

# International Rewards for Gender Equality Reforms in Autocracies

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**H**ow do international audiences perceive, and respond to, gender equality reforms in autocracies? For autocrats, the post-Cold War rewards associated with democracy create incentives to make reforms that will be viewed as democratic but not threaten their political survival. We theorize women's rights as one such policy area, contrasting it with more politically costly reforms to increase electoral competition. A conjoint survey experiment with development and democracy promotion professionals demonstrates how autocracies enhance their reputations and prospects for foreign aid using this strategy. While increasing electoral competition significantly improves perceived democracy and support for aid, increasing women's economic rights is also highly effective. Gender quotas exhibit a significant (though smaller) effect on perceived democracy. A follow-up survey of the public and elite interviews replicate and contextualize the findings. Relevant international elites espouse a broad, egalitarian conception of democracy, and autocrats accordingly enjoy considerable leeway in how to burnish their reputations.


In the post-Cold War era, many international benefits, including foreign aid, international organization (IO) membership, and status, are contingent on democracy.<sup>1</sup> For autocrats, this environment poses an obvious challenge: reforms that increase political pluralism and electoral integrity offer international advantages, but they endanger the regime's hold on power. A solution may be to enact policy reforms that are related to democracy but pose fewer risks for regime survival.

Research draws attention to women's rights as one such possibility. Many autocracies have embraced gender equality reforms,<sup>2</sup> including electoral quotas (Valdini 2019; Zetterberg et al. 2022), laws related to violence against women (Htun and Weldon 2018; Tripp 2015), and women's economic rights and family law (Donno and Kreft 2019; Tripp 2019). Moreover, autocracies have increasingly included women in leadership positions, such as in cabinets (Kroeger and Kang 2022). The impetus for these advancements stems not only

from societal, “bottom-up” pressure, but also from international, “top-down” pressures. Supporting this argument, cross-national studies document an association between gender equality reforms and international engagement, including foreign aid, United Nations (UN) peacekeeping, and non-governmental organization (NGO) naming and shaming (e.g., Bush 2011; Donno, Fox, and Kaasik 2022; Edgell 2017; Kang and Tripp 2018).

Yet we have little direct evidence about the causal processes behind these correlations. How do international policymakers perceive, and respond to, gender equality reforms in autocracies? Can such reforms substitute for enhanced electoral competition? The lack of research on these questions is a significant omission since theories about the effects of international incentives hinge on such responses. It is possible that prominent Western donors and IOs rhetorically express support for women's rights but that policymakers' actual preferences and behavior are guided more by other considerations, including by state characteristics that are correlated with gender equality reforms in practice.

To shed light on these issues, we build on one prior study that causally addressed the issue of international responses to autocracies' adoption of gender equality reforms. Bush and Zetterberg (2021) conducted a survey experiment with citizens in Sweden and the United States, finding that electoral gender quotas and increases in women's descriptive representation enhance countries' international reputations for democracy and access to foreign aid. While building on their work, we make some important innovations. First, we draw from democratic theory to explore the content of international audiences' beliefs, distinguishing between procedural conceptions of democracy and

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Donno and Neureiter (2018), Dunning (2004), Hyde (2011), Pevehouse (2002), and von Borzyskowski and Vabulas (2019).

<sup>2</sup> We use “women's rights” and “gender equality” synonymously, following Htun and Weldon (2010, 207) and others.

more expansive egalitarian and participatory conceptions. Second, this move allows us to examine whether some women's rights reforms are valued differently than others. We compare the effect of electoral gender quotas (i.e., a reform related to women's political rights) with laws related to women's economic rights—a prominent type of reform which, although not related to governmental institutions, has bearing on women's life chances and involvement in the public sphere. Our study thus answers the call for gender and politics researchers to contrast the adoption and effects of gender equality reforms across different policy areas (Bush and Zetterberg 2023). Third, by comparing responses to gender reforms with responses to enhanced electoral competition, we draw new inferences about the potential for women's rights to serve as a reputational substitute for political liberalization.

Our study further offers methodological innovations in terms of sample, experimental design, and multi-method evidence. We survey a main population of theoretical interest that has rarely been studied on these topics: international development and democracy professionals. Our survey instrument features a conjoint experiment that assesses the relative importance of multiple policy dimensions in autocracies, including the adoption of laws related to electoral competition, women's economic rights, and women's political rights. Our research design, therefore, allows us to compare the effects of gender equality reforms with other liberalizing reforms unrelated to women's rights. To probe causal processes and help interpret our findings, we conduct interviews with international development and democracy practitioners. Finally, we replicate our elite survey's findings on another population of interest—citizens—using a larger U.S. sample.

Our findings indicate that autocrats enjoy considerable leeway in their efforts to reap international rewards. In both the elite and citizen samples, increasing opposition parties' ability to compete in elections significantly enhances perceived democracy and support for foreign aid, as expected. Yet reforms related to women's economic rights—operationalized as a law guaranteeing equal rights to employment, property, and inheritance—also have a large positive effect on both outcomes. This finding suggests that international development and democracy practitioners hold broad, egalitarian conceptions of democracy that differ from the procedural definitions often espoused by scholars—a conclusion our interviews also support. Further, it challenges assumptions that “democracy promotion is dominated by a narrow, elitist model of liberal democracy” (Hobson and Kurki 2012, 6).

