

# Promoting Democracy and Promoting Autocracy: Towards A Comparative Evaluation

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## Abstract

Canada may be about to create a publicly-funded Centre for Advancing Democracy. However, at the present time there is international speculation that autocracy promotion is increasing, now that the global wave of democratisation has stalled or gone into retreat. Some prominent authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes have gained in confidence; their potential to influence politics in other countries attracts growing attention. If international democracy promotion is to measure up to the challenge that this could pose then comparative evaluations of the performance of international support for democracy and for autocratic rule should be undertaken. Evaluation endeavours across this political divide face shared similarities and major complicating differences too. These make meaningful comparisons problematic. Nevertheless, new democracy promotion initiatives should employ whatever can be learned from studying autocracy promotion, so as to maximise their chances of success. Canada's proposals for advancing democracy abroad offer a timely opportunity to address the challenge of comparing democracy and autocracy support, and in doing so become a world leader in the field.

**Keywords:** Canada, Democracy promotion, Autocracy promotion, Evaluation

## 1. Introduction: Canada's democracy promotion in a changing world

For some time now Canada has been considering the establishment of a national, publicly-funded organisation dedicated to promoting democracy abroad, to which recent discussions have given the title of Canadian Centre for Advancing Democracy. In 2007 a report of Canada's House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, on *Advancing Canada's Role in International Support for Democratic Development*, talked of advancing Canada's role in international support for democratic development. The report was adopted by the House in July. In November of the following year the government endorsed the report's findings. One year later a specially appointed Advisory Panel on the Creation of a Canadian Democracy Promotion Agency submitted its own set of recommendations on implementing the findings, in a report to the government (Government of Canada Privy Council Office 2009). Since then work on finalising a practical response by the government seems to have moved forward rather slowly, and has involved consulting with opposition political parties and taking account of the deteriorating state of the public finances that the recent international financial crisis and global economic recession has brought about.

Of course Canada has been in the business of democracy promotion for several years, principally through the agency of the government's Canadian International Development Agency, the Parliamentary Centre of Canada, and Rights and Democracy (formerly International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development). But only now has the idea of creating a public body that compares somewhat with the United States' well-known National Endowment for Democracy become a real possibility. Some critics might ask why did it take so long? That is a question for contemporary historians to address, and not one that is addressed here.

Instead this article asks a different and, perhaps, more vital question. Is it now too late to model a new Canadian initiative on endeavours that are already well-established elsewhere, albeit qualified by the insertion of a distinctive twist reflecting what Canada can offer from its own democratic experience as a tolerant and diverse multicultural society (see Jardine 2008-09) while avoiding criticisms of being too close to the democracy promotion of the United States (a charge levelled by Fenton 2006 against the Canadian Foundation for the Americas, for instance)? Or have the recent signs of what might be called a new autocracy promotion in international politics, and the potential competition this provides to democracy promotion, made a fundamental rethink of democracy promotion increasingly urgent. In this context too we can mention the 2009 *Advisory Panel Report on the Creation of a Canadian Democracy Promotion Agency* reference to the importance of making regular evaluations of the performance of any new agency. This picked up on an acknowledgment in the earlier

House of Commons Standing Committee report (2007) that a deficit both of policy-relevant knowledge and of evaluation of the effectiveness of democracy aid is a persistent reality. In the light of these observations, which are generally well-supported, it is time to ask whether evaluations should now go beyond just the efforts to promote democracy and instead try to compare its performance with evaluations of incipient autocracy promotion as well?

This question is worth posing if only because comparative evaluation might facilitate a more useful overall judgment on the progress (or regress) of democracy and the impact of international democracy support, and enlighten democracy promotion policy-makers on what they are now up against (along the advice to 'know thy enemy' before going into battle). In some places this now goes beyond just internal opposition or resistance to democratic reform and seems to encompass international forces and influence that are that supportive of authoritarian rule. Also, the possibility should not be discounted that democracy promoters might learn useful tactics and strategies from their opposite numbers in the promotion of autocracy abroad. More radically they could be moved to reconsider whether democracy promotion can bear fruit or instead is turning into a doomed enterprise.

More specifically, the methodology for evaluating democracy promotion has long been a topic of intense debate (for illustration see Burnell 2007) including among Canadian academics (for example Professor George Perlin and colleagues at the Centre for Study of Democracy, Queen's University, Ontario). *The Advisory Panel Report on the Creation of a Canadian Democracy Promotion Agency* rightly judged that evaluating even the democracy assistance component of democracy promotion is inherently difficult. But questions about whether autocracy promotion and autocracy export can also be evaluated and if so, how, have not even been posed, let alone addressed, anywhere. The comparability of any such evaluations with the methods of assessment already used or proposed for democracy assistance is a yet further conundrum that has not been raised. Put differently, although comparative assessment might be desirable is it feasible? This article focuses on precisely the thorny matter of how to compare the performance of democracy and autocracy promotion. But first it must briefly clarify the key terms.

## **2. Promoting democracy, promoting autocracy**

International democracy promotion is a well established activity. It increased exponentially around the time of the fall of the Berlin wall (2009). It has attracted considerable attention since. Conventionally-speaking democracy promotion refers to a wide range of activities involving support for the replacement of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian political regimes by democracy, preferably liberal democracy, and for assisting new and emerging democracies to consolidate and improve their quality.

