

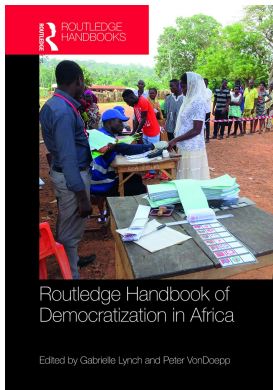
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THE IMPACT OF FOREIGN AID

Tessa Devereaux Evans and Nicolas van de Walle

Promoting democracy has been an official goal of bilateral aid to Africa by Western donors for several decades. However, rhetorical support for democracy has often failed to transfer into policy. During the Cold War, American policy towards Africa was strongly conditioned by competition with the USSR and, while other donors may have been less motivated by global geostrategic concerns, commercial and foreign policy concerns often trumped democracy promotion (Alesina and Dollar 2000; Schraeder, Hook, and Taylor 1998). This included ex-colonial donors such as France and the United Kingdom who—while they paid lip service to the importance of democracy—tended to manage relations with their former colonies in a manner that protected longstanding commercial and cultural investments (Fraser 2009). In turn, while some northern European donors were motivated by more explicitly humanitarian aims—officially linking aid to human rights concerns as early as the 1970s—internal politics in recipient countries remained a low priority for the first three decades of the postindependence era (Gillies 1996).

Modernization theory provided an intellectual justification for this relative inattention to the quality of governance in recipient countries, by legitimizing the view that democracy was incompatible with lower levels of national income. Most notably, Lipset (1959) and Moore (1966) popularized the view that economic growth and the interplay of social forces would work to gradually facilitate democratization by promoting a strong middle class, while Huntington (1966) viewed the promotion of democracy as secondary to the more fundamental problems of ensuring state-building and political stability in rapidly changing societies. This idea of a policy *sequence*, in which economic development needed to be assured before the fineries of political development were attended to (Carothers 2007), was in turn supported by prevailing economic growth theories which posited that the necessary deferral of consumption to facilitate investment and economic growth was best supported by authoritarian regimes (Bhagwati 1966).

At the end of the Cold War in 1989, authoritarian regimes governed all but a handful of sub-Saharan Africa's forty-eight countries (Ake 1996, 135), and few countries convened regular competitive elections or tolerated an active political opposition. Whether or not authoritarian government was a necessary condition for rapid development, it had clearly proven insufficient, as Africa's authoritarian regimes were mired in a devastating economic crisis, despite the regular increases in foreign aid that had made African countries the most aided in history (van de Walle 2001).

The wave of democratization that swept across Africa in the early 1990s surprised most Western donors, but the dramatic failures of authoritarian government in the region, combined with the demise of the Soviet threat, had made Western governments progressively more receptive to regime change. The early 1990s also coincided with the peak of the region's aid dependence, which maximized Western leverage in the region. Since then, the resumption of growth and the concomitant decline of debt, increased competition with other non-African states, most notably China, and the struggle against global terrorism, have all conspired to lower Western leverage and have lessened their governments' commitment to democratic reform in the region. As a result, Western political conditionality has been significantly loosened in recent years, governance sector assistance has declined, and donors have sponsored research that downplays the economic benefits of democratization and advances a new version of a sequencing thesis not unlike the modernization theories of a half century ago.

The rest of this chapter is divided into five sections. The second and third sections examine different approaches to the analysis of the political impact of general economic development aid. Section four then examines the impact of democracy assistance—the more narrow set of aid activities that are specifically designed to promote democratic institutions. We discuss both the rise of this form of assistance in the 1990s and whether it has had a discernible effect on recipient country political institutions. We argue that only democracy assistance has had an unambiguously positive impact on democracy. Development assistance, on the other hand, can indirectly promote democratization, but its direct effect is more typically to reinforce the political status quo, largely because most aid resources provide the incumbent government with discretionary resources that can be used to remain in power. Section five then explains the circumstances in which democracy assistance to African countries went into decline in the last two decades, as donors reduced their emphasis on governance and democracy. Section six surveys the recent literature that provides intellectual justification for this donor policy evolution.

