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ФАКТОРИ ЕФЕКТИВНОСТІ ІНОЗЕМНОЇ ДОПОМОГИ У ПРОЦЕСАХ ДЕМОКРАТИЗАЦІЇ: МОТИВАЦІЯ ДОНОРІВ ТА ПІДХОДИ ДО НАДАННЯ ДОПОМОГИ

FACTORS OF FOREIGN AID EFFECTIVENESS IN DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESSES: DONOR MOTIVATION AND APPROACHES TO AID PROVISION

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Abstract. *The article provides a comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of external assistance in promoting democratization processes, taking into account donor motivations, their ideological orientations, and the characteristics of recipient countries. It reveals how normative, strategic, and economic factors shape donor behavior and determine their approaches to providing aid. Two dominant approaches to supporting democracy are identified: the "political" approach, focused on the development of civil society, independent media, and transparent electoral processes, and the "developmental" approach, which emphasizes strengthening state institutions, transparency, accountability, and the rule of law, reflected in the concept of good governance. The study shows that the first approach produces notable effects in the electoral and participatory spheres, whereas the second contributes to enhancing institutional capacity. The analysis demonstrates that external assistance is least effective in strengthening the rule of law, judicial independence, and oversight of the executive branch due to resistance from political elites, for whom institutional constraints pose a direct threat to maintaining power and access to resources.*

Keywords: *Foreign aid, democratization, donor motivation, democracy assistance, aid effectiveness, political conditionality, good governance, civil society.*

Анотація. *У статті здійснено комплексний аналіз ефективності зовнішньої допомоги у сприянні процесам демократизації з урахуванням мотивацій донорів, їхніх ідеологічних орієнтацій та характеристик країн-отримувачів. Розкрито, як нормативні, стратегічні та економічні чинники визначають поведінку донорів і формують підходи до надання допомоги. Виокремлено два домінантні підходи до підтримки демократії: «політичний», зорієнтований на розвиток громадянського суспільства, незалежних медіа та прозорих*

виборчих процесів, і «розвитковий», що фокусується на зміцненні державних інститутів, прозорості, підзвітності та верховенстві права, що позначається концепцією належного врядування. Показано, що перший підхід має відчутні ефекти у виборчій і партисипативній сферах, тоді як другий сприяє підвищенню інституційної спроможності. Аналіз показав, що зовнішня допомога найменш ефективна у зміцненні верховенства права, незалежності судів і контролю над виконавчою владою через опір політичних еліт, для яких інституційні обмеження становлять безпосередню загрозу збереженню влади та доступу до ресурсів.

Ключові слова. *Іноземна допомога, демократизація, мотивація донорів, допомога демократії, ефективність допомоги, політична обумовленість, належне врядування, громадянське суспільство.*

Introduction. The paradox of contemporary international development is striking: while resources allocated to democracy assistance have increased substantially - from $4.1 billion in 2002 to $16.3 billion in 2019 - global democracy indicators demonstrate opposite trends *(OECD DAC)*. The V-Dem Institute documented that by 2020, 68% of the world's population lived in autocracies, and the level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2022 had declined to 1986 levels, erasing over 35 years of democratic gains. This contradiction raises fundamental questions about the effectiveness of foreign aid as an instrument of democratization and the factors that determine its success or failure.

The relationship between foreign aid and democracy has been extensively debated in academic literature, with scholars offering divergent assessments. Some argue that aid can serve as an effective catalyst for democratic transitions by providing resources and expertise to reform-minded actors. Others contend that aid may undermine democracy by reducing government accountability to citizens, strengthening authoritarian regimes, or serving primarily as an instrument of donor foreign policy rather than genuine democracy promotion. This theoretical disagreement reflects the complexity of the aid-democracy relationship and suggests that effectiveness may be highly contextual.

This article addresses a critical gap in existing research by systematically analyzing how donor motivations and approaches to aid provision influence democratization outcomes. While previous studies have examined either donor motivations or aid effectiveness separately, few have explored their interaction and its implications for democracy promotion strategies. The research question guiding this analysis is: under what conditions and through what mechanisms does foreign aid contribute to democratization, and how do donor characteristics - particularly their motivations and ideological approaches - shape these outcomes?

The article proceeds in four sections. First, it examines the spectrum of donor motivations, from normative commitments to geopolitical and economic interests, analyzing how these shape aid allocation patterns. Second, it explores contrasting approaches to democracy assistance and their relationship to donor ideology. Finally, it discusses the challenges of using aid to promote good governance in recipient countries.

Literature review. The issue of foreign aid and democratization has attracted significant scholarly attention since the end of the Cold War, when democracy promotion became a central component of development assistance. Early optimism was reflected in the works of Thomas Carothers, who in his book “Aiding Democracy Abroad” (1999) argued that foreign assistance could effectively support democratic transitions. However, later research presented a more complex picture, emphasizing that aid’s impact on democratization is far from uniform.

Theoretical frameworks explaining aid effectiveness have developed within broader democratization theories. Scholars such as Seymour Martin Lipset and Adam Przeworski highlighted the structural dimension of democratization, rooted in modernization theory. They argued that economic development - often facilitated by foreign aid - creates social conditions favorable to democracy, including the rise of educated middle classes and pluralistic societies. In contrast, institutional theorists like Staffan Lindberg emphasized the role of aid in strengthening formal democratic institutions - parliaments, electoral systems, judiciaries, and civil society organizations - thereby fostering sustainable democratization. From another perspective, Terry Karl

and other proponents of agent-oriented theories focused on how aid empowers domestic reformers and pro-democratic actors who drive political change.

Empirical studies have yielded mixed results. The large-scale analysis conducted by Steven Finkel and colleagues (2007) demonstrated that targeted U.S. democracy assistance produced measurable positive effects on democratic indicators such as Freedom House and Polity scores during 1990-2003. However, meta-analytical studies by Zakir Askarov and Hristos Doucouliagos (2013) revealed that, across broader samples, the average effect of aid on democracy was close to zero or even negative. Later researchers, including Sam Jones and Finn Tarp (2016), suggested that these discrepancies stem from variations in donor types, aid modalities, recipient contexts, and the specific time periods examined.

