assistance has become “bad.” Rather, following the definition of “tame” in the Oxford English Dictionary, I seek to understand how and why democracy assistance has been “reclaimed from the wild state,” becoming in the process less adventurous and overtly political.⁹

Most research on foreign influence emphasizes the importance of Western states’ self-interests and target states’ characteristics in determining variations in types of international pressure. Rather than only examining states’ preferences, this book also considers the role of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that design and implement democracy assistance overseas in shaping the nature of democracy promotion. Those organizations want to foster democratization, but they also want to survive and thrive as organizations. To do so, they must obtain two crucial resources: donor-government funding and physical access to non-democratic states. Relatively tame democracy-assistance programs, which I define as activities associated with measurable outcomes that refrain from directly confronting dictators, help organizations promote their survival. Problems arise because such programs can at times conflict with organizations’ stated goal of effecting democratization, and may even occasionally reinforce authoritarian rule. Beyond their effects on democracy, such programs can also have far-reaching consequences. Dictators wishing to appear democratic, for example, increasingly adopt the institutions promoted by democracy promoters, such as quotas for women’s representation in politics, in order to cultivate domestic and international legitimacy.¹⁰

⁹ “Tame.” Def. 1. *Oxford English Dictionary* (2014).

¹⁰ Bush (2011).

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If it can demonstrate that non-governmental organizations shape democracy assistance, then this book will make a significant contribution to theories about world politics as well as to the practice of democracy assistance. Synthesizing insights from literatures in economics, politics, and sociology, the book seeks to show that understanding states' attempts at foreign influence requires looking not just at the preferences of donor and target states, but also at the non-state actors that inhabit the space in between them. For that reason, this book adopts what I refer to as a *transnational* approach to understanding democracy assistance. The evidence is diverse. Statistical methods allow me to analyze a broad sample of countries and three decades of new data on democracy assistance projects. Qualitative methods – including field research in Washington, DC, Jordan, and Tunisia and the analysis of primary materials from organizational archives – allow me to analyze specific organizations and countries in depth. In the end, the project sheds new light on the debate about democracy promotion. Rewarding the programs that are most likely to advance democracy may require reform in how governments delegate democracy assistance.

What is democracy assistance?

Many activities conducted by states, as well as private foundations, fall under the banner of “democracy assistance.” In 2010, the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) – the UN’s main democracy-promotion initiative – sought to strengthen the media in Albania, mobilize women for elections in Azerbaijan, increase women’s representation in Jamaica, create youth councils in Lebanon, empower youth leaders in Burma, and address AIDS-related discrimination in Tanzania. The funding for those activities, which took place in almost fifty countries, ranged between \$50,000 and \$400,000.¹¹ Should those programs be considered democracy assistance?

I define democracy promotion as any attempt by a state or states to encourage another country to democratize, either via a transition from autocracy or the consolidation of a new or unstable democracy. Democracy promotion can involve rewards or punishments. Its methods are various: social pressure; economic carrots and sticks; conditionality; diplomacy; and military intervention. Democracy assistance is another method. Thomas Carothers, a foremost expert on the subject, defines democracy assistance as “aid specifically designed to foster a democratic opening in a nondemocratic country or to further a democratic transition

¹¹ United Nations Democracy Fund (2014).

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in a country that has experienced a democratic opening.”¹² In some cases, all the tools of democracy promotion, including democracy assistance, work together in a state’s foreign policy; in other cases democracy-assistance programs can become decoupled, or separated, from the other tools of democracy promotion as well as states’ broader foreign policies.