We also find that elite respondents distinguish between women's economic and political rights in interesting ways. A gender quota treatment increases the perceived level of democracy. But the magnitude of this effect is relatively small, and in contrast to women's economic rights, gender quotas do not significantly affect support for foreign aid. Our interviews suggest that this relates to practitioners' beliefs (correct or not) about how quotas are implemented in autocracies.

These findings contribute new insights to scholarship on development assistance and IOs. The trend toward democracy promotion and gender mainstreaming within Western aid agencies has been deepening for some time, but ours is the first attempt to extensively survey development professionals on these topics. We, therefore, provide direct evidence that autocrats can use women's rights to enhance their legitimacy among those responsible for the design, implementation, and evaluation of aid programs. That these reforms reap benefits even in the absence of electoral liberalization speaks to how international incentives can encourage domestic policy substitution effects (e.g., Bisbee et al. 2019; Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022)—an issue that is challenging to pin down with observational data alone (Kelley and Simmons 2019). Yet we caution against drawing too-cynical conclusions. Even if unaccompanied by political transformation, advancements in *de jure* gender equality nevertheless represent important steps toward women's empowerment and integration into politics.

## DEMOCRACY AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS: A FRAMEWORK

Our inquiry is motivated by three claims. First, autocracies seek to adapt to Western pressure for democracy. Second, democracy is a capacious concept that, according to both political theorists and foreign policy practitioners, may encompass a concern for gender equality. Third, many gender equality reforms are compatible with authoritarian rule. Putting the pieces together, autocracies that want to access international benefits associated with democracy have incentives to pursue gender equality reforms. We elaborate on each point below, highlighting how we seek to fill key gaps in our understanding of the preferences and choices of policymakers responsible for allocating international benefits.

### International Incentives for Democracy

In the post-Cold War environment, many international benefits, both material and social, hinge on whether a country is thought to be a democracy. Dictatorships thus face a problem: how to balance international pressure for democratic reforms against the domestic imperative of political survival (Dukalskis 2021; 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 coalition. Examples include liberalizing rules for forming political parties, allowing opposition groups to operate freely, reducing government control over the media, and improving the professionalism of election management bodies. By increasing political competition and providing the opposition with an electoral foothold, these

policies generate pressure for expanding the winning coalition (Boix and Svobik 2013). And, by enhancing mechanisms of political accountability, they can disrupt patronage networks that are crucial for regime survival (Escribà-Folch and Wright 2015, 52–4).

Given the 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, by inviting election observers while committing malpractice in subtle ways (Simpser and Donno 2012) or by establishing civil society organizations that maintain close links with the regime (Walker 2016). Another form of adaptation is *selective compliance* with democratic norms. The advantages of this strategy are apparent when considering the range of policies implicated by a broad conceptualization of democracy.

### Conceptualizing Democracy in International Politics

According to Coppedge et al. (2011, 253), the minimal electoral definition of democracy involves “competition among leadership groups, which vie for the electorate’s approval during periodic elections before a broad electorate.” Yet views on the importance of elections differ, and recognizing the multiple and contested meanings of democracy has motivated a number of research efforts, including the Varieties of Democracy project. Studies criticizing the “electoral fallacy” in democracy promotion note the need to ensure stability before introducing elections (Karl 1990). Theorists of participatory and deliberative democracy focus on fostering a politically active citizenry (Pateman 2012), whereas liberal theorists argue civil liberties and rule of law are necessary for well-functioning institutions (Zakaria 1997). In short, beyond elections, alternative conceptualizations of democracy emphasize values of inclusion, participation, equality, personal liberty, and separated powers, among others.

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). Similar to Sen (1999), this perspective insists on attention to *de facto* inequalities beyond the realm of formal politics, arguing that for women to exercise meaningful political influence, they must be empowered to participate as equals in the family, economy, and society (Pateman 1988). Egalitarian democracy, therefore, emphasizes equality of participation, representation, protection, and resources (such as income, education, and health), in both the political and *socioeconomic* spheres (Coppedge et al. 2011, 254; Rizzo, Abdel-Latif, and Meyer 2007; Tremblay 2007).

How to conceptualize democracy is not only a matter of academic debate. Gender egalitarian values are increasingly featured in the rhetoric and policy

priorities of (Western) institutions promoting democracy and development. The mid-1990s saw women’s rights assume a newly prominent role in international democratic discourse. We highlight developments in three areas: international institutions, global performance indicators, and foreign aid agencies.

First, IOs began to “mainstream” gender into their activities, linking it to a broader agenda advancing democracy and human rights (Hafner-Burton and Pollock 2002). The 1995 UN World Conference on Women in Beijing was a particularly important moment. Its Platform for Action emphasized the importance of equal representation and equal rights to strengthen democracy.

