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From Aid to Empowerment: The Impact of Democracy Assistance on Civil Society

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ABSTRACT *A growing body of research indicates that democracy aid improves levels of democracy in recipient countries. However, the precise mechanisms behind this relationship are understudied. Contributing to the debates on democracy promotion, we argue that earmarked funding channelled through civil society strengthens civil society organisations' capacity building, curbs corruption, and reduces information gaps. Consequently, aid empowers civil society and ultimately enhances democracy in recipient countries. Using aid data from OECD-DAC and Varieties of Democracy, we analyse earmarked funding for civil society organisations across 128 recipient countries between 2005 and 2021 and find evidence for the positive but modest impact of this type of aid. The results demonstrate that democracy aid channelled through CSOs is positively associated with both, the strength of civil society and democracy levels in the recipient country, although the associations are relatively weak. We also find these associations to be slightly stronger in closed authoritarian regimes. This work contributes both theoretically and empirically to the debates about the effectiveness of democracy aid and the role of civil society in democratisation processes.*

KEYWORDS: Democracy aid; civil society; democracy assistance; democratisation; authoritarian regimes

Global levels of democracy are currently declining (Wiebrecht et al., 2023). Given that international donors spend billions of dollars every year on democracy assistance, it is paramount to understand the impact of this aid in fostering political change abroad. Empirical results in this area have largely been mixed (e.g. Bush, 2015; Finkel, Pérez-Liñán, & Seligson, 2007; Scott & Steele, 2011). However, more recent findings have indeed established positive relationships between democracy assistance and improving levels of democracy in recipient countries (e.g. Gafuri, 2022; Gisselquist, Niño-Zarazúa, & Samarin, 2021; Steele, Pemstein, & Meserve, 2021). While these results are encouraging, the field remains theoretically underdeveloped. There is still uncertainty regarding the precise mechanism through which democracy assistance

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contributes to democratisation. Recent work by Steele et al. (2021), for instance, fails to find conclusive results for the strengthening of electoral institutions because of democracy aid, leading them to suggest that ‘perhaps other agents are being empowered to improve democracy’ (2021, p. 513).

Building upon this line of work, in this paper, we focus on civil society as an empowered agent. Specifically, we are interested in analysing whether and how democracy aid channelled through civil society organisations (CSOs) strengthens civil society and fosters democratisation in recipient countries.¹ Over the last ten years, international donors have increasingly directed democracy aid to CSOs as opposed to foreign governments (e.g. Allen, Ferry, & Shammama, 2023; Dietrich, 2013). We argue that earmarked funding, i.e. funding set aside to implement donor-initiated projects, channelled through CSOs can empower them, curb corruption, and reduce information gaps. Recognising its pivotal role in democratic processes, we then highlight civil society as an ‘institutional vehicle’ that can foster democratic change since it can aid the political momentum, contribute to civic education and enhance accountability mechanisms.

Utilizing time-series cross-sectional data from 128 recipient countries between 2005 and 2021, we analyse whether earmarked democracy assistance channelled through CSOs a) enhances civil society robustness, i.e. autonomy from the state, b) does so across regime types of the recipient countries and c) improves democracy levels. We find that democracy assistance channelled through CSOs is indeed associated with a strengthening of civil society. In addition, we demonstrate that democracy levels in the recipient countries improve with more democracy aid channelled through CSOs. These findings are robust to a wide range of model specifications and further tests accounting for potential endogeneity. Although we identify positive and statistically significant relationships, the associations are rather weak, implying that to contribute to a substantive strengthening of civil society and democracy in recipient countries, donors would have to increase aid channelled through civil society well beyond current levels of support.

The contributions of this study to the literature are threefold. First, while previous research has focused on general democracy assistance (e.g. Gafuri, 2022; Scott & Steele, 2011), we zoom in specifically on examining the impact of democracy assistance channelled through CSOs. This type of aid is becoming an increasingly common form of democracy assistance and therefore, merits its own empirical assessment (Dietrich, 2013). We provide the most comprehensive empirical analysis of aid and civil society, in terms of the number of donors and recipients included and the timeframe (2005–2021). Our findings provide empirical evidence that there is a positive association between democracy aid bypassing the government and modest improvements in civil society indices. Our findings are in line with previous studies that show that democracy aid bypassing governments can foster political change (e.g. Dietrich, 2013; Pospieszna & Weber, 2020).

Second, this study adds to the literature on democracy promotion by focusing on the impact of democracy assistance on civil society specifically. We contribute theoretically by stipulating the key mechanisms through which aid via CSOs can strengthen civil society and democratisation processes. We find that channelling democracy aid through CSOs strengthens civil society in recipient countries, but in line with some qualitative studies also find that the overall, average effects of aid may be minor (e.g. Heiss, 2019; Jalali, 2013; Zeeuw & Kumar, 2006). In the next step, we also find that democracy aid channelled through CSOs is associated with modest improvements in democracy scores, supporting previous analyses that drew links between democracy aid and democratisation without clarifying the precise mechanisms behind them (e.g. Steele et al., 2021).

Third, our large-N study allows an evaluation of the impact of democracy assistance on civil society across different regime types. Current debates do not only revolve around the question of whether democracy assistance is effective *per se*, but also in which types of regimes this type of aid can make a difference (e.g. Hyde, Lamb, & Samet, 2023). Previous research highlights the importance of domestic political conditions on the effect of democracy assistance (e.g.

Cornell, 2013). We also find that the impact of democracy assistance varies across regimes but identify a positive impact in closed authoritarian regimes and thus, contribute to recent findings that even under the most authoritarian regimes, democracy assistance can be impactful (e.g. Cornell, 2013; Hyde et al., 2023).

Next, we briefly review the literature and outline theoretical arguments for why democracy assistance channelled through civil society is likely to affect both, civil society and overall democracy levels. After introducing our research design, we present our empirical tests and results. Finally, we reflect on our findings and discuss potential avenues for future studies.