The instruments or tools of democracy promotion can range quite widely from consensual programmes and projects of support to diplomatic engagement and the use of democratic conditionalities attached to offers of trade and development aid. Democratic conditions might also be attached to eligibility for membership of a regional inter-governmental organisation, the Organization of American States (OAS) for instance, and for accession to the European Union (EU). Democracy assistance however refers to a narrower range of interventions focused on concessionary or grant-aided support to democracy programme and projects. These can embrace support for capacity-building in civil society, legislative strengthening, judicial reform and, even the development of political parties, among other things. The term 'support for building democracy' is a variant that also concentrates on essentially consensual methods and seeks to highlight the importance of mutual dialogue and genuine partnership between the international and domestic actors. It emphasises respect for the domestic or endogenous inspirations for - and ownership of - any externally supported pro-democratic endeavours. The United Nations' various involvements in supporting democratic initiatives, for instance election observation and monitoring, depend on willing cooperation by the host government. They provide good examples of democracy assistance and support for democracy-building.

Most democracy promoters forswear the use of highly coercive methods and military force in particular, and seek to distance themselves from so-called 'regime change' - the forcible removal of a government by international aggression, as in the downfall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Too much has been written about democracy promotion and democracy assistance in so many outlets for it to be necessary to identify major contributions here, but a start could be made by mentioning the many works of Thomas Carothers, at the Washington, DC-based Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, who is widely acknowledged both by the relevant policy institutions and among interested academics as a leading expert (see for example Carothers 1999 and 2004).

By comparison with the above topic, the idea of autocracy promotion is fairly new, and as yet is only weakly formulated (see Burnell 2010). This befits the recent nature of the phenomena that could fall within its terms of reference. Or, perhaps, it reflects more the only recent growth in awareness of these political developments. Indeed, claims about the revival of authoritarian rule and the possibility a new autocracy promotion are both contestable, with the second of these open to question even if the first is now widely accepted. Nevertheless there is an emerging literature that claims authoritarian or semi-authoritarian rule are on the rise and that their increasing international influence is a real possibility, with practical examples being given. These sources range from the three most recent annual surveys of political rights and civil liberties in the world conducted by Freedom House in Washington, DC, to the widely-cited diagnosis of a seismic change in geopolitical rivalry and competition between democratic and non-democratic regimes that Kagan (2006) offers. Relevant accounts that focus on specific countries include Barma and Ratner (2006) and McGiffert (2009) on the growth in China's soft power and the attraction its so-called model of political economy holds for parts of the developing world (see also Breslin 2009). Both Ambrosio (2009) and Jackson (2010) at Simon Fraser University dwell on the externally-oriented attempts by Putin's Russia to maintain the political regime at home, which has consequences in Central Asia and countries like Ukraine, Georgia and Belarus (see also Boonstra 2007 and Fawn 2007 on Russian attempts to undermine the election observation endeavours of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe). The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Commonwealth of Independent States both offer the possibility of collective defence of autocracy through offers of mutual support among states. Meanwhile Kurlantzick (2010), in remarking on what he calls the downfall of human right and rights promotion says that Saudi Arabia and Vietnam have both brought in Chinese internet specialists to show them how to block web-sites from the West. Of course in all of this there could be more smoke than fire: so far the systematic assessment of evidence of a new autocracy promotion is an underdeveloped feature of the discourse. But this state of affairs is bound to change sooner or later. And there is much to be gained now from trying to anticipate such developments by elaborating a conceptual framework for assessing and comparing the performance of autocracy promotion, if only so as to give the processes of data collection and analysis additional guidance.

The current uncertainty about what the international promotion of authoritarian rule actually comprises, how much of it there is and its relationship to the idea of exporting autocracy or autocratic models of governance owes in part to the fact that prominent authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes differ among themselves in some very significant respects. Just think of how much government and politics differ among such countries as China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran and President Chávez's Venezuela (Krastev 2006: 53 claims that both Putin and Chávez 'are now in the business of exporting their brand of "democracy"'). It also owes to doubts over how much these regimes really intend to influence other states in a more authoritarian direction out of their own attachment to the idea and values of authoritarian rule. After all, their main concern is probably to promote their own national interests of security and stability at home, and commercial and economic gains. The consequences for upholding or increasing authoritarian rule elsewhere could be incidental. A recent attempt to disentangle these and other threads in autocracy promotion is Burnell (2010). And for the purposes of the study offered here the next paragraph, which lists the different ways or means whereby political authoritarianism could spread across borders, draws on that attempt.

