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Autocratic Aid and Governance: What We Know, Don't Know, and Need to Know

Bradley C. Parks

The College of William & Mary

Austin Strange

Harvard University

Abstract

The growing availability of subnationally georeferenced data has opened up new opportunities to study the intended and unintended impacts of aid from democratic and autocratic donors. We review studies that use such data to measure the effects of democratic and autocratic aid on three different types of outcomes: (1) political capture, (2) corruption and the quality of local governance, and (3) citizens' political attitudes and behavior. After summarizing key insights from this literature, we highlight several unresolved theoretical puzzles and empirical challenges that merit further exploration.

Author Information

Bradley C. Parks

The College of William & Mary
bparks@aiddata.wm.edu

Austin Strange

Harvard University
strange@g.harvard.edu

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Bradley C. Parks
The College of William & Mary
bparks@aiddata.wm.edu

Austin Strange
Harvard University
strange@g.harvard.edu

After World War II, a group of democratic donors formed a club called the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD. They did so in order to establish a shared set of behavioral norms and mechanisms to monitor compliance with these norms. This group of governments with relatively homogenous preferences and values functioned much like a cartel for five decades (Easterly 2009). However, the coherence and stability of the global development finance regime is now in jeopardy. Autocratic donors—with a different set of policy preferences and normative values—account for a growing share of official financial flows to the developing world, and have shown little interest in following the norms established by and for democratic donors after World War II (Hook and Rumsey 2016; Dreher et al. 2018).

In many Western capitals, the conventional wisdom is that these “rogue donors”—including but not limited to China, Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia—are undermining some of the hardest-won governance gains that were achieved in developing countries since the end of the Cold War (Naím 2007). However, given that autocratic donors do not adhere to the information disclosure standards of the OECD-DAC, social science research on whether, when, and how autocratic aid influences governance outcomes in recipient countries is still in its infancy. In this essay, we review the best available evidence on the governance impacts of aid from democratic and non-democratic donors, and highlight several potentially fruitful avenues for future research.

Looking in the Rear-View Mirror

For nearly two decades, quantitatively-oriented social scientists who studied the effects of democratic and autocratic aid treated countries as the relevant units of observation. They uncovered evidence that aid from democratic donors can, under certain conditions, promote political liberalization, human rights, and rule-based governance (Dunning 2004; Finkel et al. 2007; Carnegie and Marinov 2017; Carnegie and Samii forthcoming). By contrast, they found that autocratic aid can reduce the probability of democratization and even undermine the effects of aid from democratic donors (Kersting and Kilby 2014; Li 2017).

But these studies face important limitations: they use imprecisely defined and measured treatment and outcome variables; they seldom address the key causal inference assumptions of unconfoundedness and unit homogeneity in a convincing manner; and they draw upon variation across countries to test theoretical predictions that more directly relate to variation *within* countries.¹ The existing literature also tells us little about the specific mechanisms through which democratic and autocratic aid affect outcomes of interest.

¹ For example, while cross-country studies that seek to identify that impact of aid on democracy and governance frequently invoke the logic of political survival, many of the testable implications that follow from the logic of political survival relate to variation *within* countries.

However, the growing availability of subnationally georeferenced aid, outcome, and covariate data has created new opportunities for social scientists to estimate the effects of aid at local rather than national scales (BenYishay et al. 2017a). These data are attractive from a causal inference standpoint because localities within countries face a common set of conditions, which makes it easier to identify “treated” and “comparison” cases that are sufficiently similar to establish a credible counterfactual.² In addition, when panel studies exploit variation in the precise timing of aid exposure across subnational localities and include both time fixed effects and fixed effects at fine geographic scales, they can address longstanding concerns about confounding and omitted variables in a more convincing way (BenYishay et al. 2017b).