The conditional political impacts of foreign aid

Several different potential political effects of development assistance can be identified, that may be called the conditional effects of development assistance on governance and democracy. Most generally, following political scientists from Lipset (1959) on, democracy is more likely to result if aid promotes economic development and, as a consequence, the emergence of a larger middle class. Similarly, if successful, development assistance should enhance the capacity of the state and enable it to be more responsive to the concerns and welfare of the citizenry. Some observers have argued in recent years that the low capacity of African states is currently the biggest single factor undermining good governance and the process of democratic consolidation in the region (Booth and Cammack 2013). These two processes are sometimes viewed as linked. Radelet (2010), for instance, has argued that donor support for structural adjustment in the 1980s helped to restore economic growth to the region and strengthened African states, which set the stage for the progress in democratization in the 1990s.

Finally, if development assistance is made bindingly conditional on democratic reforms and good governance, governments that accept aid will be forced to undertake pro-democracy reforms. Donors have always attached conditions to their aid, including political conditions, although, as we argue below, their importance grew significantly in the late 1980s and 1990s.

All three of these postulated impacts of aid on politics are conditional in the sense that they are predicated on the effectiveness of foreign aid or the extent to which pro-democracy political conditionality is constraining on local actors. These conditions are certainly present in some forms of aid in some countries some of the time. When aid is not effective, however, economic

growth and state capacity are unlikely to be enhanced. When donors do not choose to promote democracy through their conditionality, or when the political conditions they choose to adopt are not constraining to the government, any political effects of aid should be viewed as largely unintentional and not causally linked to the nominal transfer of resources from donor to recipient.

What is the empirical evidence about aid effectiveness and donor conditionality? That aid can be effective should not be in doubt, but unfortunately, the cross-national econometric literature has not generally found a clear and unambiguous relationship between development assistance and economic development. This is at least in part because such a large proportion of aid has historically either been motivated by non-developmental considerations or has not benefited from the effective support of the recipient government and its policies (Easterly 2003; Rajan and Subramanian 2008; Roodman 2007).

The literature on donor conditionality is harder to gauge. Critics of foreign aid have often viewed donor economic policy conditionality as so constraining to African governments as to leave them “choiceless” in Mkandawire’s (1999) formulation. Governments are forced into the straightjacket of donor “neoliberal” economic policies (see also Whitfield 2009). Conditions set by donors are said to force political parties to campaign on the same set of orthodox economic programs, thereby promoting convergence and undermining the possibility for developmentalist social policy, leading to the “hollowing of the democratic process” (Mkandawire 2006, 26). In contrast, the econometric literature that is more positive about aid, has viewed donor conditionality as the key causal mechanism linking aid to political reform in the region in the 1990s (see Wright 2009; Wright and Winters 2010; and Resnick 2013 for a good discussion).

On the other hand, at the micro-level, the public policy literature on donor conditionality found that the rate of compliance with donor conditions in the 1980s and 1990s was generally fairly low, at least when donor and recipient government preferences did not overlap (Killick 1997; White and Morrissey 1997). This was one of the reasons why the donor community undertook a thorough reappraisal of conditionality in the 1990s (Collier et al. 1997; van de Walle 2005). However, in practice, non-compliance with donor conditions only very rarely led to a sustained decline in aid. Indeed, Alesina and Weder (2002) found a significant positive correlation between aid levels and corruption during the 1980s and 1990s, suggesting that donors actually rewarded poor governance (Moyo 2009).

Certainly, donor pressures on African governments to democratize have been argued to have played a key role in the toppling of a handful of African governments in the early 1990s (Bratton and van de Walle 1997, 27–30). Typically, however, this pressure was asserted through the withdrawal of aid due to perceived governance lapses, rather than the actual disbursement of conditional aid. Moreover, there is little evidence of a “democratic dividend” or of a move by donors to increase the proportion of aid given to democratizing African countries in the wake of these transitions. On the heels of rapid growth of overseas development assistance (ODA) to the region in the 1980s, net aid levels first stagnated before declining in the mid- and late 1990s. Aid levels to Africa then resumed their climb again, following the 2002 Monterrey Development Conference. Political conditionality remained inconsistent, however, rarely fully constraining and contradictory across donors (for different perspectives, see Hook 1998; Crawford 2007; Brown 2005).

