

Democracy, Aid, and Diffusion: A Normative Approach to the Hybrid Regime
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Abstract: Despite its increased prioritization over the past several decades, democracy remains an elusive feat for many nations. This is due, in part, to a recent uptick in hybrid regimes, which possess qualities of both democracy and authoritarianism simultaneously. Among others, one especially salient explanation for hybrid formation is democracy aid itself, which often engenders superficial democratization while masking ongoing authoritarian practices. Still, despite considerable research examining how various factors – including aid – impact hybrid regimes, relatively little headway has been made. This is due primarily to continued disagreement over how to best measure and situate hybrids within the broader democracy literature. In this review, I demonstrate the role sociology can play in addressing this issue while advancing research on democracy, hybrids, and aid in a productive way. I argue that using sociological theories explaining the spread of global norms – such as democracy – to analyze hybrid regimes will facilitate improved understanding of democracy and the factors which shape it across the social sciences.

Keywords: democracy, sociological institutionalism, norm diffusion, hybrid regimes, foreign aid, democracy promotion, world society

Sparked by the rise in democracy promotion following the end of the Cold War (Smith, 1994), a massive body of literature seeking to define, measure, and explain democracy has emerged. Yet the growth of hybrid regimes – or governments possessing qualities of both democracy and authoritarianism simultaneously (Diamond, 2002) – has created puzzles earlier research rarely anticipated. In addition to defying conventional expectations about how democratic transitions occur, hybrids may also, in fact, be incentivized by aid intended to foster full democracy (Simpser, 2008).

However, scholars remain divided over how to best conceptualize and measure hybrids (Mufti, 2018), notwithstanding significant yet controversial efforts to do so (Lueders & Lust, 2018). Fundamentally, should we consider hybrids to be flawed, or perhaps transitioning, democracies? Autocracies? Something else entirely? How one chooses to answer this question inevitably shapes their analytical approach - and no one clear answer has emerged, leaving the literature severely disjointed (Bogaards, 2009). As a result, our understanding of hybrids and the conditions which shape them – including aid – is incomplete, and their place within the broader literature on democracy is unclear.

In my review, I discuss the democracy, aid, and hybrid regime literatures in further depth while highlighting existing gaps. I conclude by arguing that a **normative, sociological institutionalist approach** provides one way to make sense of hybrid regimes in the context of democratization and aid. As a theory of diffusion, institutionalism evaluates how global norms, such as democracy, manifest at different levels of compliance – national policies, practices, and opinions – and seeks to explain why nations experience inconsistencies between these levels [e.g. adoption of free and fair elections by law (policy) combined with election fraud (practice)] (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997). By analyzing democracy within this framework,

scholars can now make sense of, measure, and analyze hybrids' simultaneous democratic and authoritarian qualities in a way that was not previously possible. Because institutionalism acknowledges the key role of organizations in promoting global norms (Boli & Thomas, 1999), the effect of aid and aid organizations on democratization and hybrids specifically can now be adequately fleshed out. Thus, by merging the literatures on democracy, aid, and institutionalism, scholars can propel these literatures forward while improving their ability to measure and analyze global trends in democracy.

To lay out this research agenda, I briefly review standard definitions and explanations for democracy. I then discuss the democracy aid and hybrid regime literatures while identifying several gaps in the literature. I close by introduce sociological institutionalism as one way forward and discussing how future studies can apply this framework to advance research on democracy.

UNDERSTANDING DEMOCRACY

Scholars typically categorize democracy to varying degrees of robustness.¹ The most parsimonious form, *minimalist democracy*, entails only “a competitive struggle for the people’s vote” (Schumpeter, 1942, p. 269), regardless of “electoral integrity” (Moller & Skaaning, 2013, p. 145). Slightly more complex, *electoral democracy* also requires elections be free and fair (i.e. guaranteed universal suffrage, equal opportunity for candidacy, and voter protection from intimidation, coercion, and fraud) (Elklit & Svensson, 1997). More exhaustive types further emphasize equal rights and freedoms. For instance, a *polyarchy* must guarantee civil liberties

¹ Moller and Skaaning present a “taxonomical hierarchy” of democracy types (2013:144).

such as freedom of speech, information, and association, in addition to quality elections (Dahl, 1971), and a *liberal democracy* must respect equal and impartial enforcement, or the rule of law (O'Donnell, 2004).