An inclusive definition of autocracy promotion - one that goes beyond deliberate attempts by autocratic governments to export their own political institutions - could then include all of the following. First, deliberate attempts to influence a regime in an anti-democratic direction especially by offering concrete forms of support, or what might be called true autocracy export. This could be extended to include manipulation of the instruments of hard and soft power so as to bolster authoritarian trends and/or destabilise and subvert democratic ones. Second, there is the diffusion of authoritarian values across borders, and the unprovoked borrowing or imitation of foreign models of authoritarian rule and their institutions. This may happen with or without the active encouragement of the authoritarian source. Non-state and transnational entities like civil (or uncivil) society organisations and social movements could be a major actor here. Third, regimes might be assisted in international forums in their efforts to counter the pressures and inducements to democratize that come from the international democracy promoters. Fourth, analysts should look for deliberate attempts to influence the public policies (especially foreign policies) and other conditions in other countries where one by-product, intentional or otherwise, is to move the regime in an anti-democratic direction. Fifth, there is doing 'business as usual' with a regime in a way that gives it greater freedom to determine its political trajectory vis-à-vis all its international partners. In principle this can facilitate ownership of democratic reforms and make democratic sustainability more likely. However it can also produce the opposite effect of helping the maintenance or increase of authoritarian characteristics.

The above list may not be exhaustive, and is extremely varied. At first sight the first item on it might look the most convincing way of conceptualising autocracy promotion, or more specifically autocracy export. This is because it replicates by inversion the most well-known manifestations of international support to democratisation - the granting of diplomatic, financial, economic, military and other security assistance, and other approaches that tie these forms of support to an acceptance of democratic or human rights conditionalities. However, the fifth and final entry in the list is one of the most talked about developments. It has particular regard to China's growing financial and commercial dealings with developing countries and the ensuing political significance for the governments of those countries, especially their capacity to reject approaches by foreigners seeking to promote democracy.

### 3. Evaluation

Evaluation has been defined as the system for and objective assessment of an ongoing or completed project, programme or policy and its design, implementation and results. The aim is to determine the relevance of the objectives and how far they have been fulfilled, and to assess the effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability of the activities and the value of their results (Burnell 2007: 16). There can be different motives, political as well as financial and economic, for demanding that something be evaluated. But in respect of the arguments advanced here the principal grounds for evaluation are to enhance learning about what has been done and perform better in the future. The aim is to find lessons that can inform both policy and practice, potentially benefiting either or both of these and their chances of being successful. Evaluation, then, is or should be much more than an 'academic' exercise.

The actual assessments can take different forms, with a major distinction being between those done in advance, that is to say *ex ante* (also sometimes and perhaps more properly called appraisals), and others *ex post*, namely weighing up the performance and its achievements after the event. The focus can range from individual projects to complete programmes, or alternatively the entire performance of the implementing or commissioning agent, in other words institutional evaluation. The choice of methods or instruments and tools used to pursue the mission objectives may also be an object of the evaluators' attention, irrespective of whether they involve the provision of technical support or financial and material assistance instead. Evaluation has long been considered essential in international development assistance. Its potential importance in regard to democracy support is also now widely understood, although a rigorous and systematic application and a determination to adopt the lessons it provides both seem to be lagging behind. The great bulk of the assessments of democracy assistance projects and programmes so far fall into the *ex post* category, although there are strong grounds for arguing that an *ex ante* approach to contextualising the assessment of democracy assistance within a more wide-ranging appraisal of democracy promotion *tout court* would offer important advantages to policy-makers (Burnell 2008).

### 4. Similarities facing the comparative evaluation of democracy and autocracy promotion

On the surface many of the challenges that face attempts to assess the performance of attempts to support democracy-building can be anticipated with respect to evaluating autocracy promotion as well. Therefore an approach to evaluating autocracy promotion looks entirely feasible, in so far as these challenges can be overcome. Moreover, to the extent that the presence of common challenges elicits a common set of responses in the shape of the methods of inquiry and analytical techniques that are used, the possibilities for engaging in comparative evaluation also begin to look promising. However these propositions entail big and, as will be argued later, unrealistic assumptions. First, though, it is worth noting briefly a selection of the leading issues that have arisen from attempts to evaluate democracy support and which remain contentious even to this day (for more comprehensive introduction to the issues see Green and Kohl 2007; Burnell 2007).

First there is the enduring debate in social science over the respective merits of qualitative and quantitative approaches to gathering evidence, and how best to integrate the findings from these two. There are many in the democracy promotion industry who argue that something like the performance of democracy assistance can be properly assessed only after in-depth fieldwork that involves talking to – extracting stories from – the actors who are most intimately involved. Judgments that are formed after consulting this kind of information will then have a qualitative feel: they might be highly qualified and accompanied by several caveats that relate to the specifics of each individual situation. Generalising more broadly can be a risky procedure. In contrast, Finkel *et al.* (2009) provide a leading example of the quantitative approach that analyses aggregate numerical data in the search for patterns that might reveal correlations, which in turn might underpin one or more plausible inferences about causal connectivity. The soundness of the causal inferences as much as the robustness of the assumptions and statistical techniques employed often occasion much dispute, in approaches of this kind more generally. Discussions among interested observers of democracy assistance about the findings reached by Finkel *et al.*

(2009) are no exception. A replay of similar arguments comparing the respective strengths, weaknesses and limitations of qualitative and quantitative approaches can be anticipated in regard to attempts to assess the performance of international support for maintaining and building autocracy.