1. Literature review

Democracy assistance, as a targeted form of foreign aid, aims to advance democratisation abroad (Grimm & Mathis, 2018).² It can take many forms, such as grants or loans, technical support to improve electoral processes, or capacity building to improve an organisation's administration (Bush, 2015). This kind of assistance has a greater potential to foster democracy than generic developmental aid because it directly targets democratic institutions and agents of democratic development (Bader & Faust, 2014; Gisselquist et al., 2021; Mesquita et al., 2003).

Over the years, many studies have analysed the impact of democracy assistance programs, and the findings have been mixed (Bush, 2015; Finkel et al., 2007; Gafuri, 2022; Grimm & Mathis, 2018; Scott & Steele, 2011; Steele et al., 2021; Zeeuw & Kumar, 2006). Qualitative studies on democracy aid are sceptical of whether democracy assistance results in substantial improvements in democracy. For instance, Zeeuw and Kumar (2006) argue that technical aid, especially in post-conflict countries, does not lead to sustainable democratic improvements. Bush (2015) describes a more 'tamed' version of democracy assistance whereby donors try to avoid confrontation with the recipient regime. As a result, the programs do not contribute to actual democratic improvements. Bicchi (2009) and Kurki (2011) note that European Union's democracy assistance faces challenges such as political instability, weak institutions, and authoritarian rule in the recipient countries, limiting its effectiveness abroad.

Quantitative studies, in contrast, often empirically link democracy aid to improving levels of democracy, primarily by measuring the change in democracy scores (Gisselquist et al., 2021). Scott and Steele (2011), for instance, confirm a positive impact of USAID democracy aid on democratisation, as opposed to more general economic aid packages. Likewise, Kalyvitis and Vlachaki (2010) argue that democracy aid, delivered in democracy-related initiatives, positively influences the democratisation of recipient nations. Recent work by Gafuri (2022), including a large-*N* analysis, also demonstrates a positive effect of the EU's democracy assistance on democracy levels in developing countries. In an attempt to identify the mechanism between democracy assistance and democratisation, Steele et al. (2021) focus on electoral institutions as agents for change but find no conclusive evidence for the relationship between USAID aid and changes in electoral institutions targeted by that aid. An important question, therefore, remains: through which mechanisms is democracy aid contributing to improvements in democracy?

Traditionally, civil society has been viewed as a driver of democratisation and has been at the forefront of thinking about democracy (Diamond, 1994; Spires, 2011; Warren, 2011; Grimes, 2013; White, 1994). Civil society can be conceptualised as a realm of association in which people engage in collective action to address various needs, ideas, and interests (Edwards, 2014). While there are many definitions, essentially, civil society is viewed by many as a key component to ensure government accountability to its citizens, a critical player in the checks and balances of the state, ensuring broad citizen participation in decision-making, and fostering partnerships with the private sector to deliver services effectively (Grimes, 2013). In this vein, civil society organisations (CSOs) can be seen as a formal representation of civil society (Wood & Fällman, 2019). Similarly, the OECD understands any non-profit entity organised on a local,

national or international level to pursue shared objectives and ideals, without significant government-controlled participation or representation (OECD, 2022, p. 2). We follow this broad conceptualization of civil society and, for instance, also conceive of NGOs, interest groups, labour unions, professional associations, and charities as CSOs. This approach allows us to capture all CSOs that engage in civic and political activities which is important given that they may also contribute significantly to democratisation.

Research on aid specifically for civil society is divided. Some prominent studies highlight allocation to civil society as the most fruitful approach, especially when compared to government-to-government funding (e.g. Dietrich, 2013). Others hold that foreign funding makes local civil society too dependent on and accountable to donors, depoliticizes them, and undermines other local NGOs (e.g. Atia & Herrold, 2018; Chahim & Prakash, 2014; Henderson, 2002; Zihnioğlu, 2019). Yet, apart from individual and comparative case studies, the effect of aid on civil society specifically has largely escaped empirical tests. Given that many of the critical studies also highlight some positive effects such as professionalization, and enhanced training for NGOs, a large-N analysis seems warranted (e.g. Atia & Herrold, 2018; Henderson, 2002).

We build upon prior research that highlights how donor countries can, through choosing different allocation channels, support different mechanisms to push for democratic change (e.g. Dietrich, 2013; Pospieszna & Weber, 2020). Rather than supporting governments in power, we highlight direct assistance to CSOs as an effective way to promote democratic progress. In other words, in responding to the above question, we argue that civil society is an agent for change and provides the mechanism through which democracy is strengthened in recipient countries. Civil society can be regarded as an ‘empowering agent’ (Finkel et al., 2007) or ‘institutional vehicle’ bringing about democratic change (Mercer, 2002), and direct assistance to CSOs serves to ‘leveling the playing field between incumbent governments and opposition groups and allows for bottom-up pressure to occur’ (Dietrich, 2013, p. 708; also Pospieszna & Weber, 2020).

Empirically, we provide the most comprehensive analysis of aid and civil society, in terms of the number of donors and recipients included and the timeframe (2005–2021). While we provide a causal theory and explain the mechanisms behind the associations between aid and democracy-related components, due to the observational nature of the data we refrain from making any causal claims from our empirical results.

2. Theoretical framework

Below, we present a theoretical framework that explains how earmarked funding can strengthen civil society, explain the variation across regime types, and its impact on democratisation processes.

We argue that earmarked funding, in particular, is likely to contribute to strengthening CSOs in recipient countries. Earmarked assistance refers to funding that is designated by foreign donors to reach specific targets and goals (OECD, 2022). This type of democracy assistance channelled through CSOs, particularly, is likely to empower CSOs. While other types of developmental aid focus on enhancing economic or social conditions that facilitate the foundation and survival of democracy, democracy assistance on the other hand, is specifically devised to empower key domestic agents (Finkel et al., 2007). Many local CSOs are restricted in their operations by limited financial capital and consist of small teams juggling different projects simultaneously. Therefore, additional financial assistance from external donors can help CSOs invest in more human resources. In turn, with additional funds and/or staff, CSOs can organize more projects. Consequently, their presence in society is strengthened and they are more robust. The problem of funding may be particularly acute in more authoritarian contexts, where CSOs tend to rely more on the state for financial assistance (Tuncel, 2023). Financial assistance, therefore, is likely to empower CSOs and make them more independent and robust.