The search for clear, unambiguous generalizations in this area is further undermined by the great variety of aid relationships between several dozen donors and the forty-nine countries in sub-Saharan Africa, over the course of several decades. Not all donors are motivated by the same reasons to provide aid, while different African governments have varying levels of aid dependence and internal political dynamics. Moreover, dynamics have varied over time, depending on the prevailing international environment, commodity prices, and public opinion in the West.

Foreign aid as incumbency support

Another thesis about the political effect of aid largely disagrees with conditional approaches and argues that aid should be viewed as a largely discretionary source of resources to incumbent governments and thus a source of support for the political status quo. Again, this thesis is compatible with different views on the long-term political effect of aid. If the status quo eventually promotes economic development, then the stability facilitated by ODA will eventually promote democratization. This is not fanciful. Donor support for the nascent democratic regime in Botswana with substantial assistance in the 1960s and 1970s can legitimately be posited to have helped strengthen the regime and deepened its democracy (Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2003). Similarly, the substantial aid increases in support of the Rawlings regime in Ghana in the 1980s arguably promoted economic reform and growth, and promoted the top-down democratization of the regime in the 1990s (Gyimah-Boadi and Yakah 2013).

In turn, an old literature argued that the high fungibility of aid resources made conditionality largely illusory. If aid for the health sector allowed governments to reduce their own spending on health and increase defense spending, say, the donors had in effect funded the government's priorities rather than their own (Boone 1996; Feyzioglu, Swaroop, and Zhu 1998). Fungibility would not be an issue if donor and government preferences were aligned, but such a situation would make conditionality unnecessary.

More recent work has emphasized the role of aid in buttressing the political status quo (Remmer 2004; Morrison 2014; Knack 2004; Alesina and Dollar 2000). These scholars argue that the main effect of foreign aid during the 1980s and 1990s was to promote government consumption and increase the size of government even, paradoxically, when the aid was provided to promote market-oriented programs of state retrenchment. Far from destabilizing governments, van de Walle (2001) argued that the substantial increases of aid to Africa in the 1980s and 1990s allowed many governments to weather a devastating economic crisis and protest-driven democratization efforts, with minimal concessions.

Similarly, Bräutigam and Knack (2004) and Moss, Pettersson, and van Walle (2006) both argue that the large volume of aid going to low-income countries can have a negative effect on state capacity and political institutions in general. Morrison (2014) has placed this argument in a broader context by theorizing that aid should be viewed as a non-fiscal resource for low-income governments. Much like oil revenues, aid serves to promote regime stability, lessening the need for taxation and, partly as a result, reducing the accountability of governments to their citizens. This argument assumes that aid is largely fungible. Contesting this view, Bermeo (2016) finds a pro-incumbent effect of aid during the Cold War, but not from 1989 to 2010, where the relationship between aid and democratization is positive, yet not statistically significant. The causal mechanism is presumed to be that donor preferences for democracy have increased since the end of the Cold War, resulting in less discretion for governments on how to spend donor funds.

As for most propositions about foreign aid, the econometric evidence for this postulated pro-incumbent effect of aid is only partial and inconsistent (Resnick 2012; Bermeo 2016; Carnegie and Marinov 2017). Partly, no doubt, bad data and measurement issues are responsible, but once again, we are forced to acknowledge the great variety of incentives, capabilities, modalities, and actors involved in the aid process, so that different effects are possible.

What the incumbency support thesis does highlight is the key role that donors inevitably delegate to recipient government actors in the aid process. They control most aid resources, which donors direct to them, and they have the advantage of knowing much more about the local economy and local actors than do the donors, even when the latter control the local implementation agencies, which is not always the case. Plenty of recent evidence has shown the

ability of African governments to use aid resources for political ends. Thus, for instance, Briggs (2014) shows that project aid funds to Kenya between 1989 and 1995 were disproportionality directed to core areas of political support for the president. Similarly, Mason, Jayne, and van de Walle (2016) show that fertilizer subsidies were used for electoral purposes by successive governments in Zambia, while Briggs (2012) shows similar political intent for aid-funded rural electrification in Ghana.

The rise of democracy assistance

The democratic transitions of the 1990s came as a surprise to most donors (Bratton and van de Walle 1997). However, they were greeted by many with cautious optimism. The events of the 1970s and 1980s had caused a crisis in the aid industry. Substantial increases in foreign aid were now viewed as having achieved little beyond propping up authoritarian leaders, often with dire social and economic costs. In a famous mea culpa, the World Bank (1989) conceded that Africa's economic problems were due to a "crisis of governance" and that economic reform needed to include profound institutional changes (Fraser 2009, 66).