A second major issue of concern to analysts of democracy assistance is the problem of attribution. This refers to the ability to assign causal properties to the projects, programmes or other democracy support initiatives that are being investigated, in situations where the many possible influences on the outcome could include some from other assistance initiatives. Statistical techniques that aim to isolate the influence that is exerted by one or more of the independent variables are not always infallible. They have only limited relevance to the more qualitative- and, some would argue, potentially more insightful approaches. And as Ambrosio (2009: 210) remarks, determining the causes of the maintenance of regime, that is to say of the absence of change, may be far harder than where factors can be traced to a specific set of actual political developments.

Establishing the policy outputs of an intervention is a much easier and more reliable exercise than identifying the outcomes that can be assigned to that intervention. And establishing the assignable outcomes is but one step towards identifying the overall impact that interventions at the micro and meso levels might be responsible for at the macro-level. This is no less fraught with methodological difficulties, but accurate findings about impact might be – indeed, should be – of more interest to democracy promotion strategists. The difficulties could be less manageable in respect of new and emerging democracies given their more favourable disposition to political pluralism at home, compared to autocracies. But in today's globalising world even autocracies cannot run their domestic politics completely in isolation from international forces and events. And irrespective of the type of regime or direction of regime change that is being investigated no researcher will have definitive knowledge of the counterfactual – the outcome that would have existed in the absence of the democracy or autocracy promoting intervention. Again, similar problems to evaluating democracy support might be expected to arise in the examination of autocracy promotion and ascertaining the reasons why it achieves the results that are imputed to it.

Third, with autocracy promotion just as with evaluating democracy promotion there are identical questions concerning what should be the most appropriate baseline, the relevant time period and census date for collecting the evidence. For democracy assistance the opportunity to construct adequate baseline data against which subsequent political outcomes can be assessed may have long since passed. Detailed records for the early days may be patchy at best, especially where key personnel have since moved on. But the possibility of doing this for examples of autocracy promotion that seem to be emerging only now still exists. Needless to say the choices exercised in regard to all these issues can have a critical bearing on the nature of the findings that are reached. The full effects of international interventions in any country may be lagged, and reliable clues to the overall net impact become available only on an even longer timescale. Indeed, given that the possibilities for autocracy promotion have started to register only recently the present time could be too soon to tap into institutional memories and to explore consequences that will become fully apparent only in the more distant future. After all, quite aside from impact assessments of international interventions, the estimations of whether democracy itself is advancing or retreating and the stabilisation of former trends are themselves at the mercy of decisions over when as well as where to look for evidence.

Fourth, evaluations of autocracy support should be no different from evaluations of democracy support in developing ways of capturing the production of unintended effects. This includes any that occur in nearby states where the political elite might feel threatened by the political changes and/or the foreign intervention taking place in the country that provides the primary focus of investigation. It may also include effects not just in terms of changes to the type of political regime but other crucial variables as well, for example the level of political stability, the quality of governance, and freedom from violent civil conflict. No assumptions should be made in advance about the effectiveness of either kind of international intervention, pro-democratic or pro-autocratic. And the design of evaluation methods must be capable of identifying where the consequences differed from, and perhaps were even contrary to those that were sought by the relevant policy-makers and their larger aims and objectives.

Fifth, one area where a significant difference might be thought to obtain, but in practice is unlikely to expose a major gulf relates to the methods of participant or participatory evaluation. As in the case of international development assistance there has for some years now been a strain of thinking that says participatory methods of evaluation are both desirable and merit special recognition in regard to evaluating democracy assistance. They have been called both a requirement for democratic progress and an opportunity to offer education in democratic practice (Crawford 2003). The meaning of participatory in this context refers to the very people who are supposed to benefit from the work of international democracy practitioners – the ultimate stakeholders. It does

not mean just the organisations and their leaders who formally provide the partner organisations overseas, whose cooperation in delivering the assistance to projects and programmes may be essential. International support for autocratic rule is hardly likely to place a similar value on this method or to encourage its manifestation, except perhaps in cases where favourable findings can be fixed in advance. However, the amenability of democracy assistance to effective participatory assessment has been questioned (for example by Green and Kohl 2007), and despite the rhetoric there is not much evidence to suggest that it has become standard or uniform practice throughout democracy support. But even this does not mean that trying to compare democracy support and autocracy support without recourse to highly participatory methods would be without value.

Finally, in both cases it is important to get behind the formal to the informal aspects of external involvements as well; to go beyond the official statements about intentions and results achieved to the actualité, which could be very different. Everywhere politicians and administrators alike have an interest in trying to put the best possible gloss on their record. This may not mean hiding, or falsifying, evidence, but instead going about interpreting results in the most favourable ways. Indeed the logic of democratic accountability suggests that the problem is likely to be more pronounced in democracies and, thereby, in the realm of democracy promotion.

In fact democracy promotion agencies, especially those that receive most of their funds from public sources, are likely to be under stronger political pressure to demonstrate – or at least claim – good results. This in turn may hand to independent evaluators a more bullish yardstick against which to measure their own independent findings, in comparison to the agencies for promoting autocracy. This difference might have to be taken into account when issuing statements about comparative performance that use the organisations' own claims as a reference point. Similar considerations apply even where democracy support organisations see the wisdom of being unduly modest about their achievements – a deliberate tactic to avoid provoking a nationalist backlash or the unwelcome attention of the authorities in the countries where they operate.