A crucial insight from contemporary literature is the role of donor motivations. According to Alberto Alesina and David Dollar, foreign aid allocation reflects not only humanitarian or developmental intentions but also donors' geopolitical and commercial interests. Similarly, Anke Hoeffler and Veronica Outram emphasized that these overlapping motives lead to what scholars describe as "selectivity problems," when aid flows to strategically important countries regardless of their governance quality. Eric Neumayer demonstrated that such practices undermine the credibility and effectiveness of democracy conditionality, as they erode the link between aid and political reform.

Differences between donor approaches have also been widely discussed. Thomas Carothers, in his later work (2009), distinguished between "political" and "developmental" approaches to democracy assistance. The political approach prioritizes rapid political change through support for elections and civil society, while the developmental approach focuses on gradual institutional reform and state-building. Building on this, Milja Kurki (2013) argued that these contrasting strategies reflect deeper ideological divides regarding the relationship between democracy and development.

Despite the substantial scholarly attention devoted to the topic, significant research gaps remain. First, as several authors note, there is still limited understanding of how the interaction between donor motivations and recipient characteristics shapes democratization outcomes. Second, little attention has been paid to how donors' ideological orientations affect not only aid allocation but also implementation strategies and their long-term effectiveness.

The purpose of this article is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of foreign aid in promoting democratization, with particular attention to how donor motivations, ideological orientations, and recipient country characteristics shape aid allocation patterns and outcomes. The study seeks to identify the mechanisms through which different donor approaches affect various dimensions of democracy, and to determine the key factors that enhance or constrain the transformative potential of foreign aid within contemporary global conditions of democratic backsliding.

Main results of research. The relationship between foreign aid and democratization emerges from a complex interplay of donor motivations, ideological approaches, and recipient country characteristics. To understand why democracy assistance produces such varying results across different contexts - and why, despite substantially increased resources, global democratic indicators continue to decline - requires examining how these factors interact and shape both the allocation and impact of aid.

Donor motivations represent far more than a technical question of resource allocation - they reveal the often contradictory purposes that democracy assistance serves in international relations. While donors rhetorically emphasize democracy and human rights as guiding principles, the actual patterns of aid distribution tell a more complicated story. Geopolitical and security interests frequently override democratic objectives, creating a fundamental tension between stated principles and operational reality. This contradiction matters profoundly because it undermines the credibility of conditionality and weakens the link between aid flows and genuine political reform. When recipients observe that strategically important countries receive substantial aid regardless of their democratic performance, while less strategically valuable countries face strict conditions, the message is clear: democracy matters less than geopolitical alignment.

The empirical evidence for this pattern is overwhelming and appears across multiple dimensions of aid allocation. Countries receive substantially more aid when they serve on the UN Security Council - a finding that strongly suggests donors use aid to "buy votes" in international forums *(Dreher et al., 2009)*. The effect is not subtle: countries receive 59% more US aid during their tenure on the Security Council, and this increase concentrates specifically on countries that vote with the US *(Kuziemko & Werker, 2006)*. Former colonial relationships continue to predict current aid flows decades after independence, indicating that historical ties shape contemporary assistance patterns independently of need or merit. Military alliances and voting alignment in the UN General Assembly similarly correlate positively with aid receipts. These patterns reveal that aid serves multiple purposes simultaneously - as a foreign policy tool for maintaining influence, as a development instrument for reducing poverty, and as a means of rewarding political alignment. The challenge for democracy promotion is that these purposes often conflict, and when they do, strategic considerations typically prevail.

Regional disparities in aid allocation make this dynamic starkly visible. In the Middle East and North Africa, the US allocated $7.7 billion to security assistance but only $250 million to democracy programs in fiscal year 2024 - a ratio of 30:1 that speaks volumes about actual priorities *(Middle East Democracy Center, 2024)*. No other region received more than 41% of its funding devoted to security assistance, highlighting how strategic interests in this particular region overwhelm democracy promotion objectives. Egypt provides perhaps the clearest illustration: the country continues receiving $1.3 billion in annual military aid despite persistent human rights violations and authoritarian governance, because its strategic importance - maintaining peace with Israel, controlling the Suez Canal, cooperating on counterterrorism - trumps democratic concerns *(U.S. Department of State, 2024)*. When confronted with this contradiction, policymakers typically acknowledge it but argue that maintaining strategic relationships serves broader stability objectives. The result, however, is that democracy conditionality loses credibility when applied selectively.

At the same time, it would be inaccurate to suggest that donor motivations are purely cynical or strategic. Economic development and poverty reduction genuinely influence aid allocation, and donors generally provide more aid to poorer countries. However, even this ostensibly needs-based allocation falls far short of optimal distribution. Aid could lift nearly twice as many people out of poverty if distributed purely according to need *(Collier & Dollar, 2002)*, suggesting that other factors substantially dilute the poverty-reduction focus. Multilateral donors demonstrate stronger commitment to poverty-focused allocation than bilateral donors, likely because they face less pressure to serve national strategic interests. Within bilateral donors, significant variation exists - Scandinavian countries allocate aid more consistently according to need and governance quality, while major powers like the US, France, and China show stronger strategic influences.

The question of merit-based allocation - rewarding good governance and democratic progress - emerged prominently after the Cold War as donors sought to distance themselves from the cynical realpolitik of the previous era. The principle that aid should flow preferentially to countries demonstrating commitment to democracy and good governance gained widespread rhetorical acceptance. Implementation, however, remains inconsistent and selective. Donors increasingly provide more aid to countries with better policies and institutions *(Dollar & Pritchett, 1998)*, suggesting some genuine shift toward merit-based allocation. Yet the picture regarding human rights reveals persistent ambiguities. Most donors consider civil-political rights when selecting which countries receive aid, but they pay little attention to personal integrity rights like freedom from torture and extrajudicial killing. More troublingly, many donors actually provide more aid to countries with poor human rights records after the initial selection stage *(Neumayer, 2003)*, suggesting that strategic considerations override human rights concerns once the decision to engage has been made. Germany stands out as showing more consistent responsiveness to human rights across all allocation stages than other major donors, indicating that domestic political culture influences how donors balance competing objectives.

