

Institution: Aberystwyth University
Unit of Assessment: 21: Politics and International Studies
Title of case study: Conceptions of Democracy in Democracy Promotion
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>This case study examines the impact of research relating to the conceptual foundations of democracy promotion on thought and practice of the relevant practitioner communities. Practitioners affected include: officials, desk officers, policy drafters, and implementers of democracy promotion in governmental organisations and international organisations; consultants involved in democracy promotion; and members of non-governmental organisations involved in delivery and planning of democracy promotion. The impact has been primarily on enhanced awareness among practitioners of the multiple meanings of democracy; on the capacity of practitioners to identify and reflect on conceptual underpinnings of their work; and on the thought frameworks relating to practitioners' work. Additional impacts on behavioural practices have also been generated.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The research underpinning the impact arises from a major project undertaken with the support of the European Research Council's Starting Grant (3.5). The 'Political Economies of Democratisation' project sought to analyse the implications of democracy's 'contested' nature as a concept for the concrete practices and principles of 'democracy promotion', a key foreign policy agenda for many Western states and a key objective also for many international organisations and non-governmental actors today. The core team consisted of Principal Investigator Professor Milja Kurki (based at Aberystwyth throughout the assessment cycle) and Postdoctoral Fellows Dr Christopher Hobson (based at Aberystwyth from start of the project July 2008 until February 2010) and Dr Jeff Bridoux (based at Aberystwyth since April 2010 to present, from July 2012 as Lecturer).</p> <p>In its first stage, the research argued, on a theoretical basis, that democracy is an 'essentially contested concept' and explored the theoretical implications of this idea. During the first stage of research various traditions of democratic thinking were examined and 'politico-economic models of democracy' were delineated. Then, in its second stage, the research analysed, in relation to the variety of politico-economic models specified, the current conceptual contours of democracy promotion among four key democracy promotion actors – the US, the EU, International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and civil society organisations. The study specifically examined how 'democracy' is conceived by key democracy promotion actors today; how donors deal with the essentially contested nature of the idea of democracy; what conceptual contours of democracy promotion tell us about the present world order; and what effect reflection on conceptual orders can have for contemporary democracy promotion policy practice.</p> <p>The study argued that conceptual foundations of democracy promotion are, problematically, under-studied in democracy promotion analysis and poorly reflected on in practice of democracy promotion (3.1, 3.2, 3.3). It was argued that scholars and practitioners need to pay more attention to conceptions of democracy they work with, because through clearer and more systematic reflection on conceptual aspects of their work important new dynamics can be observed in democracy promotion. To adopt a conceptual angle to reflection on practical problems is highly unusual in this policy agenda, but, the project argues, uniquely able to provide new insights and provocations for the agenda.</p> <p>Many specific insights were reached on the democracy promotion of the US, EU, IFIs and civil society organisations, but the main findings across the actors were as follows. First, the project finds that debate on democracy's multiple meanings is not fully reflected on or explored in democracy promotion practice. As a result, a 'fuzzy' and increasingly 'implicitly' liberal democratic consensus on democracy emerges from the discourses and practices of democracy promoters. The lack of reflection on, and the acceptance of, 'implicit liberalism' in democracy promotion has many problematic effects. For example, there is a tendency to approach democratisation without an awareness of the contextual and flexible nature of democracy for recipients and with a poor understanding of conceptual dimensions of practical problems (3.3). There is also a tendency to technicalise delivery of democracy promotion. Mechanisms of civil society funding, for example, do not adequately address the potentially multiple meanings of democracy but assume a 'neutral' understanding of democracy, which however can carry a conceptual bias towards specific (often 'liberal' or 'neoliberal') conceptions of democracy (3.4). As a result, the inability of democracy</p>

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promoters to 'see' some democratic actors and their different ideas of democracy goes un-noticed. The ability of democracy promoters to fully engage with the consequences of 'essential contestability' remains constrained. These constraints are explored through an engagement with Foucauldian and Gramscian theoretical perspectives (3.3).

Second, despite these tendencies towards a depoliticised, implicitly liberal view of democracy, the study also found interesting conceptual openings. Indeed, liberal democracy is interpreted to mean slightly different things in different practitioner communities. It has gone un-noticed that there have been some subtle movements away from 'classical liberal' ideals towards exploration of what seem to be 'reform liberal' or even 'social democratic' meanings of democracy (3.3). Many practitioners, as well as scholars, remain unaware of these shifts. Yet, the project argues, such unacknowledged shifts can open up new avenues for democracy promoters to explore (3.3).

A critical theoretical perspective informed the research design of this project, including the development of a critical theoretical approach to engagement with practitioners (3.3). The project argued that value-orientations or policy directions need to be generated *from within* democracy-promoting communities themselves, rather than emanating from 'external' recommendations, a principle which engagement (described below) sought to embody.