Using these classifications, countless studies examine the conditions that facilitate or impede democracy.² Most indisputably, economic development is crucial for both initiating democratization (Brunk, Caldeira, & Lewis-Beck, 1987; Burkhart & Lewis-Beck, 1994; Dahl, 1971; Jackman, 1973; Lipset, 1959) and preventing reversion (Boix, 2003; Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub, & Limongi, 2000; Przeworski & Limongi, 1997; Svobik, 2008). In contrast, other economic factors such as unequal resource distribution (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2001; Boix, 2003; Houle, 2009; Kapstein & Converse, 2008) or economic downturns (Bernhard, Nordstrom, & Reenock, 2001; Gasiorowski, 1995; Svobik, 2008) may provoke democratic breakdown.³

Culturally, religious (e.g. Islam, Christianity) and ideological systems (e.g. Confucianism) impact democratization (Diamond, Plattner, & Brumberg, 2003; Philpott, 2004; Shin, 2012; Tusalem, 2009; Woodberry, 2012), as do civic attitudes (e.g. individualism, tolerance) (Almond & Verba, 1963; Gorodnichenko & Roland, 2017). State and institutional characteristics are also relevant. For instance, having a presidential (rather than parliamentary) system (Kapstein & Converse, 2008; Stepan & Skach, 1993), a history of military authoritarianism (Svobik, 2008), weak executive constraints (Kapstein & Converse, 2008), and low state capacity (Andersen, Møller, Rørbæk, & Skaaning, 2014) all increase nations' risk of a failed transition.

Yet despite potential barriers to democratization, democracy became a widely accepted global norm by the twenty-first century (Diamond, 2003; Franck, 1992). Studies demonstrate

² See O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) for their seminal work establishing the transitions literature.

³ Economic downturn may similarly delegitimize authoritarian regimes, spurring democratization (Haggard & Kaufman, 1997; Huntington, 1991; Teorell, 2010).

widespread public support for democracy across varying social, cultural, and economic contexts, both as the preferred form of government and a priority development goal (Inglehart, 2003; H. Klingemann, 1999; Norris, 1999; Shin & Kim, 2018). Although some express frustration with its execution (H.-D. Klingemann, 2014; Shin & Kim, 2018), democracy remains “virtually the only political model with global appeal” (Inglehart, 2003, p. 52).

Mirroring democracy’s rising emphasis and acceptance, research examining its proliferation has similarly expanded. Much of this work falls into two areas: democracy aid and hybrid regimes. The first examines aid’s controversial role in democratization, and the second examines how hybrid regimes challenge democracy proliferation at large.

DEMOCRACY AID

Although democracy is a “universal value” (Sen, 1999, p. 5), its recognition as such is relatively recent and is closely tied to the rise of democracy aid. During the Cold War, containment policies (Muller, 1985) and practitioner discomfort with aid’s colonial and missionary roots (Smith, 1994) rendered democracy assistance⁴ marginal (Carothers, 1999). By the 1990s, however, democracy’s instrumental role in development (Carothers, 1999) and peace (Russett, 1994) became apparent, and the U.S. – spurred by the Soviet Union’s collapse – called for a “new world order” founded upon liberalism, human rights, democracy, and peace (G. Bush, 1991; Smith, 1994). Democracy consequently became not only a major global development and foreign policy aim (Burnell, 2000; McFaul, 2004), but also, a common prerequisite for bilateral

⁴ Defined as “aid specifically designed to foster a democratic opening . . . or to further a democratic transition” (Carothers, 1999, p. 6). Because democracy assistance approaches vary, democracy aid comprises any endeavor explicitly encouraging democracy.

aid and organizational memberships (Carothers, 2002; Levitsky & Way, 2005). Democracy-promoting international non-governmental organizations (INGOs)⁵ subsequently proliferated and global democracy aid⁶ skyrocketed from approximately \$1 billion in 1985 to nearly \$20 billion by 2008 (S. Bush, 2015; Ottaway & Carothers, 2000).

Standard approaches to democracy aid are well-established and conventionally target three areas – elections, state institutions, and civil society – through election monitoring (Bjornlund, 2004; Hyde, 2011a; Kelley, 2008) training and institutional reform (Carothers, 1999), and support for NGOs and independent media (Ottaway & Carothers, 2000), respectively. For instance, election monitoring in nonconsolidated democracies increased from 10 to 80 percent between 1988 and 2004 (Kelley, 2008). Other targets of democracy aid also include women’s, human, and minority rights and civil liberties (Tierney et al., 2011).

Yet despite aid’s ubiquity and funding, its effect on democracy is mixed (Bueno de Mesquita & Smith, 2009; Djankov, Montalvo, & Reynal-Querol, 2008; Dunning, 2004; Knack, 2004; Qian, 2015; Savun & Tirone, 2011).⁷ Though democracy aid can positively impact democracy (Jones & Tarp, 2016; Kalyvitis & Vlachaki, 2010) – especially with a diverse donor pool (Ziaja, 2020), its ability to invoke transitions does little for long-term consolidation, particularly in donor-dependent Africa (Dietrick & Wright, 2013). In fact, democracy aid can undermine governance by fostering the *appearance* of democracy rather than its *actualization* (S. Bush, 2015; Carothers, 1999; Simpser, 2008; van de Walle, 2013).