However, where poor performance has been detected in past evaluations and this is taken to be a useful starting point for reaching a more up-to-date judgment then this could actually work in favour of democracy promoters. By now they have been on the receiving end of many criticisms. It is hard to believe that a comparable situation exists in countries where autocracy promotion currently originates. In practice however the comparatively greater secrecy or coyness likely to be encountered in agencies of autocracy assistance could be the greater problem. It might bias research initiatives away from the kind of in-depth fieldwork inquiries that have been applied to democracy assistance in preference for attempting more remote approaches that rely on making a general statistical overview.

Furthermore, when trying to disentangle fact from fiction an added twist comes from distinguishing what actors appear to be trying to do from what they claim to be trying to achieve (and from any achievements they might claim), which means identifying and measuring the gap. Take the institutionalisation of free and fair elections as an example. Whereas it is reasonable to expect the gap among democracy support activities to be minimal, or at worst unintended, except in the eyes of the most jaundiced of critics, the attitudes displayed by autocracy promoters sometimes seem rather disingenuous. A glaring example is the foreign election observation missions mounted by authoritarian or semi-authoritarian governments that are determined to ensure a particular election outcome. And while professing a commitment to the idea of free and fair elections they ignore or condone the most egregious violations, when passing judgment (see Boonstra 2007 and Fawn 2007 for illustration). Indeed the very same governments might well be claiming to be democratic or are aspiring to become more democratic themselves, while at the same time contravening fundamental aspects of liberal democracy at home and demonstrating no serious commitment in practice to establish an internationally credible democracy there.

All things considered, then, it is time to even up the score. For sure, autocracy promotion policy and strategy may learn useful things from the performance of democracy support and the failings that have been detected in that so far. This cannot be helped, and perhaps social scientists should not even try to prevent it happening. But as examples of autocracy support become more salient so democracy promotion should not pass up the opportunity to study it for any lessons that can be usefully incorporated into thinking about how to adapt democracy support in the future. After all, one of the purported strengths of a free society is the comparatively greater likelihood that the disclosure and exchange of information and understanding will take place and stand a chance of being turned to advantage, if necessary by circumventing or undermining political and bureaucratic restrictions that often tend to dog the policy and implementation process. However, in order to follow up on the possibilities for enhancing knowledge in this way it is important to be aware first of some key differences that any attempts to compare the performance of democracy assistance and autocracy promotion are likely to encounter. For these may well complicate the analysis, if not take away from its feasibility entirely.

## 5. Key differences that beset attempts to compare the performance of democracy assistance and autocracy promotion

The key differences that beset attempts to compare the performance of democracy assistance and autocracy promotion not only outnumber the main similarities enumerated above but are so profound as to make any reluctance to attempt comparisons of this sort easily understandable. The differences concern not just how to assess but even extend to the very objects of assessment.

First, democracy assistance, which has been the main focus of evaluation in the context of democracy promotion overall, has been a major activity in its own right. It is a very significant component of all the different ways, means, tools and strategies for trying to advance democracy abroad. By their very nature budget figures for this activity are available and the size of the efforts can be measured accordingly. This is crucial for endeavours to assess cost-effectiveness and efficiency, whether the aim is to weigh up the success of individual projects and programmes or the performance of the institution that is responsible for them, or both. However there seems to be no comparable object for the assessment of autocracy promotion or, even, autocracy export to focus on. As already described, several of the main ways in which authoritarian political institutions and values might be circulating around the world and the means whereby authoritarian proclivities receive external impetus differ from straightforward grant-aided projects and programmes of the kind associated with democracy assistance. On the one hand an authoritarian regime's efforts in support of authoritarian rulers elsewhere may be a deliberate strategy to secure authoritarian rule at home and, more particularly, ensure continuation of the present incumbency. For example the Russian state's response to the so-called rose and orange revolutions that took place in its neighbourhood has been widely interpreted in this light: political intervention in Ukraine for instance may be a strategy aimed primarily at protecting the Russian regime from 'democratic contagion'. On the other hand the overall objective might be much less clear, or the intentions have multiple content among which promoting autocracy abroad is only one consideration, and not necessarily uppermost. As Bader *et al.* (2010) argue by employing a rational choice analysis, autocracies' support for autocratisation abroad is unlikely if there is an expectation that it could lead to political instability at home or threaten national security in some way. The assessment of outturns against the original motives or objectives lying behind external intervention then becomes more hazardous than in the case of democracy assistance. For although sometimes confused or open to deliberate misrepresentation, the objectives of democracy assistance interventions tend to be couched in more transparent and single-minded language.

Put differently, autocracy assistance may well not be where the main action lies, and a more comprehensive trawl for evidence would show that to be the case. Indeed, several commentators have pointed out that democracy promotion is not up against deliberate attempts to export a non-democratic political alternative. Rather the concern is about the pro-authoritarian consequences for governments especially in the developing world of having increasing and increasingly close political, commercial, economic and other ties with the leading authoritarian or semi-authoritarian states. A tendency to be over-impressed by the domestic achievements of those states, especially in China's case its dramatic economic transformation, also figures in the concerns expressed by democracy promotion's international sympathisers. These aspects of international influence are much harder to tie down and measure than are typical democracy assistance projects. So, comparing how the different dimensions perform is intrinsically difficult, if not impossible. By the same token the most promising subjects for researching comparative evaluations might well not be assistance projects and programmes but the actors and institutions that are responsible for conducting a much wider range of activities and relationships that could impact on political regimes abroad. This includes the likes of national intelligence and security agencies and the diplomatic service, and foreign trade ministries and the government departments that manage outwards investment flows, commercial lending and foreign economic cooperation more generally. However the exercise of public diplomacy on behalf of a specific set of political values or institutions through channels like government-run or government-backed international broadcasting does present an obvious candidate for assessing the comparative performance of institutions, in what may be politically very different countries.

