

Rewarding Women's Rights in Dictatorships

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Abstract

How can dictatorships signal a commitment to democracy? We theorize women's rights as a policy area in which autocrats can make democratic progress without risking their survival in the way reforms to the electoral sphere can. We field a conjoint survey experiment on a sample of international elites working on foreign aid and a parallel sample of the American public. Our design allows us to assess how policies related to electoral competition, women's economic rights, and women's representation influence perceptions of democracy and support for giving foreign aid. Electoral reforms significantly improve perceived democracy and support for aid, but increasing women's economic rights is also highly effective. Gender quotas exhibit a significant (though smaller) effect on perceived democracy among elites. The findings indicate that relevant international elites espouse a broad, egalitarian conception of democracy, and that autocrats accordingly enjoy considerable leeway in how to burnish their reputations.

1 Introduction

In the post-Cold War era, many international benefits, status, and prestige are contingent on democracy.¹ For autocrats, particularly those that are economically dependent on the West, this environment poses an obvious challenge: reforms that increase political pluralism and electoral integrity offer international benefits, but they endanger the regime's hold on power. Autocrats therefore have incentives to enact reforms in policy areas that are related to democracy but pose fewer risks for regime survival.

Research has drawn attention to women's rights as one such possibility.² Many autocracies have embraced gender equality reforms, including electoral quotas (Zetterberg et al., 2022), laws related to violence against women (Tripp, 2015), and women's socioeconomic rights and family law (Donno and Kreft, 2019). The impetus for these reforms stems not only from societal, 'bottom-up' pressure, but also from external, 'top-down' pressures. Cross-national studies document an association between women's rights and various forms of international engagement, including foreign aid conditionality, UN peacekeeping, and NGO naming and shaming (e.g., Bush, 2011; Edgell, 2017; Kang and Tripp, 2018; Donno, Fox and Kaasik, 2021). Yet we have little direct evidence about the causal processes behind these correlations. How do international policy makers and practitioners perceive, and respond to, gender-related reforms in autocracies? This is a significant omission since theories about

¹See Pevehouse (2002); Kelley (2004); Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2004); Hyde (2011); Gray (2013); von Borzyskowski and Vabulas (2019). On aid specifically, see Dunning (2004); Bermeo (2016); Carnegie and Marinov (2017); Donno and Neureiter (2018).

²For example, Goetz (2002); Ottaway (2005); Longman (2006); Adams (2007); Burnet (2008); David and Nanes (2011); Bjarnegård and Zetterberg (2016); Donno and Kreft (2019); Valdini (2019); Tripp (2019).

international incentives hinge on such responses. Indeed, it is possible that foreign policy professionals rhetorically express support for gender equality but that their actual decisions about aid and other benefits are guided more by other considerations, perhaps even by factors that tend to correlate with gender reforms in practice.

To address this issue, we theorize and test for the effects of women’s rights reforms on two outcomes: countries’ international reputations for democracy and their access to foreign aid. We make two theoretical innovations. First, focusing on the preferences and beliefs of international development professionals, we consider whether some women’s rights reforms are valued differently than others. Specifically, we compare the effect of electoral gender quotas with laws related to women’s economic rights—an important category of reform which, although not related to formal political institutions, nevertheless has real bearing on women’s life chances and their involvement in the public sphere. Second, we theorize more fully the content of international audiences’ beliefs, distinguishing between narrow procedural conceptions of democracy which focus on competitive elections and more expansive conceptions that include gender egalitarian and participatory dimensions..

We test our hypotheses on a unique elite sample of international development professionals and then replicate our survey on a sample of American citizens. To overcome inferential challenges associated with observational research on gender reforms, our survey instrument features a forced-choice conjoint experiment in which a pair of hypothetical autocracies are randomly assigned values on multiple dimensions, including the adoption of laws related to (1) electoral competition; (2) women’s economic rights; and (3) women’s political representation. To probe causal processes and help interpret our findings, we conduct xx qualitative interviews with practitioners working in international development and democracy promotion.

Our findings indicate that autocrats enjoy considerable leeway in their efforts to build a democratic reputation and reap international rewards. In both the elite and citizen samples,

we find, as might be expected, that reforms that increase opposition parties' ability to compete in elections have the largest positive effects on perceived democracy and support for foreign aid. Yet, reforms related to women's economic rights—operationalized as a law guaranteeing women equal rights to employment, property and inheritance—also have a large positive effect on both outcomes. This suggests therefore that international elites hold broad, egalitarian conceptions of democracy quite different from the “procedural,” election-focused definitions often espoused by scholars—a point also supported by our interviews with development professionals.

We further find that elite respondents distinguish between women's economic and political rights in interesting ways. Our gender quota treatment increases the perceived level of democracy. But the magnitude of this effect is relatively small, and in contrast to the women's economic rights treatment, gender quotas do not have a significant effect on support for foreign aid. In interpreting these findings, our interviews suggest that electoral gender quotas in autocratic settings are perceived as often having a limited impact on political and policy outcomes. The fact that most nondemocracies have already adopted quotas, and thus that quotas have proven compatible with continued autocratic dominance, also contributes to their more ambiguous reception.

By directly engaging a main population of interest—namely, the practitioners responsible for crafting, implementing, and evaluating democracy and development assistance programs—our study makes a unique contribution to research on foreign aid, autocratic politics and international norms. To date, international elites' understandings of democracy have seldom been rigorously investigated, despite their importance for many theories of world politics, not to mention the practice of democracy promotion. Our exploration of this issue sheds light on the type of international reputation that women's rights (and other policies) help engender, whether a general modernizing reputation or—as we show—a more specific reputation for democracy. This insight, together with our findings about foreign aid provi-

sion, helps establish a key missing link in the literature on why dictatorships have pursued gender equality reforms, providing microfoundational evidence in support of the idea that autocrats can use women’s rights (perhaps instrumentally) to improve their prospects for political survival. In other words, leaders may reap democracy-contingent rewards without necessarily engaging in political liberalization. This conclusion speaks, in turn, to debates about whether international incentives encourage domestic policy substitution effects (e.g., Bisbee et al., 2019)—an issue that is challenging to pin down with cross-national observational data alone (Strezhnev and Simmons, 2019).