For the purposes of this book, identifying democracy-assistance projects according to what seems likely to foster democratization would be impossible. Even if it is possible to agree about what democracy is and why countries democratize – very challenging tasks, as I discuss below – critics have argued that many so-called “democracy-assistance” efforts do not lead to democratization at all.¹³ Therefore, excluding projects that seem to me unlikely to cause democratization from this study could exclude a number of programs that donors intend to promote democracy. Instead, in this study, I define democracy assistance as aid that states, international organizations, and other donors explicitly give to promote democracy abroad. I thus consider UNDEF projects “democracy aid” because UNDEF claims that its projects “support democratization efforts around the world.”¹⁴

Defined as such, it is clear that democracy assistance is a new, and growing, phenomenon. Figure 1.1 illustrates the rise of democracy assistance since 1985. What in the early 1980s consisted of the work of a few governments is now an international enterprise. The rise of democracy assistance does not simply reflect an increase in foreign aid since the end of the Cold War. In the United States, for example, democracy aid increased from 8 percent of the annual foreign-aid budget in 1990 to 16 percent in 2009.¹⁵

The activities sponsored as part of democracy assistance fall into several loose clusters. Civil society projects support the media and various overseas NGOs. Governance projects support more transparent and accountable government institutions. Political-processes projects aid elections, legislatures, and political parties. Rule-of-law projects strengthen constitutions, human rights, and legal institutions.¹⁶ The projects are implemented in diverse ways – through government

¹² Carothers (1999, 6).

¹³ Carapico (2002); Carothers (1999); Guilhot (2005); Henderson (2002); Mendelson (2001); Traub (2008).

¹⁴ United Nations Democracy Fund (2014).

¹⁵ Calculations from Azpuru *et al.* (2008, 152) and United States Agency for International Development (2009, 18).

¹⁶ Finkel, Pérez-Liñán, and Seligson (2007, 406–7).

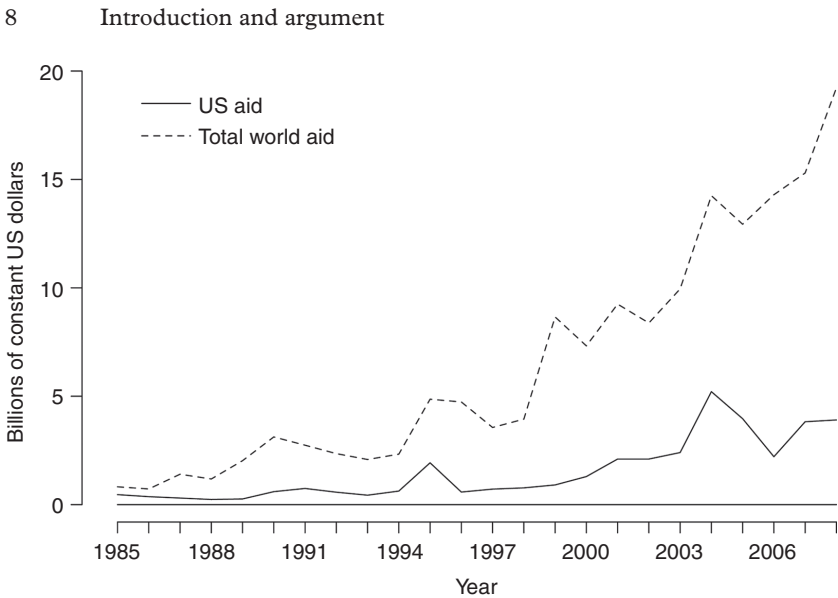


Figure 1.1 The rise of democracy assistance.
Data source: Tierney et al. (2011).

agencies, domestic and foreign non-governmental organizations, and multilateral institutions. Their defining characteristic is that recipients take the funds with the stated goal of fostering democracy.

To be sure, some of the activities such recipients engage in may seem unlikely to lead to democratization in the short or medium term. That is, however, part of the book’s puzzle. Understanding, as scholars Christopher Hobson and Milja Kurki have put it, “democracy’s meaning in democracy promotion” is significant for scholars working across a range of epistemologies and methodologies, yet it has been a task rarely pursued by political scientists.¹⁷ What explains the strategies that donor states and intergovernmental organizations pursue via democracy-assistance programs? Previous research points to two possible answers: the preferences of donor governments and the characteristics of target states.

The anatomy of foreign influence: what we know

Under what conditions can states and international institutions successfully influence a target state’s domestic political institutions and

¹⁷ Hobson and Kurki (2012, 2).