Second, and related to the previous point, the autocracies have no single institutional model to offer even if their general intention is to encourage other countries to imitate the way they govern their own society at home. Of course even the democracy promoters may be said at one level to export their own distinctive understanding and national experience of democracy (Jardine 2008-9), not a uniform system. But they all still operate within the bounds of a broad consensus on democracy's most essential defining features. These resemble very closely western-style liberal democracy, sometimes called polyarchy, and incorporate ideas about universal human rights that receive United Nations backing. The existence of such a consensus in the democracy assistance industry is confirmed by the very criticisms that are levelled by (usually academic) proponents of more radical

versions of democracy that place much more emphasis on maximising public participation or deliberative features, social democracy and female empowerment. Notwithstanding these occasional disagreements about the kind of democracy the West should be trying to further, there is sufficient broad agreement on the fundamentals for it to be possible for an academic like George Perlin (2008) to devise a template of liberal democracy and democratic development against which the results of democracy assistance can be assessed.

Autocracy promotion bears no comparison here, given that leading authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes are so diverse, ranging from one-party states and military-backed personal rule to theocracy and, even, cases of what has come to be called competitive authoritarianism: regimes that resemble some of democracy's ideas. Given this wide variation among types and sub-types of regimes that are not liberal democracies the best choice of indicators and yardsticks - in methodological terms the dependent variable - against which to evaluate autocracy promotion's performance is highly debateable. One possibility is to measure the take-up and spread of values that are most closely and, perhaps uniquely, associated with the concept of authoritarian rule: prioritising political order and stability over fundamental human rights defined in terms of political rights and civil liberties might be an example. A pragmatic solution could lie in simply adopting the converse of the democracy template for assessing progress towards non-democracy. Practical estimates of changes in variables like the rule of law, concentration of executive power, the record of protecting universal human rights and other freedoms could be used as the proxies for evaluating a political regime, the changes to the regime, and so indirectly provide evidence for assessing the impact of external influence. Accounts of the precise institutional architecture could be left on one side.

However this point does not detract from the possibility of utilising a very different framework for making comparative assessments, namely considering the effects of international influence against the grander foreign policy goals that help explain the different powers' attempts to influence politics in other countries. This means *inter alia* the interests of national security and national economic gain. It could also include less self-regarding - but still self-serving - goals as varied as regional or larger international peace, global hegemony, and the prospering of a comprehensive capitalist world economy. This kind of framework is not one that most democracy assistance assessments concentrate on, not least because additional methodological complications come forward when attempting to evaluate performance not simply in terms of a proximate objective like democratisation but the further - perhaps underlying - foreign policy goals that the objective is supposed to serve. Deciding which of these goals provides the most accurate depiction of a state's foreign policy drivers and the weighting among them can be quite contentious issues among independent analysts. Nevertheless, comparing autocracy and democracy promotion along this dimension could make at least as much sense as trying to compare what may be unequally sized portfolios of assistance projects or programmes in terms of their respective impact on democratic and autocratic tendencies.

A third and more mundane point is that whereas information about democracy assistance is easy to access even if not everything about it is put on public view (and that includes even the results of some evaluations that organisations have conducted in-house or commissioned from outside consultants), detailed information about autocracy promotion is almost bound to be harder to find. This is not just because the phenomenon is a recent one, in contrast to over two decades of ascending the learning curve about democracy support, but also because by their very nature autocratic systems tend to be less transparent.

There is also a less obviously political point worth making here, namely that by virtue of today's inherited stock of knowledge about democracy assistance any new investigations into its performance will be shaped in certain ways. For not only are previous findings open to being checked, confirmed or found wanting but an attempt to do these things will dictate in some measure the basis that new rounds of inquiry build on. Nothing comparable exists in the case of autocracy promotion: the virtue of not having been studied is that the scope for avoiding path dependence in new research is greater. Moreover, borrowing and transferring over to autocracy support the same lines of inquiry that have been deployed in past evaluations of democracy assistance could distort the findings, just as making identical inquiries about democratisation in old and struggling new democracies might miss some relevant distinguishing features in either group, and give rise to misleading conclusions.

