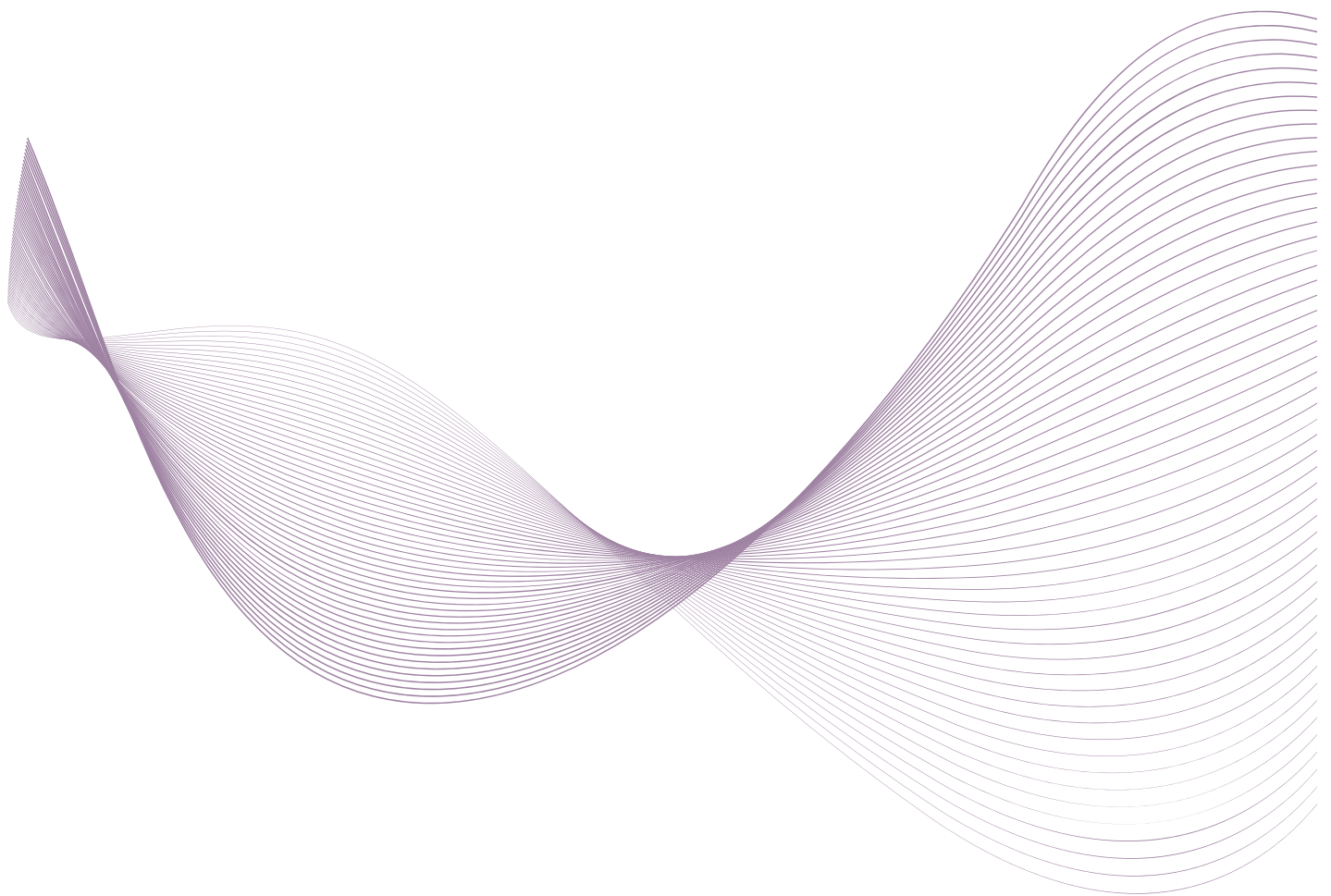


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# Democracy and Autocracy

Vol. 18(1) Feb. 2020

“Is Democracy Promotion Dead?”



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Symposium authors presenting at WCED Panel, “Is Democracy Promotion Dead?” on February 4th in Ann Arbor. From left to right: Thomas Flores, Jennifer Raymond Dresden, Erica Frantz, Jeffrey Conroy-Krutz, David Waldner, Dan Slater.