Moreover, while concerns about aid capture are widely warranted, these problems may be alleviated when working with CSOs (e.g. Dietrich, 2013). Although bypassed aid may not be completely insulated from aid capture, aid channelled through bypass actors is relatively more shielded from misallocation compared to government-to-government transfers. On the one hand, the issue-focused approach of NGOs makes their survival strategy dependent on their performance. On the other hand, given the large number of nonstate development actors, donors can potentially punish bad implementation by switching to another partner (Dietrich, 2013). These two conditions create incentives for bypass actors to, at a minimum, mitigate corrupt practices, thereby reducing the amount of aid at risk of being captured, and instead being used to strengthen CSOs.

In general, aid programs are characterised by an information discrepancy between the donor (principal) and the recipient (agent) (Radelet, 2006). The international dimension and physical distance further contribute to this asymmetry (Radelet, 2006). The principal-agent dilemma impacts almost every element of aid programs, including the creation of programs, implementation, and evaluation. One way of overcoming this problem and helping donors achieve specific development goals is to earmark their funding (Tortora & Steensen, 2014; Weinlich, Baumann, Lundsgaarde, & Wolff, 2020). Using earmarked funding increases accountability and involves the donor more directly (Weinlich et al., 2020). When donors pursue specific goals, they can follow the implementation and track the progress of these programs. Consequently, donors can measure the extent to which they have achieved their targets (or not) (Wood & Fällman, 2019). Therefore, earmarked funding is more likely to help donors achieve specific goals and mitigates some of the risks associated with handing out money to CSOs (OECD, 2011).

Furthermore, democracy assistance may come as more than just ‘money’, but also in the form of technical assistance, training, and aid that aims to enhance the capacity development of civil society. Capacity development as an aid allocation approach has been increasingly acknowledged as a worthwhile exercise (e.g. Bentley, McCarthy, & Mean, 2003; Blagescu & Young, 2006). Capacity-building approaches for CSOs concentrate on improving an organisation’s administration, leadership, and operation (Blagescu & Young, 2006). Improving organisational capacity can enable CSOs to establish their mission, organise and manage resources better and eventually achieve their goals (Blagescu & Young, 2006). In other words, aid delivered in the form of capacity development provides CSOs with the resources needed to strengthen their organisational capacity. With a stronger capacity, CSOs can become more effective in engaging citizens, advocating for their rights, and promoting participation in the democratic process. Examples of this include the British Council’s Civil Society Support Programme for CSOs in Ethiopia, or similar initiatives funded by the European Union in Turkey (e.g. the Civil Society Development Center STGM). These projects include activities such as strategic planning and project cycle management training for other CSOs and training in project oversight, budget control, activity coordination, and social media administration. Hence, given that donors focus on the capacity-building of CSO, it is reasonable to assume that increased assistance directed to CSOs will enhance their organisational capacity, thereby enabling them to operate more effectively.³

Based on these considerations, we expect earmarked assistance to strengthen civil society in the recipient countries and formulate our first hypothesis as follows:

H1: *Democracy assistance channelled through civil society organisations is positively associated with improvements in the civil society index in the recipient country.*

3. CSO aid in different regime types

Yet, we argue that the impact of CSO aid on the strength of civil society varies across different regimes. We concur with previous research that domestic political contexts must be considered

when assessing the effect of aid on democracy, but we depart from it in that we are not primarily focusing on authoritarian leaders' survival strategies or time horizons (e.g. Cornell, 2013; Lührmann, McMann, & Van Ham, 2017). This is the case because we are specifically investigating the impact of aid channelled through CSOs which is by definition, bypassing the dictator (Dietrich, 2013). Therefore, we do not face a situation in which the dictator himself decides whether to accept or decline democracy assistance according to the threat it poses to his regime.⁴ Instead, we argue that the impact of this type of aid depends on the form of civil society present in different regime types. Due to the highly restricted environment of CSOs in closed authoritarian regimes, we expect international donors and aid to have the least impact here. As we move to relatively more open regimes, however, we expect a larger impact of CSO aid on the strength of civil society. Here we draw on the Regimes of the World (RoW) typology that identifies closed autocracies, electoral autocracies, electoral democracies, and liberal democracies (Lührmann, Tannenberg, & Lindberg, 2018).

First, in closed autocracies, the head of state is not electorally accountable, and no meaningful elections take place (Lührmann et al., 2018). In addition, opposition parties are non-existent and to stay in power, the incumbent heavily relies on the repression of the media and civil society to prevent those institutions from challenging the accountability of the regime (Dupuy, Ron, & Prakash, 2016; Lührmann et al., 2018). CSOs in these regimes are in the weakest position across the globe and claims-making NGOs are subject to harsh repression (e.g. Toepler, Zimmer, Fröhlich, & Obuch, 2020). Rather than actively working towards their prescribed goals, many of these CSOs are occupied with devising survival strategies (e.g. Benevolenski & Toepler, 2017). In many cases, CSOs have also been fully co-opted by the regimes and instead of challenging it, they are loyal supporters or contribute to its legitimation by performing service roles for the regime (e.g. Wang & Snape, 2018; Wischermann, Bunk, Köllner, & Lorch, 2018). Given these systematic disadvantages and the all-encompassing nature of closed authoritarian regimes, we expect a relatively minor effect of CSO aid on the strength of civil society. CSOs here are, by definition, dependent on the regime for funding and permissions to operate and assistance from international donors is unlikely to substantively change the position of CSO in such a context.

Second, in electoral autocracies, democratic elements are still present (Levitsky & Way, 2002). Multi-party elections take place; however, the regime falls short of other democratic standards, like fair party competition or universal suffrage (Levitsky & Way, 2002; Lührmann et al., 2018). CSOs in these regimes also frequently experience repression and are severely constrained in their work. Especially autocratising regimes have an interest in clamping down on civil society (e.g. Toepler et al., 2020; Tuncel, 2023). Nevertheless, we expect the associations of CSO aid on the strength of civil society to be larger in electoral autocracies than in closed authoritarian regimes. Despite being restricted in their operations, CSOs here have more room to maneuver and although many are still dependent on and restricted by the regimes, CSOs are still capable of 'carving pockets of resistance' (Yabanci, 2019, p. 300). Additional assistance from international donors should therefore help CSOs to become more independent from the state and robust.