An example where more penetrating thought could be required in order to 'get at the truth' concerns public opinion. Polls taken in new democracies suggest strong support for the idea of democracy, although whether much of this can be credited to the efforts of international democracy practitioners is arguable. We know much less about attitudes towards inwards support for building democracy. An exception is the findings from Indonesia of Rights and Development's Michael Wodzicki (2008). However there is also survey evidence depicting considerable and widespread dissatisfaction with the experience of democracy in action in many countries (Doorenspleet 2009), but no research into popular attitudes towards incoming support for authoritarian

rule (although survey evidence about African views of economic relations with China, reported in Gadzala and Hanusch 2009, might be constructed in a way that provides some circumstantial evidence). In any case public awareness might be very limited and free expression of opinion suppressed. Furthermore if the effects of socialisation which is transmitted by non-state actors are thought to be one of the principal ways whereby values and belief systems travel across borders between states and nations, then investigations should tap receptivity to the efforts both of civil and uncivil society groups. An example would be the groups of religious fundamentalists and ethno-nationalists who seek converts abroad to a cause containing distinctly illiberal and authoritarian leanings. In some societies the political effects of these might be far more potent than any government-directed backing for either democratic reform or the maintenance of a non-liberal democratic status quo.

A subsidiary point regarding comparison is that even where information about critical components like for example the size of budgets associated with organisations or their programmes are publicised there are technical issues in measuring cross-country comparisons. This is not just because of the usual hazards of reducing all values to one standard currency, where exchange rate distortions and purchasing parity considerations come into play. There is an additional problem where on the one side the local value is determined by price-setting through market competition (as is the case with many US funded democracy support initiatives, that are put out to private tender) while on the other side the monetary value of inputs into supporting autocracy is imputed by administrative fiat. Of course further hazards lie in wait for any analyst when trying to put a numerical value on the size, weight or extent of political regime change that accrues from international intervention, even in cases where causal connectivity can be assigned with absolute confidence. What price a modest strengthening of an authoritarian ruler compared to the worth placed on a modest increase in the stability of a new democracy? Is the construction of a reasonably objective table of tariffs that would enable comparison of the rates of return on the two investments too visionary or impractical an idea? Yet sophisticated modelling of democracy support's effects on democratisation can allow for the influence of other influential factors like national economic growth or state welfare spending. And analysts like Finkel *et al.* (2009) have already put forward a way of computing the amount of additional democracy that an extra dollar of US democracy and governance aid buys abroad –and arrived at a positive sum. So the possibility that techniques enabling approximate comparisons across different kinds of international influence on different types of regime should not be dismissed.

Finally, international democracy support has many backers and it respects few national boundaries, even if there are still many countries where the efforts of foreign democracy practitioners are not welcome and where barriers erected to thwart their efforts have proliferated in recent years. In countries like Russia pro-democracy civil society activists and their activities have been badly affected in this way (Gershman and Allen 2006). Nevertheless not only are the deliberate attempts to support autocracy abroad associated with but a few major powers, mainly China and Russia plus a handful of others like the governments of Venezuela, Cuba and Iran, but their reach tends to be more regional than global. And it tends to focus selectively on countries that are of special interest by virtue of the highly valued bilateral trading or national security ties. For example Russia is particularly interested in political developments in its neighbourhood comprising the Caucasus, Central Asia, Belarus and Ukraine, whereas China has major economic and other interests in military-ruled Myanmar and such oil-exporting non-democracies as Sudan. Venezuela's President Chávez meanwhile pursues his political objectives in Andean and Central American states, whereas Iran seeks to influence politics in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine in particular, albeit with wider regional ambition too.

In contrast pro-democracy activities supported by the US and European Union, not to mention the United Nations, can be found in over a hundred different countries. And the targeting of attempts to evaluate performance anywhere should at minimum acknowledge that the places where authoritarian rule is most clearly on the march may not coincide with the places where international support for autocracy is at its greatest. Similarly, countries that are democratising most successfully are not equivalent to the countries where international democracy support has been most highly concentrated. And more pragmatically and with specific reference to Canada, not all of the places where authoritarian tendencies are receiving support from outside might be countries where the Canadian government expresses a strong foreign policy interest. This last, after all, is a consideration that the report of the Advisory Panel on the Creation of a Canadian Democracy Promotion Agency said would be reflected in the actual selection of countries chosen as democracy support partners. The 2007 Report of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development actually put forward the Francophone countries, Commonwealth member states and the Americas as a priority; the 2009 Advisory Panel report mentioned Cuba, Haiti and Afghanistan specifically.

A global scorecard for autocracy promotion and democracy promotion should certainly be of interest to anyone interested in world politics and democratisation in particular. But the difference in scope and reach of the two

sides' engagement still presents a question for comparative evaluation: should evaluations be confined to countries or regions where all sides in the international rivalry between different political and ideological systems are involved? This would enable performance comparisons to be measured against the background of the same local contextual variables, and so help to make the findings and any deductions from them more reliable. At the same time, however, the evaluations become more complex precisely because of the presence of competing international influences. And there is the added difficulty of assigning specific consequences in situations where there is interaction and, possibly, a measure of interdependence between the international interventions in the shape of democracy and autocracy support. After all, there may be places where the stimulus behind external support for autocracy and the choice of strategy might have come about as a deliberate counter to democracy assistance. Similarly, the design of democracy assistance initiatives must dwell on how to combat or offset the impact of autocracy support, and that will influence its content. Can careful analysis disentangle the intended effects secured by the intervention of one side from the counterproductive effects that might be occasioned by misguided and unsuccessful interventions by the other side (on how the efforts of the West have secured authoritarian rule in Jordan see Yom and Al-Momami 2008)? Perhaps at the current stage of thinking this question is just too taxing. If so, then could valid and useful findings still be gained by doing a comparative evaluation of democracy assistance in certain places (where autocracy support may or may not be absent) together with autocracy support in other and different places (where democracy assistance may or may not have a substantial presence), even though the surrounding political, economic or social characteristics in all these places that might have a bearing on the outturns will be different?