The implications of our study for international norms are two-sided. On one hand, we draw attention to how governments can strategically adapt to international norms by engaging in selective compliance. Yet, selective compliance is nevertheless still (partial) compliance. Particularly in autocratic regimes that are otherwise resistant to other forms of international pressure, advancements in *de jure* gender equality—even if not accompanied by political liberalization—represent important progress toward women’s empowerment and integration into political life.

2 International Incentives for Democracy and Women’s Rights

In the post-Cold War environment, many international benefits, both material and social, hinge on whether a country is thought to be a democracy. This fact creates a problem for dictatorships, which seek to balance international pressure for democratic reforms against the domestic imperative of political survival (Escribà-Folch and Wright, 2015). All autocrats rely on a “winning coalition” of supporters—some combination of business, ethnic, religious, or military/security elites—whose loyalty is secured predominantly through the provision of private goods (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2005). Reforms that enhance political pluralism

and competition can destabilize this winning coalition and thereby threaten regime survival. Examples include liberalizing rules for forming political parties, allowing opposition parties to operate freely, reducing government control over the media, or improving the professionalism of election management bodies. By increasing political competition and providing the opposition with an electoral foothold, these policies generate pressure for an expansion of the winning coalition (Boix and Svobik, 2013). And by enhancing mechanisms of political oversight and accountability, they can disrupt patronage networks that are crucial for regime survival (Escribà-Folch and Wright, 2015, 52-54).

Given the political costs of such reforms, dictatorships have incentives to pursue other, more “regime-compatible” policies that will still be positively received internationally (Bush, 2015). This strategy can sometimes be achieved through obfuscation; for example, leaders may invite election observers while committing malpractice in subtle ways that are hard to verify (Simpser and Donno, 2012), or they may establish civil society organizations that in reality maintain close links with the regime (Carapico, 2000; Walker, 2016). Yet, another strategy of adaptation—which we focus on here—is that of *selective compliance* with democratic norms, especially when we consider the range of policies implicated by a broad conceptualization of democracy.

Although competitive elections are typically considered the most fundamental element of democracy, they are by no means the only one, and views on the relative importance of elections versus other factors differ. Studies criticizing the “electoral fallacy” in democracy promotion, for example, note the need to ensure societal and institutional stability before introducing elections (Karl, 1990). Theorists of participatory and deliberative democracy focus on fostering a politically-active citizenry (Pateman, 2012); liberal theorists view civil liberties and rule of law as necessary for well-functioning democratic institutions (Zakaria, 1997). Recognizing the multiple and contested meanings of democracy has been a key driver of the Varieties of Democracy project (Coppedge et al., 2011), which offers alternatives to

the “minimalist” definitions favored by some scholars (Przeworski et al., 2000; Cheibub and Vreeland, 2010; Boix and Rosato, 2013; Geddes and Frantz, 2014). In short, beyond the ideal of competitive elections, alternative conceptualizations of democracy emphasize values of inclusion, participation, equality, personal liberty, and separated powers, among others.

Here, we focus on the centrality of women’s political, social and economic rights to an *egalitarian conception* of democracy, understood as a system in which “citizens across all social groups are equally capable of exercising their political rights and freedoms, and of influencing political and governing processes” (Sigman and Lindberg, 2019, 596). This perspective insists on attention to *de facto* inequalities—beyond liberal theorists’ focus on protection of individual freedoms, because for women to exercise meaningful political influence, they must also be empowered to participate as equals in the family, economy, and society.³ Egalitarian democracy therefore emphasizes equality of participation, representation, protection, and resources (such as income, education, and health), in both the political *and socioeconomic* spheres (Rizzo, Abdel-Latif and Meyer, 2007; Tremblay, 2007; Coppedge et al., 2011, 254), or, as Sigman and Lindberg (2019, 601) summarize, the “*de facto* protection of rights and freedoms, distribution and actual access to power” for all social groups.

Gender egalitarian values are increasingly featured in the rhetoric and policy priorities of (Western) institutions promoting democracy and development. To be sure, the struggle for women’s rights has a long history among domestic democratic activists the world over (Banaszak, 1996). But the mid-1990s saw gender equality assume a newly prominent role in *international* democratic discourse. At the 1995 UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, the concluding Plan of Action held that “[n]o government can claim to be democratic until women are guaranteed the right to equal representation,” and that improving women’s

³For example, Pateman’s critique of liberal social contract theory argues that it is built on a foundation of gender inequality (Pateman, 1988).

social, economic and political status is essential for achieving “transparent and accountable government.”⁴ Activated by this policy agenda, a host of international organizations, donors, and transnational activists began monitoring and reporting on states’ performance in terms of gender equality. Global performance indicators—including reports produced by Freedom House, CIRI, the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, the U.S. State Department, International IDEA, and election observation agencies—now measure states’ democratic performance based in part on respect for women’s rights.⁵ Western donors similarly place a strong emphasis on gender equality in their foreign aid programs’ goals and conditionality (Kubicek, 2011; The Library of Congress, 2012; Edgell, 2017; Grimm and Mathis, 2017; Bush and Zetterberg, 2021, 332-333). The U.S. Agency for International Development’s (USAID) 2012 “Policy on Gender Equality and Female Empowerment” and European Union’s (EU) 2005 revised “Development Consensus” are two noteworthy examples.⁶

⁴See UN Women, Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, available at https://beijing20.unwomen.org/~media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/pfa.e_final_web.pdf, page 119.

⁵The scope of Freedom House’s evaluations, for example, spans women’s representation as well as economic and social issues related to family law, women’s civil society participation, sexual harassment and employment law, property rights, and domestic violence. See https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/FreedomInTheWorld_2021_Methodology_Checklist_of_Questions.pdf, A1, A2, B4, D1, G1, and G2.

⁶See also the gender action and implementation plans from USAID (United States Agency for International Development, 2012, 2019, 2021*a,b*), the EU (Commission of the European Communities, 2005, 2020), the United Kingdom (Government of the United Kingdom, 2019), and France (French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2018).

