

Electoral Authoritarianism's Inherent Contradiction: Understanding International Incentives for Democratization

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Abstract

In the 21st century, democracy is perceived as the only broadly legitimate regime type, forcing would-be dictators and other authoritarian regimes to adopt, or at least mimic, varying degrees of democratic practices and norms. These increasingly common combinations of democratic practices with authoritarian governance called for the creation of new regime labels, as the predominant term of the latter half of the 20th century, hybrid regimes, no longer captured the nuance in these new forms of governance. This paper focuses on electoral authoritarianism, one of these increasingly prominent regime types, because of the term's inherent contradiction: why would authoritarian regimes hold elections? What benefits would authoritarian leaders derive from these elections that would serve to outweigh the negatives associated with potentially losing an election? While domestic considerations are undoubtedly important, this paper explores international incentives driving these regimes to hold elections. International incentives, the independent variable, are captured by foreign aid expenditures and bilateral trade ties. V-Dem's data is used to examine where transitions from closed autocracy to electoral autocracy occur, measure the extent that electoral or liberal democracy is achieved, and determine how "clean" the regime's elections are. I expect that when a closed authoritarian regime allows elections, they garner spikes in these international incentives. I find that closed autocracies that transition to electoral autocracies derive increased positive international financial incentives, but only if they continue democratizing.

Keywords: comparative politics, democratic backsliding, democracy promotion, democratic quality, electoral authoritarianism, electoral quality, international relations

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Introduction

Modern authoritarian regimes are fundamentally different from their 20th-century counterparts. Juan Linz's 1975 foundational work on autocracies, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, contains barely any reference to multiparty elections within authoritarian regimes and nothing even resembling the notion of competitive or electoral authoritarian regimes (Diamond, 2002: 24). Terms such as "competitive authoritarianism," "pseudodemocracy," "electoral democracy," and "electoral authoritarianism" have risen in popularity and come to dominate the discourse surrounding 21st-century democracy (Levitsky and Way, 2002: 51). While not entirely new concepts, these terms filled a void in the existing literature about what modern authoritarian regime types look like and how they function. The all-encompassing nature of these topics should come as no surprise: India's recent slide into electoral authoritarianism means that 68% of the world's population now lives in some form of an autocratic regime (Alizada et al., 2021: 13).

This work will focus primarily on the last term outlined above, electoral authoritarianism, because of its inherent contradiction accentuating the following puzzle: what drives authoritarian regimes to hold elections? What benefits would authoritarian leaders derive from these elections that would serve to outweigh the negatives associated with potentially losing an election? Authoritarian leaders of the past were solely focused on eliminating forms of uncertainty from the political arena, yet elections are a vast source of uncertainty (Schmitter and Karl, 1991: 117; Schedler, 1998: 95). As such, it is imperative to understand why the practice of electoral authoritarianism is gaining ground and why Schedler, an early progenitor of the term, stated that the "contemporary dictator practices electoral authoritarianism" (2015: 1).

Defining Electoral Authoritarianism

To start with, it is worth providing a conceptual definition of electoral authoritarianism. The foundational basis for this term is built upon what Schedler described as a "two-sided distinction" (2015: 2). First, the term introduces a difference between multiparty regimes, as some are authoritarian and some are traditional democratic regimes. The acknowledgment that authoritarian regimes can allow multiparty elections, even if the quality of these elections wildly

differs when compared to genuinely democratic multiparty elections, is crucial. Secondly, the term differentiates between traditional, non-electoral autocratic regimes and autocratic regimes that hold multiparty elections. In this way, the very presence of multiparty elections splits the category of authoritarian regimes, while the quality of these elections distinguishes them from electoral democracies (Schedler, 2015: 2).

With these distinctions in mind, it becomes substantially easier to place electoral authoritarian regimes on the continuum of regime types between the opposing poles of closed autocracies and liberal democracies. Schedler proposes that two symmetrical categories, electoral authoritarianism and electoral democracy, fill the void between the opposing poles and capture substantial variations among regime types (2002: 37). This categorization of electoral authoritarianism between closed autocracy and electoral democracy is emblematic of the conceptual differences outlined above and helps visualize the updated regime spectrum accordingly.

Establishing electoral authoritarianism as a category and not simply a by-product of a democratic transition is vital. As Levitsky and Way contend, many studies within the fields of competitive and electoral authoritarianism treat regimes bearing these labels as “undergoing prolonged transitions” to democracy (2002: 51-2). Instead, they argue that these regimes should be viewed as coexisting with “meaningful democratic institutions” that are widely viewed as the principal means of obtaining and exercising political authority (Levitsky and Way, 2002: 54). Because the incumbent regime violates these rules and norms, although to varying degrees across parties and states, the regime does not meet the conventional standards for democracy but continues to persist. Therefore, it is crucial to understand that while electoral autocracies can democratize, they can also stagnate as a hybrid regime or lurch towards closed authoritarianism. Although electoral authoritarianism was once thought to be “inherently transitional and unstable,” there is now considerable consensus that it is a distinct and durable regime type (Miller, 2017: 40).

The Costs and Benefits of Holding Multiparty Elections

It is now worth examining exactly how and in what ways electoral authoritarian regimes mitigate the risks associated with allowing multiparty elections. Broad normative consensus

exists regarding what democratic elections entail, with the pillars of competition, freedom, integrity, and fairness remaining uniquely constant (Schedler, 2015: 3). In electoral authoritarian regimes, a considerable amount of effort is spent on the part of the regime to ensure that these pillars appear to be intact when, in fact, they are not. Autocrats can undermine these elections in any number of ways, as they have access to an open-ended “menu of electoral manipulation” (Schedler, 2002: 36; Schedler, 2015: 3). Some, but certainly not all, of these options include vote-rigging, institutional discrimination, censorship, physical repression, gerrymandering, and outright fraud (Schedler, 2002: 45; Schedler, 2015: 1; Miller 2017: 21). As a result of these factors, elections that are constantly marred by irregularities are indicative of autocratic leaders attempting to mitigate the risks associated with elections and do not represent “free and fair” elections. As such, the distinction between “free and fair elections” held under democratic regimes and the elections held under electoral authoritarian regimes “hinges on the quality of electoral competition” (Donno, 2013: 704).

The questions surrounding election integrity are critical and should be asked of every regime that holds any form of election, fully democratic or otherwise. What is different for electoral autocracies, however, is their need to balance “electoral control and electoral credibility” (Schedler, 2002: 37). In liberal and electoral democracies, the incumbent regime’s ability to control the outcome is sufficiently diminished to the point of fair competition, whereas the incumbent in an electoral autocracy has increased leverage over the inner workings of the election process. However, even with this increased leverage, incumbents in electoral autocracies are careful not to remove all chances of the opposition winning, as this would hurt their chances of reaping the “fruits of electoral legitimacy” (Schedler, 2002: 37). As such, if incumbents in electoral autocracies avoid egregious, well-publicized abuses of power and commit brazen acts of election interference, they can maintain their grip on power (Levitsky and Way, 2002: 58).

It is imperative to note that electoral authoritarian regimes do not hold elections because they feel morally compelled to do so, but rather that they do so out of “rational self-interest” (Hyde, 2015: 4). These regimes expect that benefits will follow their adoption of elections, whether from internal or external actors, making the risks inherent in elections worth allowing. In this context, elections are explicitly “costly signals:” autocratic regimes tie their hands and leave themselves susceptible to potential electoral losses because they expect to garner some kind of reward in return (Fearon, 1997: 69). Hyde furthers this argument with her contention

that states seeking international incentives must portray themselves as being the “good type,” which, in this case, means allowing elections (Hyde, 2011: 9). However, electoral authoritarian regimes attempting to portray themselves this way are walking a fine line: they must simultaneously maintain their grip on power through multiparty elections while ensuring the elections appear clean enough to garner these incentives.

In their widely cited 2011 book, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries*, Bunce and Wolchik focus on the domestic dynamics within electoral authoritarian regimes. The authors examine the strategies employed by opposition actors within the country, contending that the adoption of the “electoral model” of transition is the only way for opposition parties to remove the incumbents from office successfully (Bunce and Wolchik, 2011: 37; Schedler, 2015: 6). The “electoral model” comprises several factors, including the formation of a cohesive opposition, ambitious campaigns to register voters, advertising the costs imposed by the current regime, and deploying domestic and international election observers (Bunch and Wolchik, 2006: 291).

While this book delves into the way opposition parties can win even in subpar electoral conditions, much can be gleaned about the situations where the opposition is unable to win. In arguing that opposition parties can only remove electoral authoritarian incumbents if they are organized, cooperate, and willing to accept mutual antagonism within their coalition, the argument implies that the incumbent regimes will continue to reap the benefits from allowing elections if these conditions are not present. If the incumbents were not garnering some form of benefits from holding elections, what would motivate them to hold elections in the first place?