Promoting democracy and governance reform gained support in the donor community as a result. In 1990, the British government announced that increasing democratization was crucial for economic development (Nelson and Eglinton 1992). The growing emphasis on democracy promotion within the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) led to the creation of the Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance, which grew rapidly throughout the decade. Other donors also established government-funded organizations, including the UK's Westminster Foundation for Democracy (1992) and the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (2000). Donor support for democracy manifested itself through "democracy assistance" or an explicit promotion of elections and political transition, as well as through a new resolve to condition other forms of development assistance on political liberalization. Donors also ramped up their political conditionality, threatening to withdraw aid resources when they observed a violation of democratic norms. In sub-Saharan Africa at least eighteen countries had their aid withdrawn during the 1990s due to human rights abuses, military coups, corruption, or civil conflict (Crawford 2001). In 1992, for instance, all non-humanitarian aid to Malawi was suspended after the deaths of forty protesters opposing the regime of President Hastings Kamuzu Banda (Ihonvbere 1997; Brown 2004; Roessler 2005).

Democracy assistance grew rapidly in the 1990s, albeit from a very low base. It typically included activities in the areas of electoral support (primarily the registration of voters, particularly women), civil society support, capacity-building in the legislature and judiciary, and human rights activities. The donor presence in these overtly political activities represented something of a cultural revolution during the 1990s. Aid had always been overwhelmingly directed towards government organizations. Now, donors provided much of their assistance to non-governmental actors, with hundreds of millions of dollars going to various civil society organizations, including some openly opposed to the government. Similarly, on elections support, the era witnessed a meteoric rise in the early 1990s in total commitment amounts from US\$1,863,422 in 1991 to US\$100 million by 1997, climbing up to US\$336 million by 2010 (see Table 4.1).

Of course, democracy assistance was always a minor and contested area of donor assistance. Throughout the 1990s and the early years of the twenty-first century, it constituted roughly 2–6 percent of foreign aid to sub-Saharan African countries, depending on sources and definitions. Much of it was also provided by a minority of bilateral donors, given that the regional banks and the Washington multilateral institutions did not provide democracy assistance.

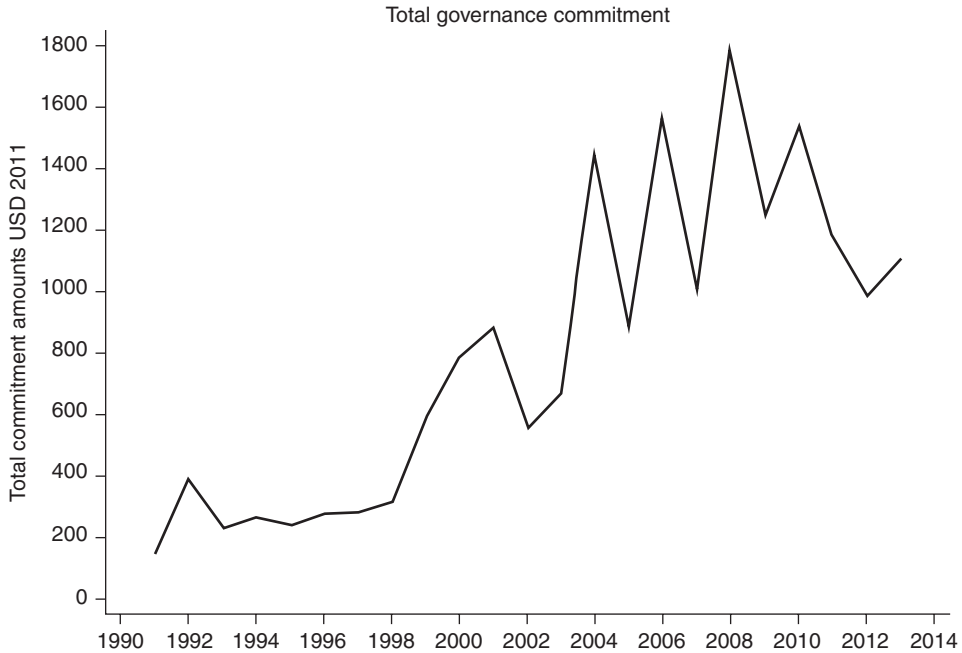


Figure 4.1 Foreign aid in the governance sector: commitments, 1991–2013

Note: the amounts shown are in millions of USD (2011).