## New Decade, New Name, New Home

### Executive Editors' Note

**Dan Slater**, Ronald and Eileen Weiser Professor of Emerging Democracies, University of Michigan

**Rob Mickey**, Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Michigan

It has been nearly twenty years since APSA established its first organized section devoted entirely to the topic of democratization. Much has changed since then, from the burst of democratic optimism of the early 2010s to the more recent wave of autocratic reaction. These changes are reflected in the new name for both our organized section and our newsletter. What was once the section on Comparative Democratization and its *Annals of Comparative Democratization* is now captured by one shared name: *Democracy and Autocracy*.

The new decade has not only brought our newsletter a new name, but a new home. This is the inaugural issue published by the Weiser Center for Emerging Democracies (WCED) at the University of Michigan. After a decade of hand-in-glove collaboration with our sister area-studies center, the Weiser Center for Europe and Eurasia (WCEE), WCED has embarked as a global and interdisciplinary center in its own right, dedicated to the study of all matters related to democracy, authoritarianism, and transitions between them. In assuming the editorship of *Democracy and Autocracy*, WCED seeks to advance its global mission while bringing an interdisciplinary flavor to one of APSA's most active and robust organized sections. As a comparativist and Americanist with shared interests in the history of democratization and authoritarianism, we will also be sure that the case of the United States is not left out of these vital conversations.

We will draw on the scholars and resources of the WCED community in publishing *Democracy and Autocracy*. The heart of the center is its two-year postdoctoral program, and this inaugural issue is both introduced and guest-edited by one of our current postdocs, Matthew Cebul (Ph.D. Yale, 2019). WCED's core public mission is to organize and host expert roundtables on pressing issues of the day. Our intention is to pair these public roundtables with the newsletter in the form of thematic symposia.

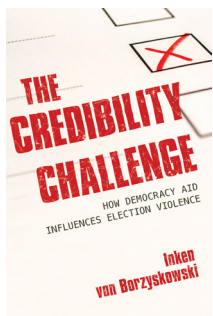
This inaugural issue is dedicated to the question: “*Is Democracy Promotion Dead?*” As Matthew discusses in his thematic introduction, it features essays by three

ultimately, is a political rather than an empirical determination, though it should certainly be informed by our research.

Regarding the human rights impact of other donors' practices (116–117), I argue that the idea of promoting democracy or human rights through foreign assistance is rapidly becoming obsolete with the growing foreign aid programs of not only China, but also Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. Research by Sarah Blodgett Bermeo (2011) finds that aid from authoritarian countries disproportionately flows to non-democratic regimes and is also associated with movement away from democracy. Irrespective of the donor, it remains that case that, so far, foreign assistance is a flawed instrument for advancing freedom.

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Bermeo, Sarah Blodgett (2011). [“Foreign Aid and Regime Change: A Role for Donor Intent,”](#) *World Development* 39(11): 2021–2031.



***The Credibility Challenge: How Democracy Aid Influences Election Violence.*** By Inken von Borzyskowski. Cornell University Press, 2019. 246 p. \$50 hardcover, \$25 Ebook

Review by Jessica Trisko Darden, Assistant Professor, School of International Service, American University

International election observation dates back to the 1850s, with the referendums that united two territories to form modern Romania. In the decades since, but especially following the collapse of the Soviet Union, election observation has been cast as an international public good. Taxpayers and donors in wealthy, democratic countries fund election monitoring missions and technical assistance as a form of foreign assistance designed to help expand democracy overseas, ensure that elections take place, and point out instances of fraud and voter intimidation. These are laudable ends. But, as Inken von Borzyskowski points out in *The Credibility Challenge: How Democracy Aid Influences Election Violence*, the effects of this “democracy aid” are far from clear.

As the saying goes, elections do not equal democracy. And while elections are typically associated with representative forms of government, they are also commonly used by authoritarian regimes. In this context, the presence of election observers can inadvertently cast a sheen of credibility on elections that

are far from free and fair. Acknowledging this concern, von Borzyskowski expands our understanding of the relationship between international democracy aid and electoral outcomes by differentiating between election observers and technical assistance. The former are extremely visible. Though they spend relatively little time in-country, high-profile election observers are often the focus of international press coverage relating to the election. Their seals of approval or condemnations shape the international community’s perception of an election’s outcome. In contrast, the impact of the latter form of democracy aid, technical assistance, takes place far from the telephoto lens. Bureaucratic experts seek to increase the capacity of national electoral commissions, facilitate election-related coordination, and ensure the smooth registration of candidates and voters. This technical assistance is implemented over a much longer time horizon and can help increase the credibility of election outcomes by improving both the capacity and credibility of key election-related institutions.