Second, and activated by this policy agenda, many IOs, donors, and transnational activists began monitoring and reporting on states’ performance on gender equality. Their products served as global performance indicators (Kelley and Simmons 2019). Reports by Freedom House, the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, the U.S. State Department, International IDEA, and election observers assessed democracy based in part on respect for women’s rights. Freedom House evaluations, for example, consider women’s representation as well as economic and social issues related to family law, women’s civil society participation, sexual harassment and employment law, women’s property rights, and domestic violence.<sup>3</sup>

Third, Western donors increasingly made their aid conditional on democracy. In articulating their goals and expectations related to democracy, they placed a growing emphasis on gender equality (Bush and Zetterberg 2021, 332–3; Edgell 2017). The U.S. Agency for International Development’s (USAID’s) 2012 “Policy on Gender Equality and Female Empowerment” and European Union’s (EU’s) 2005 revised “Development Consensus” are two noteworthy examples.<sup>4</sup> For all these reasons, it is possible for autocracies interested in accessing some of the international benefits associated with democracy to do so through improving their performance in terms of women’s rights.

### Gender Equality Reforms and Political Survival

Crucially for dictators, advancing women’s rights often does not pose an immediate threat to political survival (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022). That is not to say that gender reforms are costless; their implications for autocratic power vary across countries depending on political institutions and societal norms. Nevertheless, research shows that such reforms can be compatible with continued authoritarian rule (e.g., Gal and Kligman 2000; Htun 2003; Lorch and Bunk 2016; Tripp

<sup>3</sup> [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/FreedomInTheWorld\\_2021\\_Methodology\\_Checklist\\_of\\_Questions.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/FreedomInTheWorld_2021_Methodology_Checklist_of_Questions.pdf). See items A1, A2, B4, D1, G1, and G2.

<sup>4</sup> See Commission of the European Communities (2005) and United States Agency for International Development (2012). See also French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (2018), Government of the United Kingdom (2019), and Swedish Government (2016).

2019). 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 coopt women, bringing them into the regime’s support coalition, as in Uganda (Donno and Kreft 2019). Thus, the political costs of gender equality reforms are generally less direct and immediate than reforms related to political competition.

Consistent with this idea, many contemporary dictatorships have prioritized advancing 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. Democracies and dictatorships in the developing world have, on average, equal numbers of women in parliament. And, since at least the early 2000s, dictatorships there have introduced more gender-related legislation than democracies (Donno, Fox, and Kaasik 2022).

To many scholars, it seems clear that international incentives have encouraged these trends (Abou-Zeid 2006; Bush 2011; Edgell 2017; Hughes, Krook, and Paxton 2015; Krook and True 2012). Yet there are also reasons for caution when drawing such conclusions. There is a substantial literature that questions the sincerity of international democracy promotion in general and support for gender equality in particular (Kurki 2013; Youngs 2010). Although USAID, the EU, and other institutions have a stated emphasis on gender equality in their programming, some criticize such statements as superficial commitments that justify other foreign policy goals (Abu-Lughod 2013). In addition, critical studies of democracy promotion have faulted it for adopting a liberal, electoral approach at the expense of egalitarian concerns (Hobson and Kurki 2012, 6). If these arguments are correct, then the international democratic incentives for autocracies to adopt gender equality reforms would be overstated. The research design we lay out below allows us to examine the sincerity and depth of international audiences’ commitment to democracy and women’s rights.

## EXPECTATIONS ABOUT INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCES

With this theoretical motivation in mind, we develop hypotheses concerning how international (Western) elite audiences respond to autocracies’ adoption of gender equality reforms. Though we do not assume that *de jure* reforms are always implemented, we discuss their *de facto* effects, as well, since they inform international audiences’ perceptions. We focus on two outcomes: perceptions about a country’s level of democracy and support for providing a country foreign aid.<sup>5</sup> To the extent that aid is a democracy-contingent benefit (Hyde 2011, 52–3), we would expect these two outcomes to move in tandem—that is, that perceived democracy would also influence support for foreign

aid. Of course, decisions about aid allocation are influenced by a number of other factors, some of which we include in our experiment.

## Electoral Competition

We begin with hypotheses about the effect of reforms related to political competition. 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 (Diamond 2002; Schedler 2006). 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 key feature distinguishing democracies from 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 and democracy professionals to perceive such reforms as linked to democracy and 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.*

## Women’s Rights

As discussed above, women’s rights are an area in which policy change is less costly for autocratic survival but nevertheless related to egalitarian democracy. International policymakers may embrace these broad notions of democracy in which women’s rights occupy a prominent place. International relations (IR) research suggests values may be shared by individuals working in the same institutions (Dietrich 2021; Weaver and Nelson 2016). Thus, as development and democracy promotion agencies have prioritized and “mainstreamed” women’s rights, it 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—that is, as a policy area that is easily observable and tends to be correlated with (or lead to) democracy.

<sup>5</sup> In our pre-analysis plan (described 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 toward democracy, we focus on the former for ease of exposition. However, the results for progress toward democracy are nearly identical and contained in Section 2 of the Supplementary Material (SM).

Reputational spillover is common in international politics, even among experts who might be expected to avoid reliance on heuristics (Erickson 2015; Gray 2013). These dynamics could occur in the realm of international development and democracy promotion given uncertainty about whether politicians are “true” or “pseudo” democrats, which prompts external audiences to look for signs that they are committed to democracy (Hyde 2011).