Corruption control presents similarly mixed patterns. Scandinavian donors reward better corruption control with increased aid, reflecting their domestic political cultures that place high value on transparency and accountability. Other donors show weaker or inconsistent responses to corruption. Interestingly, less corrupt donors respond more sensitively to corruption in recipient

countries, suggesting that donor domestic governance norms influence aid allocation behavior. However, interpreting these correlations requires caution. Some of the relationship between aid and weak governance may reflect strategic decisions to engage with "fragile states" despite their governance challenges, using alternative channels like NGOs to bypass corrupt governments *(Dietrich, 2013)*. Donors face a genuine dilemma: should they withhold aid from the most poorly governed countries, punishing populations for their governments' failures, or should they engage despite governance challenges, accepting the risks of corruption and diversion? Different donors resolve this dilemma differently based on their institutional mandates, domestic political pressures, and philosophical orientations.

Commercial interests add another layer of complexity to aid allocation. All major donors provide more aid to their trade partners, and bilateral trade volumes correlate with aid flows for the US, China, and DAC donors collectively. This pattern reflects both benign and self-interested dynamics. On one hand, countries naturally develop closer relationships with their trading partners, gaining better information about their circumstances and stronger diplomatic ties that facilitate aid cooperation. On the other hand, donors clearly use aid strategically to strengthen economic relationships, open markets, and support their own commercial interests. The line between development cooperation and commercial diplomacy often blurs, particularly for emerging donors like China whose aid programs explicitly aim to facilitate access to resources and markets.

These allocation patterns have profound implications for aid effectiveness that extend beyond simple questions of resource adequacy. Who gives aid matters as much as how much they give. Aid from democratic donors appears more effective at promoting democracy than aid from authoritarian donors, likely because democratic donors bring expertise grounded in their own democratic experiences and genuinely seek democratic outcomes rather than authoritarian stability. Aid delivered through multilateral channels shows stronger effects than bilateral aid, probably because multilateral institutions face less pressure to serve narrow national interests and can maintain more consistent merit-based allocation. Aid targeted to specific sectors with clear objectives produces better results than general budget support, which can be diverted to non-reform purposes or strengthen government without improving governance. These findings suggest that debates about aid effectiveness must consider not only quantity but also the quality, credibility, and consistency of aid delivery.

The divergence between what can be termed "political" and "developmental" approaches to democracy assistance reflects deeper ideological differences about democracy's relationship to economic development and the proper role of the state. These are not merely technical disagreements about implementation modalities - they represent fundamentally different theories of how democratization occurs and what external actors can most effectively support. Understanding these ideological foundations illuminates why different donors adopt such different strategies and why they often talk past each other in debates about effectiveness.

The political approach, predominantly associated with US democracy assistance, emerged from neoliberal political economy thinking that gained ascendancy during the Reagan era and shaped post-Cold War democracy promotion. This approach views economic and political freedom as mutually reinforcing and prerequisite to development. Markets work best when political systems are pluralistic and competitive; democracy flourishes when economic power is dispersed through market competition rather than concentrated in state hands. This ideological orientation emphasizes bottom-up democratization through support for civil society, independent media, competitive elections, and political parties. The underlying theory of change assumes that empowering democratic actors and creating competitive political institutions will catalyze broader systemic transformation. Once civil society organizations gain strength, media becomes independent, and electoral competition becomes genuine, authoritarian regimes face mounting pressure to liberalize or risk being swept away by democratic mobilization.

Reagan articulated this vision clearly at his 1982 Westminster speech launching the National Endowment for Democracy: "History teaches us about the danger of government that overreaches: political control that takes precedence over free economic growth, the secret police, the cumbersome bureaucracy - all stifle individual talents and personal freedom." This worldview treats government power as inherently suspect and sees democracy emerging from limiting state authority while

expanding space for autonomous social and economic actors. The state is not the solution to underdevelopment but often its primary cause; therefore, democratization requires strengthening society vis-à-vis the state rather than building state capacity per se.

This ideological orientation translated into specific organizational structures that embody its core assumptions. The US created NED as a separate institution from USAID specifically for democracy promotion, designed to work "from the bottom up through grants" and respond to "local needs." NED operates with far greater flexibility than USAID, providing grants directly to civil society organizations without requiring host government approval - a crucial feature that allows it to support opposition movements and independent actors whom governments oppose. This institutional design embodies the belief that political change requires engaging with political actors and processes directly, supporting those who challenge incumbent power rather than working primarily through official channels to improve governance incrementally.

The developmental approach, more closely associated with European donors, maintains a statist political economy orientation that emphasizes the state's central role in socioeconomic development. This perspective has deep roots in European state-building experiences where effective, capable states preceded democratization. Democracy, in this view, emerges from gradual institutional development and socioeconomic transformation rather than rapid political change driven by civil society mobilization. Without capable state institutions that can deliver public goods, maintain order, and implement policy effectively, democratic forms may become mere facades masking chaos or predatory rule. The approach therefore focuses on building state capacity, improving governance quality, strengthening rule of law, and supporting long-term institutional reforms across multiple sectors. It is less willing to bypass governments and more oriented toward working through official channels and international organizations, reflecting both practical considerations about sustainability and normative commitments to strengthening rather than undermining state authority.