*The Credibility Challenge* provides significant evidence of the ways in which external actors shift the incentives of local actors to engage in violence through the provision of international democracy aid. By focusing specifically on election violence—a subset of political violence aimed at influencing the election process or outcome—von Borzyskowski is able to isolate a discrete period of time during which the intervention of external actors can have a significant influence on local dynamics. In targeting those involved in the election process, including candidates, their supporters, election officials, and voters, election violence is narrowly conceptualized as actively and intentionally linked to ongoing political processes.

von Borzyskowski focuses specifically on the casualties of such violence, rather than broader patterns of intimidation or harassment which are both more difficult to measure and harder to distinguish from other forms of political violence. Yet, as her own experience being tear-gassed by government forces following Kenya’s second 2017 election suggests, the boundaries between election violence and others forms of political violence are often blurred. Election violence can be perpetrated by both state and non-state actors. It can be geographically isolated or widespread. It can have escalatory dynamics, spillover effects, or be a flash in the pan.

One might assume, then, that the causes of election violence should be deeply contextual and influenced by the unique political dynamics surrounding any particular election. Yet, looking at over 400 elections in Africa and Latin America, von Borzyskowski identifies

some key trends. First, the intensity of election violence declines under high-capacity election commissions. Second, high-capacity election commissions are also associated with more peaceful elections in general. But the capacity of an election commission is not the only factor at play. As von Borzyskowski writes, “when [election] observers cast doubt on the credibility of the result by issuing a negative report, they may unintentionally encourage losers to challenge the outcome...Because a negative [international organization] report increases losers’ incentives to challenge the result, it can have the unintended consequence of contributing to violence” (18).

The idea that the international public good of independent election monitoring may inadvertently increase the likelihood of electoral violence in countries with contested elections is a serious challenge to the dominant narrative about the impact of international democracy aid. To see how serious a challenge this is, one need only look at the book’s endorsements, which (with the exception of Irfan Nooruddin) either dance around or completely ignore this core finding. Instead, they favor von Borzyskowski’s other major finding—that election-related technical assistance strengthens public confidence in election results.

To understand this reaction, it is useful to situate *The Credibility Challenge* within the context of a growing body of research that demonstrates the hard limits of America’s efforts to expand democracy overseas. Sarah Sunn Bush’s *The Taming of Democracy Assistance: Why Democracy Promotion Does Not Confront Dictators* draws attention to the “democracy establishment” that is fueled by the billions of dollars in democracy aid spent by states and international organizations each year. She finds that many current democracy aid-funded activities do not threaten the survival of autocrats. Instead, foreign-funded democracy-related activities and groups create the veneer of political opposition within non-democratic regimes, allowing dictators to claim they are open to dissent. Local actors are allowed to engage in such activities and continue to receive foreign funding so long as they don’t push too hard.

But, increasingly, this compromise is falling apart. In countries with some political freedoms, the heavy emphasis of democracy promotion activities on stimulating political participation at the local level may antagonize governments, leading to restrictions similar to those imposed on foreign NGOs in Hong Kong, Egypt, Hungary, India, and Russia, among other countries. This contraction of civil society space has occurred in spite of what Michael McFaul (2004) identified as growth in the legitimacy and practice of external actors promoting

democracy—be they states, NGOs, or international institutions—as the idea that people have a right to democracy has gained support.

The idea that democracy is an end point on a political trajectory is no longer taken for granted. The rigorous statistical analyses and cogent theory provided by von Borzyskowski in *The Credibility Challenge* suggest that our assumptions about democracy aid are also well worth revisiting.

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Bush, Sarah Sunn (2016). *The Taming of Democracy Assistance: Why Democracy Promotion Does Not Confront Dictators*. Cambridge University Press.

McFaul, Michael. 2004–2005. “[Democracy Promotion as a World Value.](#)” *The Washington Quarterly* 28(1): 147–163.

## Response from Inken von Borzyskowski

I am grateful to Jessica Trisko Darden for her thoughtful and enthusiastic review, which touches on some of the key contributions of my book and also highlights its importance for researchers and practitioners engaged in democracy assistance and conflict prevention. The issue of foreign aid and democracy promotion is contentious and increasingly controversial in public debates. Aid and democracy promotion need consideration and learning from both successes and failures, and a weighing of the various pros and cons, effects and risks associated with different options in the toolbox of practitioners. As usual, it is not a simple conclusion about aid being good or bad in general. This is important because these debates can find their way into policy discussions and decision-making.