Crucially for dictatorships, advancing women’s rights often does not pose an immediate threat to political survival (Gal and Kligman, 2000; Htun, 2003, Ch. 3; Lorch and Bunk, 2016; Tripp, 2019; Valdini, 2019, Ch. 6). In Rwanda, for example, Bauer and Burnet (2013, 107) note that women members of parliament are beholden to the ruling party and “tend to support legislative proposals emerging from the executive and avoid tackling contentious issues.” When ruling party institutions are strong, concessions on women’s rights can even serve to co-opt women, bringing them into the regime’s support coalition, as has occurred in Uganda (Donno and Kreft, 2019). In sum, the political costs of gender-related reforms are less direct and immediate than the costs of reforms related to political competition.

Consistent with this idea, many contemporary dictatorships have prioritized the advancement of women’s legal rights. Although democracies perform better on measures of *de facto* women’s political empowerment, dictatorships perform well on other dimensions related to descriptive and *de jure* reform. The average proportion of female legislators is now equal across democracies and dictatorships in the developing world. And since at least the early 2000s, dictatorships have introduced more gender-related legislation than democracies in the developing world (Donno, Fox and Kaasik, 2021).

To many scholars, it seems clear that international incentives have played a role in encouraging these trends. Research on international socialization and global performance indicators argues that prestige hierarchies create social pressure for norm compliance, including in women’s rights (Towns, 2010; Hughes, Krook and Paxton, 2015; Kelley and Simmons, 2019; Risse, Ropp and Sikkink, 1999). Consistent with these ideas, cross-national studies have shown that specific forms of international engagement—including foreign aid, shaming by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and peacekeeping—are associated with gender reforms (Abou-Zeid, 2006; Bush, 2011; Krook and True, 2012; Edgell, 2017; Donno, Fox and Kaasik, 2021), while citizen surveys in Western nations find that developing countries experience reputational benefits from enacting legislative gender quotas (Bush and Zetterberg,

2021).

Missing, however, is a direct examination of the views of (Western) foreign policy elites—a consequential omission, given that they are posited as a key audience for such reforms. Although institutions such as USAID, the EU, and other European development agencies have emphasized the importance of gender equality in their programming, some criticize such statements as representing only superficial commitments that help justify other foreign policy goals (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Insofar as autocracies are now fairly widely recognized as strategically embracing women’s rights, we might also question whether international elites would actually reward them for doing so.

3 Expectations about International Audiences

In considering international (Western) elites’ responses to policy reforms in authoritarian regimes, we focus on two outcomes: (1) perceptions about a country’s level of democracy; and (2) support for providing a country foreign aid.⁷ To the extent that Western policy makers view aid as a “democracy-contingent benefit” (Hyde, 2011, 52-53), we would expect these two outcomes to move in tandem, i.e., that factors shaping perceived democracy would also influence support for foreign aid. Of course, decisions about aid allocation are shaped by a number of other factors, some of which we control for in our research design.

⁷In our pre-analysis plan (described in more detail below), we also registered perceptions about democratic progress as an additional outcome. Because we made the same theoretical predictions about the effect of various policies on perceptions about levels and progress towards democracy, we focus on the former for ease of exposition in the paper. However, the results for progress towards democracy are nearly identical and are contained in supporting information (SI) §3.

3.1 Electoral Competition

We begin with hypotheses about the effect of reforms directly related to political competition. Elections are widely considered the fundamental “necessary condition” for democracy. But the proliferation of multiparty elections in dictatorships has led observers to focus on the *quality* of these contests as the key to distinguishing between democracy and authoritarianism (Diamond, 2002; Schedler, 2006). Democratic elections are held in an open environment in which opposition parties and civil society organizations can operate freely; campaign conditions, election administration, and the media environment are not unduly biased; voters are allowed to seek information and cast ballots free from intimidation; and ballots are accurately counted and disputes among candidates resolved impartially. Levitsky and Way (2010) focus especially on an even playing field—marked by equal access to state institutions, resources and the media for all political parties—as the feature most lacking in contemporary electoral authoritarian regimes. Reforms that tackle these imbalances and create an environment in which opposition parties can effectively compete are therefore essential for democratic electoral quality. We expect (Western) development professionals to perceive such reforms as linked to democracy and be willing to reward countries accordingly with foreign aid.

Hypothesis 1a: Reforms that increase electoral competition are associated with higher perceived levels of democracy.

Hypothesis 1b: Reforms that increase electoral competition are associated with greater support for the provision of foreign aid.

3.2 Women’s Rights

As discussed above, women’s rights are an area in which policy change is less costly for autocratic survival but nevertheless closely related to egalitarian conceptions of democracy. International elites—including professionals in the development and democracy promotion

sectors—may embrace such broad notions of democracy in which women’s rights occupy a prominent place. Theories of organizational culture would expect that to be the case (Weaver and Nelson, 2016). As development and democracy promotion agencies have prioritized women’s rights and ‘mainstreamed’ it into their project design, implementation, and evaluation, this should influence the ideas and values of their staff. A slightly different possibility is that international audiences view women’s rights not as an element of democracy *per se* but rather as a heuristic “shortcut” for democracy—that is, as a policy area that is easily observable and tends to be correlated with (or lead to) democracy in practice. The use of women’s rights as a heuristic for democracy may be especially likely for policies, such as gender quotas, whose implementation is easily observed. Reputational spillover is common in international politics, even among experts who might be expected to have professional incentives to avoid reliance on heuristics (Gray, 2013; Erickson, 2015). These dynamics are likely to occur in the realm of democracy specifically given the uncertainty about whether politicians are “true” or “pseudo” democrats, which prompts external audiences to look for signs that they are truly committed to democracy (Hyde, 2011).