This represents a fundamentally different theory of how democratization occurs and what external actors can most effectively support. Rather than empowering opposition actors to challenge incumbent governments, the developmental approach seeks to transform state institutions themselves, making them more capable, accountable, and responsive. The assumption is that better-functioning states gradually become more democratic as educated middle classes expand, economic development creates stakeholders in stability, and improved institutions make governance more predictable and less personalistic. Democracy emerges as a byproduct of successful development rather than as its precondition. This approach worries that premature political liberalization without adequate institutional capacity may produce instability, state collapse, or populist authoritarianism rather than sustainable democracy.

These ideological differences shaped not only rhetoric but concrete programming priorities in ways that can be empirically documented. Democracy aid allocation between 2014-2020 reveals striking divergences reflecting these different approaches. Neoliberal donors like the US and Sweden allocated substantially higher proportions of their aid to civil society support and electoral processes - precisely the areas the political approach emphasizes. Sweden directed 80% of its democracy assistance to civil society and human rights in 2015, exemplifying the political approach's commitment to strengthening autonomous social actors *(Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, 2016)*. Meanwhile, statist donors like Japan and Germany focused more on governance capacity and public administration reform - the institutional development the developmental approach prioritizes. Japan allocated less than 5% of foreign aid to democracy support, with most going to infrastructure and institutional capacity building *(Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2018)*. These allocation patterns are not random or arbitrary - they reflect coherent but competing visions of how democratization occurs.

The relationship between donor ideology and aid modality reinforces these distinctions in ways that affect how aid functions on the ground. Neoliberal donors progressively reduced their bilateral aid agency staff and increasingly channel aid through NGOs and private contractors, reflecting beliefs about limited government and private sector efficiency. This shift means that implementation increasingly occurs through organizations outside the donor government bureaucracy, selected through competitive processes and managed through contracts emphasizing

measurable results. Statist donors maintained larger bilateral agency staffs capable of direct implementation and developed closer working relationships with recipient governments. These operational choices are not merely technical - they embody different assumptions about the proper role of the state and the mechanisms through which democracy develops. Channeling aid through NGOs allows supporting actors governments oppose but reduces coordination with government development plans. Working through government strengthens state capacity but may bolster authoritarian incumbents.

The crucial question is whether these different approaches produce different results, and the evidence suggests they do - though perhaps not in the ways their proponents expect. Aid from neoliberal donors shows stronger positive correlation with participatory and electoral democracy indicators, reflecting their focus on civil society and electoral processes. When US or Swedish aid supports civil society organizations, independent media, and election monitoring, measurable improvements in citizen participation and electoral quality often follow. Aid from developmental approach donors shows stronger, though still limited, effects on governance quality and public administration effectiveness. German or Japanese aid that supports institutional reform, civil service training, and administrative systems can improve bureaucratic performance and policy implementation capacity. However - and this is perhaps the most important finding - neither approach demonstrates a strong impact on liberal democracy dimensions measuring rule of law and constraints on executive power. Whether donors work through civil society empowerment or state capacity building, they struggle equally to transform the deeply entrenched power structures that protect elite interests and enable authoritarian control.

This pattern suggests fundamental limitations in aid's ability to transform power structures regardless of ideological approach or implementation strategy. The aspects of authoritarian governance most threatening to incumbent elites - independent judiciaries that can overturn government decisions, effective constraints on executive power, enforceable property rights that limit arbitrary intervention, corruption controls that disrupt patronage networks - prove resistant to external influence whether that influence works through empowering opposition or improving governance. Both approaches can support important dimensions of democratization, but neither can force powerful domestic actors to accept institutional constraints on their own power. This represents not a failure of either approach per se, but a recognition of the inherent limits of external influence in fundamentally political processes.

These findings have important implications for understanding debates about democracy aid effectiveness that often generate more heat than light. Disagreements may partly reflect underlying differences about what democracy entails and how democratization occurs rather than genuine disagreement about empirical evidence. Evaluations using electoral democracy measures may overestimate neoliberal donor effectiveness while underestimating developmental donor contributions to governance improvements that don't immediately register in electoral indicators. Conversely, focusing exclusively on governance indicators may miss important civil society strengthening that creates long-term foundations for democracy even without immediate institutional changes. A comprehensive assessment requires examining multiple democracy dimensions simultaneously and recognizing that different approaches may strengthen different aspects of democratic governance. The real question is not which approach is “better” in some abstract sense, but rather which approach works better in which contexts for which aspects of democratization.

When we turn to systematic empirical evidence on aid effectiveness, the picture that emerges is one of modest positive effects that vary significantly across different dimensions of democracy. The most robust quantitative evidence comes from Finkel et al.'s (2007) comprehensive study of US democracy assistance from 1990-2003, covering 165 countries and representing one of the most ambitious efforts to measure aid impact rigorously. The findings demonstrate measurable positive effects: each $10 million in additional US democracy aid increased Freedom House scores by 0.25 points and Polity IV scores by 0.4 points. To contextualize these magnitudes, $1 million (in constant 1995 dollars, equivalent to $1.2 million in 2004) produced 50% more democracy improvement than otherwise expected in an average recipient country in any given year. These effects persisted for 2-

3 years rather than dissipating immediately, indicating cumulative impact potential rather than merely temporary improvements that vanish once aid stops.

The follow-up study covering 2001-2014 confirmed these sustained positive effects, lending confidence that the earlier findings were not artifacts of the particular time period or methodology. However, the magnitude of impact remained decidedly limited relative to resources invested. Democracy assistance resources increased over 500% between 1990 and 2003 - a massive expansion reflecting the post-Cold War consensus that democracy promotion should be a central goal of development cooperation *(Finkel et al., 2007)*. Yet despite this enormous increase, the aggregate impact on global democracy levels was bounded and modest. If a larger share of USAID's portfolio were devoted to democracy rather than economic development, health, or humanitarian assistance, the cumulative impact could be significantly greater. But even then, the effects would remain gradual and incremental rather than transformative.