As Trisko Darden rightly points out, one of the core findings of my book is that observer condemnations can have unintended negative effects. Outside observers can exacerbate *post*-election violence intensity if they cast doubt on election credibility. I also document the condemnation effect on the risk of violence—using different data and different models than in the book—in a recent article (von Borzyskowski 2019). The potentially negative consequences of observation are important, but we should also consider the other findings on observation.

Election observation has positive effects especially in the run-up to elections. As I show in the book’s second chapter (pp. 71–99), observation can reduce the intensity of *pre*-election violence. It shapes the electoral



environment during the campaign period and can reduce incentives of candidates and parties to engage in violence by increasing accountability for manipulation. It increases the credibility of campaigning periods. This is similar to arguments about the observer effect on fraud: the presence of observers makes it more likely that manipulation will be detected and publicized, thus deterring illicit practices (Hyde 2011). The analyses show that observed elections have less campaign violence, and that this does not seem to be due to selection (observers are not more likely to attend peaceful elections). Together with earlier work, these findings suggest that election observation can reduce fraud and violence before elections – but after elections, observer condemnation can exacerbate the risk and intensity of violence.

Further, the other major type of international election support – technical election assistance – is associated with less election violence. As Trisko Darden points out, election commissions are important for lowering the prospects of violence, and technical assistance can increase the capacity of election institutions and perceived election quality (pp. 131-148). Technical election assistance is also associated with less election violence before and after voting (pp. 127, 84-87). This form of election support has received little attention in the past and provides a promising field of future research.

Election aid largely has positive effects in terms of reducing fraud and violence – with the negative effect of condemnation a notable exception. These findings suggest nuanced policy implications (pp. 157-163). Together with *Aiding and Abetting*, our two books showcase interesting dynamics of different policy tools (election, economic, military aid) on violence in recipient countries, suggesting nuance and care in how and when democracy and development are supported across a wide variety of country contexts. Support for elections and democracy need not be seen as strictly positive or negative: the question is usually not whether to support democracy, but how and where to support democracy. The same can be said of many other types of aid.

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Hyde, Susan. 2011. *The Pseudo-Democrat’s Dilemma: Why Election Observation Became an International Norm.* Cornell University Press.

## Meet the Authors



**Jeffrey Conroy-Krutz** is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Michigan State University, studying media, ethnicity, clientelism, and polarization in Africa, and focusing on experiments. His current work examines radio-based efforts to combat hate speech and encourage democratic engagement, in Burundi, DR Congo, Kenya, Mali, Niger, and Rwanda; he has also worked in Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Senegal, and Uganda. His work appears in *African Affairs*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Journal of Politics*, *World Development*, and elsewhere, with funders including the NSF, USAID, BBC Media Action, and US State Department. He currently edits the [Afrobarometer Working Papers Series](#).



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**Ellen Lust** is the Founding Director of the Programs on Governance and Local Development (est. 2015) and Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg. She has held faculty positions at Rice University and Yale University, and has conducted fieldwork and implemented surveys across the Middle East and Africa. She has authored numerous books, textbooks, and articles, including most recently, *Safer Research in the Social Sciences: A Systematic Handbook for Human and Digital Security* (SAGE Publishing, 2019), in collaboration with Jannis Grimm, Kevin Koehler, Ilyas Saliba, and Isabell Schierenbeck. Her current research is aimed at examining political transitions and local governance.



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**Jessica Trisko Darden** is an Assistant Professor at American University's School of International Service and a Non-Resident Fellow at George Washington University's Program on Extremism. She was previously a Jeane Kirkpatrick Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and a Visiting Scholar at Yale University's Program on Order, Conflict, and Violence. Dr. Trisko Darden is the author of *Aiding and Abetting: U.S. Foreign Assistance and State Violence* (Stanford, 2020) and co-author of *Insurgent Women: Female Combatants in Civil Wars* (Georgetown, 2019). Her research examines the influence of foreign assistance and international development programs on political violence conducted by both state and non-state armed groups.



**Inken von Borzyskowski** is Assistant Professor of Political Science at University College London, having recently moved from Florida State University. She received her PhD from UW-Madison. Her research falls into three areas: international democracy assistance, international organizations' membership politics, and election violence. Related to election violence prevention, she has conducted externally-funded field research in Liberia and Kenya. Her work is published in *International Studies Quarterly*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Peace Research*, *Review of International Organizations*, and Cornell University Press.



**David Waldner** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Politics at the University of Virginia, where he teaches courses in political development, democratic transitions, and qualitative methods. His research focuses on the interconnection between state building, economic development, and democratic transitions in the post-colonial world.