### *Women’s Political Rights*

The agenda for advancing women’s political rights includes increasing suffrage, electoral participation, and the right to hold public office. Because women’s right to vote is now nearly universal, present efforts focus primarily on increasing women’s political representation. To accomplish that goal, the most prominent policy advocated for and recognized by the international community is electoral gender quotas (Bush 2011; Edgell 2017; Krook 2007; Krook and True 2012). This policy builds on the notion that women are discriminated against in politics and that processes of exclusion within political parties create a low demand for women who aspire for office. This notion contrasts with ideas that were typical until the mid-1990s, which associated women’s underrepresentation with their lack of resources and ambition (i.e., with limited supply of women) (Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2005).

Increasing women’s political representation is a measurable outcome that is directly related to the democratic ideal of equal representation. Quotas increase the number of women in legislatures and in turn legislative attention to women’s interests and policy priorities (Brulé 2020; Clayton and Zetterberg 2018; Weeks 2018). They also seem to change attitudes among men legislators (Franceschet 2011; Murray 2014; Xydias 2014).

Importantly, some of the benefits of women’s representation embraced by international audiences seem to hold in autocracies as well (Forman-Rabinovici and Sommer 2019; Mechkova and Carlitz 2021). For example, women representatives influenced landmark legislation in non-democratic Rwanda and Uganda, where they are part of the regime’s support coalition (Bauer and Burnet 2013; Johnson and Josefsson 2016; Muriaas, Tonnessen, and Wang 2018; Tripp 2012; Wang 2013). During Uganda’s eighth parliament (2006–11), a number of laws—including against genital mutilation, domestic violence, and human trafficking—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 development and democracy professionals to positively evaluate gender quotas in autocracies due to their anticipated effects on legislative representation and pro-women policies.

**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.*

At the same time, the relationship between women’s representation and democratization is complex. Women lawmakers in authoritarian regimes tend to be relegated to less influential committee assignments (Shalaby and Eliman 2020). Meanwhile, quotas can be implemented in ways that maintain an autocratic regime’s legislative control, especially in regimes governed by dominant executives (Muriaas and Wang 2012) or entrenched ruling parties. In Tanzania, the Chama Cha Mapinduzi party enjoys cross-regional support and its affiliated women’s movement selects women candidates that are loyal to the regime (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2016). In Morocco, Sater (2007, 732) notes that women legislators hail from elite families that are embedded in the “neo-patriarchal” political system. Such dynamics are part of a larger phenomenon whereby autocracies use institutions such as legislatures to coopt the opposition, deliver policy concessions, and ultimately stay in power (e.g., Gandhi 2008; Svobik 2012). To the extent that international audiences take these dynamics into consideration, it may weaken the perceived benefits of women’s representation and gender quotas in autocratic contexts.

### *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 democracy. 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 are distinct from political rights.<sup>6</sup> In addition to laws related to work and employment, reform to family law touches upon issues of women’s inheritance and freedom of movement that are essential for economic empowerment (Muriaas, Tonnessen, and Wang 2018). If implemented, such reforms carry the potential for large-scale economic and societal transformation, particularly in patriarchal cultures (Brulé and Gaikwad 2021), or in states with institutionalized religious authority and Shar’ia law (Htun and Weldon 2018, chap. 4; Topal 2019).

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 near-term political consequences tend to be tractable or even beneficial. While backlash against women’s empowerment is a risk in societies characterized by patriarchal power structures (Morgan and Buice 2013), it can often be managed. In the Maghreb, for

<sup>6</sup> 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 pay discrimination and guarantee women’s property rights (Barnett, Jamal, and Monroe 2021, 956).

example, monarchies and civilian governments alike have used progress on women's economic rights—including reform to family law—to push back against more conservative religious opposition movements (Tripp 2019). Donno and Kreft (2019) find that well-institutionalized autocratic parties are even 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 egalitarian conceptions of democracy but not to narrower electoral conceptions which focus on competition among elites and on the institutions associated with democratic elections. If international audiences respond favorably to women's economic rights, it 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 advancing women's economic and political rights are evaluated similarly to reforms deepening electoral competition. If we find similar effects in terms of direction and statistical significance, it would support the idea that autocrats can enact gender equality policies as a way to reap benefits without necessarily having to engage in political liberalization.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

To test our hypotheses, we surveyed a sample of professionals working in the international development and democracy promotion fields.<sup>7</sup> In addition, we fielded a follow-up study on members of the American public that replicates and extends the research design and a set of in-depth interviews with similar individuals as were included in our elite survey. Below, we discuss the survey samples and design; further details concerning the interviews are provided later when we discuss our qualitative findings.

### Survey 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 find an 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 elites, especially once we account for compositional differences between citizens and elites (Kertzer 2022). Nevertheless, a growing number of IR studies note the value of elite experiments (Dietrich, Hardt, and Swedlund 2021; Kertzer and Renshon 2022), particularly when the research question centers directly on the choices and preferences of decision-makers.

Our research follows this new tradition, focusing on a population of special theoretical interest: individuals responsible for designing, evaluating, and implementing aid related to development and democracy. We shed light on how these practitioners conceptualize the normative dimensions of their work—a topic that has seldom been investigated, despite its importance for theories of world politics. Past research on aid professionals has employed surveys to explore their preferences about conditionality (Swedlund 2017), IO coordination and delegation (Clark 2021; Dietrich 2021), and aid allocation (Briggs 2021); other studies (e.g., in Hobson and Kurki 2012) have drawn on qualitative methods such as document analysis and interviews. Our survey focuses on how practitioners evaluate democracy and gender equality, using an experiment to identify the effect of different domestic reforms.