Democracy assistance is different from other forms of assistance in the degree to which it is targeted at institutions that seek to increase the accountability of the executive branch of government. For example, aid directed at electoral institutions, political parties, and civil society can enhance the primary mechanism of vertical accountability and citizenry participation, while assistance to the legislature and judiciary can help these key branches of government to impose horizontal accountability on the executive branch. As a result, democracy assistance is more likely to promote political pluralism, even if projects are poorly designed, insofar as they channel resources to the non-state actors directly involved in the opening up of political space. Thus, while it can arguably be manipulated by executive incumbents and diverted from its ostensible purpose, its impact is less conditional than regular aid. The small number of econometric studies of the political impact of democracy assistance (Dietrich and Wright 2013; Finkel, Pérez-Liñán, and Seligson 2007; Kalyvitis and Vlachaki 2010; and Knack 2004) provides some cautious support for this view. However, one of the problems is that countries that receive a lot of democracy assistance typically also receive a large volume of general development assistance and it is hard to separate their effects.

The decline and fall of political conditionality

Donor enthusiasm for promoting democratization soon waned, however. On the one hand, the democratic transitions of the early 1990s did not resolve the structural developmental problems facing most countries, their problematic insertion into the global economy, or institutional weaknesses. With the exception of a handful of countries, it soon became evident that political

Table 4.1 Aid flows to Africa, 1991–2013

Year	Total Donor Commitments (in millions of 2011 dollars)		
	Total Aid	Governance Aid	Election Aid
1991	28,900	150	1.863
1992	27,700	392	34.8
1993	21,200	233	26.6
1994	22,100	265	46.7
1995	21,100	240	46.6
1996	20,900	277	35.5
1997	21,800	282	100
1998	27,200	313	34.9
1999	27,200	584	93.2
2000	38,000	789	87.4
2001	31,600	882	47.8
2002	37,600	557	55.6
2003	43,400	667	45.7
2004	46,900	1,450	248
2005	50,800	881	282
2006	57,800	1,580	237
2007	51,200	1,000	149
2008	57,600	1,790	278
2009	73,700	1,240	275
2010	56,100	1,540	336
2011	44,800	1,180	234
2012	57,000	987	165
2013	58,000	1,110	155

Source: AidData 2016.

reforms had been quite limited in much of the region, despite the universal turn to regular multiparty elections and some real political liberalization. Most African political systems remained characterized by executive dominance, subordinate legislatures, underfunded judiciaries and weak opposition parties (Crawford and Lynch 2012; Bleck and van de Walle 2018). The move to multiparty politics had improved governance only marginally, with political corruption and rent-seeking remaining important concerns, while low state capacity constrained all forms of policy implementation.

The novel focus on democracy promotion was always unevenly embraced and too focused on electoral competition, with relatively little attention devoted to the building of capacity and mechanisms of horizontal accountability in-between election cycles (Carothers and de Gramont 2013). Aid for judicial and legislative strengthening was limited, while political parties were generally viewed as too directly partisan for donor support.

On the other hand, donors also soon began to relax democratic conditionality, tolerating various abuses of power in countries in which macroeconomic conditions were being adhered to (Young 1999), and often prioritizing stability over increased participation when faced with the choice (Brown 2005). Many regimes were able to resist donor pressure to reform and donors were often satisfied with the mere holding of multiparty elections, even those that were clearly not “free and fair.” As with previous attempts to enforce conditionality, donors proved hesitant

to enforce the political conditions they had defined (Uvin 1993, 73), as “the structure of aid agencies does not lend itself well to the suspension and resumption of aid” (Brown 2005, 184).

The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005 crystallized another trend in donor doctrine—the promotion of a “partnership model” between donors and recipients—emphasizing government ownership and the alignment of donors onto national development strategies. Such an approach inevitably proved hard to reconcile with the assertion of political conditionality. Instead, the ideal of local ownership of the development process weakened the resolve of donors to pressure governments about human rights and governance failures (van de Walle 1999). By the end of the decade, it was hard to resist the conclusion that the ideal of local ownership was used to reduce political conditionality. Indeed, the 2005 Blair Commission on Africa Report, *In Our Common Interest*, explicitly argued that the substantial degree of progress made on democratization and liberalization in the region justified a decline in political conditionality and the evolution towards the partnership model. However, while this was perhaps justified in some countries, the report generalized this logic to the entire region.