Another central argument for why electoral authoritarian regimes hold multiparty elections originates from Levitsky and Way’s 2010 book *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*. In it, they contend that societies that are “densely interwoven” with the international community are increasingly likely to hold elections “Levitsky and Way, 2010: 23; Schedler, 2015: 5). The inverse is also true in that if autocracies are isolated from international pressures, they are unlikely to hold competitive elections. A central tenet of their argument is that the Western liberal hegemony that dominated international affairs since the end of the Cold War created strong incentives for ruling elites around the world to adopt “Western-style political institutions” and raised the costs of sustaining autocratic rule (Levitsky and Way, 2010: 23; Levitsky and Way, 2020: 52). Inherent in this argument is the idea that

authoritarian leaders benefit from following the international norms regarding multiparty elections, either for positive (ex: increased developmental aid) or negative (ex: fear over economic sanctions) reasons.

Furthermore, autocratic regimes have come to realize that merely having the presence of “contested elections” enables them to reap the international benefits primarily aimed at democracy promotion (Miller, 2017: 22). Democracy promotion policies often result in rewarding regimes holding critically flawed elections, and, as Diamond contends, it is typical that a “highly minimalist, electoral conception of democracy” fulfills the criteria necessary to receive democracy promotion aid (2002). These forces tempt autocratic regimes to hold systematically flawed multiparty elections to gain international benefits, but only if domestic socio-economic conditions enable them to dominate the ensuing electoral competition (Miller 2017: 17-18).

A robust discussion of these ideas has continued in the past ten years, and both internal and external actors play a role in authoritarian regimes’ decision-making processes on whether or not to hold multiparty elections. Conventional wisdom on the subject lands somewhere in the middle, arguing that when domestic and international pressure is intense, organized, and focused in the same direction, regimes are more likely to shift towards democracy (Bunce and Wolchik, 2011: 37; Levitsky and Way, 2010: 23). While understanding that domestic actors play a substantial role in a given country's adoption of multiparty elections, this paper focuses primarily on the role of international democracy promotion incentives and aims to produce a new scholarly contribution to the existing electoral authoritarianism literature through an exploratory analysis of regime transitions and international benefits.

As such, the central hypothesis that I will test in this paper is as follows:

H₁: Closed autocracies that transition to electoral autocracies will derive increased international benefits aimed at democracy promotion.

Measuring Electoral Authoritarianism and Operationalizing its Electoral Costs and Benefits

Measuring levels of democracy and autocracy is an arduous task, with no absolute consensus about the correct way to undertake this process (Coppedge et al., 2011: 247). For this paper, the crucial indicator of interest is the year when a closed autocracy transitions to an electoral autocracy, as this year marks the period where I expect a given country's levels of international incentives to increase. I will use Varieties of Democracies' (V-Dem) "Regimes of the World Measure" to assess precisely when such transitions occur.² This measure assigns each country-year a score from zero to four, where zero represents closed autocracy, one represents an electoral autocracy, two an electoral democracy, and three a liberal democracy. As such, the specific year transitions in regime type took place can be identified, and the incentives, as well as other democracy measures, can be measured over the transition period.

Measuring regime types in this way also allows for the distinction between democratization processes and strategic shifts within autocratic styles of government (Miller, 2017: 21). The processes incentivizing closed autocracies to shift toward electoral authoritarianism may not be the exact processes that incentivize a shift towards a fully democratic system. For example, positive shifts in the Polity dataset³ from closed authoritarian regimes are three times more likely to result in electoral authoritarianism than democracy (Miller, 2017: 19). Measuring how international incentives influence the more nuanced democracy indices, including V-Dem's "Electoral Democracy Index" and Correlates of War's "Polity Score," is a substantially different task and requires a significantly different methodology.⁴ When attempting to analyze what results from these shifts towards electoral autocratic forms of government, it is useful to use a dataset that makes a distinct conceptual differentiation between autocracies, electoral autocracies, and democracies.

² Coppedge et al., 2021. "V-Dem Codebook v11.1" Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project.

³ Available at: systemicpeace.org/inscrdata

⁴ For an influential "large-n" study of the efficacy of democracy promotion aid, see: Finkel et al., 2018, Effects of U.S. Foreign Assistance on Democracy Building

Economic Factors

In assessing the international benefits autocratic regimes stand to gain by allowing multiparty elections, economic factors are a solid starting place. Economic growth, stability, and security are pivotal to ensuring the longevity of any regime (Cable, 1995: 307; Feng, 1997: 392). Increasing and diversifying the international sources of economic cooperation provides regimes with much-needed investments and opportunities for growth (Diamond, 1999: 79). If these opportunities are contingent on allowing multiparty elections, it is entirely reasonable for autocratic leaders to signal their good intentions in an effort to solidify and expand their economic base.

Trade Ties

Democracy promotion policies target economic benefits in a multitude of ways, with bilateral and multilateral trade agreements being among the most prominent. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to these economic agreements moving forward as “positive incentives.” In this way, if an autocratic regime allows multiparty elections or takes other steps towards democratization, the regime can expect to garner these positive incentives as rewards.

Ensuring access to such economic agreements can often be a matter of regime survival. Democratic regimes, on the whole, prefer to trade with other democratic regimes, creating the implicit notion that taking steps toward democratization will result in positive economic results (Miller, 2017: 23). This trading preference stems from the increasingly open and competitive markets typically found in democratic states (Milner, 2005: 188).

However, that is not to say that democratic regimes are entirely unwilling to trade with autocratic regimes. In the case of apartheid South Africa, 95% of its bilateral trade in the 1980s was with democratic states (Miller, 2017: 26). When many of these democratic regimes threatened to revoke these trade agreements following South Africa’s domestic political turmoil in the 1990s, the regime liberalized (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2014: 97). While domestic factors present in South Africa certainly played a leading role in the decision of the international system to pressure the regime into reforming, the power of economic threats was substantial. These threats to rescind cooperation are what I will refer to as “negative incentives.”

For the sake of operationalizing the impact that trade ties’ have on autocratic regimes’ decision to allow multiparty elections, this paper will focus on positive rather than negative

incentives. First and foremost, they offer verifiable, quantitative insights into the results of allowing multiparty elections in autocratic regimes. Negative incentives typically come in the form of coercive threats that may or may not occur, and their efficacy, particularly pertaining to economic sanctions, has repeatedly been called into question (Drezner, 2003: 644; Hovi et al., 2005: 479; Pape, 1997: 92). Because it is nearly impossible to know the decision-making process undertaken within a given regime's leadership without a first-hand account, it is difficult to discern anything of value from the use of negative incentives (Barber, 1979: 368).

In order to measure positive incentives for international trade, I will use the Correlates of War dataset on bilateral trade.⁵ Because this dataset ended in 2014, data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Bilateral Trade dataset is used to bring the data up to 2020.⁶ I will use the United States' dyadic trading relationships as a proxy for democracies' ability to incentivize autocratic regimes to allow elections for two reasons. First, the United States is the world's largest economy, with trading relationships with nearly every polity worldwide. Second, the U.S. explicitly uses trade policy, both positively and negatively, to incentivize certain behaviors and norms from its trading partners (Bailey et al., 1997: 310; Bergsten, 2002: 87). Because the U.S. often "weaponizes" its economic policy in this way, I expect that autocratic regimes that allow elections will see an uptick in bilateral trade with the U.S (Farrell and Newman, 2019: 46).

Following the central hypothesis of the paper, I would expect to see the following:

H₂: Closed autocracies that transition to electoral autocracies will experience increased bilateral trade with the United States.

Foreign Aid

Foreign aid also serves as a substantial incentive for authoritarian regimes to hold multiparty elections. These types of aid take varying forms but can include everything from funding for massive projects, such as the building or reforming of infrastructure and foundational improvements in healthcare and education healthcare provisions, to establishing local security

⁵ Barbieri, Katherine and Omar M. G. Omar Keshk. 2016. Correlates of War Project Trade Data Set Codebook, Version 4.0. Available at: correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/bilateral-trade

⁶ BTDIxE dataset. Available at: stats-oecd.org

forces to protect civilians. These forms of foreign aid can have outsized implications for regimes, as accessing these pools of resources is enticing and can be a driving factor toward increasing pluralism within an autocratic regime.

Further, the United States provides billions of USD annually to promote democracy abroad through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).⁷ The absence of substantial alternative economic aid sources increases many autocratic regimes' need for ties with democratic countries (Levitsky and Way, 2002: 61).⁸

With that said, considerable questions surround foreign aid's efficacy in promoting democracy (Knack, 2004: 262). However, to an autocratic regime intent on retaining power, the prospect of allowing the bare minimum “electoral conception of democracy” to garner the right to access these resources is alluring (Miller, 2017: 23).

In order to measure foreign aid as a positive incentive, I will use USAID's foreign aid expenditure dataset.⁹ The United States is one of the largest foreign aid donors in the world, spending the most raw capital (though not the largest percentage of its GDP) on foreign aid in the world. This dataset provides information on all projects approved through the agency from 2001 to 2020, and I have specifically chosen to look at three categories of USAID spending: democracy, human rights, and governance (DRG), economic development, and peace and security. These categories were chosen for several reasons. First, DRG spending is explicitly aimed at the type of policies that would lead to the allowance of multiparty elections in autocratic regimes. Instead of sitting back and enabling opposition leaders to claim these funds, autocrats may instead choose to allow elections on their own (flawed) terms while seeking to reap the rewards of these democratization processes. Second, because economic and security crises can potentially spell the downfall of an autocratic regime, and because autocratic leaders fear being forcibly removed from power, seeking incentives by allowing elections in dire situations may help solve both problems: the aid can be used to alleviate the crisis, and if it proves insufficient, the autocrat can leave office via popular vote instead of more violent means. Finally, the data will be used as a proxy to show how inflows of foreign aid to an autocratic regime change over time compared to the regime's type.