3.2.1 Women’s Political Rights

We focus first on how gender quotas may shape autocracies’ reputations through these processes. The agenda for advancing women’s political rights and representation includes efforts to increase suffrage, electoral participation, and office holding—all of which are outcomes closely monitored by external actors. But arguably the most prominent policy advocated and recognized by the international community is electoral gender quotas (Krook, 2007; Bush, 2011; Krook and True, 2012; Edgell, 2017; Swiss and Fallon, 2017). Quotas can take different forms, but the most common type among nondemocracies are reserved seat quotas, in which a predetermined number of legislative seats—often ranging from xx-xx percent—are

earmarked for women (Zetterberg et al., 2022).⁸

Increasing women’s political representation is a concrete and measurable outcome that is directly related to the democratic ideal of improved and more equal representation. Research on the effects of quotas finds that they do increase the number of women in legislatures and that this effect in turn is associated with increased legislative attention to women’s interests and policy priorities (Zetterberg, 2009; Weeks, 2018; Clayton and Zetterberg, 2018; Brulé, 2020), as well as changed attitudes among male legislators (Franceschet, 2011; Mackay, 2014; Xydias, 2014). Importantly, some benefits of women’s representation seem to hold in autocracies as well as democracies (Forman-Rabinovici and Sommer, 2019; Mechkova and Carlitz, 2021). Studies of Rwanda and Uganda, for example, show the influence of female representatives on landmark pieces of legislation even in decidedly non-democratic contexts (Tripp, 2012; Bauer and Burnet, 2013; Wang, 2013; Johnson and Josefsson, 2016; Muriass and Wang, 2018). During Uganda’s eighth parliament (2006-2011) a number of laws—including laws against female genital mutilation, domestic violence, human trafficking, and the establishment of an equal opportunity commission—can be attributed at least in part to the “cumulative impact of a continuing increase in female MPs” and the active parliamentary women’s caucus (Wang, 2013, 116). In sum, we expect Western development professionals to positively evaluate gender quotas in autocracies due to their anticipated effects on legislative representation and pro-women policy outcomes.

Hypothesis 2a: Reforms that increase women’s political rights are associated with higher perceived levels of democracy.

Hypothesis 2b: Reforms that increase women’s political rights are associated with greater support for the provision of foreign aid.

⁸Other quotas more common in democracies are candidate quotas and voluntary party quotas, which stipulate that a percentage of all candidates on party lists should be women.

At the same time, the relationship between quotas and democratization is complex, in that quotas typically do not challenge an autocratic regime’s legislative control. This pattern is especially true in regimes governed by dominant executives (Muriass and Wang, 2012) or entrenched ruling parties, as in Tanzania where the Chama Cha Mapinduzi enjoys broad cross-regional support and its affiliated women’s movement selects female candidates that are highly loyal to the regime (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, 2016). Similarly, in Morocco, Sater (2007, 732) notes that women legislators hail from elite political families that are deeply embedded in the “neo-patriarchal” political system and unlikely to challenge the status quo. To the extent that international audiences take these dynamics into consideration, it may weaken the perceived benefits of gender quotas in autocratic contexts.

3.2.2 Women’s Economic Rights

Finally, we consider rights for women in areas that are unrelated to the realm of electoral politics but intimately related to egalitarian notions of a democratic society. Reforms that enhance women’s economic rights—for example, the rights to work, join “dangerous” professions, inherit and own property, start businesses, and enjoy equal pay—are essential to ensuring that women have access to resources and are empowered to participate as equals in society. These rights do not necessarily go hand in hand with political rights. In Jordan, for example, the government’s more progressive stance on women’s voting and legislative representation coexists with an absence of laws to reduce gender and pay discrimination and to guarantee women’s property rights (Barnett, Jamal and Monroe, 2021, 956). Not surprisingly, women’s labor force participation in Jordan is among the lowest in the world. In addition to laws directly related to work and employment discrimination, reform to family law often touches upon issues of women’s inheritance and freedom of movement that are essential for economic empowerment (Muriass and Wang, 2018). If implemented, such reforms carry the potential for large-scale societal transformation, particularly in traditional

patriarchal cultures (Brulé and Gaikwad, 2021), or in states with institutionalized religious authority, including those where women’s roles are subject to Shar’ia law (Htun and Weldon, 2018, Ch. 4).

In the long term, bringing women more fully into economic and social life may also increase expectations and pressure for democracy. But, for autocratic rulers, the immediate political consequences of such policies tend to be manageable and may even benefit the regime. In the Maghreb, for example, monarchies and civilian governments alike have used progress on women’s rights—including reform to family law—to push back against more conservative religious opposition movements (Tripp, 2019). More generally, Donno and Kreft (2019) find that well-institutionalized autocratic parties are positioned to capitalize on women’s economic rights as a means to bolster female support and cement relations with the women’s movement. In sum, women’s economic rights are closely linked to broad, substantive conceptions of democracy but not to more minimal conceptions which focus on electoral competition among elites. If international audiences respond favorably to women’s economic rights, this would indicate that they espouse the former, more expansive view.

Hypothesis 3a: Reforms that increase women’s economic rights are associated with higher perceived levels of democracy.

Hypothesis 3b: Reforms that increase women’s economic rights are associated with greater support for the provision of foreign aid.

Taken together, these hypotheses allow us to evaluate whether reforms that advance women’s economic and political rights are evaluated in a similar manner as reforms that deepen electoral competition. If we find similar effects in terms of direction and statistical significance, it would support the idea that autocrats can enact gender-related policies as a way to reap reputational and material benefits without necessarily having to engage in political liberalization.

4 Research Design

To test our hypotheses, we survey a unique sample of professionals working in the international development and democracy promotion fields. In addition, we field a follow-up study on members of the American public that replicates and extends the research design. Below, we first discuss the samples and then the survey design.

4.1 Samples

Many audiences are relevant for understanding countries' international reputations, including "citizens, national elites, other governments, and the global community" (Kelley, 2017, 34). Most of the experimental literature on this topic focuses on citizens (e.g., Brutger and Kertzer, 2018). Studies examining *citizens'* willingness to support foreign aid programs have found a generally adverse reaction to human rights violations (Heinrich, Kobayashi and Long, 2018) and a positive reaction to electoral gender quotas (Bush and Zetterberg, 2021). Such findings may generalize to more elite audiences, especially once we account for compositional differences between samples of citizens and elites (Kertzer, forthcoming). Nevertheless, a growing number of studies in IR now employ elite experiments (Dietrich, Hardt and Swedlund, 2021; Kertzer and Renshon, 2022), particularly when the research question centers directly on the choices and preferences of these decision-makers themselves.