African governments also contributed to greater donor reticence to impose political conditionality by attacking these efforts as neocolonial and counter to the spirit of partnership. In a number of countries, incumbents have portrayed political conditionality as intrusive and partisan and have been able to stoke up nationalist sentiment in response to certain donor activities.

Two other factors also came to undermine the commitment to African democracy. First, following 9/11, the renewed focus on security concerns and the rise of the war on terror in Africa led donors to retreat from their prioritization of democratization and good governance in the region. States such as Uganda, Ethiopia, Chad, and Burkina Faso balanced out democratic backsliding with the provision of troops and support in regions where the radical Islam threat seemed most pressing. President Museveni of Uganda, for example, contributed 2,500 peacekeepers to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) in 2007 positioning himself as a vital ally in fighting terror (Epstein 2017; Fisher 2012; Cheeseman 2015: 133) and arguably boosting his leadership credentials (Williams 2018) after the 2006 presidential election was marked by controversy and violence.

These changing realities were reflected in a shift in Western rhetoric and growing divisions among donors, which further served to weaken conditionality. During a July 2015 visit to Ethiopia, for example, President Barack Obama described the government as “democratically elected” despite widely documented repression and human rights abuses (HRW 2016). Other Western governments in Scandinavia and the Netherlands remained more willing to prioritize democracy and human rights over security concerns. Sweden, for example, aims to “strengthen the development of democracy” in Ethiopia and notes that “respect for human rights in the country is neglected, in particular with regard to democracy and women’s rights” (Government Offices of Sweden 2016, 4).

The second trend that has undermined the donor emphasis on political liberalization and willingness to exert political conditionality has been the rise of Chinese involvement on the continent. As one Bretton Woods spokesperson noted, China’s emergence as a key player in investment and lending to the region have “undermined years of painstaking efforts to arrange conditional debt relief” (cited in Horwitz and Budhwar 2015, 45). The country’s official lack of conditionality is popularly believed to have changed relationships between traditional Western donors and recipient governments, undermining the US and the EU’s ability to “set material incentives” and “implement their strategies” (Hackenesch 2015, 419). EU diplomats in Uganda, for instance, openly complain that they are “rapidly losing influence,” while former UK Secretary for International Development Hilary Benn argued in 2007 that “China’s failure to match the conditions placed on aid by countries such as Britain – including evidence of good governance ... could set back progress toward democratic administrations” (cited in Hackenesch 2015, 420).

China's growing role in the continent has been spurred by the return of economic growth in Africa after the mid-1990s, which it has in turn helped to enhance through large capital infusions in a number of countries. Examining the case of Angola, Soares de Oliveira (2011, 301) argues "one [cannot] underestimate the extent to which the Chinese credit mattered in 2004," allowing the country to resist governance conditionality in its pursuit of finance. To be sure, the decline of commodity prices after 2013 tempered Chinese enthusiasm for the region somewhat, but Western perceptions of a diplomatic competition with China have remained a significant deterrent to the application of political conditionality.

These different factors have served to weaken the Western donor emphasis on pro-democracy reform in the region. Faced with commitment problems and a continual process of bargaining and renegotiation (Swedlund 2017), donors and recipients renewed their "development dance," continually searching for new frameworks and a scattergun approach to democratic change (Bunce and Wolchik 2011, 235). Looking at programs aimed at strengthening civil society, supporting NGOs, and funding elections, we can track the rise and fall of donor enthusiasm. Overall trends show that governance commitment grew from US\$150 million in 1991 to a peak of US\$1,790 million in 2008 (AidData 2016), with commitment flows falling through the following years.

However, individual donors show substantial variation. For instance, the United States undertook a sharp increase in funding for African governance through the 1990s and early 2000s, but then cut back sharply after this (Piccio 2013). The Obama administration maintained a rhetorical commitment to democracy in Africa, vowing to "take a strong and consistent stand against actions that undermine democratic institutions or the legitimacy of democratic processes" (White House 2012). The Trump administration has moved further away from democracy promotion, proposing large cuts in foreign aid to the continent, and aiming its focus on "security and countering China's influence" (Signé and Allen 2018).

