

# The Taming of Democracy Assistance

*Why Democracy Promotion Does Not Confront  
Dictators*

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# 1 Introduction

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*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.*<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> As of 2014, over half the world's states are electoral democracies.<sup>3</sup>

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

<sup>1</sup> Obama (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Huntington (1991).

<sup>3</sup> Freedom House (2014).

democracy promotion has fundamentally altered how American leaders make foreign policy in many countries.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Cox, Ikenberry, and Inoguchi (2000).

<sup>5</sup> McFaul (2010, ch. 2).

<sup>6</sup> Kelley (2004); Vachudova (2005).

<sup>7</sup> Petrova (2014).

<sup>8</sup> Carothers (2009b).

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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> “Tame.” Def. 1. *Oxford English Dictionary* (2014).

<sup>10</sup> Bush (2011).

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.<sup>11</sup> 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

<sup>11</sup> United Nations Democracy Fund (2014).

in a country that has experienced a democratic opening.”<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.”<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup> The projects are implemented in diverse ways – through government

<sup>12</sup> Carothers (1999, 6).

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

<sup>14</sup> United Nations Democracy Fund (2014).

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

<sup>16</sup> Finkel, Pérez-Liñán, and Seligson (2007, 406–7).

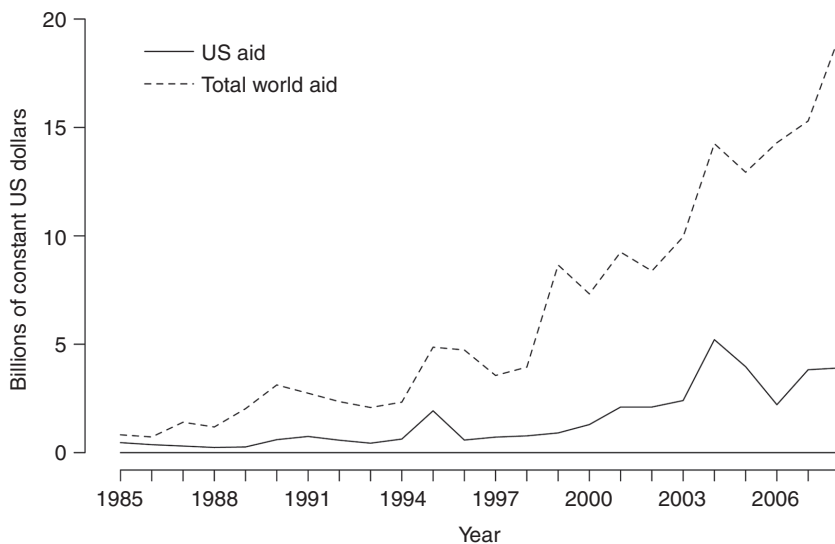


Figure 1.1 The rise of democracy assistance.  
*Data source: Tierney et al. (2011).*

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.<sup>17</sup> 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

<sup>17</sup> Hobson and Kurki (2012, 2).



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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup>

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

<sup>18</sup> Gourevitch (1978).

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

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

<sup>21</sup> Burnside and Dollar (2000, 2004); Wright (2008b).

<sup>22</sup> Bermeo (2008); Wright and Winters (2010, 63–5).

explanations offer important insights into the process.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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

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

<sup>24</sup> Kopstein (2006); Petrova (2014).

the end of the Cold War. But I argue that organizations in the democracy establishment are an important, and often overlooked, part of the causal story. In a nutshell, organizations in the democracy establishment take part in strategic games with both donors (for funding) and target states (for access). As they compete for funding and become more professional, they pursue programs that better match their survival incentives. In addition to clarifying several puzzles about democracy assistance, the argument also suggests new ways to think about foreign influence and non-governmental actors in world politics.

*Transnational delegation in democracy promotion*

As with many other international phenomena that involve delegation, governments delegate authority and funding to non-state actors to design and implement democracy assistance.<sup>25</sup> They do so for a variety of reasons, including to benefit from other organizations' expertise and legitimacy. Authority and aid typically pass through several institutions, not to mention moving across state boundaries. That lengthy process of delegation makes it hard for donor states to fully observe and control the projects that they fund, and gives organizations in the democracy establishment some room to design projects that satisfy their desires to survive and thrive.