Our sampling procedure focused on identifying people with experience in the international development and democracy fields, with an emphasis on Western government aid agencies and international NGOs whose mandate, goals, or rhetoric include a commitment to democracy. We identified individuals from North American and European organizations including USAID, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the EU, the Canadian International Development Agency, the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, International IDEA, and aid agencies from other member states in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Our sample thus mainly targeted bilateral aid agencies and NGOs from Global North countries.

We recruited staff in executive and programmatic roles. Our sample includes individuals with varying levels of responsibility. Not everyone 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., Dietrich 2021; Weaver and Nelson 2016) 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.

We fielded the anonymous online survey between November and December 2019 after inviting the professionals to participate via e-mail. Participants were offered an incentive of a 20 USD/Euro gift card or a

<sup>7</sup> Section 9 of the SM contains a discussion of research ethics.

gift card to a movie theatre. One hundred and eight individuals took at least part of our survey, for an overall survey response rate of 12%.<sup>8</sup> As expected, our respondents were highly educated, with 90% having obtained some form of graduate degree, and tended 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 being Swedish (54%), American (21%), French (5%), British (5%), and Canadian (4%). The sample was evenly split between men (49%) and women (51%). The represented countries are associated with distinct approaches, with Nordic countries historically putting more emphasis on socioeconomic equality than the United States and others (Schraeder 2003, 35–6). Below, as specified in our pre-analysis plan, we consider whether our results vary with respondent nationality.

We also conducted a follow-up, preregistered 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 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, 333–4). It further enables us to consider differences between elites and the public in views about democracy and aid, topics which have received less attention in the IR literature combining elite and public survey evidence.

## Survey Design

Our elite survey contained three sections: background demographic and political attitudes questions; a forced-choice conjoint experiment; and questions about global performance indicators for a separate project involving one of the authors.<sup>9</sup> 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. As Dietrich, Hardt, and Swedlund (2021, 603–4) note, experiments with elites are especially helpful for studying research questions like ours, which may raise social desirability concerns, such as a desire to express the value of gender equality reforms when making foreign aid decisions.

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 with many characteristics that may have conflicting effects on perceptions of 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.

We 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.<sup>10</sup> The 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 the scenarios in other survey experiments about 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*;

<sup>8</sup> Elites are difficult to survey due to concerns about time and privacy. Although this response rate is lower than we had hoped, it is higher than recent online surveys of politicians (Teele, Kalla, and Rosenbluth 2018, 530) and World Bank staff (Briggs 2021, 7).

<sup>9</sup> Section 1 of the SM 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 preregistered) is in Section 6 of the SM and does not reveal evidence of such effects.

<sup>10</sup> The order of the dependent variable questions was randomized to encourage respondents to read each scenario carefully. In addition, Section 2 of the SM 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 what our theory predicts in relation to adherence to liberal-democratic norms, including to a traditionally male-dominated policy area (i.e., national security).

- 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;
- Parliamentary Quotas: *Yes, 30% of seats reserved for women* or *No legal requirements for women’s representation*;<sup>11</sup>
- Level of corruption: Corruption is *high* or *low*.

In sum, the conjoint provided information on reform or lack thereof in three areas: electoral competition, women’s economic rights, and women’s political rights. The women’s rights treatments were designed to reflect, in a general way, the types of reforms commonly implemented by autocratic regimes. 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 political rights, we chose a substantively meaningful number of seats (30% is in the upper range of typical thresholds for reserved seats) and the most-common quota type in autocracies.

We also controlled 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 specified the region since research suggests that Arab or Muslim countries may be singular—or 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 effectively, respectively.

The values for the attributes in our 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 (SEs) by respondent. This approach, as well as the other facets of the analysis below, follow the plans we preregistered with Evidence and Governance and Politics prior to fielding the survey unless noted.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> In 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 Section 8 of the SM, the results are similar regardless of the treatment wording.

<sup>12</sup> <https://osf.io/gv4ax>.

## FINDINGS FROM THE ELITE SURVEY

We begin by considering the 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 an SE of 0.03—to be perceived as more democratic 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 perceived as more democratic by 0.23 (SE = 0.03). The existence of a 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

**FIGURE 1. Effects of Country Attributes on Perceived Democracy**



Note: This figure shows the average marginal component effects with 95% confidence intervals based on regressions with standard errors clustered by respondent.  $N = 936$ . Section 11 of the SM (column 1 of Table A2) contains a table with these results.



