

January 2016

Resnick, Danielle and Nicholas van de Walle, eds.  
Democratic Trajectories in Africa: Unravelling the  
Impact of Foreign Aid. New York: Oxford  
University Press, 2013. 310pp.

Chris WJ Roberts

*University of Alberta, Department of Political Science, cwrobert@ualberta.ca*

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## Recommended Citation

Roberts, Chris WJ. "Resnick, Danielle and Nicholas van de Walle, eds. Democratic Trajectories in Africa: Unravelling the Impact of Foreign Aid. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 310pp.." *Journal of Retracing Africa*: Vol. 2, Issue 1 (2015): 108-110.  
<https://encompass.eku.edu/jora/vol2/iss1/18>

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**Resnick, Danielle and Nicholas van de Walle, eds. *Democratic Trajectories in Africa: Unravelling the Impact of Foreign Aid*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, x+310 pp.**

Over the last few years, scholarship on foreign aid in Africa has increasingly focused on three related qualitative paths: intentions, forms or types of aid, and their variable impacts. Where for too long the focus seemed limited to “how much is required?” or testing assumptions via economic regression about aid’s impact on macroeconomic growth, increased consideration for the types of and intentions behind aid, and its uneven economic and political impact, is a welcome trend. This edited volume, completed under the auspices of the United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UN-WIDER), attempts to parse out the impact of aid on African democracy, both in terms of transitions and consolidations. The collection comprises three broadly comparative chapters, seven case study chapters—covering Mali, Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia, Benin, and Ghana—and a final “Conclusions and Policy Recommendations” chapter. Those seven case studies were carefully selected as part of a comparative research design: they all transitioned to multi-party democracy in the 1990s and have held at least four presidential and parliamentary elections since the transition. By narrowing these parameters for the selection of African cases, which still display considerable variation in terms of development status, aid flows, and democracy indicators, the impact of aid on democratic consolidation (compared to more authoritarian polities) can be better assessed. A wide range of figures and tables provide excellent illustrative support for both quantitative and qualitative approaches employed by the contributors.

The book opens with a straightforward research question that is hardly simple to answer: “When, why, and how has foreign aid facilitated, or hindered, democratic transitions and consolidation in recipient countries?” (1). Because aid directed at easier-to-measure economic and social outcomes may undermine democratic processes, and aid focused on supporting nascent democratic trends may become implicated in and overly influence local political processes, much care has to be taken to gauge aid’s impact. The editors thus rightly adopt a nuanced, multi-method approach where comparative quantitative and qualitative methods are combined with in-depth country case studies. This study partly builds on insights from van de Walle’s earlier seminal work.<sup>1</sup> There, van de Walle identified how the foreign aid regime evolved from the independence era, institutionalizing a range of norms and practices that impacted not only development-related

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<sup>1</sup>Nicholas van de Walle, *African Economies and the Politics of Permanent Crisis, 1979-1999*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

inputs and outputs but also the evolution of the post-colonial African state and the neopatrimonial politics operating within it. His initial (2001) assessment of the 1990s democratization wave on the seemingly permanent economic and governance crisis suggested minimal direct influence on state capacity to deliver public goods and to constrain executive power and neopatrimonial politics. While this assessment came right before the NEPAD and “China in Africa” era which transformed to some degree the international development regime and improved terms of trade for a growing number of African commodity exporters, van de Walle also hinted that “There are reasons to believe that in the long-term, democratization may well improve economic management by increasing the accountability and transparency of governments” (276). Thus, if democratization may gradually improve economic management but decades of foreign aid may have undermined economic development, understanding varying and perhaps competing objectives within a complex aid regime becomes exceedingly important.

This edited collection seeks to “disaggregate” democratization and consolidation processes as well as different types of aid over time to better understand the “conflicts and complementarities between development and democracy aid” (3). All the core definitions—democratic transitions and consolidation, development and democracy assistance—are provided early on to ground the comparative and case study chapters, and Table 2.1 (30) delineates different components of the democratization continuum. While not wholly distinct, targeted democracy assistance—only 6-8% of total aid flows (7)—is dwarfed by development assistance and generally exhibits less donor agency coordination. Qualitative differences are critical, however; there is usually short-term tension between promoting democratic change and economic stability. This may include trying to build up horizontal and vertical accountability mechanisms rather than simply working within existing executive structures. What this study does well is demarcate the more obvious forms of democratic assistance that support transitions to multi-party elections versus the more complex ways aid may be intended to sustain consolidation processes.

While every chapter makes a significant contribution to the collection, the quantitative comparative chapter three by Dietrich and Wright illustrates the complexities of addressing the core research question. The authors create new datasets that capture qualitative variables for democratic transitions and consolidation over time, not solely relying on measures offered by existing databases. They examine how different types of aid influence transitions to multi-party regimes, multi-party failure, electoral fairness failure, incumbent turnover, and term-limit failure. Overall, Dietrich and Wright admit their findings are weak or inconclusive: they find “some evidence consistent with the proposition

that economic aid increases prospects of multi-party transitions in [Sub-Saharan Africa]. . . . However, we find little support for the contention that democracy assistance is correlated with other aspects of democratic development” (83). Despite their inconclusive results, Dietrich and Wright offer important insights into methodological challenges including endogeneity bias intrinsic to foreign aid flows, and lay the groundwork for the in-depth country case studies that follow. Each country case study is an important contribution—theoretically and empirically—to the general foreign aid and democracy literature as well as to understanding the political economy of development and democratization in each country. A few short policy recommendations designed to improve both democracy assistance and direct budgetary support close out the book.

Ultimately, the book supports the contention that development aid can play a positive role in the promotion of democratic transitions, specifically to multi-partyism. However, the real conundrum remains aid’s role in consolidation processes. Democracy assistance can improve vertical accountability mechanisms especially around elections and to support civil society groups, but could do more between election cycles to strengthen electoral and party institutionalization. Two issues are not specifically addressed in the volume: first, the possible effects of patronage networks and the informal realities undermining consolidation, and second, there is no consideration of the influence of the designed formal political institutions, that is, the constitution(s) after democratic transitions. Perhaps democracy assistance and donor leverage can never overcome badly designed constitutional frameworks, from powers invested in the executive branch to weak amendment formulas. Thus, if the informal networks are powerful and the constitution itself does not enable adequate prospects for constraints (horizontal accountability mechanisms or the rule of law), then no amount of democracy assistance will help. That notwithstanding, this collection stands as an ambitious and highly valuable study that tackles the complexities of aid’s impact on one desired outcome for assistance, the promotion and entrenchment of democracy. For anyone interested in foreign aid in Africa and the interaction of aid and democracy, this collection represents a leading-edge contribution.

Chris W. J. Roberts  
Doctoral Candidate and Instructor  
Department of Political Science, University of Alberta  
Department of Political Science, University of Calgary