Consider an American government-funded project in the Central African Republic in 2010. At the time, Freedom House ranked the war-torn country as "partly free," noting that it was "not an electoral democracy" due to unfair elections and various restrictions on freedoms.<sup>26</sup> In that environment, the US-sponsored program, which cost \$42,953, sought to "ensure that women [in the Central African Republic] are more empowered and understand their socio-economic and political rights and legal processes for defending them."<sup>27</sup> Although the program's goal of promoting women's "greater involvement in local political life" was in many ways noble, it generally fits this book's definition of tame, which is to say that it was both measurable and regime-compatible. Not only could the program be plausibly evaluated using quantitative outcome measures about women's participation (e.g., the number of women in parliament), but it also did little to directly confront the government of President François Bozizé by fostering competition or mobilizing regime-challenging groups.

<sup>25</sup> Bradley and Kelley (2008); Hawkins *et al.* (2006); Nielson and Tierney (2003); Pollack (1997); Weaver (2008).

<sup>26</sup> Freedom House (2010).

<sup>27</sup> National Endowment for Democracy (2010).

Consider another American government-funded project in the same year. This \$120,000 project took place in Jordan, a constitutional monarchy ranked by Freedom House as “not free” that year. Although the country’s leader, King Abdullah, did permit elections, he dismissed the elected parliament at will and made use of extensive executive and legislative authority at the time.<sup>28</sup> As was the case in the Central African Republic, one of the democracy-assistance programs supported by the US government in Jordan that year aimed “to support women parliamentary candidates and newly-elected women parliamentarians.”<sup>29</sup> Again, this program fits the book’s definition of a tame program. Jordan has made remarkable improvements in terms of women’s representation in the twenty-first century, but many experts on the country’s politics suggest that these improvements have done more to enhance the regime’s international reputation than they have to advance democracy.<sup>30</sup>

How were these American programs, which sought to engage citizens in fundamentally undemocratic political systems, designed and funded? The democracy-assistance projects in the Central African Republic and Jordan began, in a distant sense, with the American public, which elects representatives to make foreign policy on its behalf. In 2010, as in other years, the United States Congress delegated authority and funding for democracy promotion to several institutions, including the Department of State, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Congress delegated because it lacks the capacity to directly run democracy-assistance programs and because some separation from the government serves democracy promotion well. Some formal separation benefits democracy promotion because a heavy US-government imprint can delegitimize reform efforts<sup>31</sup> and also undermine diplomatic relations. For the Central African Republic project, the NED, a quasi-governmental American foundation, awarded a grant to Mercy Corps, an American non-governmental organization. Mercy Corps organized activities locally in collaboration with local civil-society organizations, including a Central African NGO, Association des Femmes Juristes de Centrafrique. For the Jordanian grant, the NED awarded a grant to the National Democratic Institute (NDI), which then made a sub-grant to Women Helping Women, the Jordanian Women’s Election Network, which had been launched by the NDI in 2006 and was governed by female Jordanian leaders.

<sup>28</sup> Freedom House (2010).

<sup>29</sup> National Endowment for Democracy (2010).

<sup>30</sup> Baylouny (2005, 41–2); David and Nanes (2011).

<sup>31</sup> Bush and Jamal (2015).

What were the preferences and strategies of the actors involved in the Central African Republic and Jordanian projects? First, donor governments, including the United States, fund democracy aid in countries such as the Central African Republic and Jordan at least in part because they support democracy. That idea may seem obvious, but it is not: Western states, including the United States, have often supported stability rather than democracy in their autocratic allies and even supported the overthrow of democratically elected governments. Competing strategic interests can and do still trump democracy promotion, especially in cases such as Jordan, and we would expect those competing interests to affect the types of aid program donors fund. Despite all that, as Figure 1.1 suggested, since the end of the Cold War, democracy donors have made a real commitment to aiding democracy abroad. At the same time as they hope to support democracy, however, democratically elected officials also worry about satisfying their publics, who may be skeptical of foreign assistance and democracy promotion. Consequently, donor officials want to document democracy assistance's efficacy to justify spending public money.