The United Kingdom's governance commitment has followed a similar trajectory as the US, but other donors exhibit far less variation. France, Norway, and Denmark, for example, have shown far more consistency in their governance commitment, while Sweden's commitment actually shows an upward trend to the present, rising from US\$15 million in 1995 to US\$185 million by 2013.

Finally, while many have criticized donors for focusing on elections to the relative neglect of other forms of democracy promotion, donors seem to be moving away from this as a priority in recent years. Again, we see a meteoric rise in the early 1990s in total annual commitment amounts, growing from US\$1,863,422 in 1991 to US\$336 million by 2010, with a fall in the following years (AidData 2016). While governance and elections seemed to fall out of favor after 2010 or so, donors maintained a commitment to human rights projects, with commitment amounts remaining relatively stable from 2000 to 2013. Commitment to legal and judicial development also seems to have grown while overall governance was declining, with overall commitment amounts rising from just US\$700,300 in 1991 to US\$427 million by 2013 (AidData 2016).

Towards neo-modernization theory?

These recent trends have gone hand-in-hand with the renewal of development theorizing that downplays the benefits of democracy to the development of low-income countries. The key tenets of the modernization theories, and of sequencing, seem to be enjoying a comeback, with democracy often presented as a long-term goal rather than an immediate priority, best supported today by trade and economic development. Modernization theory's notion that

certain societal prerequisites are necessary for the success of democracy (Lipset 1959) seems to have been revived; with increasing references to the need for a “certain level of education or a sizeable middle class” (Western Ambassador cited in Brown 2011, 522) before democracy takes hold.

In the policy community, references to the economic costs of democratic politics in low-income countries are increasingly common. For instance, loose macroeconomic policy in countries like Ghana (Aryeetey and Kanbur 2017, 55–56) or Nigeria (Collier 2009, 37–45) are more likely to be blamed on competitive elections, which are little more than a “distraction” (Collier 2009, 43). On the other hand, heralding the economic virtues of authoritarianism in Africa has become increasingly common. Non-democratic leaders like Rwanda’s Paul Kagame are praised, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon telling him in 2014, “I hope many African nations will emulate what Rwanda is doing. I highly commend you” (*Washington Post* 2015). More generally, donors who once emphasized the importance of democracy and human rights are more likely today to express tolerance of the democratic deficiencies of the region’s hybrid and even authoritarian regimes, emphasizing their purported political progress, and pointing to their commitment to economic growth (see Brown 2011).

Political violence is increasingly blamed on social forces and “tribalism,” rather than on governments with a long history of repressive actions. As Brown (2011, 519) argues with respect to donor officials working with the governments of Kenya, Malawi, and Rwanda, the blame for undemocratic elections has shifted from the ruling party “to a divided opposition or an immature ‘tribalist’ electorate” and the priority has turned to peaceful elections rather than free and fair ones. Donor officials present these societies as “inherently violent” and emphasize the achievement of stability and order.

This trend is also reflected in recent donor literature. For example, the World Bank’s 2017 World Development Report emphasizes the need to “rethink governance for development” and leave behind a “dialogue based on ideology.” In so doing, the report moves away from seeing democratic government as an aim in and of itself, and instead emphasizes the need to assess governance in terms of its capacity to provide security, growth and equity (World Bank 2017, 4).

The UK’s Department for International Development (DFID 2017) lays out this position even more clearly in its 2017 Economic Development Strategy. Moving away from aid or conditionality, it focuses on investment and trade as an “engine for poverty reduction” and makes no mention of democracy or political participation. Te Velde (2017) for example, argues that Britain’s new trade and investment policies should be “high on the development agenda.”

The Trump administration’s 2017 National Security Strategy is also symptomatic of these shifting norms. Emphasizing a world of “extraordinarily dangerous” security threats, it contains no commitment to promotion or protection of human rights other than through leading by example (*Washington Post* 2017). While it emphasizes the value of American democracy, there is no “general statement that the United States will seek to advance democracy in the world.” The strategy itself may, as argued by Carothers and Brown (2018), provide some tools for democracy and rights advocates looking for approval, however it remains emblematic of a dramatic shift when contrasted with the US’s unambiguous support for democratic transition in previous decades.