Electoral democracies conduct multi-party elections and demonstrate competence in electoral institutions and procedures. Yet, they also display shortcomings in one or more other democratic elements, particularly in terms of civil rights and the rule of law (Lührmann et al., 2018). Given that CSOs are *relatively free* to operate and are embedded in functioning support environments including opposition parties and relatively free media in these regimes, we expect international democracy assistance through CSOs to have the largest impact on civil society in electoral democracies. Since the political system is not substantively biased against civil society, CSOs here should benefit more from international assistance.

Based on these considerations, we propose our second hypothesis on the varying effects of CSO aid in different regime types as follows:

H2: *Democracy assistance channelled through civil society organisations is associated with greater improvements in the civil society index as regimes become more democratic.*⁵

4. CSO aid on democratisation

Finally, beyond strengthening civil society, we also argue that aid channelled through CSOs will be associated with overall democracy levels. Civil society is believed to have a pivotal role in generating political momentum for democratic change (e.g. Clarke, 1998). During democratic transitions, civil society is regarded as an ‘institutional vehicle’ or ‘empowering agent’ bringing about democratic change and turning authoritarian societies into liberal societies (Finkel et al., 2007; Mercer, 2002). Therefore, supporting and, in turn, empowering civil society enables it to build pressure to democratise from within the country (e.g. Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997; Collier & Mahoney, 2015; Dietrich, 2013; Lipset, 1994; Pinckney, Butcher, & Braithwaite, 2022; Pospieszna & Weber, 2020). The reasons for the importance of civil society in advancing and retaining democracy are manifold (e.g. see Diamond, 1994; O’Donnell & Schmitter, 1986), but we particularly highlight two factors.

First, CSOs play a significant role in educating and mobilizing populations for the cause of democracy (Lipset, 1994). Although not all interventions prove successful, a large body of research has shown that many civic education and engagement programmes are effective in increasing citizens’ political knowledge and lead participants to update their assessments of the local levels of democracy (e.g. Baldwin & Winters, 2020; Finkel, Neundorff, & Rascón Ramírez, 2024; Finkel & Lim, 2021; Hyde et al., 2023). Moreover, research shows democratisation is often advanced when organisations ‘from below’ are involved as leaders in resistance campaigns (e.g. Haggard & Kaufman, 2016; Pinckney, 2020). A prime example of this process was the ‘Arab Spring’ (e.g. Hudáková, 2021). CSOs can fulfil several important roles in episodes of mass mobilization such as ‘provid[ing] strategic and tactical leadership, a focal point for the interaction of activists ... and a source for recruiting new members and identifying future leaders’ (Tarrow, 2011, p. 123). Indeed, in the case of Tanzania, most candidates standing for elections for the opposition started their careers in CSOs (Weghorst, 2022).

Second, studies have emphasized civil society’s role in monitoring government actions and holding political leaders accountable (e.g. Grimes, 2013; Peruzzotti & Smulovitz, 2000). CSOs can improve the channels of communication and oversight between governments and citizens by informing about (proposed) legislation, drawing attention to its consequences, and proposing policy alternatives (e.g. Hegre, Bernhard, & Teorell, 2020). Yet, they can also take a more active role in changing government actions, for instance, filing litigation in the courts or by organizing disruptive protests that force governments to respond (e.g. Almén & Burell, 2018; Cornell & Grimes, 2015). Large and small-N studies confirm that having a robust civil society is also an important precondition for the survival of democracies in the current wave of autocratisation (e.g. Bernhard, Hicken, Reenock, & Lindberg, 2020; Laebens & Lührmann, 2021).

With overall more assistance from international donors, CSOs should be better prepared to organize more activities in either of these domains and therefore, we formulate our third hypothesis as follows:

H3: *Democracy assistance channelled through civil society organisations is positively associated with higher levels of democracy in the recipient country.*

5. Data and research design

To empirically test the proposed hypotheses, we conduct time-series cross-sectional analyses, using ordinary least square (OLS) regressions, with data from the Varieties of Democracy

Project and the OECD/DAC. Based on the availability of data, the analysis includes the years 2005 to 2021 for 128 countries (see Table A2 in the Online Appendix).

Regarding democracy assistance on civil society and democracy, the OECD Creditor Reporting System distinguishes two forms of official development assistance for civil society. Aid *to* CSOs includes core contributions and contributions to programs initiated and developed by CSOs (OECD, 2022). Aid channelled *through* CSOs includes funds directed via CSOs to implement donor-initiated programs, in other words, earmarked funding (OECD, 2022). Most donors generally prefer to earmark their funding (OECD, 2022). According to the OECD statistics of 2018, almost 85 percent of all support for CSO flows *through* CSOs, and only 15 percent was delivered *to* CSOs (OECD, 2022). In this study, we focus on aid channelled *through* CSOs (earmarked funding) specifically.

To create the main independent variable, we extracted data from the OECD/DAC data from all official donors listed in the Creditor Reporter System (CRS).⁶ In this paper, we focus on aid disbursements instead of commitments since only implemented projects can be expected to have an impact. Specifically, we extract gross disbursements channelled ‘through NGOs and Civil Society’ from ‘all official donors’. The CRS definition of an NGO closely corresponds to the OECD definition of civil society, making it a valid data source for the independent variable capturing aid to civil society organisations. The disbursements labelled ‘channelled through civil society’ refer to funds specifically, distributed through CSOs to implement donor-initiated projects (earmarked funding) (OECD, 2022). In order to capture democracy assistance to civil society, we solely focus on aid labelled with the following Creditor Reporting System (CRS) code: 150.0 Government and Civil Society, since this aid specifically targets democratic development. Lastly, we follow leading studies on foreign aid and democratisation, which use ‘foreign aid per capita’ as their key independent variable (see Cornell, 2013; Finkel et al., 2007 & 2019; Gafuri, 2022; Grimm & Mathis, 2018; Scott & Steele, 2011). Therefore, we transform the aid variable into per-capita values in constant US Dollars. This approach has the advantage that it also controls for aid intensity (Scott & Steele, 2011) and allows for more meaningful comparisons between countries of different population sizes.