⁷ Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance | USAID. Available at: [usaid.gov/democracy](https://www.usaid.gov/democracy)

⁸ However, as China's (as well as Russia's, Iran's, etc.) capacity and desire to provide these alternative forms of foreign aid grows, this argument may need reassessment. See: Cheng, 2019

⁹ Available at: foreignassistance.gov/data

As such, the following hypothesis draws a correlation between foreign aid expenditures in a given country and the allowance of multiparty elections:

H₃: Closed autocracies that transition to electoral autocracies will experience an increased inflow of foreign aid from USAID.

Electoral and Democratic Quality

Because much of this foreign aid is aimed at democracy promotion, it is worth noting both the electoral quality of the democratizing elections as well as the regime's trajectory after transitioning to electoral authoritarianism. Electoral quality is of interest if the positive incentives are correctly working because a regime that holds free and fair elections should gain more incentives than a transitioning regime that holds marred elections. If the incentives are doled out to transitioning regimes regardless of electoral quality, it would seem increasingly likely that closed authoritarian regimes would hold elections under the facade of democracy to gain these incentives.

In order to measure electoral quality, I will use V-Dem's dataset, which contains a measure of "clean elections."¹⁰ The clean elections index (CEI) is measured on a 0 to 1 interval scale,¹¹ with higher scores indicating "cleaner" elections that are free of systematic irregularities and government manipulation and violence. This index is comprised of several of their smaller variables, most notably: the autonomy and capacity of electoral management bodies (EMB), voting irregularities, government electoral intimidation, vote-buying on behalf of the incumbent, and state and non-state electoral violence.¹²

Assessing how democratic quality shifts after transitions from closed authoritarianism to electoral authoritarianism is imperative. Understandably, it is expected that a regime's democracy scores will spike after transitioning to an electoral autocracy, but what is more interesting is the democratic trajectory it follows afterward. If the regime continues to democratize following its transition, then international democracy promotion incentives can be said to have a positive effect over the long term. However, as much of the current literature on

¹⁰ Coppedge et al., 2021. "V-Dem Codebook v11.1" Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. Available at: v-dem.net/dsarchive.html

¹¹ I have converted this interval to a percentage running from 0% to 100% for ease of visualization.

¹² Coppedge et al., 2021. "V-Dem Codebook v11.1" Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. Available at: v-dem.net/dsarchive.html

democracy promotion is grappling with, regimes may transition to electoral authoritarianism, seeing an initial spike in democracy scores, but their scores often then hold constant or see minimal improvement moving forward. I posit there are two possible explanations for this phenomenon: first, the regime's good-faith democratization efforts were stalled for any combination of reasons, or second, the regime had no intention of democratizing further and, instead, sought the positive incentives associated with holding elections.

To measure democratic quality, I again turn to V-Dem's indices. I will use both their "Electoral Democracy Index" (EDI) and their "Liberal Democracy Index" (LDI) because although they are related, they have important conceptual differences.¹³ On the one hand, the EDI seeks explicitly to measure the electoral principles of democracy: namely, to what extent are rulers responsive to their citizens, is electoral competition free and fair, how extensive is suffrage throughout the country, and is civil society able to operate freely. The LDI, on the other, builds on the EDI by adding measures regarding the protection of individual rights, including the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, and checks and balances that limit executive power. Both indices are measured on a 0 to 1 interval scale,¹⁴ with higher scores indicating to what extent the ideals of electoral and liberal democracy are achieved.¹⁵ Taken together, they provide tremendous insight into a regime's democratic quality, which will be used to assess the following hypothesis:

H₄: Regimes that transition from closed authoritarianism to electoral authoritarianism will see increased international financial benefits aimed at democracy promotion, resulting in increased democracy index scores.

Methodology

After the explanatory theory-building process was complete and questions of operationalization were settled, the next task was compiling these indicators into one dataset. This new dataset, comprised of USAID foreign aid expenditures, U.S. bilateral trade data, V-Dem's regime measure, indices of democracy, and electoral cleanliness index, has nearly 2,200

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ I have converted these intervals to percentages running from 0% to 100% for ease of visualization.

¹⁵ Coppedge et al., 2021. "V-Dem Codebook v11.1" Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. Available at: v-dem.net/dsarchive.html

rows. Data is provided on a country-year basis for nearly every country in the world from 2001 to 2020.

I combed the dataset for cases where closed autocracies transitioned to electoral autocracies using V-Dem's regime measure to test the first four hypotheses. There were a few dozen instances where these transitions occurred, but I ruled out many of them for several reasons.

First, if the regime experienced rapid fluctuations in its type, it was not considered as a case because this instability creates an environment where it is difficult for international (and domestic) actors to predict and interpret the regime's actions. Second, a case was discarded if the transition occurred within the last several years, as not enough time has passed to observe how the levels of international incentives shift with the transition. Finally, cases were chosen with an eye toward geographic, historical, and cultural variation. This process sought to ensure that endogenous regime traits, including post-colonial or post-soviet status, were not influencing the observed trends. Based on the preceding arguments, I selected two countries that transitioned from a closed autocracy to an electoral autocracy during the period covered by my dataset: Burundi and Pakistan.

It is crucial to note that the following case studies are rudimentary and explanatory in nature. There are myriad forces determining whether or not closed authoritarian regimes will hold elections and transition to electoral authoritarianism. These cases serve as plausibility probes that seek to explore the connections between regime transitions and international incentives; I do not try to prove causation in one direction or another (Levy, 2008: 6). They should be viewed as illustrations and visualizations of how these forces interact in the 21st century, opening the door for future research on these connections and more in-depth examinations of these cases.

Data and Analysis

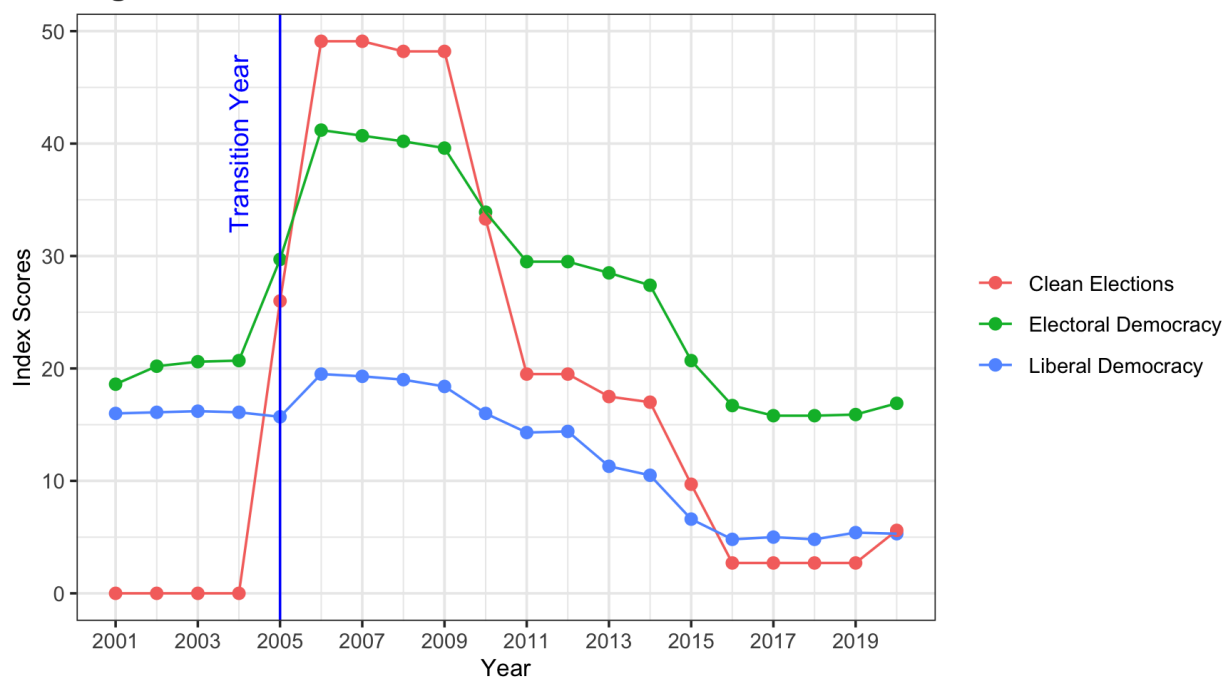
To introduce the case studies, I will lay out the format each will follow. First, I will give an admittedly brief description of each country's context leading up to their transition to electoral autocracy and note exactly when V-Dem codes this transition. Second, I will present two figures, the first of which shows the V-Dem indices (CEI, DEI, and LDI) over the covered period

(2001-2020). The second figure shows what I have outlined above as positive international financial incentives, which includes bilateral trade data and the USAID data. Finally, I will discuss the interactions between two figures across the year the regime transitioned, listing observations and posing potential confounding variables.