Subsequent research using alternative methodologies has corroborated these findings while revealing important nuances about when and how aid works. Carnegie and Marinov (2017) exploited random variation in EU aid allocation created by the EU Council presidency rotation to address a thorny methodological problem: countries that receive more democracy aid may differ systematically from those receiving less, making it difficult to isolate aid's causal effect. Their quasi-experimental design found that a one log-point increase in EU aid raised the CIRI human rights index by 1.88 points and the Polity index by 2.03 points - somewhat larger effects than previous studies, though still modest in absolute terms. This methodological innovation strengthens confidence in causal inference by addressing endogeneity concerns that plague observational studies. One additional democracy donor in a recipient country raises democracy levels by 0.9 points on a 0-100 scale *(Ziaja, 2020)*, suggesting that donor pluralism creates beneficial competition and learning as recipients can compare approaches and donors can observe each other's strategies.

Sectoral allocation matters significantly for understanding these aggregate effects. Not all democracy aid categories produce equal results. Aid for elections and political processes shows stronger immediate impact than governance capacity building, though the latter may have longer-term effects that short-term evaluations miss *(Kalyvitis & Vlachaki, 2010)*. This makes intuitive sense: supporting election observation, voter education, and poll worker training produces visible, measurable improvements in electoral quality relatively quickly. Building judicial capacity, reforming civil service systems, and strengthening parliamentary oversight requires longer time horizons before effects become apparent. The challenge is that political systems and donor bureaucracies favor interventions with visible short-term results, potentially underinvesting in the slower institutional development that may be more important for sustainable democratization.

The picture becomes considerably more complex - and more troubling for democracy promotion - when examining aid effects across different democracy dimensions. Using V-Dem's multidimensional democracy indicators, which distinguish between electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian democracy, reveals that aid's impact is highly uneven. EU democracy aid positively correlates with improvements in participatory democracy (+0.005 units), electoral democracy (+0.009 units), and egalitarian democracy (+0.004 units), but shows zero effect on liberal democracy *(Hackenesch et al., 2021)*. This pattern is not random or inexplicable - it reflects the fundamental political economy of reform. Liberal democracy measures rule of law, judicial independence, and constraints on executive power - precisely the elements most threatening to incumbent elites who control access to state resources and political power.

This finding reveals a fundamental constraint that explains much of the limited effectiveness of democracy assistance. While donors can support electoral processes and civil society mobilization, they cannot compel political elites to accept institutional constraints on their power. Aid flows through government channels or operates with government permission in most contexts, giving elites effective veto power over the most transformative reforms. Governments may tolerate or even welcome aid that supports election administration, civil society training, and media development because these can be managed, co-opted, or tolerated as releasing political pressure without fundamentally threatening power structures. But aid that seeks to establish independent judiciaries that can overturn government decisions, create effective anti-corruption mechanisms that disrupt patronage networks, or impose genuine constraints on executive discretion threatens the core

interests of those who control the state. Elites can simply refuse such reforms, and donors have few effective means of imposing them against determined resistance.

The effectiveness of democracy aid depends critically on recipient country characteristics and contextual factors in ways that further limit its transformative potential. Aid demonstrates positive effects primarily in countries with some prior level of democracy - those in the "middle range" of authoritarianism where political openings exist and some space for civil society, opposition, and independent media persists *(Jones & Tarp, 2016)*. In highly authoritarian regimes like China, Saudi Arabia, or Turkmenistan, where governments maintain comprehensive control over society, restrict foreign funding to civil society, and brook no opposition, democracy aid faces severe constraints. Even when donors provide it, recipients can prevent it from reaching intended beneficiaries or force it into channels that serve regime interests. In consolidated democracies, marginal returns to democracy aid diminish because basic democratic institutions already function reasonably well - the problems these countries face involve deepening and improving democratic quality rather than establishing democracy's fundamentals.

This curvilinear relationship suggests democracy aid works best for democratic consolidation and deepening rather than initiating transitions from highly authoritarian rule. The implication is sobering: aid is most effective precisely where it is least needed and least effective where it is most needed. Countries in democratic transition where reformers have achieved initial openings but face resistance from entrenched interests can benefit substantially from external support - resources for civil society, expertise in institutional design, election monitoring that deters fraud, and international legitimation that strengthens reformers. But the hardest cases - where authoritarianism is most deeply entrenched and democratic prospects most uncertain - are exactly where aid struggles most to gain traction.

Temporal context also matters profoundly for understanding aid effectiveness. Democracy aid showed negative or zero average effects during the Cold War when geopolitically motivated aid to authoritarian allies predominated *(Dunning, 2004)*. During this period, donors provided massive aid to countries like Zaire, Indonesia, and Pakistan specifically because they were anti-communist allies, explicitly subordinating democratic concerns to strategic objectives. This aid often strengthened authoritarian regimes by providing resources they could use to co-opt opposition, build security forces, and maintain patronage networks. Effects became positive after 1990 as democracy genuinely became a higher priority and aid allocation began reflecting merit-based criteria more consistently. However, the recent wave of democratic backsliding since 2010 raises troubling questions about whether earlier effectiveness estimates remain valid in the current more challenging environment. As authoritarian governments develop more sophisticated tools for resisting external pressure - learning from each other how to manage civil society, control information flows, and neutralize opposition while maintaining facades of electoral competition - the pathways through which aid previously supported democratization may become blocked.

Aid targeted at civil society support and media development consistently shows clearer positive effects than aid for government capacity building or anti-corruption programs. This pattern likely reflects both selection effects and genuine impact. Civil society aid can proceed even when governments resist because donors can channel it through international NGOs or opposition groups rather than requiring government cooperation. It also produces genuine impact by empowering citizens, creating networks of activists who can mobilize for accountability, and building organizational capacity that persists beyond particular aid projects. Government capacity building requires working with the very institutions donors seek to reform, giving those institutions opportunities to divert, co-opt, or undermine reforms. Anti-corruption programs face the fundamental challenge that those who benefit from corruption control the institutions supposedly implementing anti-corruption measures - asking foxes to guard henhouses rarely succeeds.