Aid’s Consequences

⁵ See Bush (2015) for a comprehensive list of INGOs.

⁶ Democracy aid is also a global norm (Kelley, 2008; McFaul, 2004).

⁷ Most quantitative studies of aid on democracy examine generalized aid, though some have begun to examine democracy aid specifically.

Because democracy aid indiscriminately grafts an oversimplified, inflexible, cookie-cutter form of Western democracy onto diverse (typically non-Western) contexts, it is often unable to adapt as issues arise (Carothers, 2015). Aid also prioritizes regime-compatibility (e.g. business, governance, women's rights) and measurability (e.g. number of elections monitored), usually at the expense of *quality* programming directly challenging the status quo (S. Bush, 2015). It also tends to prioritize vertical accountability without strengthening other government branches to balance executive power (van de Walle, 2013).

Additionally, by prioritizing institutional modeling and technical assistance, aid falsely equates democratic institutions with democracy itself, and, in the (frequent) case that aid personnel monopolize the process, undermines local agency and capacity-building. Consequently, most democracy aid fails to address underlying power imbalances and social conditions inhibiting democracy, thus rendering a pseudo-democratic shell beneath which lies marginal substance (van de Walle, 2013). For instance, building polling stations does not prevent voter disenfranchisement; nor does training make representatives less beholden to clientelistic elites (Carothers, 1999). In fact, as occurred in Tanzania, democracy aid may actually provide ruling party members with the resources necessary to uphold their patron-client networks, further entrenching authoritarian practices (Tripp, 2013). Although some practitioners recognize these issues, they remain largely unaddressed (Carothers, 2015).

Moreover, because nations accept aid – mostly election monitors – to “signal” their commitment to democracy, these superficial indicators and the aid endorsing them have normalized and spread, even among nondemocracies (Hyde, 2011a, 2011b). This increased surface-level scrutiny unintentionally encourages subtler, indirect forms of manipulation (e.g.

restricting media freedom prior to elections) and produces “spillover effects” undermining the foundations of democracy at large (e.g. rule of law, accountability) (Hyde & O’Mahoney, 2010; Simpser, 2008; Simpser & Donno, 2012, p. 501).

Why, then, do organizations continue to promote ineffective democracy aid? Mainly, because organizations’ survival depends on funding and access, they prioritize “tame” assistance that satisfies donors and avoids confrontation with dictators (S. Bush, 2015). Member nations’ strategic interests and normative pressures further constrain organizational behavior (Kelley, 2009). Although this literature is relatively nascent, future studies can examine how aid organizations’ dynamics and strategies impact democracy (as opposed to how nations adapt to aid), with particular emphasis on non-electoral aid (e.g. civil society, legislatures, judiciaries, etc.).

In sum, notwithstanding significant aid efforts, democracy remains elusive. Indeed, recent findings suggests that democracy is at risk.

THE HYBRID REGIME

Despite a generally positive trajectory, global democracy fluctuates periodically (Huntington, 1991) – with current estimations indicating a decline (Cooley, 2015; Diamond, 2015) or, at the very least, a modest taper (Plattner, 2015; Schmitter, 2015). Yet unlike prior eras, this trend is not driven by a “wholesale, rapid collapse into authoritarianism” (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018, p. 83), but rather by an increase in hybrid regimes,⁸ which are neither democracies nor autocracies but contain components of both (Diamond, 2002). In general, hybrid regimes

⁸ Despite alternative naming conventions, they all represent substantively similar phenomena. This discussion therefore conceptualizes hybrids as any regime combining democracy and authoritarianism.

formally guarantee individuals' capacity to choose, but constrain their range of choices and the extent to which those choices are honored (Markoff, 2015). By coupling democratic institutions and laws (e.g. competitive elections, rule of law, separation of powers, and protection of civil liberties) with authoritarian practices (e.g. election manipulation, abuse of power and resources, corruption, and political intimidation), hybrid regimes embody democracy in *form* but not in *function* (Carothers, 2002; Diamond, 2002; Levitsky & Way, 2002). For example, despite passing democratic constitutional reforms in the early 2000s, Turkey has increasingly suppressed opposition candidates, prosecuted journalists, and centralized Presidential power.