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

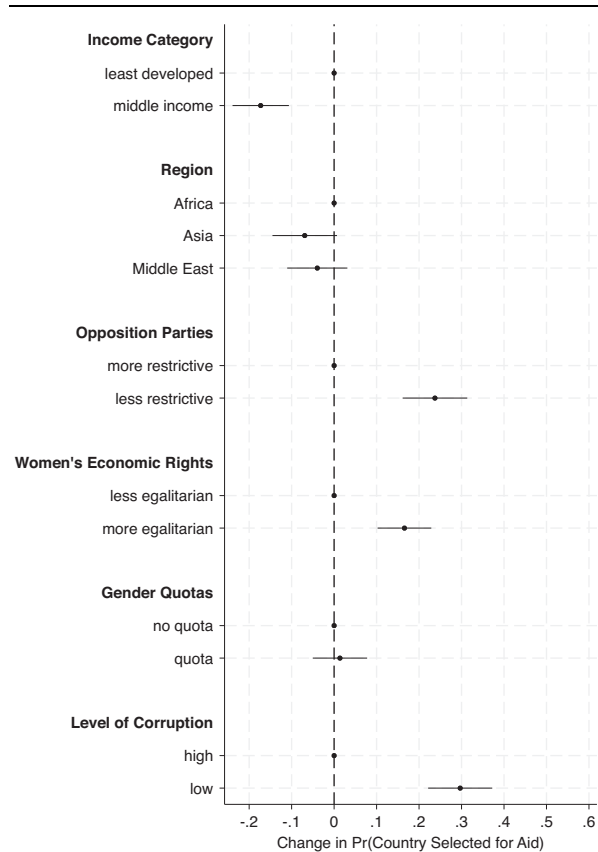
We draw three conclusions from Figure 1. First, elites viewed whether opposition parties could campaign and compete in elections as the most important indicator of democracy in our study. This pattern was expected, since free and fair elections are the *sine qua non* of democracy, even in its most minimal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

Second, a new law guaranteeing women equal economic rights also had a substantial effect on perceptions of democracy—one that was approximately 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) autocratic stability. Our findings, therefore, imply that authoritarian governments wishing to gain a reputation for democratic progress without subjecting themselves to competitive elections—and thus to wholesale political liberalization—can do so through passing gender equality laws. The findings also suggest development professionals have an egalitarian conception of democracy.

Third, elites linked women's political rights—operationalized through the existence of a gender quota law—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). A plausible explanation (which we explore below) is that elites perceive quotas as less transformative than reforms that aim to secure women's economic equality. Whereas quotas recognize women as legitimate political actors, in practice they mainly elevate elite women, who have been accused (rightly or wrongly) of constituting “loyal vote banks” to authoritarian regimes (e.g., Goetz 2002). By contrast, women's economic reforms aim to redistribute resources and empower women at all levels of society, which may spill over into enhanced political participation (Brulé and Gaikwad 2021). If practitioners perceive that enhancing women's representation in politics (through quotas) is not always combined with an economic politics of equality (Fraser 1995), then it may send a weaker signal of egalitarian democracy.

Figure 2 presents the results for our other main outcome: 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 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.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, the existence of a reserved seat

**FIGURE 2. Effects of Country Attributes on Support for Aid**



Note: This figure shows the average marginal component effects with 95% confidence intervals based on regressions with standard errors clustered by respondent.  $N = 954$ . Section 11 of the SM (column 2 of Table A2) contains a table with these results.

quota did not have a positive effect relative to the baseline on this outcome (AMCE = 0.01, SE = 0.03), reinforcing the finding in Figure 1 that it is a less important factor than women's economic rights for how experts evaluate countries.

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, Figures 1 and 2 imply that reforms to increase electoral competition and women's economic 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 economic rights may influence ideas about aid provision independent of their effect on democracy. For example, respondents may have thought that aid supporting education, water supply, and sanitation would be more effective in a country with greater respect for women's rights. Indeed, that the quota treatment had a small positive effect on perceptions of democracy but no clear effect on support for aid implies that elites may not view every dimension of democracy as implying countries deserve more aid.

<sup>13</sup> The AMCE for less restrictive opposition parties is 0.24 (SE = 0.04) for aid versus 0.17 (SE = 0.03) for more egalitarian women's economic rights.

Turning to the other variables, we see that respondents were less likely to support giving middle-income countries aid (compared to least-developed countries) ( $-0.17$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ) and more likely to support giving it to low-corruption countries ( $0.30$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ), as would be expected given that these countries are thought to have a greater need for and capacity to use aid. Notably, the effect sizes are roughly similar to those associated with opposition parties and women's economic rights. We contrast our finding about the significant effect of economic development on support for aid to the null effect on perceptions of democracy. These results suggest that 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. Finally, we do not observe significant regional variation in Figure 2.

Do these 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 Section 3 of the SM, they generally did not.

Second, we consider whether respondents from different nationalities responded differently to information about gender equality reforms in Section 4 of the SM. We preregistered 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 and, relatedly, does not have any form of gender quota, in contrast to many European countries. Since most of our European respondents came from Sida, we also present non-preregistered analyses that distinguish between Sida and non-Sida respondents. In general, elites 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 Section 5 of the SM, we find little evidence of a significant interaction between more egalitarian women's rights and the country's region.