Our research design follows this new tradition, focusing on a population of special theoretical interest: individuals responsible for designing, evaluating, and implementing assistance programs related to development and democracy. In doing so, we shed new light on how these practitioners conceptualize their work. Past research on aid professionals has employed surveys to explore their preferences about conditionality (Swedlund, 2017), delegation to NGOs (Dietrich, 2021), and aid allocation (Briggs, 2021); or has drawn on qualitative methods such as document analysis and interviews (e.g., Hobson and Kurki, 2012). Our survey instead

focuses on how these practitioners think about democracy and introduces an experimental component to identify the effect of different types of domestic reform.

Our sampling procedure focused on identifying people with experience in international development and democracy fields, with an emphasis on staff at government aid agencies and international NGOs. Using staff rosters, we created a list of names and e-mail addresses that was drawn from American and European organizations including USAID, the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), EU, Canadian International Development Agency, International Republican Institute, National Democratic Institute, International IDEA, and aid agencies from other OECD member states.

To best test our hypotheses, we recruited staff members in executive and programmatic roles. Our sample includes individuals with varying levels of responsibility and few (if any) political appointees. Not everyone in this sample makes decisions that directly impact aid allocation, and many are involved in program implementation or performance evaluation. The validity of our sample therefore stems not so much from respondents' decision-making authority as from their internalization of organizational culture and values, which following other research (e.g., Weaver and Nelson, 2016; Dietrich, 2021) we expect to hold across levels of responsibility within a given organization. Although some respondents work primarily in one country or region and could have had that location in mind when answering our questions, most were based in their home countries at the time of our survey, and the rest had responsibilities that were not concentrated in a particular region.

We fielded the online survey between November and December 2019 after inviting the professionals to participate via e-mail. Participants were offered an optional incentive of a 20 dollar/euro gift card. 108 individuals took at least part of our survey, for an overall survey response rate of 12 percent.⁹ As expected given our sampling frame, our respondents were highly educated, with 90 percent having obtained some form of graduate degree, and tended

⁹Elites can be a difficult population to survey due to concerns about time and privacy.

to be at a mid- to senior-career stage, with a median age between 45 and 54, which suggests substantial knowledge and experience on the topics central to our study. Our respondents came from a variety of nationalities, with the largest number coming from Sweden (54 percent, which reflected our access to a comprehensive roster of Sida employees), the United States (21 percent), France (5 percent), the United Kingdom (5 percent), and Canada (4 percent). The sample was evenly split between men (49 percent) and women (51 percent). Below, and as specified in our pre-analysis plan, we consider whether our results vary with respondent gender and nationality.

In addition to our elite survey, we conducted a follow-up online survey of members of the American public in December 2021. We fielded the study to a diverse national sample of more than 1,200 American adults via the survey firm Prolific. Around half of the respondents were randomly assigned to take an exact replication of our elite experiment; the others were randomly assigned to take an experiment with a slight adjustment to the experiment wording discussed below. Our follow-up study allows us to examine whether our elite results replicate on another population—citizens—that is also relevant theoretically, as discussed in Bush and Zetterberg (2021, 333-334). It also enables us to consider differences between elites and the public in views about democracy and aid, topics which have received less attention in the emerging IR literature combining elite and public survey evidence.

4.2 Survey Design

Our elite survey contained three sections: background demographic and political attitudes questions; a forced-choice conjoint experiment; and questions about global performance in-

Although this response rate is lower than we had hoped, it is higher than other recent online surveys of elites, such as politicians (Teele, Kalla and Rosenbluth, 2018, 530), international NGOs (Nielson, Hyde and Kelley, 2019, 698-701), and World Bank staff (Briggs, 2021, 7).

dicators for a separate project involving one of the authors.¹⁰ A challenge with testing our hypotheses using observational data is that countries' progress on women's rights often occurs at the same time as other political changes (e.g., the adoption of a new constitution) that could also shape perceptions of countries' status (e.g., Hughes and Tripp, 2015; Tripp, 2015). An experiment helps isolate the effect of women's rights while holding other country characteristics constant.

We opted for a conjoint design given our interest in comparing the effects of *multiple* attributes and policies. In the real world, development professionals must evaluate countries that have many different characteristics, which may send conflicting signals about democracy and aid worthiness. The conjoint design is ideally suited to the task of disentangling the effect of specific policies while varying other features (e.g., level of economic development and region) that often correlate with those policies in practice.

Our task asked respondents to evaluate pairs of hypothetical countries in terms of which was more democratic and which should be chosen to receive a new foreign aid program.¹¹ The

¹⁰SI §1 contains the questionnaire. The last section was omitted from the survey of the public. Although we did not anticipate significant interactions between the conjoint experiment and questions about global performance indicators, we randomized the order of these blocks to allow us to examine question-order effects. The analysis (which was not pre-registered) is in SI §7 and does not reveal evidence of such effects.

¹¹The order of the dependent variable questions was randomized to encourage respondents to read each scenario carefully. In addition, SI §3 considers an additional outcome measure—perceptions that the country is effective at fighting terrorism—to investigate whether elite audiences updated their beliefs about country performance more broadly. As we discuss there in more detail, this outcome enables us to test the extent of reputational spillover beyond

aid in question was a \$50 million per year program to support education, water supply, and sanitation and was paid directly to the recipient country government. This is a meaningful amount of aid—equivalent to about the total annual U.S. aid disbursements to countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Chad in recent years—and similar to what has been described in the scenarios in other recent survey experiments about foreign aid (Heinrich and Kobayashi, 2020, 110).

The introductory text that all respondents read stated: “After the release of an expert report about political development around the world, government officials are undertaking a review of relations with developing countries. The following two countries are under review. Both of the countries hold elections, but they have been found to be ‘not politically free.’ Please carefully review each country’s profile. You will then be asked to evaluate each country.” Guided by our research question, we held regime type constant via this text to fix the respondent’s understanding of the country as being an autocracy that holds elections.