Second, organizations in the democracy establishment – such as the NED, Mercy Corps, NDI, and local civil-society organizations in the Central African Republic and Jordan – share general preferences. Fundamentally, they want greater democracy. Promoting democracy in a partly free country such as the Central African Republic or Jordan is hard – even dangerous – work that organizations pursue because they believe it is right. But to survive and thrive, organizations must secure several resources. First, organizations need government funding. Without it, they cannot work. Second, they need access to target countries. Again, without it, they cannot work; without it, they may also face legal problems, as illustrated most famously by the 2012 crackdown on NGOs in Egypt. Yet, as is shown later in the book, there is no evidence that the tame projects that best generate funding and access are effective at democratizing countries.

Organizations pursue predictable strategies for achieving funding and access. To win funding, they prefer to pursue programs with measurable outcomes: programs that are linked to clear, quantitative outcomes. Organizations can show donors that they are making democratic progress through, for example, an improvement on a cross-national index of women's representation. Practical, ethical, and methodological limitations still make it hard to assess the causal impact of democracy programs, but at least measurable programs have concrete indicators that measure their associated outcomes, which are plausible, if minimal, barometers of success. Although more subjective dimensions

of democracy also matter, they do not form clear signals to far-off funders. It is important to note that the pursuit of measurable programs represents in many cases responsiveness to donor preferences on the part of organizations in the democracy establishment. At the same time, research on democracy assistance reviewed in the next two chapters does suggest that measurable programs can conflict with effective democracy promotion. If that research is correct, then government officials are sending mixed messages to organizations in the democracy establishment: they want effective aid programs and they want measurable programs. In that case, delegation dynamics may be relevant.

To win access, organizations prefer to pursue programs that do not directly confront dictators. Incumbents want to stay in power and can and do block access to democracy-assistance organizations that threaten them. Indeed, autocrats in Egypt, Russia, the United Arab Emirates, and elsewhere have used legal and extralegal means to thwart democracy promoters.<sup>32</sup> Even if foreign funding is permitted, as it was in 2010 in the Central African Republic and Jordan, leaders such as Bozizé and Abdullah can set up other obstacles to democracy practitioners, such as difficult and non-transparent procedures for mandatory NGO registration. If NGOs support dissidents in such countries today, then their staff may be kicked out of the country or arrested. Organizations therefore often choose to support programs that target countries will at least tolerate, if not embrace.

Organizations' survival incentives therefore help explain why they prefer certain democracy-assistance programs, such as support for women's political participation – which are both measurable and regime compatible – over other types of programs, such as support for dissidents – which are neither measurable nor regime-compatible. Rational organizations will choose the democracy-assistance programs that help them survive. When donors cannot observe and control those NGOs, they should be more likely to reward measurable programs. Moreover, they should be less likely to punish organizations for pursuing regime-compatible programs. Thus, the more discretion that organizations in the democracy establishment have, the more we can expect them to pursue tame programs.

### *The professionalization of democracy promotion*

Yet even given a constant delegation structure, I expect organizations in the democracy establishment to have responded differently to the

<sup>32</sup> Gershman and Allen (2006).

same incentives over time. As democracy assistance grew, a transnational field emerged with shared ideas about the appropriate institutions and practices for developing democracies.<sup>33</sup> As organizational theories would predict, organizations in the democracy establishment came to promote democracy in similar ways over time due to competition and professionalization.<sup>34</sup> Organizations converged on approaches that treated democratization as an incremental process rather than as a political struggle. Despite the field's ideological origins and sometimes grand rhetoric, its organizations are "normal" in the sense that they care about many of the same mundane tasks that other organizations care about.

A Weberian process of competitive learning winnowed the democracy establishment's strategies. Democracy practitioners learned about effecting democratic change and also about attaining funding. The rise of democracy assistance encouraged organizations to enter the lucrative field, heightening competition. Competition in turn focused practitioners on monitoring and evaluation and reinforced the incentives for measurable programs. The organizations that survived successfully adapted. Certain characteristics of democracy assistance – such as the field's short-term projects and concentrations of practitioners in certain countries – especially fostered information-sharing and adaptive learning. Practitioners could quickly replicate models that they saw succeed elsewhere.