## UNDERSTANDING THE MECHANISMS: ELITE NARRATIVES

To shed light on the mechanisms underpinning the relationships identified in the conjoint experiment, we conducted eight semi-structured interviews with practitioners working in international development and democracy promotion between September 2021 and May 2022. Our interview questions elicited views about whether and how the three sets of reforms described in our conjoint experiment—concerning opposition parties, women's economic rights, and women's political rights—are related to democracy and aid. All meetings were conducted digitally due to the COVID-19

pandemic; audio was recorded with the participants' permission from which transcripts were made and analyzed. The interviewees had experience working in IOs, state agencies, and NGOs to ensure a diverse set of experiences.<sup>14</sup>

The interviews confirm a pattern from the survey: increased political competition is closely related to elites' perceptions of democracy. There was agreement that reforms related to opposition parties' ability to compete in elections represent democratic progress. As one interviewee put it: "If you have...access for political candidates..., ability to cast a vote and then the ability to have that vote accurately counted...if you have all these things, I think that that is a huge determinant of how the international community ends up viewing the level of democracy."<sup>15</sup>

More important for our purposes is that all interviewees associated women's economic rights with democracy, though sometimes for different reasons. Almost all (7/8) of our interlocutors felt that a definition of democracy that focuses only on elections was too narrow. In explaining why, several respondents expressed that women's socioeconomic empowerment creates the conditions for greater political engagement, including among grassroots women. For instance, one of the interviewees—and he said, his organization—embraces a definition of democracy that "includes a very strong focus on political equality, both in political participation, in representation, and also in all of the other resources, be it economical and social and cultural that allows for a truly equal participation in the deciding decision making forums like parliaments."<sup>16</sup> Another stated that "[t]he more we ensure that women have the same rights and resources...and social independence, then the chances that they will be able to compete and participate in political life are much higher."<sup>17</sup> And another explained, "at the end of the day, democracy is about equality...if inequality is reduced in a country, that of course has an impact on democracy because people who were marginalized now have more of a voice."<sup>18</sup> In sum, economic rights are important because of their potential to redistribute resources and transform gendered power relations in society: providing women citizens with equal opportunities for ownership, employment, and inheritance has an empowering effect beyond just the economy, giving them "a place at the political table," where they can defend their interests.<sup>19</sup> Although not all interviewees espoused precisely this view, others still saw a link

<sup>14</sup> Section 10 of the SM contains an interview methods appendix, which includes a discussion of the sample, response rate, guiding questions, and saturation.

<sup>15</sup> Interview subject 4, former U.S. State Department advisor on issues related to democracy, interviewed on November 8, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Interview subject 7, IO staffer on issues related to governance, interviewed on March 25, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Interview subject 2, senior consultant on election management at international NGO, interviewed on March 4, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Interview subject 6, IO staffer on issues related to governance, interviewed on April 8, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Interview subject 7.

between women's economic equality and democracy, for instance, by pointing to how they are critical elements of "human rights" in general.<sup>20</sup>

Interviewees' beliefs about how gender quotas are related to democracy were more mixed, consistent with our survey evidence. A few interviewees perceived that quotas generate democratic progress by getting women "in the door and their voices in the room," thereby spurring democratic representation.<sup>21</sup> However, most of them argued that quotas' potential link to democracy is context-specific and depends on other factors. For instance, some observed that authoritarian governments can adopt quotas and enhance women's representation to "create a facade of democracy"<sup>22</sup> or to "save face when they get criticized."<sup>23</sup> In these cases, our interviewees argued that a country does not become more democratic simply because undemocratic men are being replaced by undemocratic women. They also noted that the quota implementation process may constrain quotas' democratic potential. Unless quotas are embedded within an open democratic process, there is a risk that party gatekeepers or male parliamentarians "bring in their female friends"<sup>24</sup> or relatives,<sup>25</sup> and thus that "the people who are nominated are the wives, or daughters, or mothers of the puppets behind the scenes."<sup>26</sup> By contrast, worries about poor implementation were seldom expressed when it comes to women's economic rights. An exception was a former U.S. government official we spoke to, who raised concerns about judges' enforcement of economic rights and whether women's access to courts was sufficient to protect their rights.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, various interviewees expressed that to be truly linked to democracy, gender quotas need to be "accompanied by...other measures" that compensate for how "political culture and how political norms have shaped women's political participation in the past."<sup>28</sup> They also emphasized that participation is not enough and that "people need to see meaningful changes,"<sup>29</sup> such as reforms in areas that "women may care about more than men."<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the interviews suggest that quotas' association with democracy is conditioned by reforms related to, for instance, women's economic empowerment. To explore this possibility using our survey data, we conducted a non-preregistered analysis of the interaction between our women's economic rights and quotas treatments (see Section 7 of the SM). Consistent with what our interviewees told us, there is a positive interaction: quotas are associated

with more democracy and support for aid in an environment in which recent egalitarian economic reforms have been pushed through.<sup>31</sup>

## FINDINGS FROM THE REPLICATION SURVEY

Finally, we present evidence from our follow-up survey of American citizens. Recall that we conducted this survey to assess whether our findings replicate on another population of interest and when slightly adjusting the treatment wording.

The findings (see Section 8 of the SM) are 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 gender quota.

Thus, the American public—similar to elites working in development and democracy—perceives reforms that increase electoral competition as the biggest positive reform in our survey. At the same time, both gender equality reforms and especially the law related to women's economic rights have substantively large effects among the American public. The similarity of these results is 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. In a preregistered extension, we also explored whether citizen respondents viewed the women's rights treatments as contributing to regime instability (which may be an alternative explanation for why they view these reforms as linked to democracy), but we find that they do not (Section 8 of the SM).