Although not necessarily new, hybrid regimes only emerged *en masse* around the mid-1980s. However, they quickly proliferated thereafter, outstripping even autocracies by the 1990s. Figure 1 roughly depicts these trends in regime frequency by type over time.⁹ Moreover, due to their long-term stability within the “gray zone,”¹⁰ scholars now recognize hybrids as a unique regime type rather than a temporary transitional situation (Bogaards, 2009; Carothers, 2002; Gilbert & Mohseni, 2011; Morlino, 2009).¹¹ In fact, most hybrids result from the gradual decay (*backsliding*) or piecemeal implementation (*partial democratization*) of democracy (Elkins, 2000; Huq & Ginsburg, 2018), rather than a decisive transition. Consequently, research examining hybrid formation through these processes has flourished.

Backsliding

⁹ As elaborated later, conventional cutoffs for regimes – particularly hybrids – are highly disputed. These trends should be interpreted cautiously but are included to *generally* illustrate hybrids' growth and stability.

¹⁰ Defined as a space where nations are “neither dictatorial nor clearly headed toward democracy” (Carothers, 2002, p. 9).

¹¹ This does not suggest transitions are irrelevant; the transitions literature can guide new hybrid research.

Backsliding, or the “deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance,” occurs when democracy is subtly and incrementally undermined without being dismantled entirely (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018; Waldner & Lust, 2018, p. 95). For example, hybrids may exploit legal democratic channels to weaken institutional checks on the executive (i.e. executive aggrandizement), thus framing their “legal repression” as the legitimate product of democracy at work (Bermeo, 2016, p. 9; Levitsky & Way, 2010). This approach further enables the executive to relax or eliminate term limits or perform a “self-coup”¹² (Bermeo, 2016, p. 7; Diamond, 2015; Ginsburg, Elkins, & Melton, 2011; Kenney, 2004). Yet traditional and even self-coups are dwindling¹³ as leaders experience increased pressure to market their takeover as a temporary yet necessary step towards democracy (Powell & Thyne, 2011; Thyne & Powell, 2016). Indeed, hybrids increasingly utilize “promissory coups,” which overthrow the existing regime with the promise that democratic elections will follow. Unfortunately, these elections, if held at all, rarely facilitate democratization and regularly favor coup-backed candidates (Bermeo, 2016).

Backsliding can also occur through election manipulation. Because day-of election hacking is heavily monitored and easily detected, hybrids maintain democratic elections while skewing the field prior to election day (e.g. voter disenfranchisement in opposition strongholds, modified election rules, stacked courts, media repression, opposition harassment and defamation) (Donno, 2013; Hyde & O’Mahoney, 2010; Levitsky & Way, 2002). It seems hybrids are becoming more adept at concealing their oppression (Beaulieu & Hyde, 2009); although election fraud is declining (Bjornlund, 2004; Hyde, 2011b), electoral misconduct has not decreased since the 1990s (Donno, 2013). Uganda’s Museveni illustrates this process superbly: after

¹² Defined as “a freely elected chief executive suspending the constitution outright in order to amass power in one swift sweep” (Bermeo, 2016, p. 7).

¹³ Only one nation – Niger – experienced a self-coup between 2000 and 2013 (Bermeo, 2016).

overthrowing the military regime in 1986, Museveni promised to deliver democracy to Uganda upon gaining power. As of 2020, Museveni has maintained and centralized his 34-year Presidency using constitutional amendments eliminating executive term and age limits and through several fraudulent, but judicially upheld elections marred by intimidation and voter disenfranchisement. Practices such as these suggest that hybrids pay lip service to democracy while strategically backsliding. Perhaps unsurprisingly, hybrids behave similarly during partial democratization.

Partial Democratization

As with backsliding, hybrids originating from a “shift from an autocratic to a partially democratic (or anocratic) regime,” or partial democratization, also implement democracy superficially (Mansfield & Snyder, 2005, p. 530). Yet this process is not always deliberate; low state capacity, low accountability, and weak institutions may produce a “failure of institutionalization,” which stifles regimes’ delivery of high quality governance and legitimacy (Bueno de Mesquita, Smith, Siverson, & Morrow, 2003; Fukuyama, 2015, p. 12; Huntington, 1991). In turn, leaders engage in clientelism¹⁴ to increase their credibility (e.g. exchanging public goods for electoral support or engaging in rent seeking) (Huntington, 1991; Kapstein & Converse, 2008), further subverting democracy (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003; Keefer, 2005; Keefer & Vlaicu, 2008).

Still, many hybrids intentionally coopt “nominally democratic institutions” to conceal strategic resource distribution and safeguard their rule (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007, p. 1280;

¹⁴ Defined as “a political exchange: a politician (a ‘patron’) gives patronage in exchange for the vote or support of a ‘client’” (Robinson & Verdier, 2013, p. 262).