Professional norms locked in lessons about obtaining funding and access. Certain programs and goals became taken for granted. Supporting women's groups may have initially worked well at gaining access, for example, but it later came to be viewed as an appropriate practice. Associations, university programs, and an elite spread and reinforced the field's body of knowledge. The democracy establishment's reliance on state funding and frequent turnover especially fostered convergence. As is common among organizations that focus on vague and complex goals, the means (organizational survival) gradually became the ends in the democracy establishment. For all of those reasons, organizations in the democracy establishment will be more likely to pursue tame programs as they compete and professionalize.

Although competition and norms encouraged organizations in the democracy establishment to promote democracy in ways that helped them survive, idealism in the field endures. The point is that the balance between idealism and incentives has evolved. Optimists tend to view

<sup>33</sup> Guilhot (2005).

<sup>34</sup> Weber (1978 [1922]); DiMaggio and Powell (1983); Barnett (2009).



transnational activists as generally motivated by ideals.<sup>35</sup> Cynics tend to view them as just as materially-motivated as firms despite their high-minded rhetoric.<sup>36</sup> The truth lies somewhere in between the two perspectives for the democracy establishment, and, crucially, it varies in predictable ways. Indeed, part of what is novel about this book when compared to previous pioneering studies of NGOs in world politics is that it identifies and explains important variations in organizational behavior even when a variety of pertinent factors that we know influence NGOs – such as the extent of principal–agent problems, short-term contracts, and multiple-principals problems – are held constant.<sup>37</sup> The approach that I use to study democracy-assistance organizations can also be extended to study fields in a variety of issue areas in world politics relating to foreign influence, from developmental to environmental assistance.

### **Organization of the book**

This book has three main parts. The first part motivates the project and provides a theoretical framework for what follows. Chapter 2 develops my argument in more detail. I derive testable hypotheses from the argument that I contrast with complementary and alternative explanations, which emphasize donor countries' preferences and target countries' characteristics.

To test the argument, I develop a new typology of democracy assistance projects in Chapter 3. Measurable programs have quantitative indicators that can be used to evaluate their outcomes. Regime-compatible programs are not judged by autocrats to be likely to lead to their overthrow. In this chapter, several illustrative cases also show how measurable and regime-compatible projects can come at the expense of effective democracy assistance and thus document the principal–agent problems on which the book focuses.

Part II turns to testing my argument and represents the book's empirical core. In it, I track variations in how measurable and regime-compatible democracy-assistance programs are across time and space. The order of the chapters in Part II loosely mimics the order of the

<sup>35</sup> Keck and Sikkink (1998).

<sup>36</sup> Cooley and Ron (2002); Dichter (2003); Kennedy (2005); Prakash and Gugerty (2010); Sell and Prakash (2004).

<sup>37</sup> This study is also novel when compared to important previous studies, such as Cooley and Ron (2002), because it looks at a new sector of transnational NGOs, systematically theorizes the influence of target states (not just donor states), and contains a multi-method empirical test that explains variations in transnational NGOs' programs (rather than a qualitative-only empirical test).



transnational delegation chain in democracy assistance that I study, moving from the practices of donor governments to quasi-governmental organizations, to donor-country-based NGOs, and finally to target-country-based NGOs. The chapters in Part II also rely on a combination of empirical research methods. I draw on existing and original cross-national, over-time data sets of democracy-assistance projects, which I examine statistically, including using matching techniques for causal inference, to identify general correlations and make some counterfactual inferences. I also draw on a survey of practitioners and detailed case studies to validate my assumptions, provide context, and show the intermediate causal steps that are necessary to have more confidence in the statistical causal inferences. The data for the case studies come from more than 150 interviews, documents from organizational archives, and extensive fieldwork that I conducted in Jordan, Tunisia, and Washington, DC. In addition to testing the book's argument, by examining democracy assistance in the Middle East before and after the "Arab Spring," the chapters also contribute to ongoing policy debates.