This attitudinal shift towards democracy and a reframing of African authoritarianism has been shaped and praised by influential voices from think tanks and academia, often supported by funding from the donor community. Critical of previous attempts at democracy promotion and a “conventional wisdom” in favor of democratic government that is portrayed as simplistic and naïve, studies argue for a “context-sensitive” and pragmatic approach. Echoing earlier scholars

like Lipset (1959), they suggest that democracy may not be effective in developing countries, which still lack the appropriate “social and economic conditions” (Booth and Cammack 2013, 87; see also Noman and Stiglitz 2012; and Khan 2012).

For these scholars, the informal institutions that promote economic growth in poor countries are ultimately more important than formal institutions, such as democratic constitutions. For Booth (2017), informal arrangements that cement a broad agreement across national elites to promote economic development are the primary key to promoting growth in low-income countries. How such a “political settlement” is achieved is not defined precisely, but formal democratic institutions are deemed to either prevent it, or to be largely irrelevant to it, and its adherents view their political settlements approach as a powerful critique of the “good governance” approach (see Khan 2010). Instead, “attentiveness to history, geography and scale should be at the core” of development initiatives (Bebbington et al. 2017, 29), although this anodyne recommendation seems largely aspirational, as little guidance is provided regarding its practical implications.

Undermining the connection between democracy and equity, Rocha Menocal (2017) emphasizes that “the greatest strides against inequality” have not been achieved through democratic politics but often through “authoritarian coercion.” In low-income countries, democratic institutions such as regular competitive elections are likely to be ineffectual in promoting economic development and may often actually undermine social stability (North et al. 2013, 341–3). Despite rhetorical flourishes about “doing development differently” (ODI 2016), the return to the old sequencing logic of modernization theory is apparent.

Many academics have celebrated the end of the “narrow space prescribed by the Washington Consensus” (Mkandawire 2014, 171) and suggest that new doctrines allow more space for the continent to reach its developmental potential (Chang 2002; Stiglitz et al. 2013). In this vein, development policy in Rwanda and Ethiopia has been praised for following this model (Bräutigam and Xiaoyang 2011), while Western donors are criticized for attempts to impose their own approaches on the continent (Chang 2002). Implicitly or explicitly, these writers often imply that the East Asian developmental state, or “Beijing model” can be exported to the continent, even if their suggestions are rarely as context-specific and pragmatic as they suggest.

Conclusion

Critics of donor efforts to promote democracy often suggest that the demand for African democracy is largely external to Africa, and that Africans value economic growth and security above representation or political participation (Chabal and Daloz 1999; Monga 1997; Kelsall 2008). In fact, Afrobarometer surveys, based on interviews with about 54,000 citizens in thirty-six African countries, have consistently shown that a majority of citizens claim that democratic forms of government are more desirable than the alternative, and that they want more democracy than they are actually getting (Bratton and Mattes 2001; Bratton 2013). Establishing strong multiparty democracies is challenging and donors have undoubtedly made mistakes in the past. However, many of these thinkers have been pushing for an end to the “Washington Consensus” for such a long time that they pay little attention to what might be taking its place or what they are lending credence to.

As outlined by Yanguas (2017), a belief in the underlying “political settlement” that underlies a society does not allow donors to abstain from making moral choices. Donors can never calculate the full consequences of their decisions. Democracy in the continent is facing a time of profound risk and opportunity, as the power of long-term incumbency is challenged (Cheeseman, Lynch, and Willis 2017). While peaceful transfers of power from Ghana to Nigeria have consolidated

democratic norms, these vulnerabilities also run the risk of inciting greater repression across the continent as ruling parties tighten their grip on power and threaten civil liberties.

With this in mind, donors are therefore compelled to make difficult value judgments about whether to support and try to influence incumbent actors or undermine them. Aid must, of course, be flexible and tailored to local contexts, but pragmatism need not require an abandonment of democracy all together. Future research must refrain from studying foreign aid as a homogenous force. Instead, we should work to understand the forms and conditions in which financial support can help or hinder the peaceful transfer of power and consolidation of democratic norms in a shifting global climate, how different modes of assistance shape the relationship between formal and informal institutions and what impact foreign aid may have on both subnational and supranational levels of governance.

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