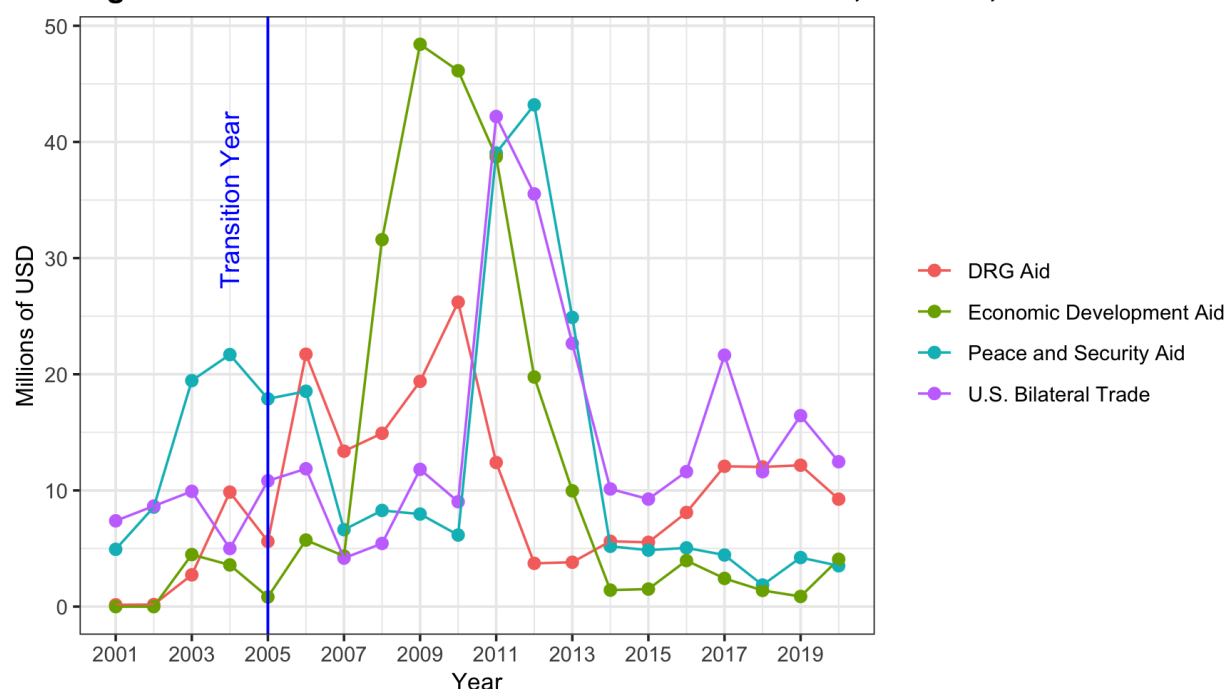
Burundi

Burundi became an independent nation in 1962 and almost immediately was thrown into political and military conflict. With a rotating door of constitutional monarchies, military regimes, and coups (some failed, some successful), political life in Burundi was anything but stable. The 2005 elections held in Burundi were the first since the 1993 Rwandan genocide began, as the interim period was dominated by military factions vying for power and ethnic divisions tearing the country apart. Peace agreements in 2000 and 2003 eventually laid the groundwork for the 2005 elections, where V-Dem officially categorized Burundi as having transitioned from a closed autocracy to an electoral autocracy. With 2005 as our transitional reference point, Figure 1A and Figure 1B show the V-Dem indices and international incentives for Burundi.

Figure 1A. V-Dem Indices, Burundi, 2001-2020



Source: Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project v11.1, Available at: v-dem.net/dsarchive.html

Figure 1B. Positive International Financial Incentives, Burundi, 2001-2020

Source: Correlates of War Project Trade Data Set, Version 4.0: correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/bilateral-trade. BTDXE dataset: [stats-oecd.org](https://stats.oecd.org). USAID foreign aid expenditures dataset: foreignassistance.gov/data

As evidenced in Figure 1A, both the Clean Elections Index (CEI) and Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) spiked drastically in 2005, while the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) lags due to its more stringent requirements. However, all three scores remain almost entirely unchanged for the next five years, plummet following the 2010 elections, and continue to decline until 2019, which sees an incredibly minor uptick in CEI and EDI scores.

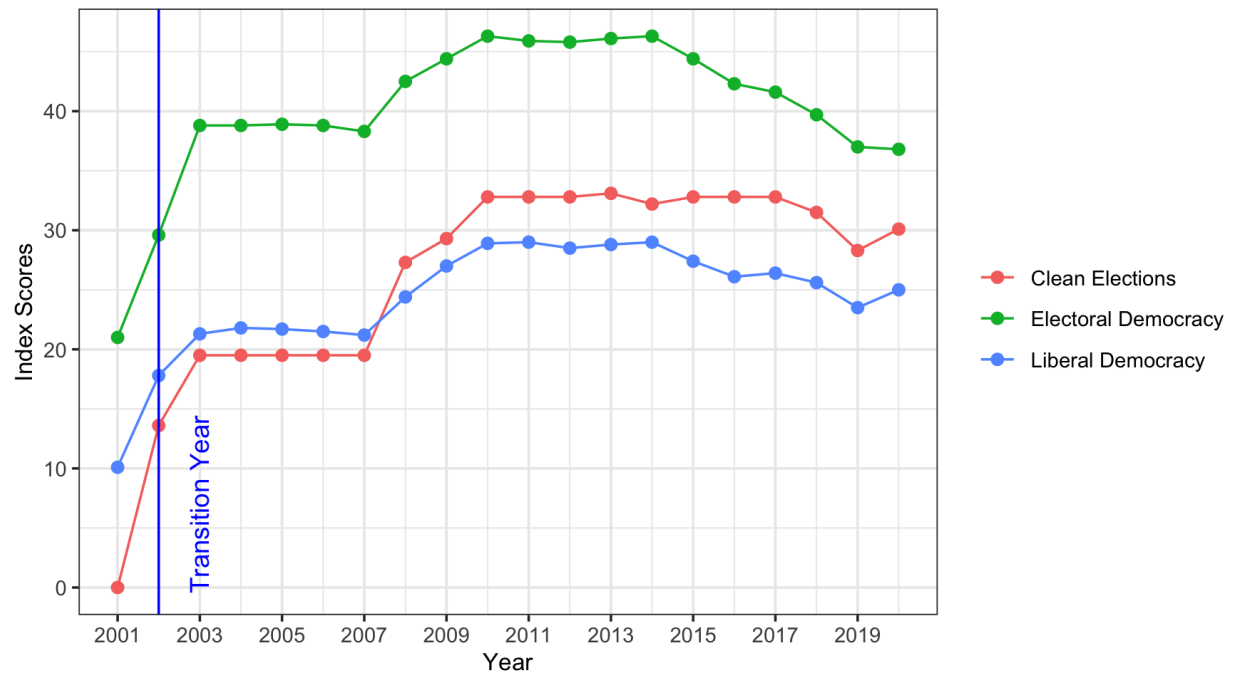
Figure 1B presents a slightly different picture, in that all four incentives reached their highest peaks from 2009 to 2012. This would suggest a slight lag exists between shifts in regime type and the garnering of these incentives, which is not entirely unreasonable. USAID programs, in particular, can take years to design and implement. If the U.S. was waiting for the results of the 2005 elections to begin these processes, it makes sense that it would take some time to see the payouts. However, DRG aid spiked immediately after the 2005 elections, contrary to the other sources of incentives. This might speak to the specific ability of the democracy promotion program to quickly act when opportunities to foster democratic institutions arise, although they were ultimately unable to generate the levels of democratic consolidation necessary to further Burundi's democratic transition or even maintain their existing democracy scores.

Similar to Figure 1A, but adhering to a similar time lag, there is a steep decline in incentives following the 2010 elections. As such, it is reasonable to assume that the incentives increased and decreased alongside the democratic indices. Although slightly lagged, this correlation implies a learning process on behalf of the providers of these economic incentives, in that the incentives can be taken away if continued progress is not achieved.