Joseph, 1999; Schedler, 2002). For example, hybrids utilize political parties and multiparty elections to reward members for upholding the status quo, nonviolently vie for power, and distribute party spoils (Magaloni, 2008) – though liberalizing electoral outcomes can occur (Howard & Roessler, 2006). Moreover, because only loyal representatives gain access to state resources, and only candidates who deliver those resources to constituents are voted in, elections in hybrids typically facilitate patronage and regime preservation, not democracy (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007; Lust, 2009; Teorell & Hadenius, 2009).

Overall, explanations for *how* hybrids form abound. Explanations for *why* they form are much scarcer, however, many point to how international norms and legitimacy motivate hybridization (Crawford, 2001; Hyde, 2011a; Hyde & O’Mahoney, 2010; Schedler, 2002).

Normative Signaling and Legitimacy

Because democratic norms make overt repression costlier, nations cannot simply rebuff democracy without consequence¹⁵ (Hyde & O’Mahoney, 2010; Levitsky & Murillo, 2009). As a result, many nations “fake it” by repurposing conventional democratic institutions for authoritarian practices, thus maintaining legitimacy without losing power (Joseph, 1999; Levitsky & Murillo, 2009; Levitsky & Way, 2002; Schedler, 2002). Such was the case in Mexico, where its hegemonic party, the PRI, adopted democratic rituals to avoid being classified as a one-party system (Crespo, 2004). In other words, hybrids impersonate democracy precisely *because* it is *the* legitimate form of government, suggesting that democratic norms themselves also underlie hybrid formation (Hyde & O’Mahoney, 2010; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Przeworski,

¹⁵ For example, the Organization of American States (OAS) suspended Honduras’s membership following a coup, per the organization’s charter (Organization of American States, 1992, 2009).

2014). Indeed, these “deliberately contrived” fronts intended to “satisfy prevailing norms” (Joseph, 1999, p. 4) have been widely documented across regions, including Africa (Joseph, 1999), Latin America (Crespo, 2004; O’Donnell, 1996), Southeast Asia (Case, 1996), and Central and Eastern Europe (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016; Shevtsova & Eckert, 2001).

Yet amidst this striking trend in democracy and the scholarship examining it, hybrids’ optimal definition and operationalization remains unresolved, despite significant debate (Mufti, 2018).

Conceptual and Measurement Issues

Although all hybrids combine democracy and authoritarianism to some extent, scholars typically categorize them as either: a diminished subtype, a transitional situation, an authoritarian regime, or a residual category (Mufti, 2018).¹⁶ The first conceptualizes hybrids as a diminished form positioned between two extremes – democracy or authoritarianism “with adjectives”¹⁷ (Armony & Shamis, 2005; Collier & Levitsky, 1997, p. 431). The second assumes hybrids represent an intermediate transitional phase (O’Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Przeworski et al., 2000), and the third classifies any regime utilizing authoritarianism as fundamentally authoritarian while still acknowledging (but typically underemphasizing) hybrids’ mixed form (Ottaway, 2003; Schedler, 2002). Whereas these three approaches measure hybrids along a linear democracy-authoritarian spectrum, the fourth extricates hybrids from democracy and autocracy

¹⁶ See Mufti (2018) for an astute overview.

¹⁷ For example: competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way, 2010), semi-authoritarianism (Ottaway, 2003), electoral authoritarianism (Schedler, 2002), pseudodemocracy (Diamond, 2002), illiberal democracy (Zakaria, 1997), defective democracy (Merkel, 2004).

altogether, instead placing and analyzing them within a separate category altogether (Bogaards, 2009; Carothers, 2002; Gilbert & Mohseni, 2011).

Each approach has pros and cons, yet they all produce serious measurement and comparison issues (Mufti, 2018). The first three are limited by disagreement over appropriate category cutoffs (at what point does a hybrid become a democracy? An autocracy?) and rigor (do we adopt a robust or narrow definition of democracy?) (Bogaards, 2009). And although a residual category avoids these pitfalls, it lacks precision by pooling all hybrids into a single class (Cassani, 2014; Johannes & Schmotz, 2011). These issues are further compounded by the use of aggregated numerical scales quantifying governance, which frequently assign otherwise dissimilar hybrids identical scores due to their inherently mixed quality (Gilbert & Mohseni, 2011; Lueders & Lust, 2018; Munck & Verkuilen, 2002). Because equivalent scores do not imply equivalent political processes, using conventional measures undermines the validity of one's claims and comparisons. Although scholars have begun to address this issue using *multidimensional* measures (Gilbert & Mohseni, 2011), current iterations seem to repurpose the subtype approach while still relying upon dichotomous classifications – suggesting that more work is needed to adequately capture regime complexity. One potential solution to this measurement problem lies in sociological institutionalism, which specifically *anticipates* and *theorizes about* partial compliance with global norms as they diffuse (Boli & Thomas, 1997; Meyer et al., 1997).