3. References to the research

Research outputs:

- 3.1 Hobson, C. and Kurki, M. (2011) Introduction: The Conceptual Politics of Democracy Promotion. In Hobson, C. and Kurki, M. (eds.) *The Conceptual Politics of Democracy Promotion*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp 1-15. ISBN: 978-0415596879. Notes on quality: editors' introduction to innovative book featuring globally prominent academics on democracy promotion such as Laurence Whitehead, Richard Youngs, Sheri Berman and Tony Smith; peer-reviewed and editorially reviewed; cited in subsequent scholarly literature; key analyst, Thomas Carothers, in preface describes the book as 'the most serious effort yet coming from the scholarly research community to raise hard questions about the conceptual bases of international democracy support'.
- 3.2 Kurki, M. (2010) Democracy and Conceptual Contestability: reconsidering conceptions of democracy in democracy promotion. *International Studies Review*, 12 (3): 362-386. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2486.2010.00943.x. Notes on quality: peer-reviewed; published in a respected journal; widely cited in scholarly literature (Google Scholar: 26 citations); submitted in REF2.
- 3.3 Kurki, M. (2013) *Democratic Futures: Revisioning Democracy Promotion*. Abingdon: Routledge. ISBN: 978-041569034-8. Chapter 7 co-authored with Jeff Bridoux. Notes on quality: peer-reviewed and editorially reviewed; recent publication but already positively reviewed and cited by key scholars such as Peter Burnell; submitted in REF2.
- 3.4 Kurki, M. (2011) Governmentality and EU Democracy Promotion: The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights and the Construction of Democratic Civil Societies. *International Political Sociology*, 5 (4): 349-366. DOI: 10.1111/j.1749-5687.2011.00139.x. Notes on quality: peer-reviewed publication in a leading journal in the field; lead article of issue; submitted in REF2.

Research grants:

- 3.5 European Research Council-sponsored grant awarded under European Community's Seventh Framework Programme (2007-2013) to project *Political Economies of Democratisation*. Principal Investigator: Milja Kurki. Dates of grant: 01/07/2008-31/12/2012. Total value of grant: 817 922 Euros. Notes on quality: grant awarded on a highly competitive basis (~3% success rate); final reports of grant project approved by funder (final academic evaluation not yet completed). Linked to publication of three books and many articles in well-respected journals.

4. Details of the impact

The project's engagement with democracy promotion practitioners and policy makers reflects the critical theoretical principles which underpin the research. The engagement process which led to impact included communication of research findings through public blogs and through preparation of plentiful dissemination materials, including a practitioner-oriented 'policy paper' which sought to communicate the implications of the reflective conceptual approach to democracy promotion in an easily accessible way. However, in order to ensure direct communication of research findings and especially to ensure that a process of 'reflection' by practitioner communities could be achieved,

further steps were taken. The dissemination of research became structured centrally around the delivery of a series of 'conceptual politics workshops' in 2012.

Two aims guided the workshops. First, they sought to communicate research findings with regard to the contested nature of democracy and current conceptual frameworks in democracy promotion. Second, they sought, in relation to research findings, to facilitate focused reflection and debate on the beneficiaries' part on the policies and practices of the individual target organisations and thereby to enhance practitioners' awareness of, and capacity to perceive and debate, conceptual issues in relation to their work. The focus was on impacting beneficiaries' awareness of, and capacity to think about, democracy promotion in new conceptually informed ways, although some behavioural change also arose as a result of changes in awareness and capacity to engage in conceptual reflection (see below).

Through these workshops, the research findings have had significant global reach among the relevant practitioner community. Eleven conceptual politics workshops were organised in 2012 at key practitioner sites such as: the US Department of State, USAID and National Democratic Institute (NDI) in Washington D.C.; UN Secretariat/United Nations Democracy Fund in New York; Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Berlin; International IDEA, Stockholm; Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Brussels; Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy, Copenhagen; and DEMO Finland, Helsinki. Also, a one-day conference at Chatham House was organised, which aimed to generate debate on project findings amongst high level policy makers and NGO actors. Practitioner participants at events included: EU Commission officials, US Department of State officials, UN officials, government ministers, development practitioners, think-tank leaders and officials, trade union officials and representatives of party-political democracy support organisations, political foundations, private consultancy firms, NGO movements and other network organisations. An estimated minimum of 120 participants attended the workshops and another 60 participated in the Chatham House conference. Access to a number of high profile practitioner organisations resulted from initial positive contacts developed through dissemination events. For example, access to the US Department of State was facilitated by early positive engagement with a representative of the organisation (5.1).

Significance of impact on these practitioner communities is indicated by both survey returns from participants at events and testimonials. Survey returns, completed between three to twelve months after the initial event, strongly support our claim to have altered the way in which practitioners think about, and indeed practice, democracy promotion. Feedback from participants (5.2) indicates that 95% of the participants who responded were of the view that 'essential contestability' is a notion relevant to their work. While most responding participants (90%) indicated that they were aware of the notion of essential contestability prior to the workshops, the feedback also indicates that following the events 75% of participants had an increased awareness of the multiple meanings of democracy and 60% had an increased capacity to identify the often hidden conceptual dimensions of democracy promotion.