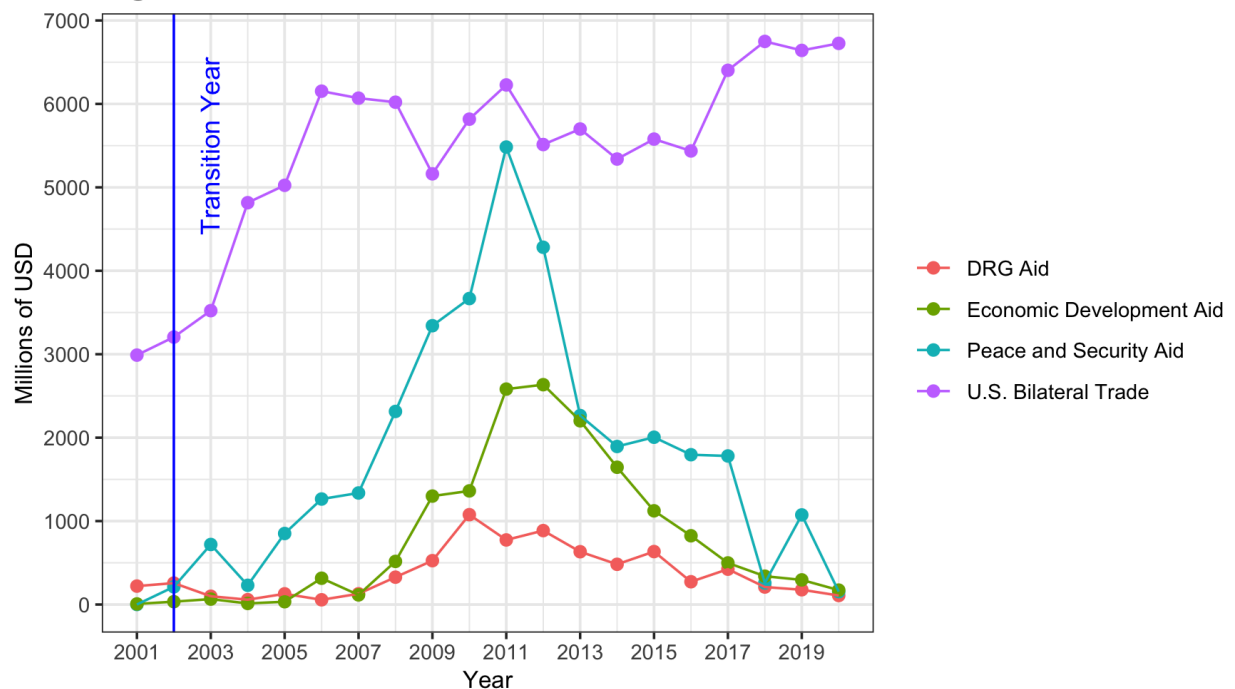
Figure 1B provides modest support for the first three hypotheses, as Burundi saw an uptick in all positive financial incentives measured after transitioning to electoral authoritarianism in 2005.

Pakistan

Since Pakistan's independence from Britain in 1947, there have been seven coups, with four of them succeeding in overthrowing the current regime, and the country has spent nearly three decades under military rule during that time. The most recent coup occurred in 1999 under the direction of General Pervez Musharraf, who promised a return to democracy by 2002. As such, the 2002 elections were held under the watchful eye of domestic and international audiences, both hoping to see an end to a long pattern of nondemocratic rule. While the 2002 elections were undoubtedly not free and fair, they were sufficient enough evidence for V-Dem to return Pakistan to the status of an electoral autocracy, making 2002 the reference point for Pakistan's regime transition in Figures 2A and 2B.

Figure 2A. V-Dem Indices, Pakistan, 2001-2020

Source: Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project v11.1, Available at: v-dem.net/dsarchive.html

Figure 2B. Positive International Financial Incentives, Pakistan, 2001-2020

Source: Correlates of War Project Trade Data Set, Version 4.0: correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/bilateral-trade. BTDixE dataset: stats-oecd.org. USAID foreign aid expenditures dataset: foreignassistance.gov/data

Figure 2A illustrates the exact dynamic expected to be at play regarding the electoral indices and the timing of the regime's transition, as all three indices climb 10 to 20 points on the

100-point scale. All three then level out until the next election, held in 2008, where they jump nearly 10 points yet again. However, following the 2008 election, the scores peaked in 2010, and all three indices leveled out and slowly began to decline.

Figure 2B shows a decided lack of incentives gained following the 2002 elections, outside of increasing bilateral trade with the U.S., even though Pakistan's democracy scores saw considerable increases over the same period. Peace and security aid is the first to rise, but given Pakistan's outsized regional importance to the United States regarding the "war on terror," this is hardly surprising. What is more surprising is that all three types of aid see a drastic uptick following the 2008 election, very much in line with the swing upwards in Figure 2A. However, these incentives begin to decline at nearly the same time as Pakistan's democracy scores stagnate and begin to decline.

As seen above in Figure 1B, bilateral trade flows do not hold steady with the patterns of the rest of the incentives. While they rise slightly earlier than the rest of the incentives, trade flows either hold steady or continue rising while the others fall.

As such, the case of Pakistan provides modest support for the first and third hypotheses, with relatively little to no support for the second.

Conclusion

Throughout the case studies presented in this paper, it is apparent that a relationship exists between regime transitions, democracy scores, and international democracy promotion incentives. I contend that there is support for the paper's first hypothesis, but with an addendum: closed autocracies that transition to electoral autocracies derive increased international financial benefits, but only if they continue democratizing. In both Burundi and Pakistan, as soon as democracy scores started dropping, they lost access to these economic benefits. The second hypothesis, focused on bilateral trade with the U.S., found little to no support in both cases; even where it found support in Burundi, the overall amount of bilateral trade was so low that it calls into question the legitimacy of the result. The case studies lent the third hypothesis, centered around USAID spending, a strong base of support, but with the same addendum that the first hypothesis needed: if, and only if, states continue democratizing, will they retain access to this incentivized aid.

An interesting finding in line with the support for the first and third hypotheses is that there is a lag between regime transition and the start of acquiring these incentives, which is understandable given the moving parts associated with providing the incentives. However, it is noteworthy that this lag appears not to be as substantial when deciding to stop providing access to these incentives. Both cases had varying levels of startup lag, typically ranging from two to five years, yet the countries had their incentives revoked within one to two years of either stagnation or decline in the democratic indices.

Finally, the fourth hypothesis, which posited that the increased incentives garnered by regimes in their transition to electoral authoritarianism would increase their democracy index scores, fared relatively poorly in the case studies. While they certainly experienced spikes in these indices, none of these spikes were ultimately sustained. Whether that is from a lack of further incentives, domestic pressures to reconsolidate power, or other factors is still an open question.

Future Research

Given the explanatory nature of this paper, there are many areas that merit further examination. I would like to draw attention to the three areas that I feel are most pressing: selection bias in choosing cases, how transitional democratization dynamics differ between regime types, and other international incentives that could drive autocratic leaders to hold elections.

Selection Bias

In anticipating a criticism of this piece, I agree that selection bias in the case selection process is a cause for concern in this paper. Limiting the paper's focus to regimes that transition to electoral authoritarianism and maintain that regime type potentially removes cases that successfully transitioned from a closed autocracy to an electoral autocracy and then to an electoral democracy. This is certainly a fair critique, as these excluded cases may, in fact, show that democracy promotion worked as intended.

My response is twofold: first, given the limited temporal scope of my dataset, there were few states, if any, that fit this category of regime transitions. Future work should extend the timeframe of these analyses and examine how regimes transition from closed authoritarianism to

electoral authoritarianism and then on to electoral democracy. The second response leads me to the next area for future research: different types of democratic transitions do not necessarily function in the same ways.

Dynamics of Democratic Transitions

I believe that the dynamics of regime change are different from closed authoritarianism to electoral authoritarianism than from electoral authoritarianism to electoral democracy. I share Miller's contention that treating all shifts towards democracy as equal appears overly deterministic, as the transition dynamics from electoral authoritarianism to electoral democracy should be examined separately from the dynamics from closed authoritarianism to electoral authoritarianism (Miller, 2017: 18). Even if both transitions entail the adoption of similar formal institutions, autocratic regimes shift towards electoral authoritarianism because they can maintain their hold on power and garner international benefits; autocratic regimes shift towards electoral democracy, however, because they can no longer maintain their hold on power (Miller, 2017: 18). As Miller shows, closed authoritarian regimes that positively shift on democracy indexes (in this case, he uses the Polity dataset on democracy)¹⁶ are nearly three times more likely to end up as electoral authoritarian rather than democratic; using these scores to assess democratic transitions risks categorizing predictors of electoral authoritarianism as predictors of electoral democracy (Miller, 2017: 19). As such, future research must do more to unpack the different dynamics of each type of regime transition instead of solely relying on shifts towards democracy as evidence of true democratization.

Other International Incentives

As discussed above, bilateral trade ties with the United States and its foreign aid expenditures are just two examples of international financial incentives that could drive closed autocracies to transition to electoral authoritarianism. To start with, specific countries may have closer trade ties with other countries or international organizations. For example, Germany is Turkey's largest trading partner,¹⁷ not the United States, and, collectively, the European Union is the biggest international foreign aid donor in the world.¹⁸ As such, using the United States for

¹⁶ Available at: systemicpeace.org/inscrdata

¹⁷ More information on Turkey's bilateral trade ties is available at: [UN Comtrade](https://comtrade.un.org/)

¹⁸ European Union foreign aid spending is available at: [Recipients and Results of EU Aid](https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/)

both trade and foreign aid expenditures is a rough proxy for understanding the nuance of the dynamics of regime transitions.

Further, entirely different variables could be influencing the decision-making process of autocratic regimes. One such predominant international incentive is the acquisition of formal military alliances. These alliances provide mutual security for both regimes and alleviate the need for incessant domestic military spending. Further, it is important to note that military alliances foster economic relationships (Long and Leeds, 2006). The realist rationale for this is that states are wary of creating “security externalities” by trading with non-allies (Long and Leeds, 2006). In this way, states are not and can never be certain that the states they trade with will not use the resources gained to threaten their security. This notion highly incentivizes trading with military partners, as not only do the states gain military assurances from each other, the resources gained are now being used to enhance their collective security. Many military agreements are dependent on economic agreements, enabling states to devise networks of dependency aimed at strengthening regime security (Goodliffe and Hawkins, 2017).