We varied six country attributes in our conjoint experiment, with the italicized text being randomized:

- Income: *Least developed* or *Lower-middle-income* country
- Region: *Africa*, *Asia*, or *Middle East*
- Environment for Opposition Parties: *Recent law makes it easier* or *Legal restrictions make it difficult* for opposition parties to campaign and compete in elections
- Women’s economic rights: *Recent law guarantees* or *Country does not guarantee* equal rights for property, inheritance, and employment

what our theory predicts in relation to adherence to liberal-democratic norms, including to a traditionally male-dominated policy area (i.e., national security).

- Parliamentary Quotas: *Yes, 30% of seats reserved for women* or *No legal requirements for women’s representation*¹²
- Level of corruption: Corruption is *high* or *low*

In sum, the conjoint provided information on reform or lack of reform in three areas: electoral competition, women’s economic rights, and women’s political rights. The women’s rights treatments are designed to reflect, in a general way, the types of reforms commonly implemented by autocratic regimes around the world. The economic rights treatment, for example, is consistent with the content of reforms to employment rights in Vietnam (Gender Equality Law, 2006), family law in Algeria (Amended Family Code, 2005), or inheritance rights in Rwanda (Law on Matrimonial Regimes and Successions, 1999). For the quota treatment, the particular wording was chosen to indicate to knowledgeable professionals the existence of a substantively meaningful quota (30% is in the upper range of typical thresholds) of the type most commonly implemented in autocracies (reserved seats).

The conjoint design also allows us to control for three attributes likely to be correlated with our treatments of interest, as well as the outcome variables: region, level of corruption, and income (i.e., economic development). We included the region variable since research suggests that Arab or Muslim countries may be singular—or at least perceived as singular—on the dimension of women’s rights. Meanwhile, income and level of corruption may contribute to support for foreign aid since they are indicators of countries’ need and ability to use aid

¹²In our follow-up survey to the American public, we adjusted the treatment language for half the respondents to read: “Recent law requires that 30% of parliamentary seats are reserved for women.” This change ensured that the quota treatment was more equivalent to the other reform treatments in its reference to a “recent law.” As we show in SI §8, the results are similar regardless of the treatment wording.

effectively, respectively.

The values for the attributes in our conjoint experiment were fully randomized. Each respondent was asked to consider and answer questions about six pairs of hypothetical countries. Following Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto (2017), we use those responses to estimate the average marginal component effects (AMCEs), which tell us how much each value for a particular country attribute affects the average probability of choosing that country, relative to a baseline value. We cluster the standard errors by respondent. This approach, as well as the other facets of the analysis below, follows the plans we pre-registered with Evidence and Governance and Politics (see SI §2) prior to fielding the survey unless otherwise noted.

5 Findings from the Elite Survey

We begin by considering the country attributes that respondents in our elite survey associated with democracy in Figure 1. As expected, countries in which the environment for opposition parties was less restrictive were much more likely—specifically, around 0.43 more likely, with a standard error (SE) of 0.03—to be perceived as democracies than countries with more restrictive environments. We also see clear evidence that women’s economic rights were associated with democracy, since having passed a law to guarantee equal rights for property, inheritance, and employment increased a country’s probability of being selected as a democracy by 0.23 (SE = 0.03). Women’s political rights, captured by the existence of a gender quota, also had a positive effect on perceived democracy. The effect size, however, was substantively smaller (0.10, SE = 0.03).

In terms of the other variables, we do not find evidence that respondents inferred something about democracy from the country’s level of economic development or region, but corruption was more informative. In particular, a country with low corruption was 0.19

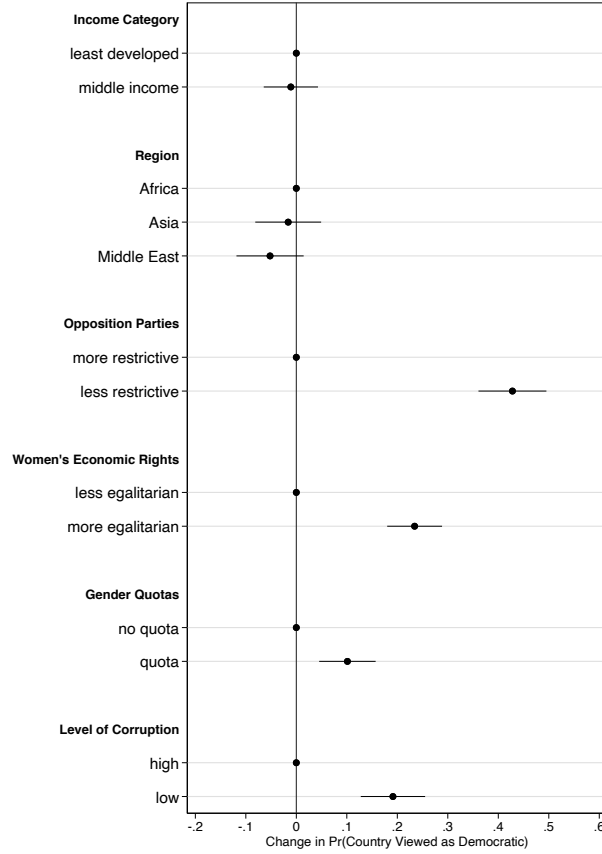


Figure 1: **Effects of country attributes on perceived democracy.** This figure shows the AMCEs with 95 percent confidence intervals based on regressions with standard errors clustered by respondent.

more likely ($SE = 0.03$) to be perceived as democratic than one with high corruption.

We draw three conclusions from Figure 1. First, development professionals viewed whether opposition parties could campaign and compete in elections as the most important indicator of democracy in our study. This pattern was expected, since free and fair elections are the *sine qua non* of democracy, even in its most minimal definitions.

Second, the enactment of a law guaranteeing women equal economic rights also had a substantial effect on perceptions of democracy—one that was more than half as large as the effect of the passage of a law that loosened restrictions on opposition parties (0.23 vs. 0.43). This pattern is notable since, in contrast to competitive elections, women’s

economic rights are often compatible with (and may even help sustain) the stability of electoral autocracies. Our findings therefore challenge the stereotype—which is perhaps outdated—that Western aid practitioners are overly focused on elections to the detriment of more substantive aspects of democracy (e.g., Karl, 1990; Brown, 2011). They also imply that authoritarian governments wishing to gain a reputation for democratic progress without subjecting themselves to competitive elections can do so through passing gender equality laws.