LOOKING AHEAD: SOCIOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONALISM AND DEMOCRACY

Sociological institutionalism theorizes about global norm diffusion.¹⁸ According to this approach, world cultural norms diffuse to states through institutional ties to international treaties, non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), which grant legitimacy to compliant states (Boli & Thomas, 1997, 1999; Meyer et al., 1997). Although liberal values (i.e. modernity, universalism, rationalism, and progress) have conventionally dominated diffusion, cultural heterogeneity is not only possible; it is also becoming more common – as rising backlash against the liberal international order demonstrates (Bromley, Schofer, & Longhofer, 2019; Schofer, Hironaka, Frank, & Longhofer, 2012). Because diffusion is complex and local contexts are not always amenable, discrepancies or *decoupling*¹⁹ between states’ policies, practices, and opinions may occur (Meyer et al., 1997), particularly in developing nations (Drori, Meyer, Ramirez, & Schofer, 2003) with limited capacity (Meyer et al., 1997; Swiss, 2009) and resistant domestic structures (Hafner-Burton, Tsutsui, & Meyer, 2008). Still, several norms have successfully diffused, including women’s rights (Cole, 2013; Ramirez, Soysal, & Shanahan, 1997), education (Meyer, Ramirez, & Soysal, 1992), development (Babb & Chorev, 2016), and environmental protection (Frank, Hironaka, & Schofer, 2000).

One norm receiving less attention in institutionalism is democracy.²⁰ Although many examine the diffusion of norms espousing democratic principles, both generally (e.g. civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights), and for specific issues (e.g. women’s, children’s, and racial minorities’ rights, freedom from torture), they employ a framework of human rights, not democracy (Boyle, 2002; Cole, 2005, 2013; Greenhill, 2010; Kim, 2013; Pegram, 2010;

¹⁸ Constructivists also analyze civil society norm promotion, however, it is less organization-centric, and adopts a “spiral” rather than a top-down model of diffusion (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Keck & Sikkink, 1999; Risse & Sikkink, 1999, p. 18)

¹⁹ Also coined involuntary noncompliance (Risse, Ropp, & Sikkink, 2013) or window dressing (Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui, 2005).

²⁰ Democracy is usually a predictor of diffusion, not the norm being diffused (Cole, 2005; Neumayer, 2007; Simmons, 2009).

Wotipka & Tsutsui, 2008).²¹ This approach emphasizes diffusion via treaties (e.g. gender equality is diffused through CEDAW) and considers diffusion successful when nations pass associated legislation (e.g. women's suffrage), or when rights violations decrease (Cole, 2013; Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui, 2005). Yet as a result, how these norms operate within the broader *system* of democratic government, as well as the diffusion and decoupling of democratic institutions and procedures (e.g. elections, representative bodies) remains unexamined.

This framework represents one avenue for future research in sociology: the diffusion of democracy as a global norm. Below, I lay out how the democracy and norm diffusion literatures can benefit from increased collaboration while advancing knowledge about hybrid regimes.

Research on diffusion, democracy aid, and hybrid regimes constitutes an enormous yet fragmented body of work. Most institutionalists examine how singular elements of democracy diffuse as they relate to human rights without assessing democracy's overall diffusion – despite its recognition as a universal norm (Franck, 1992; Sen, 1999). Democracy aid scholarship underemphasizes organizations' role in democratization, even though organizational linkages are key conduits of diffusion (Boli & Thomas, 1999). Although some highlight the unintended consequences of election-based assistance (Simpser, 2008), they disregard countless other areas where superficial democratization occurs – as demonstrated by hybrid regimes (Bermeo, 2016; Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007). Finally, while democracy scholars acknowledge discrepancies between hybrids' policies and practices, no existing measure adequately quantifies this complex phenomenon (Lueders & Lust, 2018; Mufti, 2018), even though institutionalism expects decoupling (Meyer et al., 1997).

²¹ This framing is linked to UN delegations itself, where democracy was deliberately omitted from formal agreements (Leckvall, 2013). Indeed, some reject democracy as a global norm (Beitz, 2009; Cohen, 2010).

By unifying these three literatures, scholars can address these gaps while advancing knowledge about democracy. One way forward involves subsuming all regimes, including hybrids, into the conceptual umbrella of institutionalism and analyzing trends in governance in relation to the diffusion and decoupling of democratic norms. Such an approach not only standardizes the current hodgepodge of hybrid typologies into a single uniform framework; it also avoids the controversial knife-edge decisions and unproductive quibbling over “proper” regime classification currently plaguing the literature. Though multidimensional approaches show promise, current measures – in addition to needing further refinement – also discount the central role of democratic norms in shaping and legitimating hybrids. For instance, Gilbert and Mohseni (2011) assert:

“we do not measure nondemocracies by their degree of democracy. This is because we assert that it is equally nonsensical to ask the following two questions: How totalitarian is a democratic regime? How democratic is an authoritarian regime?” (p. 282).