It is worth noting that researchers face numerous barriers to entry when it comes to studying democracy-assistance organizations, as is the case with many international organizations.<sup>38</sup> In the wake of US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, many practitioners feel that their work is vulnerable to political criticism. They fear for their livelihoods and for their organizations, themes which are at the heart of this book. As such, many professionals have an understandable skepticism of academic and journalistic interviewers who could be coming to write the next exposé on democracy promotion. As a consequence, most of the interviews that I undertook for this book were conducted using "unattributable" or "off-the-record" terms so as to reassure interviewees and enable them to speak with candor. To ease the book's exposition, I occasionally use fictitious names when referring to particular interviewees. The appendix lists the organizations where my interviewees worked to give readers a sense of the sources I relied upon. Given the obvious concerns about the reliability of information gleaned from such interviews, I also relied heavily on practitioners' public statements and organizations' primary documents, including both official and unofficial documents that were leaked to me or the public by organizations' staff.

Using the aforementioned strategies, Chapter 4 tests the proposition that when democracy donors have a more difficult time observing and controlling the organizations they fund, tame programs will be more likely to occur. I test the proposition using recent data on more than

<sup>38</sup> Weaver (2008, 14).

12,000 democracy-assistance programs funded by more than twenty government donors. Using statistical methods for causal inference, I show that several indicators of the degree of difficulty observing and controlling aid-recipient organizations – such as the use of donor-state rather than target-state non-governmental organizations as implementers – are strongly related to how likely programs are to be tame.

Chapter 5 statistically tests the proposition that competition and professional norms fostered convergence within American democracy assistance on measurable and regime-compatible programs over time and across countries. To do so, it analyzes a random sample of 5,000 democracy-assistance projects from an original data set of projects funded by the NED, a US government-supported foundation that seeks to advance democracy abroad. After explaining why the NED's projects provide a useful test of the argument from a research design perspective, I show that competition and professionalism are associated with relatively tamer democracy-assistance programs, even after controlling for a number of other relevant factors. Those factors include the amount of American military aid received by the target countries, indicators for the Cold War and post-September 11 eras, indicators for changes in American domestic politics, the level of democracy and regime type of the target country, and indicators for the regions where programs take place. The over-time trend also holds among projects funded by the other main American democracy donor, USAID. Moreover, the analysis reveals that target countries that have strategic relationships with the United States receive “tamer” forms of democracy assistance.

Drawing on qualitative data, Chapter 6 focuses on the historical development of several American organizations that were significant early activist organizations promoting democracy – Freedom House, the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe, and the Open Society Foundations. I show how competitive learning and professional norms fostered convergence across those organizations about how to promote democracy in tamer ways. I also describe how donor governments interact with organizations in the democracy establishment, documenting the network structure of the democracy establishment using internet connections and a survey of more than 1,000 democracy-assistance practitioners.

To complement that analysis, the next two chapters (Chapters 7 and 8) turn to case studies of democracy assistance in the Middle East. Among other things, what these case studies help demonstrate is what a tame program looks like on the ground, what problems of observation and control look like in practice, and how democracy-assistance professionals make tough decisions in particular contexts about how

to trade off between their ideals and incentives. To examine those dynamics, I focus on the cases of Jordan and Tunisia.

Considerations of research design as well as current policy debates guided my case selection. When country case studies are chosen to complement cross-national statistical analysis that is generally robust and confirms the argument, political scientist Evan Lieberman recommends choosing cases that are well predicted by statistical models with the goal of confirming that the hypothesized causal mechanisms are at work.<sup>39</sup> In Chapters 4 and 5, Jordan and Tunisia were two cases that were typically well predicted by the statistical models, which makes them appropriate countries for in-depth study. If the transnational approach to democracy assistance is correct, then Jordan and Tunisia are cases where we would expect to see some support for it.

Moreover, as a pair, Jordan and Tunisia are similar: they are both Arab countries that have relatively small populations and are relatively developed, falling into the World Bank's upper-middle-income economies group during the period of research. At the start of my period of field research, 2008, they had one particularly salient difference: Jordan was a security ally of the United States, whereas Tunisia was not. By 2012, an additional difference had emerged: Tunisia had experienced a democratizing revolution, whereas Jordan's monarchy remained relatively impervious to the Arab Spring. The case studies thus allow for across- and within-case comparisons. They afford me an opportunity to see how different relationships with donors and, later, different domestic regime types affect or do not affect the design of democracy assistance on the ground. It is worth noting that since the Middle East is thought to be a region where donor countries have major countervailing strategic interests, which may prevent them from truly pushing for democracy, evidence in favor of my argument from this region should be especially powerful.