Another such international incentive is gaining membership in international governmental organizations, including the UN and the EU. Intergovernmental organizations serve as an expanded form of both military and economic ties. Some intergovernmental organizations focus purely on military and security concerns, such as NATO, some focus on economic issues, such as the WTO, and many deal with both issues, such as the UN and the EU. Measuring a regime's evolving commitments to intergovernmental organizations is a reliable metric for examining international political engagement (Miller, 2017). Membership in intergovernmental organizations also creates “social networks” of states that offer new channels for bilateral agreements, a valuable commodity in the highly interdependent economies of the 21st century (Hafner-Burton et al., 2006).

Appendix

Democratic Backsliding

While much of the existing literature focused on closed autocracies transitioning into electoral autocracies, we increasingly see consolidated democracies revert to electoral autocracies. One could assume that much of this calculus remains the same for these authoritarian leaders, only in reverse. Instead of autocratic leaders allowing elections because of the incentives they stand to gain, democratic leaders would opt to restrict access to elections because they feel they will not lose the incentives they have already acquired. This idea is directly in line with much of the emerging democratic backsliding literature, which is particularly focused on the emergence of electoral autocracies in countries that previously had democratic traditions, including free and fair elections, independent judicial systems, and robust and independent media sources (Bermeo, 2016: 11). Examples of these countries include Hungary, Turkey, Poland, the Philippines, and Venezuela (Levitsky and Way, 2020).

Borrowing a formal definition of democratic backsliding from Haggard and Kaufman's influential 2021 article, this paper defines democratic backsliding as an "incremental erosion of institutions, rules, and norms that results from the actions of duly elected governments" (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021: 27). This definition shifts the focus away from precipitating events and crises as the catalysts for democratic reversion and towards the understanding that democracies' institutional pillars can be incrementally eroded over long periods, leaving once consolidated democracies as hybrid or authoritarian regimes. These processes have quickly become the go-to way that would-be autocratic leaders working within the confines of democratic systems employ when seeking to consolidate their power.

However, as Levitsky and Way contend, the institution of multiparty elections still enjoys remarkably robust support around the world (2020). The populist and ethnonationalist movements that have precipitated much of the democratic erosion in the past decade "remain grounded in electoral politics" (Levitsky and Way, 2020). Multiparty elections continue to be widely viewed as the "most legitimate means of ascending to power," creating incentives for would-be authoritarian rulers to continue holding elections, even if they are to varying degrees of freedom (Levitsky and Way, 2020).

Given adequate domestic conditions, the remaining closed autocracies in the world may well liberalize just enough to garner the benefits of allowing elections, even if they are substantively not free and fair. Electoral democracies cautiously observing the trajectory of other backsliding democracies may consider reverting to electoral authoritarianism themselves if they consider the costs imposed upon other regimes minimal.

These ideas on democratic backsliding generate a similar hypothesis to the central hypothesis of this paper, yet in the inverse regarding regime trajectory. The same indices will be utilized from above, although instead of measuring the differences in positive incentives for autocracies transitioning to electoral authoritarianism, they will measure the differences for regimes transitioning from electoral democracy to electoral authoritarianism.

H₅: Electoral democracies that transition to electoral autocracies will see decreases in the amounts of international economic benefits aimed at democracy promotion.

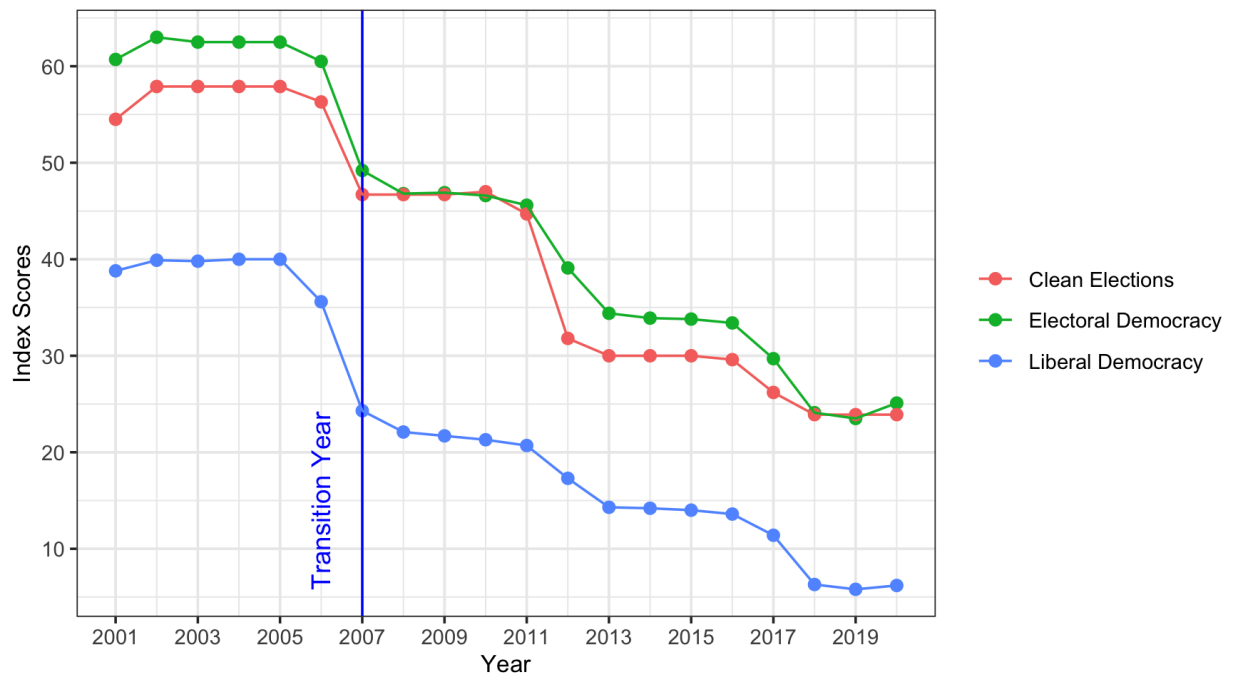
To test this hypothesis, I repeated the previous examination of the dataset, searching instead for cases where electoral democracies transitioned to electoral autocracies. Cases were chosen on the same criteria listed above, with many cases being rejected due to rapid fluctuations in regime type or because the transition occurred too recently. Two cases were selected and will be examined below: Nicaragua and Serbia.

Nicaragua

From 1990 to 2006, V-Dem Institute considered Nicaragua an electoral autocracy; however, following Daniel Ortega's election as president in 2006, conditions in the country rapidly deteriorated, leading V-Dem to declare that Nicaragua was an electoral autocracy as of 2007. Ortega regained the office he had previously held from 1979 to 1990 by winning only 38% of the national vote in 2006. Since then, Ortega has worked tirelessly to consolidate his power, weakening the independence of the judicial and legislative branches, banning or jailing opposition candidates, and severely restricting access to independent media. Recent elections have become what observers deem a "mockery of the electoral process," unable to maintain even a superficial facade of legitimacy (Stuenkel, 2021).

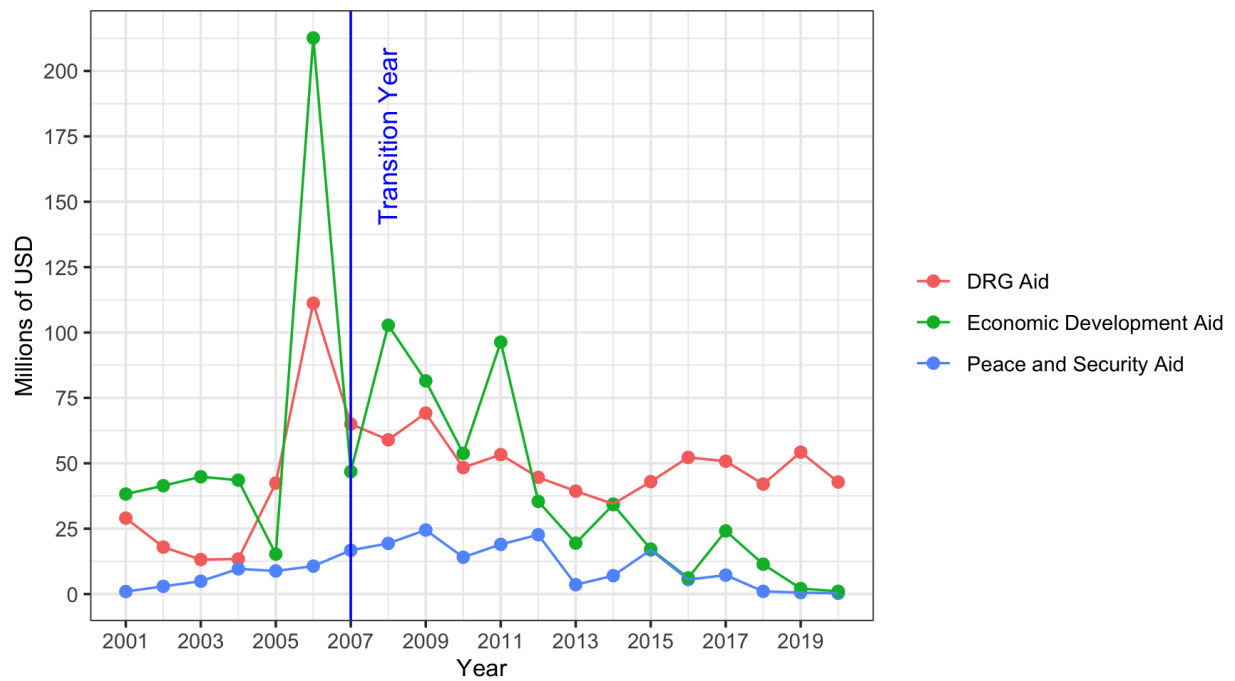
As such, the case of Nicaragua provides insight into how the levels of international incentives change following severe democratic backsliding. With 2007 as our reference point for the country's classification as an electoral autocracy, figures 3A, 3B, and 3C¹⁹ show the country's V-Dem indices and international incentives.