Third, development professionals linked women’s political rights—operationalized in our experiment through the existence of a gender quota law (30 percent of the parliamentary seats reserved for women)—with democracy. Yet, the positive effect of women’s political rights was less than half as large as the effect of women’s economic rights (0.10 vs. 0.23). We offer two explanations for this pattern. The most straightforward explanation is that international development practitioners perceive electoral gender quotas as less transformative than reforms that aim to secure women’s equal rights for property, inheritance, and employment. Whereas the former reform recognizes women as legitimate political actors, it mainly targets elite women, who sometimes have been accused (rightly or wrongly) of constituting “loyal vote banks” to authoritarian regimes (e.g., Goetz, 2002). By contrast, women’s economic rights reforms aim to redistribute economic resources and empower women at all levels of society. Women’s economic empowerment may eventually spill over into enhanced political participation (Brulé and Gaikwad, 2021). If development practitioners perceive that enhancing women’s representation in politics (through quotas) is not always combined with an economic politics of equality (Fraser, 1995), then the former reform may send a weaker signal of egalitarian democracy than women’s economic rights.

In addition, the widespread existence of quotas at the time of our survey, including in many authoritarian countries, may help explain why they exhibited a relatively weaker effect. Our experts are likely aware that most of the world’s democracies *and* autocracies have now

adopted quotas. In the language of signaling theory, whereas quota adoption may have once been a separating equilibrium, it may now be a pooling equilibrium. Thus, the adoption of a quota may currently convey less information about whether the regime is committed to making some democratic progress.

Figure 2 presents the results for our other main outcome measure: support for giving the country foreign aid. Similar to what we found for the democracy outcome, countries with less restrictive environments for opposition parties and with a recent law for women's economic rights were associated with more more material rewards (in the form of support for giving the country foreign aid) compared to the baseline categories. This time, the substantive effects associated with these two treatments were fairly similar, although the opposition parties treatment was again associated with the larger effect.¹³ Meanwhile, the existence of a reserved seats quota did not have a positive effect relative to the baseline on this outcome, reinforcing the finding in Figure 1 that it is a less important factor than women's economic rights for how experts evaluate countries. In general, the similarity in results across our two outcomes is consistent with the idea that respondents in our survey view democracies as more worthy of foreign aid; in other words, that reforms to electoral competition and women's rights increase support for foreign aid at least in part via their effect on perceived level of democracy. We note, however, that we cannot directly assess this relationship. Women's rights may influence ideas about foreign aid provision independent of their effect on democracy.

Turning to the other variables in Figure 2, we see that respondents were significantly less likely to support giving middle-income countries foreign aid (compared to least-developed countries) (-0.17, SE = 0.03) and more likely to support giving it to low-corruption countries

¹³The ACME for less restrictive opposition parties is 0.24 (SE = 0.04) for aid vs. 0.17 (SE = 0.03) for more egalitarian women's economic rights.

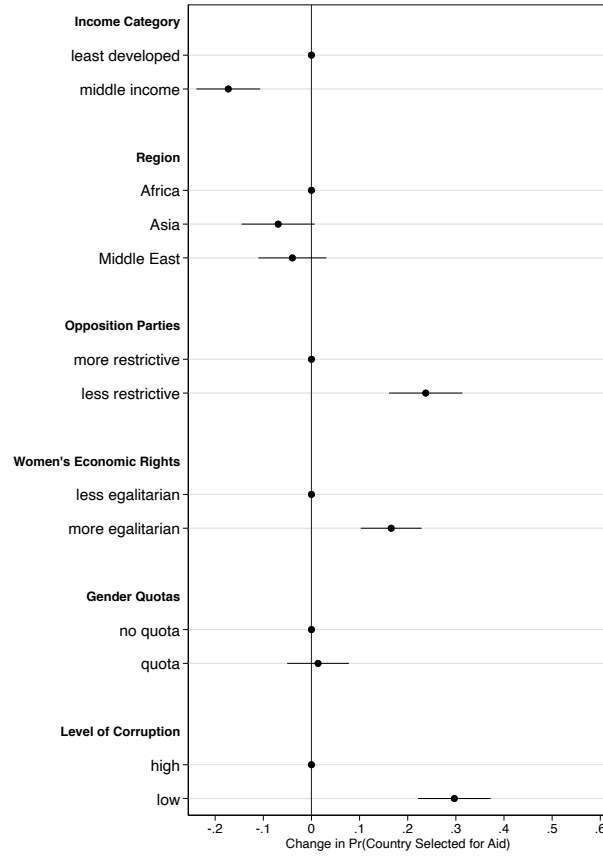


Figure 2: **Effects of country attributes on support for aid.** This figure shows the AM-CEs with 95 percent confidence intervals based on regressions with standard errors clustered by respondent.

(0.30, SE = 0.04), as would be expected given that these countries are thought of in development circles to have a greater need for and capacity to use aid effectively. We contrast our finding about the significant effect of economic development on support for aid in Figure 2 to the null effect on perceptions of democracy in Figure 1. These results suggest that our expert respondents were reading our scenarios carefully and distinguishing between the outcomes; whereas we expected and found that they would prioritize poorer countries for aid, they did not draw any conclusions about regime type from this information.

Notably, the effect sizes for the aid outcome associated with the income category and corruption treatments are roughly similar to those associated with opposition parties and

women’s economic rights. Put differently, the aid boost a country gains by being in the “least developed” category or low in corruption is about the same or even smaller than the boost it gets from electoral competition and one measure of gender equality. Given the traditional emphasis on economic need and preventing corruption in the allocation of foreign aid, these results are quite striking. Finally, we note that we do not observe significant regional variation in Figure 2.

One question that the preceding discussion raises is whether our results vary with respondents’ characteristics. First, we consider whether women responded more favorably to information about women’s economic rights, gender quotas, or both. As we show in SI §4, they generally did not.