Moreover, in terms of practical importance, the case studies make sense. The Arab world has been the focus of the greatest interest in terms of democracy promotion among policy-makers and pundits alike since September 11, 2001. Both American and European donors have dramatically increased their funding on the Middle East since 2001 and, as outlined above, Jordan, and now Tunisia, have been particular foci of new foreign-aid initiatives tied to political reform, such as the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).<sup>40</sup> Yet serious doubts remain about such

<sup>39</sup> Lieberman (2005, 444).

<sup>40</sup> Youngs and Wittes (2009).

democracy-promotion efforts, including about their sincerity, practicality, and consistency.<sup>41</sup> Thus, it makes sense to focus on the Middle East for the analysis because doing so can help show us what factors influence the design of important democracy-assistance programs and what changes might be necessary to promote democracy more effectively in the future.

Chapter 7 examines democracy assistance on the ground in Jordan among the final “agents” in the transnational delegation chain. After discussing my selection of the Jordanian case and providing some context about liberal authoritarianism in Jordan, I show that – in contrast to conventional wisdom – donor governments’ strategic interests do not offer a complete explanation of the salient variations in democracy assistance in Jordan, even after the “Arab Spring.” I thus develop a more complete explanation for the design of democracy assistance in Jordan that builds on the previous chapters’ transnational approach. My findings illustrate the importance of organizational survival, in terms of both funding and access, as well as professional norms with concrete examples of programs. The chapter also considers democracy-assistance efforts funded in Jordan by private foundations. The analysis draws its conclusions on the basis of more than seventy semi-structured interviews conducted in Amman, Jordan, as well as news articles from the Jordanian press and internal documents from donor organizations.

I shift focus in Chapter 8 to Tunisia, again drawing on field research. I show how little democracy promotion occurred in Tunisia prior to the 2011 Jasmine Revolution and explain what donors chose to support in the plentiful post-revolution funding environment. With less funding competition, NGOs in Tunisia pursued a relatively tame set of activities. Nevertheless, the common forces of funding competition and professionalism had already appeared and started influencing programs, even in 2012 despite the relatively free environment.

Chapter 9 summarizes the book’s findings and discusses their implications for the study of world politics and the practice of democracy promotion. It argues that the book’s transnational approach to democracy assistance can be fruitfully applied to the study of other types of foreign influence, such as environmental aid. It also draws out the policy implications of the book’s argument, suggesting ways that the government funding structure could be reformed to reward democracy assistance that confronts dictators. Most of those reforms involve steps that can improve the observation and control of funded organizations or that can amplify the strategies used by private foundations.

<sup>41</sup> Brownlee (2012); Carapico (2002); Ottaway (2005b); Wittes (2008).

In the end, are the consequences of the democracy establishment's influence positive or negative for democracy around the world? Much remains uncertain about democracy promotion's effectiveness and hinges on one's definition of democracy. But my findings that democracy-assistance programs increasingly prioritize quantitative measurement and compatibility with the target countries' regimes are troubling for people who are interested in fighting for democracy fiercely in the short and medium term. At a minimum, important democracy-assistance programs that supported dissidents, political parties, and unions are disappearing because they fail to generate measurable outcomes. At a maximum, some democracy-assistance programs today may inadvertently reinforce strategies of authoritarian survival as a consequence of organizations' drives for funding and access. Although my conclusions are necessarily cautious, given the challenges of making causal inferences with observational data, a rigorous series of tests suggests that survival concerns have prompted organizations in the democracy establishment to increasingly pursue tame forms of democracy assistance across a variety of target states in all the world's regions.

Advancing democracy worldwide remains a noble goal. Yet one of our major tools to accomplish this goal is weaker than it might otherwise be because of how government donors fund democracy assistance. Most of our previous analysis of democracy assistance has focused on the importance of landmark political events, such as the end of the Cold War and the Iraq War, to Western countries' strategies. Such events are key to understanding the intentions of donor governments, the extent of their aid commitments, and the contexts in which overseas programs operate. Yet how democracy assistance works on the ground also depends on many small, everyday organizational decisions and battles. Institutional reforms that promote observation and control can get the incentives right in order to reward democracy-assistance programs that more directly challenge authoritarian rulers in the future.