The main dependent variables are from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. The main dependent variable is the Core Civil Society Index (CCSI). The index indicates how robust civil society is, meaning to what extent it ‘enjoys autonomy from the state and [...] citizens freely and actively pursue their political and civic goals, however conceived’ (Coppedge et al., 2023, p. 52). It combines indicators on CSO entry and exit, CSO repression, and CSOs’ participatory environment and produces a score from low (0) to high (1) (Coppedge et al., 2023). CSOs in this measure ‘include, but are by no means limited to, interest groups, labor unions, spiritual organizations if they are engaged in civic or political activities, social movements, professional associations, charities, and other non-governmental organizations’ (Coppedge et al., 2023).

To analyse whether the effectiveness of the assistance is contingent on the regime type of the recipient country, we use the Regimes of the World (RoW) typology. The RoW typology is introduced by Lührmann et al. (2018) and is based on V-Dem variables, including the liberal and electoral index. Regimes are classified into four categories: closed autocracy, electoral autocracy, electoral democracy, and liberal democracy (Lührmann et al., 2018). Third, we use the Varieties of Democracy Electoral Index (EDI) as our dependent variable to capture the level of democracy (0–1 scale), where 0 is highly autocratic and 1 is highly democratic (Coppedge et al., 2023).

Following previous research on foreign aid, we include several control variables. First, we control for ‘CSO Total Assistance’ which includes all aid channelled through civil society except aid with the code ‘150. Government & Civil Society’, which constitutes our main independent variable. This includes aid for educational purposes or humanitarian aid received by civil society, which might still affect civil society organisations in the recipient country. Second, we control for all other aid except aid channelled through civil society organisations (total assistance). Aid received by the public sector or multilateral organisations still has the potential to influence

civil society because they may finance initiatives in civil society. All aid variables are transformed into per capita values to account for population size (Cornell, 2013; Grimm & Mathis, 2018).

Next, we control for GDP per capita to account for socio-economic development, using data from the National Accounts by the United Nations (2023).⁷ A wealthier population can engage more in civil society activities than people who are struggling to survive (Lipset, 1959). Furthermore, we account for ongoing conflicts since they are likely to affect the disbursement of aid (Pospieszna & Weber, 2020). We operationalise this with a binary variable indicating ongoing domestic or international conflict in the country based on data from the Global Peace Index (GPI).⁸ Moreover, several studies highlight the influence of governmental institutions and state capacity on the associational landscape (Grimes, 2013; Winters, 2010). Employing the V-Dem variable that captures ‘impartial and rigorous public administration’ we control for the extent to which public administration is characterised by patronage, favouritism or discrimination (Coppedge et al., 2023).

Since we are interested in the developments within countries over time, we employ country-fixed effects.⁹ Additionally, we include year-fixed effects to account for world trends commonly experienced by all countries. We estimate all models using standard errors clustered by country.

As indicated by earlier studies on democracy aid, there may be a temporal delay between aid disbursement and its effects (Cornell, 2013; Grimm & Mathis, 2018; Lührmann et al., 2017). Therefore, we include a one-year lag in all our analyses, whereby the dependent variable is measured one year after aid allocation and all independent variables incorporate a one-year time lag. Including a one-year lag also helps to alleviate concerns of reverse causality to some extent, where a robust civil society may attract more assistance rather than the other way around (Cornell, 2013).

6. Results

Table 1 presents the regression results of the relationship between democracy aid channelled through CSOs and civil society robustness. Model 1 below shows the bivariate regression. In

Table 1. The effect of democracy assistance channelled through CSOs on the Core Civil Society Index

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
CSO democracy assistance p.c.	0.01* (0.004)	0.01* (0.005)	0.01* (0.005)
CSO total assistance p.c.		−0.001* (0.0006)	−0.0009† (0.0006)
Total assistance p.c.		0.00009† (0.00005)	0.00008* (0.00003)
GDP per capita (log)		−0.002 (0.06)	−0.06 (0.06)
Rigorous and impartial administration			0.1*** (0.02)
Ongoing conflict			0.008 (0.02)
Country-FE	✓	✓	✓
Year-FE	✓	✓	✓
r^2	0.03	0.03	0.34
Observations	2042	2039	2039
Countries	128	128	128

Notes: Independent variables are lagged by one year. Robust standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. † $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

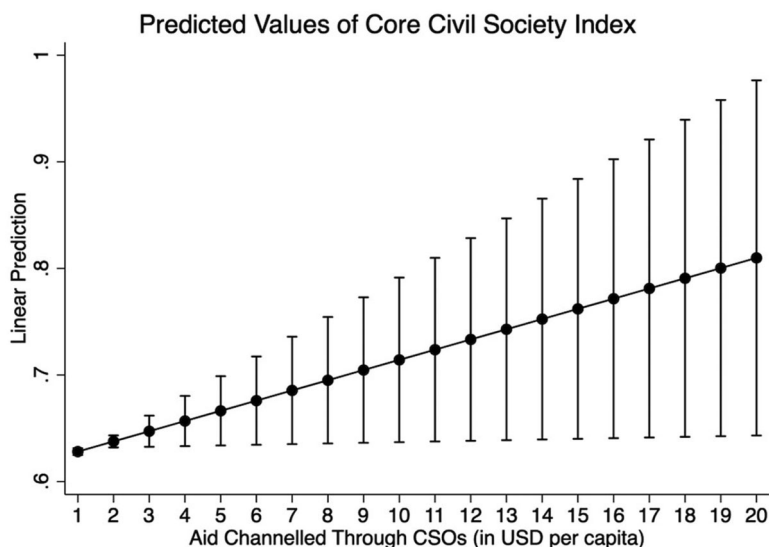


Figure 1. Predicted values of Core Civil Society Index (Model 3 above).