Figure 3A. V-Dem Indices, Nicaragua, 2001-2020

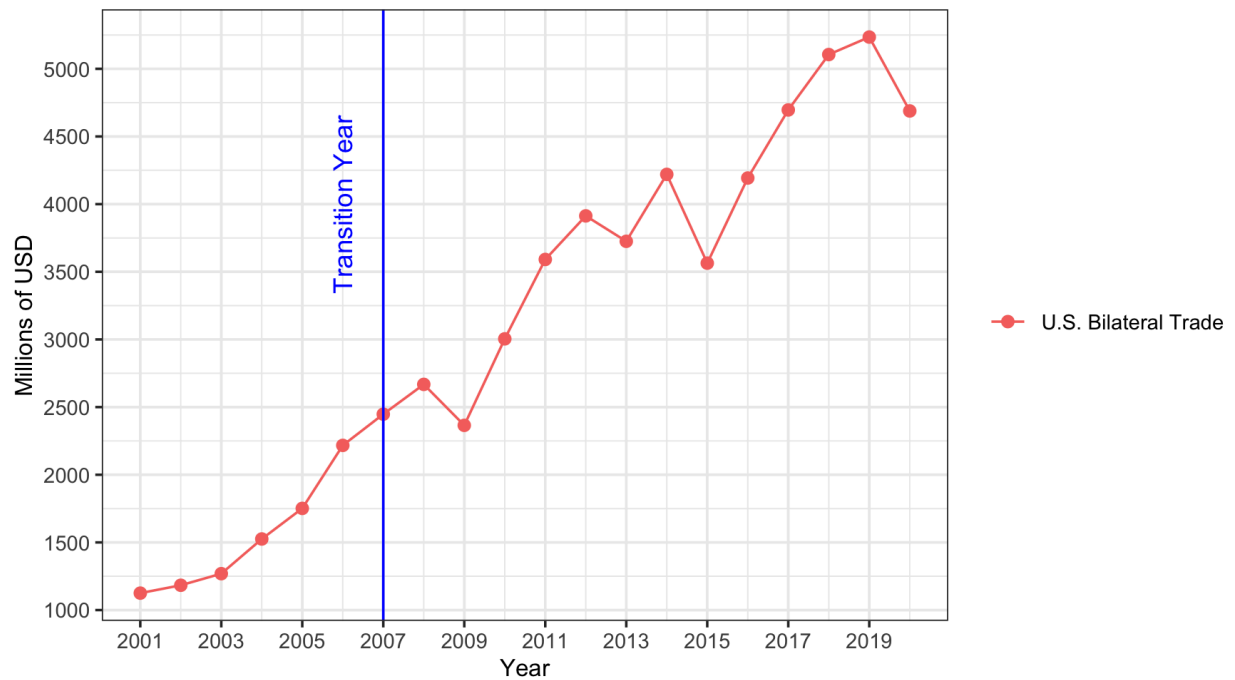


Source: Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project v11.1, Available at: v-dem.net/dsarchive.html

¹⁹ Positive Financial Incentives for Nicaragua are split into figures 3B and 3C because of wide variation on the Y-axis (millions of USD).

Figure 3B. Positive International Financial Incentives, Nicaragua, 2001-2020

Source: USAID foreign aid expenditures dataset, Available at: foreignassistance.gov/data

Figure 3C. U.S. Bilateral Trade with Nicaragua, 2001-2020

Source: BTDiX dataset, Available at: stats-oecd.org

Figure 3A makes clear that Nicaragua's democracy has deteriorated rapidly in the past 20 years, dropping nearly 40 points from 63 to 25 on the Electoral Democracy Index. The tale is considerably worse on the Liberal Democracy Index, with the country scoring just above 5 in recent years. Figure 3A shows that the repeated drops in scores correspond almost exactly with the elections held every five years; overall, the scores remain relatively steady in the interim between elections, then plummet immediately before and after elections are held, with the first significant drop occurring in 2007.

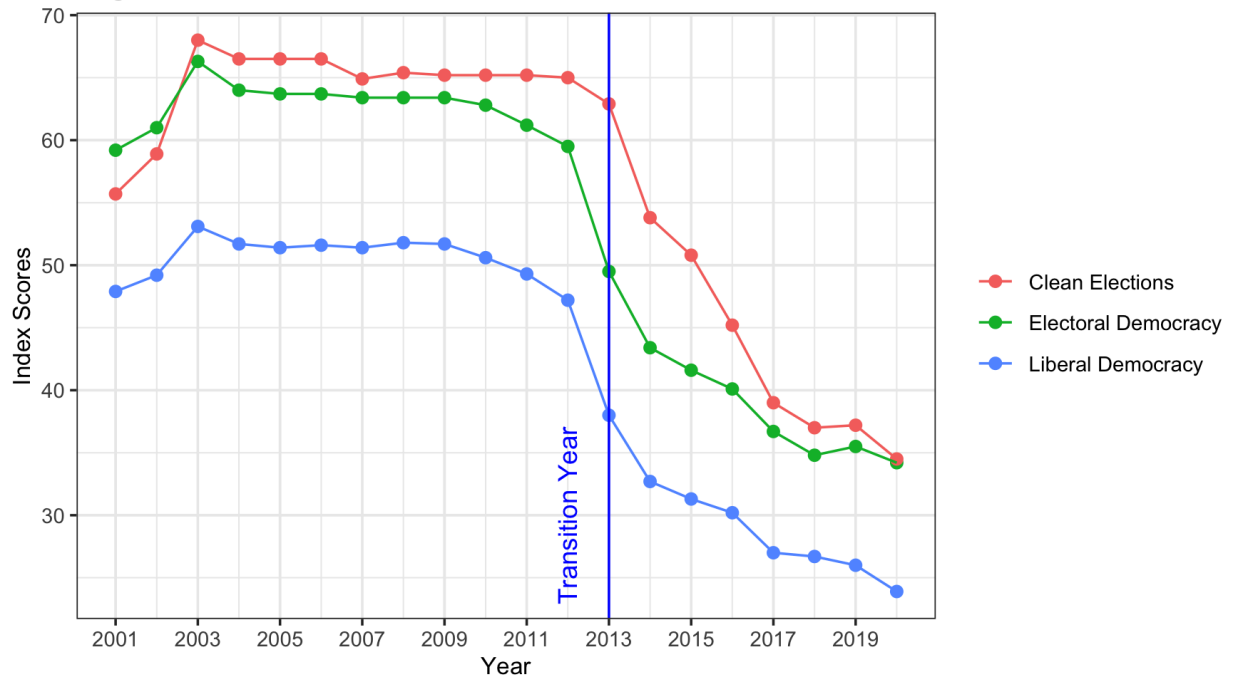
However, Figure 3B paints a somewhat different picture. DRG aid is at its lowest point before any democratic regression occurred, spikes in 2006 right before the Ortega's election, and, although it falls during Ortega's presidency, holds somewhat constant at around 50 million USD from 2007 to 2020. Peace and Security Aid was always low in the country but slowly rose until about 2012, when it began to fall back down. Barring the major outlier of 2006, Economic Development Aid follows a similar pattern in that it does not begin to fall dramatically until 2012.

In keeping with the trend from previous cases, U.S. bilateral trade with Nicaragua does not seem to be impacted whatsoever by the declining democracy scores. Overall trade increased in all but three of the years, with one of those years taking place at the height of the Great Recession.