One notable finding from Finkel et al. deserves careful interpretation because it illustrates how measurement challenges complicate evaluation. Aid for human rights showed correlation with increased reports of human rights violations - a finding that superficially suggests aid worsens human rights. However, this likely reflects improved monitoring and reporting rather than actual deterioration in practices. When donors fund human rights NGOs, these organizations develop greater capacity to document violations, face less risk because international support provides

protection, and gain platforms to publicize findings. This "inspires them to report or publicize the extent of human rights problems to a greater degree" *(Finkel et al., 2007)*. Better information about violations indicates progress in accountability mechanisms and transparency rather than democratic regression. The distinction between measuring improved outcomes versus improved transparency about problems is crucial but frequently overlooked in aid evaluation. Apparent worsening may actually indicate progress in creating the monitoring infrastructure necessary for eventual improvement.

The relationship between foreign aid and good governance - particularly its political, administrative, and judicial dimensions - crystallizes why democracy aid demonstrates limited impact on liberal democracy despite measurable successes in electoral and participatory dimensions. This “good governance challenge” represents perhaps the most significant obstacle to effective democracy promotion through foreign assistance, and understanding it requires examining why certain reforms prove so much more difficult than others.

The political dimension of governance encompasses protection of civil rights, institutional checks and balances, press freedom, ability to change government through elections, and political stability - the fundamental architecture of democratic accountability. Here aid shows decidedly mixed effects that depend heavily on donor intentions and recipient contexts. Large aid volumes can potentially undermine domestic political accountability by reducing government dependence on citizens and parliaments through what scholars term the “political resource curse” *(Djankov et al., 2008)*. When governments derive substantial revenue from external sources rather than domestic taxation, they face weaker incentives to be responsive to citizen demands or accountable to domestic constituencies. A government funded primarily by oil revenues, foreign aid, or geopolitical rents can ignore public opinion in ways that governments dependent on tax revenue cannot. Citizens who pay substantial taxes develop strong interests in how the government spends them and demand accountability; citizens whose government is externally funded have weaker leverage.

However, this negative effect appeared strongest during the Cold War period when donors explicitly supported authoritarian allies for strategic reasons, providing them with resources to maintain power regardless of democratic performance. Post-Cold War evidence suggests aid increasingly supports rather than undermines political governance, even accounting for the fact that donors continue providing substantial aid to strategically important countries with poor democratic records. The crucial difference is donor intentions. Aid specifically targeted at democracy and governance objectives, and aid from democratic donors who genuinely value democracy, shows positive effects on political governance. These donors design programs to support accountability mechanisms, strengthen opposition and civil society, and condition aid on reform progress. Aid from authoritarian donors may have opposite effects, potentially strengthening authoritarian institutions, teaching surveillance and control techniques, and providing resources that help authoritarian governments maintain power. China's aid and investment in Africa increasingly includes technology for monitoring citizens, controlling internet access, and managing dissent - tools that directly undermine rather than support democratic governance.

The number of democracy aid donors in a recipient country positively predicts democratization, suggesting that donor pluralism creates beneficial competition and learning. When multiple donors support democracy, governments face more consistent pressure, reformers can access multiple sources of support, and donors can learn from each other's successes and failures. A government that successfully co-opts or evades one donor's accountability requirements faces pressure from others. Civil society organizations that lose funding from one donor can seek support elsewhere. This competitive dynamic makes aid more effective than when a single dominant donor can be managed or manipulated. However, it also creates coordination challenges and can overwhelm limited recipient administrative capacity.

Aid conditioned on democratic reforms and tied to institutional changes demonstrates stronger effects than unconditional aid, but only when conditionality is credible - when donors actually withhold or reduce aid from non-reforming countries rather than merely threatening to do so. The challenge is that donors face multiple competing objectives that often override democratic conditions. Strategic allies continue receiving aid despite backsliding; donors fear that cutting aid will harm vulnerable populations or cede influence to competitors; domestic constituencies pressure

donors to maintain programs that benefit their own contractors and NGOs. The result is that conditionality often lacks credibility, with donors publicly announcing conditions but privately making exceptions so frequently that recipients learn to disregard them.

The administrative dimension concerns government capacity to formulate and implement policy effectively - what public administration scholars call "bureaucratic quality" and what development practitioners increasingly term "state capacity." Here aid faces a different set of challenges rooted in the complexity of institutional development and the fragmentation of donor support. Numerous donors with different requirements, reporting formats, procurement procedures, and implementation cycles can overwhelm limited administrative capacity in recipient countries. Qualified civil servants spend their time managing donor projects rather than implementing government priorities, creating parallel systems that undermine rather than strengthen state institutions *(Knack & Rahman, 2007)*. Donors hire away the most capable government employees to work on aid projects at salaries government cannot match, draining the civil service of talent. Strategic planning becomes impossible when line ministries must respond to dozens of donors with different priorities and timelines.

This negative effect concentrates in countries with the lowest initial administrative capacity, where the burden of managing multiple donors creates crushing transaction costs. A competent, well-resourced bureaucracy can manage donor fragmentation by creating coordination mechanisms and insisting donors align with government systems. A weak bureaucracy simply drowns under the administrative weight. However, post-1990s evidence suggests these concerns may be somewhat overstated as donor coordination improved following the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005) and subsequent Accra and Busan agreements. These initiatives committed donors to harmonizing procedures, using recipient country systems, and coordinating programs - though implementation remains incomplete and uneven. Some donors, particularly multilaterals and Scandinavian bilaterals, have made genuine progress toward coordination. Others, particularly emerging donors like China, operate largely outside these frameworks.

Aid can strengthen administrative capacity when properly designed and implemented, particularly through long-term institutional support and technical assistance delivered in coordination with recipient country systems rather than parallel to them. Supporting civil service reform, strengthening budgeting and planning capacity, improving public financial management, and training mid-level professionals can produce substantial improvements over time. The key is patience and commitment to working through rather than around government systems. Unfortunately, political and administrative incentives often push donors toward creating parallel implementation units that can show visible results quickly, even though these undermine the very institutions aid ostensibly seeks to strengthen.