The one point of divergence with elites in terms of our hypotheses is that American citizens responded more positively to gender quotas (see also Bush and Zetterberg 2021, 335). For example, the quota retained its positive and statistically significant effect for the support for aid variable among the public, whereas

<sup>20</sup> Interview subject 4.

<sup>21</sup> Interview subject 3, former international NGO staffer on issues related to democracy, interviewed on October 5, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Interview subject 1, senior executive, international NGO focused on issues related to democracy, interviewed on September 20, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Interview subject 6.

<sup>24</sup> Interview subject 8

<sup>25</sup> Interview subject 2.

<sup>26</sup> Interview subject 4.

<sup>27</sup> Interview subject 4.

<sup>28</sup> Interview subject 7.

<sup>29</sup> Interview subject 3.

<sup>30</sup> Interview subject 1.

<sup>31</sup> Development professionals' emphasis on women's economic empowerment, and quotas' conditional relationship with democracy, raises the question of how practitioners conceptualize the problem of women's underrepresentation in politics. The expansion of quota policies in the past three decades builds on the notion that political institutions are biased in favor of men, and thus that enhancing women's socioeconomic empowerment will not necessarily eliminate inequalities in political representation. Our analysis suggests, however, that practitioners still find appeal in ideas about the political implications of women's socioeconomic empowerment. See also Geha (2019).

we did not identify a clear effect among elites. We believe citizens may be less attuned than elites to the potential limitations gender quotas have when it comes to increasing women's political power and thus leveling out gender inequalities. The U.S. public may be particularly unfamiliar with these dynamics since the United States does not have a gender quota, unlike many countries. Our exploration of three preregistered extensions to this analysis further reveals that among U.S. citizens, a positive response to our gender quota treatment is concentrated among those espousing egalitarian conceptions of democracy and progressive gender attitudes, as well as those identifying as Democrats (Section 8 of the SM).

## CONCLUSION

Analysts increasingly note the instrumentalization of women's rights as a tool of international reputation management. For some autocrats, this strategy may be about projecting a general modernizing image. Our research supports a deeper conclusion: international audiences interpret advancements in women's rights—even in areas unrelated to political rights—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 incentivized, we show that leaders can choose to focus on policy areas that pose relatively less threat to political survival and still reap reputational and material benefits. In other words, autocrats enjoy considerable leeway in their efforts to demonstrate a commitment to democracy and can engage in selective norm compliance. To be sure, this strategy may be more feasible for some countries, such as those with deeper strategic ties to Western donors, which face less persistent pressure for deeper political liberalization. From our interviews with international development and democracy practitioners, it is clear that they are aware of these strategic dynamics and the danger of affording too much legitimacy to authoritarian governments. At the same time, they remain committed to an egalitarian conceptualization of democracy and pragmatic in their recognition that advancement on gender equality is meaningful in its own right. Enhanced 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, we join those who caution against conflating gender reforms with wholesale political liberalization (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022), while nevertheless underscoring the value of the democracy promotion agenda for enhancing women's rights.

Second, our findings clarify the preferences and beliefs of international development professionals. These individuals represent a key "front line" audience of interest for many governments in the Global South,

but their ideas about democracy and gender remain under-studied. Our research yields some nuanced conclusions in these regards. Of particular note is that gender quotas exhibit a weaker impact on perceived democracy and support for foreign aid than does enhancing women's economic rights. Our interviews suggest that gender quotas (in autocracies) are considered to be less transformative for women than economic reforms, because parties select women who are loyal to male leaders and do not manage to push through meaningful policy change. Regardless of whether these are accurate descriptions of quota implementation processes in autocracies, democracy and development practitioners' views may have resulted from learning over time, as they have experienced challenges facing quotas in (some) authoritarian regimes. Economic reforms, on the other hand, target the whole population—including grassroots women—and aim to redistribute real economic opportunities, and our interlocutors articulated the transformational nature of these changes. Taken together, our findings suggest that practitioners favor a broad, egalitarian conception of democracy. This is a point worthy of further 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.<sup>32</sup>

Looking ahead, our study lays the foundation for continued exploration of autocratic reputation building and image management, a topic of growing interest within political science (Dukalskis 2021; Guriev and Treisman 2022). One promising extension is to explore a larger set of governance-related policies that leaders can implement in response to international pressure. For example, labor rights and corruption are also areas that Western actors target in their trade agreements, aid, and lending decisions. It is a more open question whether autocrats consider the political costs of such reforms to be bearable.

In closing, we note that our investigation concerns Western policy makers who value democracy and 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. For many governments, Western institutions and governments are indeed essential sources of aid, investment, and other benefits. Yet, 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). Future research

<sup>32</sup> The development professionals' expansive definition of democracy also speaks to the literature on citizens' views of democracy. While public opinion data have shown that citizens in most countries mainly define democracy in terms of freedom and civil liberties, people in non-Western countries are somewhat more likely than those in established democracies to include social benefits in definitions of democracy (Dalton, Jou, and Shin 2007).

should investigate how this waning influence affects countries' pursuit of reforms for women's rights.

## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423001016>.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the American Political Science Review Dataverse: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/KEWQJS>.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

## ETHICAL STANDARDS

The authors declare the human subjects research in this article was reviewed and approved by Yale University and the certificate number is provided in the SM. The authors affirm that this article adheres to the APSA's Principles and Guidance on Human Subject Research.

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