Model 2 we add other types of aid and GDP as controls and finally, Model 3 further includes state capacity and conflict as controls, increasing the fit of the model substantially.

The results suggest a significant positive relationship between democracy aid channelled through CSOs and improvements in the robustness of civil society one year later. On average, the model indicates that a one USD per capita increase in democracy aid channelled through CSOs is associated with an increase in civil society robustness of 0.01 units on the Core Civil Society Index scale ranging from 0 (low) to 1 (high). This remains the same throughout all three model specifications and provides evidence for the expected association between aid channelled through CSOs and civil society robustness. Therefore, the results confirm our first hypothesis. On average, these are small effect sizes, especially relating to more populous countries that rarely receive more than 1 USD per capita in aid channelled through civil society. However, in several smaller countries increases of more than 1 USD in aid channelled through civil society are more common and therefore are likely to contribute to meaningful improvements. Montenegro saw an increase in aid from 0.65 USD per capita in 2006 to just over 5 USD per capita in 2019, during which its CCSI rose by 7.38%. Similarly, Armenia received 0.11 USD per capita in 2005, increasing to about 4 USD per capita in 2021, while its CCSI grew from .75 to .93 a 24% increase. These two examples show the predicted changes and overall trend of our model. [Figure 1](#) below displays this association with the predicted values for different levels of aid channelled through CSOs.

Regarding the control variables, we find positive associations of the total assistance provided and of rigorous and impartial bureaucracy on civil society robustness. However, we find significant negative results for other aid directed to CSOs. We find no significant effects for GDP per capita and whether a conflict is ongoing in the recipient country.

Next, we estimate whether democracy assistance channelled through CSOs contributes to the strengthening of civil society across regime types. [Table 2](#) below shows the results across regime types. We find statistically significant associations of CSO democracy assistance on strengthening the robustness of civil society in closed autocracies (Model 1), electoral autocracies (Model 2) (at $p < 0.1$ level), and liberal democracies (Model 4). Yet, the average effect is strongest in the category of closed autocracies that is comprised of 35 countries in our sample of recipient countries. This may be due to closed autocracies coming from lower levels of democracy which allow them to experience relatively larger increases in their democracy scores. However, we find no statistically significant effects in electoral democracies (Model 3). These results highlight

Table 2. The association of democracy assistance channelled through CSOs on civil society robustness across different regime types

	(1) Closed autocracy	(2) Electoral autocracy	(3) Electoral democracy	(4) Liberal democracy
CSO democracy assistance p.c.	0.05* (0.02)	0.004† (0.002)	0.001 (0.001)	0.006* (0.003)
CSO total assistance p.c.	−0.004* (0.001)	−0.0004 (0.001)	−0.00007 (0.0003)	0.0000006 (0.0002)
Total assistance p.c.	−0.0003 (0.0002)	0.00006† (0.00004)	−0.00002 (0.00004)	0.0000009 (0.00004)
GDP per capita (log)	−0.19 (0.12)	−0.03 (0.04)	−0.01 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)
Rigorous and impartial administration	−0.02 (0.03)	0.07** (0.02)	0.02 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Ongoing conflict	0.06 (0.04)	0.007 (0.03)	−0.02 (0.01)	−0.04** (0.009)
Country-FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year-FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
r^2	0.02	0.16	0.03	0.009
Observations	294	882	736	127
Countries	35	81	71	14

Notes: Independent variables are lagged by one year. Robust standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. † $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

that although we find a positive impact of democracy aid channelled through CSOs in most, the effect sizes vary across regime types.

In contrast to our Hypothesis 2, we find that as we move from more authoritarian to more democratic regimes, democracy assistance channelled through CSOs has less of an impact on the strength of civil society except for liberal democracies in our sample. Although going against our initial expectation, the results are in line with Heiss (2019) who purports that civil society can act as ‘watchdogs’ and provide a means for mobilization against the government even in very authoritarian contexts. Nevertheless, given the limited sample size in some of the categories, the results should be interpreted carefully, especially for closed autocracies and liberal democracies. In the Online Appendix, we also provide the results from these models in a visualised form.

Finally, we turn to our third hypothesis on the association between democracy assistance channelled through CSOs on overall democracy levels using V-Dem’s polyarchy measure.¹⁰ The results in Table 3 confirm that more democracy assistance channelled through CSOs is also associated with improved levels of democracy in recipient countries.

Substantively, the results show that a one USD per capita increase in democracy assistance channelled through CSOs is associated with a 0.006 unit increase in the Electoral Democracy Index (scale 0–1). These effects are even smaller than those for the strengthening of civil society in recipient countries suggesting that even if civil society benefits from aid, the link to strengthening democracy may be even more distant. Nevertheless, some successful examples illustrate the benefits that this type of aid may have for overall democracy. For instance, El Salvador benefited from increased aid, rising from 0.07 USD per capita to 4.38 USD per capita in 2018. During this period, EDI scores increased from 0.54 to 0.64, marking an 18.52% increase.

Models 1–3 highlight similar results for the relationship between democracy assistance channelled through CSOs and democracy levels across different model specifications. In line with previous research, we also find that the amount of total assistance channelled through CSOs is associated with higher levels of democracy in the following year in recipient countries but to a

Table 3. The association between democracy assistance channelled through CSOs and recipient countries' electoral democracy levels

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
CSO democracy assistance p.c.	0.007** (0.002)	0.008** (0.003)	0.006** (0.002)
CSO total assistance p.c.		-0.0007† (0.0004)	-0.0004 (0.0003)
Total assistance p.c.		0.00009† (0.00005)	0.00008* (0.00003)
GDP per capita (log)		0.05 (0.03)	0.006 (0.03)
Rigorous and impartial administration			0.08*** (0.01)
Ongoing conflict			-0.01 (0.02)
Country-FE	✓	✓	✓
Year-FE	✓	✓	✓
r^2	0.03	0.03	0.34
Observations	2042	2039	2039
Countries	128	128	128

Notes: Independent variables are lagged by one year. Robust standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. † $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

smaller extent than democracy assistance channelled through CSOs. In the Online Appendix, we also provide a figure to visualise these results with predicted values.