Feedback reviews indicate that 65% of the participants who responded recorded changes in their thinking about their work in the aftermath of the project events. For example, one participant indicated that when she plans 'the content of activities (of the democracy project of her foundation) [she] think[s] more carefully about how the concepts are used' with specific consideration given to the potential differences of meaning attached to democracy by recipients and donors. Another participant indicated that participation at a conceptual politics event had the impact of 'emphasizing stronger the risks of "technicalisation" of democracy support, as well as underscoring the very real differences of interpretation of key democratic values, such as participation, representation, solidarity and equality' (5.2).

Furthermore, 35% of participants indicated that exposure to the project findings has already had an impact on the practices of his/her organisation. For example, one participant, whose organisation had been thinking about the possibility of a summer school on trade union policies and democracy reported that 'the project helped clarify the approaches (sic) and confidence it is worth making an effort' (5.2). Another NGO-practitioner noted that they had since the event delivered a talk specifically addressing the role of 'alternative democratic actors' in her specialist geographical area (5.2).

Testimonials from key practitioners verify the significance of impact generated by project findings. A UK-based international development consultant and practitioner also attests to the impact of his engagement with the project. This consultant practitioner not only participated in an

event organised at Chatham House, but also developed close links with the project team, up to the point of working together with a project team member on a co-authored paper which sought to express the project's insights on conceptions of democracy in the context of specific case expertise of the practitioner. He highlights that he has 'been able to apply the aspect of [his] academic engagement in practical ways' (5.3). He recognises that many impacts amount to 'subtle alterations to the way in which [he] approach[es] these practical and professional issues with absorbed knowledge from the project' (5.3). He claims that 'there are also some quite specific practical areas in which [his] approach has been enhanced as a result of [his] involvement in the project' (5.3). He gives as an example that he 'was able to draw upon the project work to promote increased emphasis on social transition rather than reliance on institution building as a sign of progress towards democracy. [He] sought to reassure donors and agencies involved in democracy promotion that it is not just acceptable, but also necessary, to allow political space to develop within the implementation of a democracy promotion programme in which contextualised forms of democratic process at the social level can emerge' (5.3). This has informed his practices in specific cases, in relation to particular assignments, such as work undertaken in relation to a long term contract (from January 2012 to February 2013) with the British Government Stabilisation Unit (FCO-DfID-MoD) through which he provided advice for the UN on the broader concepts of support for elections in South Sudan.

The Director of DEMO Finland (Political Parties of Finland for Democracy) also attests that, as she seeks to implement the Finnish government's new Development Policy Programme, 'the findings of the *Political Economies of Democratisation*-project raise important questions that we should consider when we try to concretize the new development policy's democracy focus'. She highlights especially the findings of the project on standardization of democracy assistance (discussed in publications 3.3 and 3.4) as highly relevant (5.4).

Also, beneficiary sources record impact. One workshop participant wrote a lengthy blog entry on a political foundation website calling for attention to be paid to the political nature of democracy support. In so doing, she makes numerous direct references to the research and dissemination materials of the *Political Economies of Democratisation*-project (5.5). Another report on an event records the reflections of the Danish Minister for Development on the project ideas (5.6), while the EU's Office for Promotion of Parliamentary Democracy highlights the *Conceptual Politics of Democracy Promotion* book as an important source in its newsletter's section 'New and noteworthy - Publications and Resources' (5.7). The UN includes the project's 'policy paper' *Rethinking Democracy Support*, which directly refers to project publications, on its Global Issues Resources site (5.8).

Furthermore, impact on practitioners is reflected in on-going invitations to contribute to practitioner workshops, projects and conferences (exemplified by 5.9). Importantly, the unique conceptual angle of the research seems to have generated interest in the project amongst practitioners, demonstrating the relevance of this kind of conceptual work for practitioner communities. As is indicated by the correspondence attached to one invitation received by Professor Kurki to contribute to an event organised by a prominent democracy promotion organisation (specifically, for the benefit of internal debate amongst its staff), it is the project's 'thinking outside the box' which motivated the practitioners to extend the invitation (5.9).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 5.1 Correspondence from a representative of US Department of State.
- 5.2 Feedback surveys received from participants at dissemination workshops.
- 5.3 Testimonial from Independent Consultant, International Security and Global Governance.
- 5.4 Testimonial from Director, DEMO Finland.
- 5.5 Democratian Tukeminen on Aina Poliittista (Language: Finnish). May 31, 2013. Available at: <http://sorsafoundation.fi/2013/05/31/demokratian-tukeminen-on-aina-poliittista/>.
- 5.6 Kristian Friis Bach: Democracy is Dialogue. December 12, 2012. Available at: <http://dipd.dk/2012/12/christian-friis-bach-democracy-is-dialogue/>.
- 5.7 OPPD Newsletter, June 2012, p 7. Available at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/oppd/Page_1/newsletter%20OPPD-lo2_web_120710.pdf.
- 5.8 UN Global Issues, 'Non-UN Studies and Articles'. Available at: <http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/democracy/documents.shtml>.
- 5.9 Correspondence from a representative of Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.