Yet it is well known that hybrids satisfy normative demands and conceal their misconduct by adopting *overtly* democratic customs. If democratic norms were unimportant, would-be hybrids could overly oppress their citizens. However, this is not how hybrids operate, suggesting that conformity with democratic norms – however superficial, and even within alleged nondemocratic regimes – is paramount for measuring and understanding hybrids.

The supposition that global norms and their conduits centrally influence broader patterns in hybrid growth and behavior suggests that a normative approach, such as sociological institutionalism, is uniquely well-suited for evaluating this process. Although other sociological perspectives provide exceptional insight about internal mechanisms of change (e.g. religion, tolerance, GDP, ethnic fractionalization, elites, legislative system), few theorize about external

factors,²² let alone external, normative ones. While some examine how democratic citizenship norms (e.g. voter participation, political engagement, civic duty) manifest within individuals' beliefs and behaviors cross-nationally, current explanations are internal (e.g. cultural context, gender, age) (Bolzendahl & Coffé, 2017; Chang, 2016; Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010; Hooghe & Oser, 2015). Scholars interested in examining the external determinants of citizenship norms could evaluate their diffusion using institutionalism, thus melding these related but currently distinct normative approaches. This is not to say that internal factors do not influence democracy; they certainly do. I do argue, however, that evaluating external and particularly normative factors is *also* essential for understanding democracy and hybrids.

Because the proposed approach uniquely highlights democratic norms, yet accounts for the inevitability that all nations will decouple to some degree,²³ it allows scholars to substantively (rather than operationally) explore democracy. Indeed, a comparative analysis examining *how and the extent to which democracy diffuses and decouples, or how various factors (such as aid and organizations) shape how democratic norms manifest within nations' policies, practices, and opinions* would shed enormous light on the highly complex processes of diffusion and hybrid formation.

To this end, decoupling represents one possible explanation for the recent uptick in hybrid regimes. Yet this take is only one way in which an institutionalist framework can deepen our knowledge about hybrids. Considering the recent rise of illiberal norms legitimating nondemocratic practices and limiting foreign NGO funding (Bromley et al., 2019), hybrid regimes may instead signify a tangible *shift* in world culture towards illiberal scripts. Or,

²² See (Wejnert, 2011) and (Teorell, 2010) who examine factors including trade dependency, geographic contiguity, and media networks for noteworthy exceptions.

²³ Some consider democracy a “moving target,” unrealized within even the best democracies (Markoff, 2011; Paxton, 2000).

perhaps, both explanations hold merit, with hybrids representing the transitory, contradictory clash of liberal vs. illiberal global norms as the eras of normative dominance shift. As hybrids have proven, democracy and authoritarianism are not mutually exclusive. It may therefore be that hybrids manifest through the simultaneous diffusion of liberal democratic norms *alongside* competing illiberal counter-norms. Future research could compare and evaluate the relative merit of these hypotheses – hybrids as liberal decoupling vs. illiberal ascendancy – to further examine the myriad of ways democracy and diffusion plays out. Scholars could further examine how democracy aid shapes each of these processes by evaluating, for instance, how aid organizations produce decoupling, or failed to prevent (or perhaps, contributed to) such an abrupt reversal in global norms.

Fittingly, the nascent sociology of foreign aid calls for increased attention to aid's central yet heretofore overlooked role in diffusion (Swiss, 2016), further motivating a framework evaluating aid's role in democratic norm transmission. Although some examine how bureaucratic politics (Allison, 1969), organizational qualities (Babb & Chorev, 2016), and organizational relations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) influence organizations' aims, strategies, and success, none yet investigate how these factors shape democracy aid or democracy itself. By anticipating variability in diffusion, scholars can now determine aid organizations' features (e.g. their structures, strategies, personnel, politics, and resources) impact how and to what extent democratic norms diffuse.

For instance, in-depth qualitative work can shed light on how democratic norms metamorphose along various sites of the *organizational* chain of diffusion – from inception to delivery. Be it donors, directors, committee chairs, or individual fieldworkers, each imaginable transfer of command provides an opportunity for norm translation, modification, and ultimately,

decoupling – suggesting that norm packaging and implementation may play an important role in how democratic norms (and norms more broadly) manifest, and is likely conditional upon the aforementioned organizational characteristics. This type of organization-centric approach therefore allows scholars to evaluate a previously overlooked source of decoupling: organizations themselves. By evaluating decoupling at the *origin* of the diffusion process, scholars can gain additional insight into how norms manifest at the *site* of diffusion. This approach can further demonstrate how organizational characteristics predict the relative (in)effectiveness of various democracy aid strategies. For instance, given aid’s tendency to engender superficial democratization despite considerable investment in assistance, future quantitative studies could evaluate if democracy aid inflows produce decoupling.