Taken together, the results provide evidence for our Hypotheses 1 and 3 as well as giving important insights into varying dynamics across regimes, albeit distinctly from our Hypothesis 2. Nevertheless, the relatively small coefficients may suggest that these are statistically significant but modest associations that would require donors to invest significantly more resources to generate meaningful change in many countries, especially more populous ones.

7. Addressing endogeneity and robustness tests

Due to the observational nature of our data and the constraints of the two-way fixed-effects models, the study has several limitations. Countries that improve their scores on civil society and democracy indices may receive more aid over time and the relationship may thus, be endogenous. To address the potential endogeneity bias between our key dependent variables - core civil society index and electoral democracy index - and our key independent variable democracy assistance channelled through CSOs, we also use the Generalized Method of Moments (GMM) (Arellano & Bover, 1995; Blundell & Bond, 1998).

GMM is designed precisely to deal with potential issues of endogeneity in panel data models with relatively short periods that are dynamic over time, using the existing internal variable i.e. independent variables with time lags, as instruments. We use a two-step GMM estimation method, where we lag all independent variables for one year and include a one-year lag of the dependent variable in the main model. Additionally, we use the key independent variable, aid channelled through civil society, as an instrumental variable.

Using the GMM method, we find similar results to those of our baseline models for Hypothesis 1 and identify a highly significant relationship between aid channelled through CSOs and civil society robustness (full results in Table A18 in Online Appendix). Given that this model includes a lagged dependent variable, the coefficients are naturally much smaller, in this case, showing that a one-dollar per capita increase in aid channelled through CSOs is associated with an increase of 0.001 units on the Core Civil Society Index. Additionally, the levels

Table 4. Summary of robustness tests

Test purpose	Test type	Results	Table in Appendix
Variable specification	Including 'Education'	In line with baseline results	A3, A4
Variable specification	Including Clean Elections Index	In line with baseline results	A5
Variable specification	Civil Society Participation Index as DV	In line with baseline results	A6
Sample specification	Excluding Outliers	In line with baseline results	A7, A8
Model specification	Two-Year Lag	H1 and H3 in line with baseline results	A9, A10
Model specification	No Year-FE	H1 and H3 in line with baseline results	A11, A12
Model specification	No Country-FE	H1 and H3 in line with baseline results	A13, A14
Model specification	No FE	H1 and H3 in line with baseline results	A15, A16
Variable specification	Liberal Democracy Index as DV	In line with baseline results	A17
Endogeneity	Generalized Method of Moments	H1 and H3 in line with baseline results	A18, A19, A20

of the Core Civil Society Index and log GDP per capita from the preceding year positively impact the Core Civil Society Index. On the other hand, other types of aid, rigorous and impartial public administration (lagged), and conflict (lagged) negatively impact the dependent variable and are statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level.

The results from the 'Sargan Test' which tests the validity of instruments and whether they are suitably exogenous, i.e. using the existing internal variables - independent variables with time lags as instruments within the GMM framework - suggest that the instruments used are appropriate and uncorrelated with the error term (see Table A18 in Online Appendix). Moreover, we use the Arellano-Bond test to check for higher-order autocorrelation. The results suggest that we reject the null hypothesis of no second-order autocorrelation at the 5% significance level but not at the 1% significance level.

Additionally, we also get similar results for Hypothesis 3, providing further evidence that increased aid flows through CSOs are associated with marginally improved levels of democracy. The results for Hypothesis 2 are replicated to some extent in the GMM models. However, as opposed to the baseline results, they show a significant negative relationship between democracy assistance channelled through CSOs and civil society robustness in closed authoritarian regimes. All the models pass the Sargan test for the validity of the instruments and most models pass the Arellano-Bond test, although two fail to pass the second-order autocorrelation test (see Tables A18–20 in the Online Appendix).

To ensure that the results are not driven by single measurements or model specifications, we perform several robustness tests with a number of estimations and variable specifications. In the interest of brevity, Table 4 illustrates the range of additional robustness tests we conducted. The full results of these analyses can be found in the Online Appendix.

Taken together, our robustness tests show that especially the results for our Hypotheses 1 and 3 are very robust. We observe slightly more uncertainty around the results for Hypothesis 2. Here, we see that depending on variable and model specifications, the results for electoral authoritarian regimes are statistically significant in some models but not in others. However,

results for closed authoritarian regimes remain robust throughout all our estimations with the exception of the GMM model.

8. Discussion and conclusion

This study set out to assess the impact of democracy assistance channelled through CSOs on civil society and democracy through a series of cross-sectional time-series analyses including 128 recipient countries between 2005 and 2021. The study contributes theoretically to debates on the effect of Western-led democracy assistance programs on the democratisation processes of low and middle-income countries, emphasizing the role of earmarked funding as a channel to improve civil society. Additionally, we explain that this impact can vary across various types of regimes and that this type of aid can promote overall democratisation.

Moreover, we provide the most comprehensive empirical analysis of the association between earmarked aid and civil society, in terms of years and countries included in the sample. While a number of studies have investigated the impact of democracy assistance (e.g. Gafuri, 2022; Scott & Steele, 2011; Steele et al., 2021), the effect of earmarked funding given to CSOs has not been investigated empirically. Our findings indeed point to the positive association between this type of democracy assistance and improvements in civil society and democracy indices. Nevertheless, the average effect sizes we identify are small, implying that to generate substantive improvements in recipient countries, donors will have to invest significantly more resources into this type of aid.