In sum, whereas the more complex, multifaceted nature of democracy promotion overall compared to democracy assistance probably makes the former much harder to evaluate, it could be easier to make a judgment on autocracy promotion than on autocracy assistance, if only because the former may be more extensive, more prominent and less likely to be deliberately concealed from international view. Yet comparison of the performance of democracy assistance with that of autocracy promotion may be the most challenging of all. It is a bit like trying to compare chalk and cheese. However, while no-one has yet thought to ask whether this would be a meaningless and pointless exercise the point of trying to make a comparison at least remains a fit subject for interesting and potentially worthwhile debate.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has been based on the premise that organisations committed to promoting democracy around the world must take account of the emergence of new developments in international affairs that favour the spread of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian rule. The point applies especially to any established democracy that is currently considering new initiatives, such as the setting up of a brand new democracy support organisation, possessed of its own mandate, mission statement and the resources with which to pursue this goal. There is an assumption also that the larger developments on the international stage are here to stay: neither the existence of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian rule in certain places nor the interest that some appear to show in supporting likeminded rule elsewhere is going to disappear any time soon. Indeed, academic studies of democratisation are turning increasingly towards trying to explain the enduring resilience and the resurgence of non-democratic, politically illiberal and hybrid forms of rule, now that the 'third wave' of democratisation appears to have stalled or gone into reverse. This outlook complicates the task of addressing the existing domestic obstacles to democratic reform. Yet the provision of support to democracy building is only worthwhile if it works. And knowing whether it works, and if so how, and why, are now generally believed to be important parts of the job description for democracy practitioners and/or their chief policy advisers.

A further assumption underlying the article is that we should not rush to exaggerate either the magnitude of international support for autocracy or its present and likely future effectiveness. We simply do not know enough to warrant precise and firm conclusions. However, in the world that is now evolving after the era when democracy promotion faced no serious international competition, the effectiveness of democracy assistance will depend on how accurately it takes the measure of autocracy promotion and export, and on whether it can devise adequate strategies to counter and oppose any such developments and any anti-democratic effects. The potential implications for democracy promotion policy are various (Burnell 2010 reviews the main options). Policy-makers now face choices that were hardly relevant during the time when confidence in the progress of democratisation and in the worth of democracy promotion itself were both on an upwards trend. But there is now a requirement to assess democracy support against emerging rivals. This adds extra layers of complexity to the evaluation of democracy assistance, which even by itself is acknowledged by many to be inherently difficult.

The account has explored the reasons why developing the tools to make such a comparison will be very demanding. In principle it is easy to say that comparisons of effectiveness and of cost effectiveness too can be

made across a wide variety of institutions, on a broad understanding of the meaning of the term ‘institutions’. But employing the same substantive indicators and methods of inquiry for assessing and comparing the performance of international support for democracy and autocracy may not be entirely feasible. If done unthinkingly it could produce results that lack credibility. In any case if Green and Kohl (2007) were right in saying that in reality democracy practitioners themselves still show some resistance to evaluation, if only because of the difficulties and an inability to find time to engage with them, then calling for comparative evaluations that extend to autocracy support looks like a big ask.

However, the article stops short of recommending that analysts should not even bother trying to travel down this road. Instead the implication is that intellectual and other essential resources should now be allocated to this very task, as a matter of growing urgency. The research could be done in-house or contracted out, but preferably involving collaboration by interested parties across the democracy promotion organisations and in academia. The aim would be to find out whether autocracy promotion performs better at achieving the ultimate goals that autocracies seek compared to democracy promotion and all the ends sought by that endeavour. Also, does autocracy support significantly reduce the effectiveness of democracy support, and if so, how? Does the converse apply, too? To what extent has the very idea of supporting autocracy abroad and the political impulse to do this gained ground as the result of a perception – either well-founded or drawing only weak support from independent evaluations - that international democracy support has been a success? Should the democracy promoters adjust what they do and where they do it if more information comes forward about how anti-democratic trends benefit from the promotion or export of authoritarian alternatives. Just as the will of a regime to support authoritarianism abroad does not necessarily mean that authoritarian rule is strong at home, could a closer understanding of autocracy promotion offer insights into how authoritarian rule in that home country can be confronted, with a view to furthering the cause of democratisation in that country?

All the above questions and many more (for more see Ambrosio 2009: 210-16) are well worth asking. And a newly created body such as Canada’s proposed Centre for Advancing Democracy could be ideally placed to become a pioneer in addressing the challenges to making sound comparative assessments, that will issue in policy-relevant implications. After all, at its inception the Centre will be unencumbered by deeply entrenched and outdated mindsets and not yet tied down by undue constraints on exactly where and how it allocates the resources that are placed at its disposal. Indeed there is an opportunity in this endeavour for Canada to become a world leader in the field.

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