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practices? In a well-cited article from 1978, political scientist Peter Gourevitch wrote about the “second-image reversed,” or the international sources of domestic politics.¹⁸ A growing literature has expanded on his seminal insights to show how international actors promote or otherwise encourage the spread of liberal democracy. In addition to research on democracy promotion, the literature includes studies about human rights, political conditionality, and compliance with international law.¹⁹

The research on foreign influence falls into two camps, which differ in terms of which factors they emphasize as being most important for the design and effects of foreign influence. The first camp emphasizes the ideologies and self-interests of donor states.²⁰ A large body of research shows that security and economic interests shape how donors give foreign aid. Rather than conditioning aid on the quality of governance, donors – even when acting through multilateral institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank – frequently use it to reward and bribe target countries for pursuing donors’ preferred policies. Thus, the story goes, foreign aid often fails at, for example, promoting economic growth or improving governance, since donor states did not design aid to achieve growth or governance in the first place.

The second camp emphasizes the characteristics of the target states. Target states vary in how likely they are to resist foreign influence. Attempts to liberalize target states are more likely to succeed in countries that have “good” economic policies and liberal political intentions; they may backfire and lead to corruption or repression in countries that do not.²¹ The likelihood of foreign influence’s success thus depends in part on how well sending states tailor their efforts to the characteristics of target states. Scholars adopting this perspective suggest some cause for cautious optimism about foreign influence because many donor states have improved at taking into account target states’ needs and characteristics over time.²²

Previous research therefore suggests that we should be able to understand variations in the allocation and effectiveness of democracy assistance by looking at just two factors: the preferences of donor countries and the characteristics of target states. The scant literature that investigates the allocation of democracy assistance confirms that those

¹⁸ Gourevitch (1978).

¹⁹ Donno (2010); Hyde (2011); Kelley (2012); Marinov and Goemans (2014); Pevehouse (2002); Simmons (2009); Stone (2002).

²⁰ Alesina and Dollar (2000); Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2009); Easterly (2006); Hancock (1989); Stone (2002).

²¹ Burnside and Dollar (2000, 2004); Wright (2008b).

²² Bermeo (2008); Wright and Winters (2010, 63–5).

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explanations offer important insights into the process.²³ Specifically, donor states factor in target states' regime types and their foreign-policy relationships when deciding whether and how to sponsor democracy assistance. Other research on democracy assistance also emphasizes donor states' interests by noting that countries tend to export their political ideologies and institutions overseas.²⁴ But state-based explanations paint an incomplete picture of how democracy assistance works on the ground. Indeed, although donor states provide funding, NGOs often design and implement programs overseas. Donor states have a hard time observing and controlling those NGOs, which work far away and seek to aid foreign citizens, who may not want or be able to communicate information about the programs back to donors. To the extent that organizations' preferences differ from donor states', they therefore have room to significantly shape the international community's efforts.

The argument in brief

To explain the taming of democracy assistance as well as other interesting patterns in the content of democracy assistance, I develop a two-part argument that focuses on how the organizations that design and implement democracy-assistance programs interact with donor and target states. The argument seeks to explain variation across both space and time. The first part of the argument emphasizes how delegation dynamics – including what are referred to as “principal–agent problems” in political science and economics – shape the design and implementation of democracy assistance at a given point in time. The second part of the argument emphasizes how organizational changes – especially competition and professional norms – change the preferences of the actors involved and thus influence the evolution of democracy-assistance programs. In developing those ideas, I often refer to the professional field of organizations that design and implement democracy-assistance programs as the *democracy establishment*. An organization – whether non- or quasi-governmental – that obtains funding to design and implement democracy-assistance programs is a member of the democracy establishment.

In making my two-part argument, I do not argue that organizations in the democracy establishment are the only actors that matter in democracy assistance. Many of the findings in this book affirm the significance of donor governments' preferences and key events such as

²³ Finkel, Pérez-Liñán, and Seligson (2007); Scott and Steele (2011).

²⁴ Kopstein (2006); Petrova (2014).