Second, we consider whether respondents from different nationalities responded differently to information about gender equality laws in SI §5. We pre-registered a plan to compare American and European respondents, motivated by a recognition that the United States has lower levels of women’s representation in elected bodies than most West European countries do and, relatedly, does not have any form of gender quota, in contrast to many European countries. Since most of our European respondents ended up coming from Sida (i.e., from Sweden’s government agency for development cooperation), we also present non-pre-registered analyses in SI §5 that distinguish between Sida and non-Sida respondents. In general, we find that development professionals responded quite similarly to the treatments in our conjoint experiment, regardless of their nationality or organizational affiliation.

Finally, we consider the possibility of interactions between the women’s economic rights treatment and the region variable. As shown in SI §6, we find little evidence of a significant interaction between more egalitarian women’s rights and the country’s region.

6 Findings from the Replication Survey

Our findings are largely similar from the follow-up survey of ordinary Americans. Overall, the results (presented in SI §8 in the interest of space) are quite similar to what we found in the elite sample. Reforms to the environment for opposition parties (0.29, SE = 0.01), women’s economic rights (0.20, SE = 0.01), and women’s political rights (0.15, SE = 0.01) all significantly improved perceptions of democracy. All three variables also significantly enhanced support for giving the country foreign aid. Reforms to the environment for opposition parties made Americans 0.19 more likely (SE = 0.01) to want to give the country the new aid initiative, in contrast to 0.15 more likely (SE = 0.01) in the case of the reforms to women’s economic rights and 0.10 more likely (SE = 0.01) in the case of the quota.

Summing up, the American public—similar to international elites working in development and governance—perceives electoral reforms as the biggest positive reform in our survey. At the same time, both women’s rights reforms and especially the law related to economic rights have substantive large effects among the American public. We find the overall similarity of these results striking since we might expect an elite sample to respond differently either because professionals working in international development are more committed to gender equality or savvier about how authoritarian countries use gender reforms.

The one point of divergence with elites in terms of our hypotheses is that the mass public in the United States responded more positively to gender quotas. For example, the quota retained its positive and statistically significant effect for the support for aid variable among the public, whereas we did not identify a clear effect among elites. It may be that citizen respondents are less attuned than elites to how commonly autocracies have used legislative gender quotas as a strategy for retaining power. As such, they view quotas as a more positive signal for assessing countries’ democracy and, especially, aid worthiness.

7 Conclusion

Analysts increasingly note the instrumentalization of women’s rights as a tool of international reputation management. For some autocrats, this may be about projecting a general modernizing image, yet our research supports a deeper conclusion, that international audiences interpret advancements in women’s rights—even in areas unrelated to politics—more specifically as advancements in democracy. This core finding is important for at least two reasons.

First, it provides direct, microfoundational evidence in support of the idea that international norms can encourage policy substitution effects. Facing an external environment in which democracy is valued and incentivized, we show that leaders can choose to focus on policy areas that pose relatively less threat to political survival and still reap substantial reputational benefits (as well as material rewards). In other words, autocrats enjoy leeway in their efforts to signal democracy to the international community and can engage in selective norm compliance in an effort to ease pressure in other areas. From our interviews with international development practitioners, it is clear that they are aware of these strategic dynamics and of the danger of affording too much legitimacy to authoritarian governments.

Yet, before drawing a too-cynical conclusion, it is important to bear in mind the counterfactual: even if the only effect of democratic conditionality is to encourage reforms that enhance women’s rights and representation, this shift still represents important progress for women which may not otherwise have occurred. We know, for example, that women’s participation in economics and politics is associated with improved policy outcomes and increased public spending in areas prioritized by women (e.g., Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004; Clayton and Zetterberg, 2018; Mechkova and Carlitz, 2021). In sum, our findings join those who caution against conflating gender reforms with political liberalization, while at the same time underscoring the value of the democracy promotion agenda for enhancing women’s rights.

Second, our findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the preferences and beliefs of international development professionals. These individuals represent a key “front line” audience of interest for many developing-country governments. Yet their ideas about democracy, and how they weigh different types of domestic reform, remain under-studied. Our research yields some nuanced conclusions in this regard. Particularly interesting is the finding that legislative gender quotas exhibit a weaker impact on perceived democracy and support for foreign aid than does enhancing women’s economic rights. In part this may be explained by our respondents’ own experiences with quotas in their countries and specifically the mixed reaction that we found to them among Sida staffers. At the same time, our discussions with international practitioners indicate that they may consider gender quotas (in autocracies) to be less transformative for women than socioeconomic reforms which target the whole population and aim to redistribute real economic opportunities. Taken together, our findings suggest that international development practitioners embrace a broad, egalitarian conception of democracy which is more expansive than the procedural definitions often favored by scholars. This is a point that is surely worth more intense qualitative investigation, not least because it contrasts with the stereotype that Western policymakers are overly focused on elections at the expense of more substantive aspects of democracy.

Looking ahead, our study lays the foundation for continued exploration of autocratic reputation building. One promising extension of our research may be to explore a larger set of governance-related policies, beyond women’s rights, that leaders can implement in response to international pressure. For example, labor rights and control of corruption are also areas that Western actors target in their trade agreements, aid, and lending decisions. It is a more open question—and worthy of study—whether autocrats consider the political costs of such reforms to be bearable.

It would also be of interest to more precisely pin down the relationship between the two outcomes of our study: perceptions of (target country) democracy and support for providing

it with foreign aid. Here, we found that electoral and women's rights reforms influence both outcomes in similar ways. But further exploration could examine the extent to which countries are rewarded with aid specifically because they are viewed as democratizing, or whether women's rights reforms are rewarded at least in part on their own merit.

In closing, we note that our investigation here is limited to Western policy makers who value democracy and—as we show—are willing to reward countries for undertaking democratic reforms. The extent to which this dynamic translates to real reforms on the ground will depend on how important *Western* international audiences are for a particular regime. As autocratic great powers have become more economically integrated—and more assertive—on the international scene, we need to take seriously the ways in which, for some countries, Western influence is more limited than in the past (Hyde, 2020).

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