These suggestions constitute only a few possible avenues for future work. Studies pursuing this route, and others like it, can help shed light on the complex manner in which democracy plays out. Overall, this institutionalist approach to hybrid regimes incorporates the norm of democracy into the institutionalist canon while responding to repeated calls for useful, multidimensional measures capable of systematically unpacking the intricacies of democracy.

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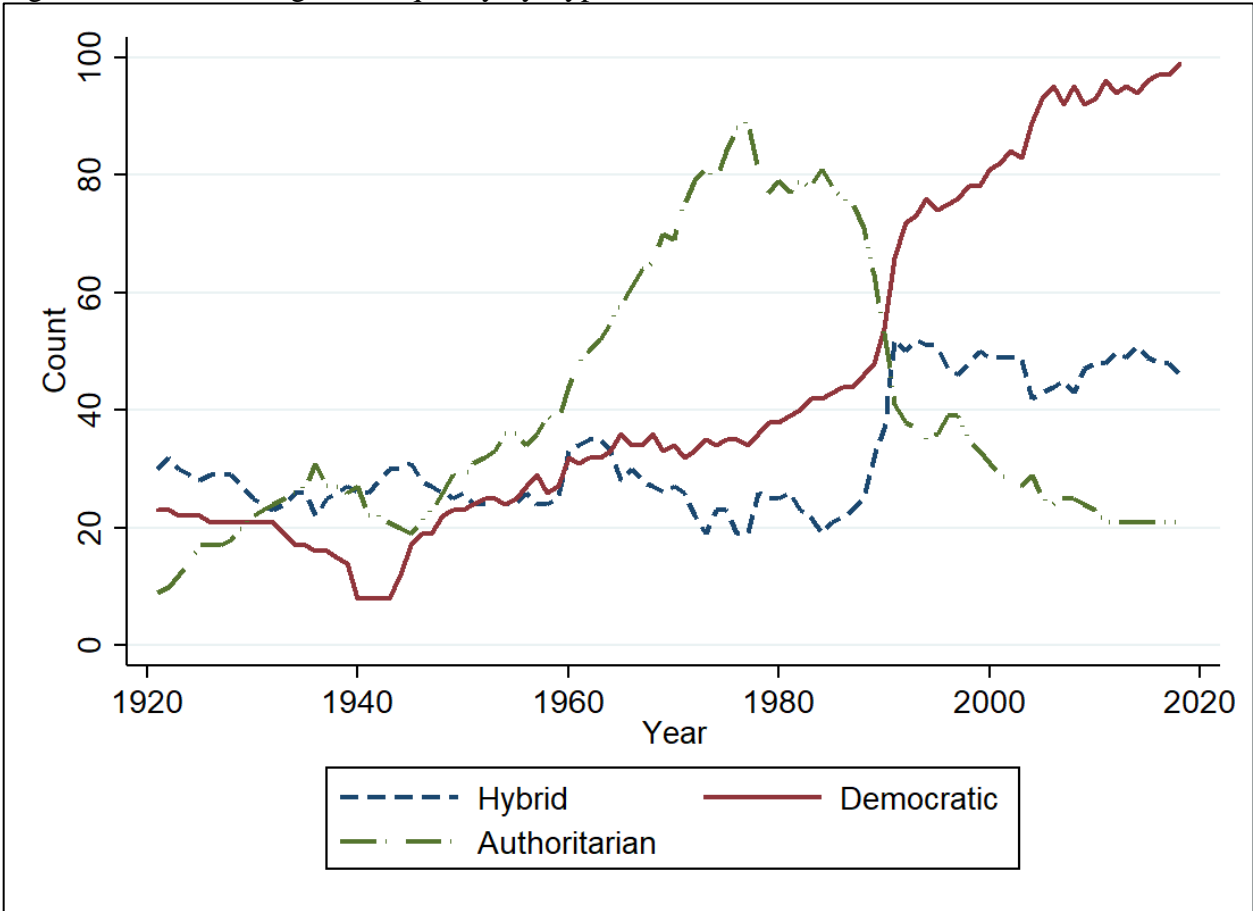
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Figure 1: Trends in Regime Frequency by Type, 1920-2020



Source: Polity IV Dataset, Center for Systemic Peace.