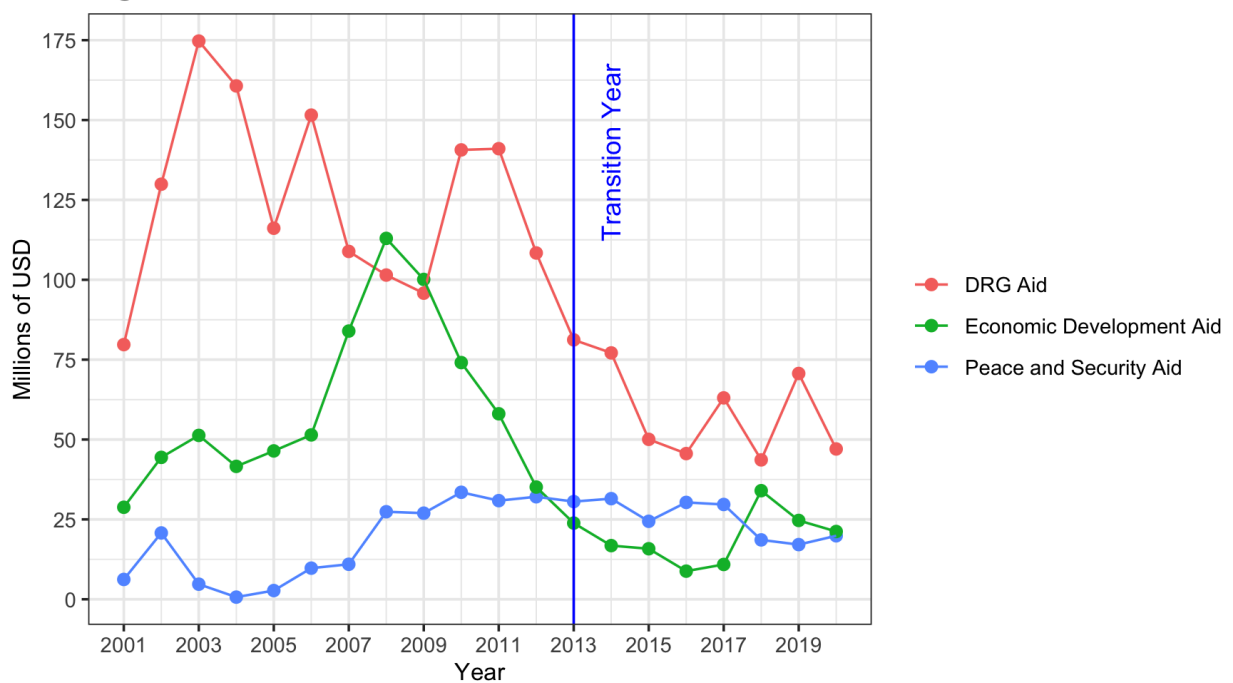
Serbia

Following the violent breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, Serbia became a fully independent nation in 2006. There was immediate democratic progress, leading V-Dem to categorize the new nation as an electoral democracy. However, this progress slowed entirely and was eventually reversed by the election of Aleksandar Vucic in 2014. Vucic assumed Serbia's premiership that year after a resounding electoral win for his Serbian Progressive Party. Under Vucic's leadership, the country saw press freedoms attacked, electoral integrity diminished, and executive powers bolstered at the cost of checks and balances (Castaldo, 2020: 1617). V-Dem marks 2013 as the year Serbia officially transitioned from an electoral democracy to an electoral autocracy; with that in mind, figures 4A, 4B, and 4C²⁰ present the country's V-Dem indices and international incentives.

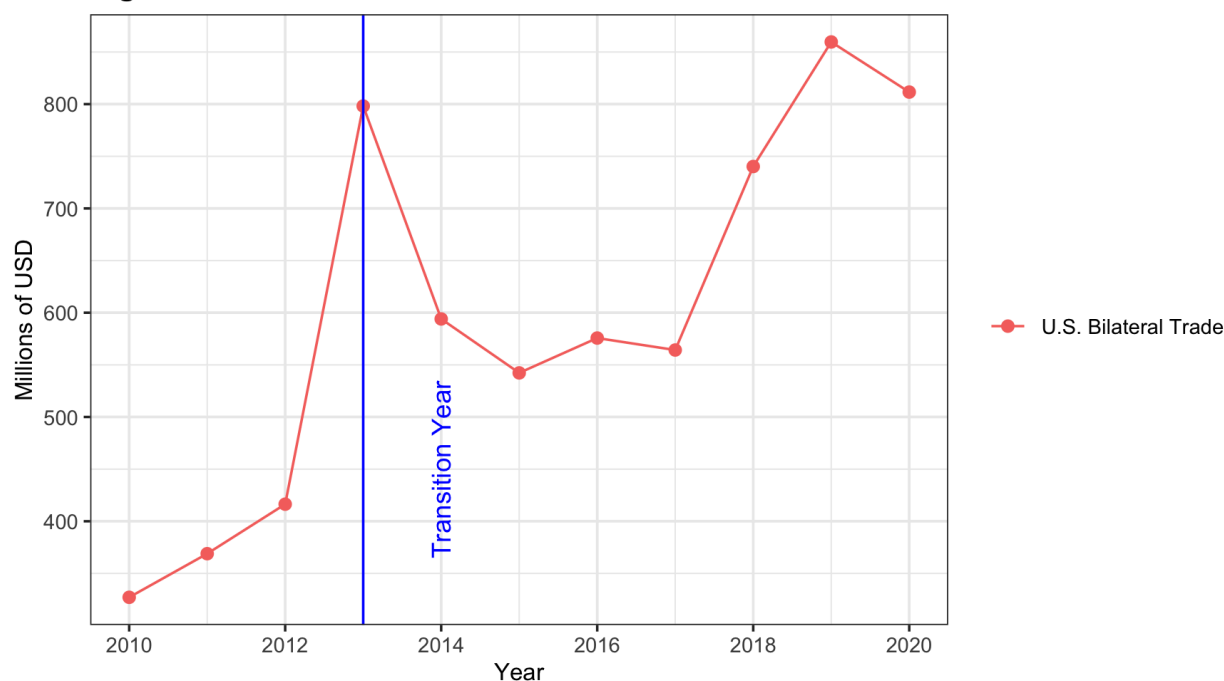
²⁰ Positive Financial Incentives for Serbia are split into figures 4 and 4C because of wide variation on the Y-axis (millions of USD) and the lack of trade data for 2001-2009.

Figure 4A. V-Dem Indices, Serbia, 2001-2020

Source: Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project v11.1, Available at: v-dem.net/dsarchive.html

Figure 4B. Positive International Financial Incentives, Serbia, 2001-2020

Source: USAID foreign aid expenditures dataset, Available at: foreignassistance.gov/data

Figure 4C. U.S. Bilateral Trade with Serbia, 2010-2020

Source: BTDixE dataset, Available at: [stats-oecd.org](https://stats.oecd.org)

Figure 4A shows that Serbia was a relatively consolidated democracy until 2013, scoring between 60 and 65 every year on the Electoral Democracy Index. However, from 2013 to 2020, their Electoral Democracy score dropped nearly 40 points. As has occurred in every case examined, the Liberal Democracy Index lags substantially behind the Electoral Democracy Index, peaking at 53 and ending at 24.

Figure 4B presents another mixed bag regarding foreign aid expenditures from the United States. DRG Aid peaks by far the highest out of the three aid categories before falling in advance of the 2013 elections. Economic Development Aid reaches its apex in the midst of the Great Recession and then steadily decreases until a slight uptick in 2018. In contrast to the other forms of aid, Peace and Security Aid remains almost entirely constant from 2008 to 2020, although the overall level of spending is low.

Because the timeframe of Figure 4C is half that of the other figures on Serbia, as well as those of the other cases, it is largely inconclusive. Interestingly, there is a small dip in trade following Vucic's 2014 election; however, given the small temporal scope of Figure 4C, this could easily be attributable to fluctuations in annual bilateral trade. Further, trade levels with Serbia went on to hit a new peak just five years later in 2019.

Conclusion

Both cases presented above are clear-cut examples of democratic backsliding, as both countries' democracy scores have continually declined in the past twenty years. What is less obvious, however, is the relationship between international economic incentives and backsliding.

DRG Aid appears to follow the declining trend of the democracy scores relatively closely, but Peace and Security Aid seems to be blind to these trends, although Peace and Security Aid was admittedly low in both countries examined. At first glance, Economic Development Aid falls alongside declining democracy scores, but this does not seem to always be the case. In Nicaragua, Economic Development Aid hit its highest point the year Ortega was elected, and it did not fall dramatically until after the following elections in 2011. Further, Economic Development Aid began to fall several years in advance of Vucic's election in Serbia.

Finally, the relationship between democracy scores and bilateral trade ties with the United States appears at best spurious. For example, contrast Nicaragua's democracy scores, which steadily decreased from 2001 to 2020, and its bilateral trade with the United States, which steadily increased over the same period.

Overall, these cases of countries experiencing democratic backsliding pose more questions than they answer. Why do some forms of aid appear to be more responsive to falling democracy scores than others? Why does DRG aid decline after a country experiences democratic regression if many of the program's stated goals are related to bolstering democracy and governance?

Without an increasingly detailed understanding of USAID's projects, timelines, and goals, viewing these figures alone is prone to misinterpretation. The figures presented in the main body of this paper are not immune from these dangers as well; however, the patterns are substantially more straightforward. The questions posed by the democratizing figures in the paper's main body primarily focus on why and how patterns emerge instead of being forced to reconcile with the fact that no clear patterns emerge when assessing backsliding countries.

As such, I am inclined to reject the fifth hypothesis at this stage. While there may be a connection between falling democracy scores and international incentives for regimes that transition from an electoral democracy to an electoral autocracy, the cases examined above do not lend sufficient support to this claim.

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