First, the results lend confirmation to the hypothesis that democracy assistance channelled through CSOs on civil society and democracy is associated with modest improvements in the civil society scores in the recipient country. This type of democracy assistance can empower democratic agents and help them regarding capacity building. This is particularly true for earmarked funding that we analyse in this study since it also alleviates the risk of aid capture. These findings also speak to recent qualitative work that has highlighted some negative consequences of earmarked funding for the autonomy and work of CSOs but do not negate them (e.g. Heiss, 2019; Jalali, 2013; Zihnioğlu, 2019). We are highlighting average effects across a large number of regimes and covering funding for different types of CSOs but acknowledge that without some factors that this line of work has highlighted such as connections to grass-roots mobilization, substantial advancements toward democracy are unlikely.

Second, the findings offer an interesting addition to previous findings on the impact of democracy assistance, not only for civil society but also for overall democracy levels. Our findings suggest that there is a marginally positive impact of democracy assistance channelled through CSOs on overall democracy levels. As such, the results are in line with prior studies that also establish the broader connection between democracy assistance and improved levels of democracy (Gafuri, 2022; Scott & Steele, 2011; Steele et al., 2021). More specifically, the findings confirm that directing democracy assistance to certain democratic actors can promote democracy as suggested, for instance, by Finkel et al. (2007). Yet, while previous research established the empirical link between democracy assistance and levels of democracy, the precise mechanisms behind this relationship have remained unaccounted for. As opposed to strengthening electoral institutions as a path to democratisation (Steele et al., 2021), we highlight that empowering civil society may be a mechanism through which democracy is developed or strengthened in recipient countries and that this worthwhile to be tested explicitly in future research. Nevertheless, similar to work on aid used for electoral institutions, the modest effect sizes here also suggest that this may not be the primary mechanism through which democracy aid is leading to improved democracy levels. Further research is therefore encouraged to also analyse other potential mechanisms that lead to this outcome.

Lastly, we also confirm that democracy aid channelled through CSOs has a varying impact across different types of regimes. Although we find significant results for both, closed and

electoral authoritarian regimes as well as liberal democracies in our baseline results, the findings for closed autocracies are the most robust across model specifications. This result is counter to our expectations but is in line with some prior work that has emphasised that even in closed authoritarian regimes, there are beacons of hope. Civil society initiatives offer citizens an avenue to mobilize, organize into an opposition, and can pose a direct threat to authoritarian states (Heiss, 2019). Their activities can have real and measure effects in the domestic politics of authoritarian countries. Wischermann, Cuong, and Phuong (2016), for instance, find that although many Vietnamese civic organizations are organised in authoritarian ways, many of them nonetheless challenge policymakers and act as supporters of further democratisation (also Vu, 2019). Even in China where civil society has also been closed significantly under Xi Jinping, some NGOs infuse ideas of democratic citizenship, public accountability, and meaningful participation into political processes (Yang, 2023). Thus, these findings contribute to the ongoing debate on whether democracy assistance in such regimes is a good investment at all, or whether autocrats can too easily curtail any progress toward democracy (Bush, 2015; Hyde et al., 2023). Our findings provide evidence for the continued benefits of democracy assistance even in closed authoritarian regimes. Future research may build upon and extend this work by going into more detail about the differences in aid effectiveness across regime types. It may also be worthwhile for further work to dissect aid to different types of CSOs and whether there are differences in effectiveness across these types.

Possible reasons why we see very small positive effects could be related to the fact that the particular period studied here provides a ‘hard test’ for our hypotheses as many countries are experiencing a wave of autocratisation (Wiebrecht et al., 2023). In addition, in line with Snider (2018), who argues that democracy aid programs are negotiated deals that can reward economic interests to incumbent regimes, especially in authoritarian contexts, this dynamic may make it difficult for these programs to achieve their initially intended goals.

Nevertheless, we also acknowledge that our study has limitations. Due to the observational nature of the data, we refrain from making causal claims regarding the effects of aid on civil society and democracy scores. Future studies could use instrumental variables or mediation analysis to establish more robust causal inference. Moreover, interviewing civil society members and individuals involved with aid projects directed toward civil society in both recipient and donor countries would be useful in understanding the nexus between aid and democracy-related improvements. Our third hypothesis regarding the impact of democracy aid channelled through CSOs on civil society, and consequently on democracy, may be tested more explicitly with a mediation analysis. However, given the nature of our data—country-year over time, and the lagged variables, capturing both within- and between-country differences, it is very difficult to employ mediation analysis.

Finally, understanding the effectiveness of democracy assistance directed to CSOs goes beyond the academic sphere; it also offers valuable guidance to policymakers. Most importantly, the findings shows that there is a weak but robust association between democracy assistance earmarked funding channelled through CSOs and both, empowering civil society and enhancing democracy. The results encourage donors to channel more of their democracy support through CSOs.

Notes

1. Throughout this article, we use the terms civil society organisations and non-government organisations interchangeably.
2. Both, theoretically and empirically, we understand democratisation as any ‘substantial and sustained improvement of democratic institutions and practices’ (Maerz, Edgell, Wilson, Hellmeier, & Lindberg, 2024, p. 5).
3. We acknowledge that capacity building can also take place without funding channelled through CSOs, for instance, in cases in which donors run capacity development programs themselves as in the case of Technical

Assistance to Civil Society Organisations in the Western Balkans and Turkey (TACSO) (Zihnioğlu, 2019). However, this type of activity is not included in the operationalization of our key explanatory variable.

4. We acknowledge, however, that dictators are, of course, able to disrupt international funding flows to local CSOs and increasingly do so (Toepler et al., 2020).
5. Empirically, we also include the category of liberal democracies for completeness but given that relatively little assistance is given to liberal democracies we do not further theorise it.
6. OECD.Stat. 'Creditor Reporting System'. Accessed March 2023: <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=crrsl>.
7. United Nations Statistics Division 'Main Aggregates Database'. GDP per capita is at constant 2015 prices in US Dollars. Accessed March 2023: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/snaama>
8. Global Peace Index. Accessed April 2023: <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/public-release-data/>.
9. A Hausman test confirms this is the appropriate model specification.
10. For potential concerns surrounding coder bias, it is also worth noting that the themes of civil society and elections (including the Electoral Democracy Index) form two different expert surveys. In other words, the experts coding levels of civil society are generally not the same as those coding elections, and ultimately the levels of democracy.

Disclosure statement

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