The judicial dimension encompasses respect for institutions governing economic and social relations - laws, property rights, and judicial systems - measured through "rule of law," "law and order," and "corruption control" indicators. This dimension presents the greatest challenge for democracy aid effectiveness and reveals most starkly why external assistance faces inherent limits. While aid shows some positive correlation with corruption control improvements, particularly aid from less corrupt donors and multilateral institutions with genuine expertise in judicial reform, the effects are weak and inconsistent *(Alesina & Weder, 2002)*. Large aid volumes may even facilitate corruption through the "greed effect" - creating opportunities for rent-seeking and disproportionate increases in inefficient resource redistribution as elites compete to capture aid flows. Some studies find initially positive effects on governance that diminish and even reverse with higher aid volumes, suggesting decreasing and eventually negative returns as the perverse incentives created by large aid flows overwhelm reform efforts.

The fundamental obstacle is political elite resistance to reforms threatening their power and rent-seeking opportunities. Rule of law reforms, independent judiciaries, and corruption controls directly threaten the political and economic advantages incumbents derive from discretionary power. An independent judiciary can overturn government decisions, protect opposition figures from politically motivated prosecutions, and enforce property rights against powerful actors who want to expropriate private assets. Strong anti-corruption measures disrupt the patronage networks through which many political systems operate - networks that provide elites with both personal

enrichment and the means to maintain political coalitions. Robust property rights and contract enforcement reduce opportunities for arbitrary intervention and extraction that allow politically connected elites to dominate business. Transparent procurement threatens the corrupt relationships between politicians and contractors that provide funding for political campaigns while enriching both parties.

These reforms strike at the core of how power operates in many political systems, particularly neopatrimonial regimes where the boundary between public office and private benefit remains blurred and political authority depends on distributing resources to supporters. Unlike electoral reforms or civil society support, which elites may tolerate because they release political pressure, provide legitimacy, or can be managed through co-optation, rule of law reforms fundamentally redistribute power from incumbents to institutions. External actors can provide resources, expertise, training for judges, new legal codes, and incentives for reform, but they cannot force powerful domestic actors to accept limits on their own power. When push comes to shove, elites who face genuine threats from judicial independence or corruption controls will resist, undermine, or reverse reforms regardless of external pressure.

This explains the striking empirical pattern observed in V-Dem data where EU democracy aid shows zero effect on liberal democracy despite positive effects on electoral and participatory dimensions. The EU provides substantial technical assistance for judicial reform, anti-corruption programs, and rule of law strengthening, employing experts with deep knowledge of European legal systems and extensive experience in institution-building. Yet these well-designed, expertly implemented programs consistently fail to produce measurable improvements in liberal democracy indicators. Donors can fund election monitoring because governments often view it as legitimating or can manage it through fraud techniques that evade detection. Donors can support civil society training because governments can tolerate or co-opt civil society as long as it doesn't fundamentally threaten power. But transforming judicial independence, constraining executive power, and establishing rule of law requires elite acceptance of institutional constraints on themselves - something aid cannot purchase, impose, or bypass.

Democracy aid cannot also substitute for domestic political will - it can resource and empower reform-minded actors but cannot create demand for reform where it doesn't exist. Aid provides tools, expertise, and financial resources, but these inputs only translate into democratic progress when domestic actors genuinely want reform and possess sufficient political power to implement it against resistance. The most sophisticated aid programs, the most experienced advisors, and the most generous funding cannot overcome the opposition of entrenched elites who control state institutions and benefit from the status quo. This suggests that aid works as a catalyst rather than a cause - it can accelerate and deepen reform processes that domestic actors initiate, but it cannot substitute for domestic political dynamics.

The same intervention succeeds where reformers hold power and fails where elites resist, explaining why aid effectiveness varies so dramatically across recipients that aggregate statistics often mislead. Studies showing positive average effects may mask the reality that aid works well in a subset of favorable cases while having negligible or even negative effects elsewhere. This heterogeneity matters enormously for policy: rather than asking whether aid works on average, donors should ask when and where it works, directing resources toward contexts where they can make a difference rather than spreading them across all recipients regardless of reform prospects. Conditionality and selectivity prove crucial - aid works best when tied to genuine reform progress and directed toward reform-oriented recipients. However, implementing genuine selectivity requires donors to accept that they will provide less aid to some countries, potentially ceding influence to less scrupulous donors, and this political challenge often proves insurmountable.

The good governance challenge also reveals important temporal dimensions that conventional evaluations consistently miss and that create serious problems for sustaining political support for democracy assistance. Institution-building requires decades, not years, for consolidation. Legal reforms must be implemented, tested in practice, refined through experience, and gradually become embedded in professional norms and public expectations. Training judges and lawyers produces results only after those individuals rise through institutional hierarchies into positions of influence. New administrative procedures require years to move from formal adoption to routine practice as

organizational cultures adapt. Democratic deepening unfolds across generations as citizens internalize democratic values and develop habits of participation.

Aid effects measured annually through standard indicators may therefore miss gradual institutional accumulation that only bears fruit over extended periods. Projects initiated in 2014-2020 may only show full effects in 2030-2040, long after evaluators have moved on and donors have shifted to new priorities. A judicial reform program that trains lawyers, supports legal education reform, and promotes judicial independence may show minimal impact in Freedom House or V-Dem scores for years while legal professionals absorb new approaches and gradually change institutional cultures. Only after a decade or more might these investments produce measurable improvements in judicial independence and rule of law as trained judges reach senior positions, legal reforms become embedded in practice, and professional norms shift toward greater independence.

This temporal lag creates multiple challenges that systematically undermine aid effectiveness. Evaluation systems emphasize short-term, measurable results because donors need to demonstrate impact to domestic constituencies and because annual budget cycles demand annual results. This pushes aid toward interventions with quick, visible impacts - election observation that can be photographed, training workshops that produce concrete outputs, civil society grants that generate immediate activity - rather than deeper institutional engagement that takes decades to mature. Domestic political constituencies in donor countries and international audiences expect visible results relatively quickly, creating pressure to show success even when genuine democratization requires patience. Politicians funding democracy programs must defend them to skeptical publics who question why resources flow abroad when domestic needs remain unmet; they need tangible achievements to justify continued support.

The mismatch between institutional timescales and political timescales creates perverse incentives throughout the aid system. Program designers favor interventions that can show results within project cycles of 3-5 years even when the most important changes require 15-20 years. Evaluators emphasize quantifiable short-term indicators even when the most significant impacts are qualitative and long-term. Implementing organizations focus on activities that generate measurable outputs - workshops held, people trained, grants disbursed - rather than harder-to-measure institutional changes. The entire system systematically biases aid toward short-term, visible interventions that may produce quick wins but contribute less to sustainable democratization than patient, long-term institutional engagement that shows few immediate results.

Moreover, sustained engagement over decades faces political obstacles in donor countries where governments change, priorities shift, and public attention moves on. A program initiated with great fanfare and strong political support may find itself orphaned a few years later when new leaders pursue different priorities. Recipient countries experience similar discontinuities as governments change and new administrations abandon predecessors' reforms or redirect aid to different purposes. The result is that democracy assistance often operates in fits and starts, with programs launched and then abandoned before they can mature, institutional relationships developed and then severed, and reforms initiated but never consolidated because sustained support evaporates.

The challenge, then, is not simply that aid is ineffective, but that the political and institutional environment in which aid operates systematically undermines its effectiveness. Donors face pressures that push them toward short-term, visible interventions rather than long-term institutional engagement. They must balance democracy promotion against competing objectives - security, commercial interests, humanitarian needs - that often override democratic concerns. They operate in recipient contexts where elites resist reforms threatening their interests and where institutional development takes decades that exceed political attention spans. They confront measurement challenges where the most important changes are hardest to quantify and where apparent progress may reflect better monitoring rather than genuine improvement.

Under these circumstances, the modest positive effects documented in empirical research represent perhaps the best that can reasonably be expected given structural constraints. Aid has helped consolidate democratic transitions in Central Europe, supported civil society resilience in hostile environments, improved electoral quality in numerous countries, and strengthened

democratic actors facing authoritarian pressure. These achievements, while limited and uneven, matter enormously for the individuals and societies involved. At the same time, aid has proven unable to initiate democratic transitions in highly authoritarian contexts, overcome determined elite resistance to reform, or reliably strengthen the rule of law dimensions of democracy that most threaten incumbent power. Recognizing both these successes and these limitations provides a more realistic foundation for thinking about democracy assistance than either celebratory narratives of transformation or cynical dismissals of ineffectiveness.

The implications for policy extend beyond simply increasing aid volumes or improving technical design. Effective democracy promotion requires rethinking fundamental assumptions about what external assistance can achieve and how it should be structured. Donors should focus resources on countries where reform constituencies exist and political opportunities are opening rather than spreading aid thinly across all recipients. They should invest in long-term institutional relationships that can weather political changes rather than short-term projects that end before producing sustainable impact. They should support domestic reformers and civil society rather than attempting to impose reforms through government channels when governments resist. They should coordinate more effectively with other donors to reduce fragmentation and increase collective leverage while accepting that coordination requires sacrificing some flexibility and control.

Most fundamentally, donors must accept that aid's impact will always remain conditional, uneven, and constrained by domestic political dynamics that external actors cannot control. Democracy promotion through foreign assistance represents not a formula for transformation but a contribution to domestic struggles whose outcomes depend primarily on local actors, circumstances, and contingencies. Understanding this reality - accepting both aid's potential and its limits - provides the foundation for more effective and sustainable democracy assistance in an era of democratic backsliding where the need has never been greater but the challenges have never been more formidable.

Conclusion. The relationship between foreign aid and democratization reveals a fundamental paradox: while democracy assistance has expanded dramatically over the past three decades and demonstrates measurable positive effects in specific contexts, its overall impact remains modest and highly conditional. This article's comprehensive analysis of donor motivations, ideological approaches, and empirical evidence demonstrates that aid effectiveness depends not simply on resource volumes or technical design, but fundamentally on the interaction between donor intentions, implementation strategies, and recipient political dynamics. The persistent gap between aid inputs and democratic outputs reflects not merely implementation failures but structural constraints inherent in using external resources to influence fundamentally domestic political processes.

The analysis reveals that donor motivations remain decisively mixed, with geopolitical and economic interests frequently overriding democratic objectives despite rhetorical commitments to democracy promotion. This contradiction undermines conditionality credibility and weakens the link between aid and reform. Moreover, ideological differences between political and developmental approaches produce distinct effects across democracy dimensions - neoliberal donors strengthen electoral and participatory democracy through civil society support, while statist donors improve governance capacity through institutional development. However, neither approach effectively addresses the liberal democracy dimensions of rule of law and executive constraints, because transforming these power structures requires elite acceptance of institutional limits on their own authority - something external assistance cannot impose or purchase regardless of approach.

The central conclusion is that democracy aid functions as a catalyst rather than a cause of democratization. It can resource and empower reform-minded actors, accelerate existing reform processes, and sustain democratic resistance under authoritarian pressure. However, it cannot substitute for domestic political will or overcome determined elite resistance to reform. Effective democracy promotion therefore requires not only increased resources and improved technical design, but fundamental rethinking of aid strategies toward greater selectivity, longer time horizons, stronger coordination, and realistic acceptance of external assistance's inherent limitations. In an era of global democratic backsliding, understanding both aid's potential and its constraints provides the

foundation for more effective support to those domestic actors whose struggles will ultimately determine democracy's future.

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