Prior to this “subnational turn,” few scholars harbored the illusion that aid was evenly or randomly allocated across subnational jurisdictions within countries, but many assumed that it was not feasible to systematically measure local variation in aid allocation and governance outcomes.³ AidData, a research lab at William & Mary, has helped to ease this constraint. Since 2010, it has led an effort—in collaboration with donor agencies and government agencies in aid-receiving countries—to pinpoint the precise locations of foreign aid projects. AidData and its partners have thus far collected and published data on more than \$1.23 trillion of foreign aid projects spread across more than 200,000 subnational locations (Custer et al. 2017). Although most of these data cover projects financed by bilateral donor agencies from democratic countries (e.g. USAID, DFID) and multilateral donors (e.g. World Bank, African Development Bank), AidData and its partners have collected comprehensive data on foreign aid projects financed by China, which is by far the largest autocratic donor (Strange et al. 2017; Dreher et al. 2017; Bluhm et al. 2018). They have also georeferenced the project-level data that are housed in the aid information management systems of 15 recipient countries: Malawi, Burundi, Nepal, Timor-Leste, Honduras, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Colombia, Uganda, and Somalia. These country-specific datasets capture incoming aid from a wide array of democratic and autocratic donors, including India, South Africa, Russia, Iran, Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Turkey.⁴

At the same time, georeferenced data on important outcomes related to governance—such as social protest, violent conflict, voter turnout, vote choice, and the quality of local public service delivery—have increased in number, scope, precision, periodicity, and accessibility (Girardin et al. 2015; BenYishay et al. 2017a, 2017c; Goodman 2019). Some of the most useful resources include the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) Project, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program’s Georeferenced Events Dataset (UCDP GED), the Integrated Crisis Early Warning System (ICEWS) Project, the Social Conflict Analysis Database (SCAD), the Rebel Contraband Dataset, the Mass Mobilization in Autocracies Database (MMAD), the Constituency-Level Elections Archive (CLEA) Project, Afrobarometer, and the Gallup World Poll. Spatial data integration and extraction tools—such as ETH Zurich’s GROWup platform, AidData’s GeoQuery platform, and the *geomerge* package in R created by Karsten Donnay and Andrew Linke—have also reduced the barriers to entry for social scientists without GIS training.

² When countries are the units of observation, it is more difficult to find “treated” units and “control” units that are sufficiently similar to establish a credible counterfactual (Pepinsky forthcoming).

³ By way of illustration, consider this excerpt from a 1995 working paper published by John Cohen, a Harvard adviser who worked with the Kenyan Government in the early 1990s: “[e]fforts to produce descriptive data on project locations have not been requested from Government [of Kenya] personnel ... who control access to computers and data. Nor has it been requested by the aid agencies. To a large extent, this failure to pursue an obviously interesting bit of data analysis results from the fact that conventional wisdom currently holds that there is a major bias of ongoing and new project activity in ethnic areas of the President and his supporters. But another reason it has not been done is that the professional capacity of the key ministries is too limited to address location variables” (Cohen 1995: 28).

⁴ All of these datasets can be accessed at <https://www.aiddata.org/datasets>.

A Subnational Turn Yields New Insights

Over the last several years, political scientists and economists have exploited these new data and tools to better understand how aid from different types of donors affects three types of governance outcomes: (1) political capture, (2) corruption and the quality of local governance, and (3) citizens' political attitudes and behavior. We briefly summarize the insights that have emerged from this literature and highlight several unanswered questions that merit further exploration.

First, a growing body of evidence suggests that politicians consistently steer foreign aid from democratic and autocratic donors towards politically privileged localities and away from less politically consequential localities (Briggs 2012, 2014; Jablonski 2014; Masaki 2018; Engelsma et al. 2017; Marx 2018; Grossman and Michelitch 2018). In Malawi, for example, analysis of aid projects financed by 30 democratic and autocratic donors indicates that leaders allocate discretionary resources to geographical areas where the expected probability of voting for the ruling party is high (Khomba and Trew 2017). Likewise, Briggs (forthcoming) provides evidence from Senegal, Uganda, and Nigeria that aid from democratic and autocratic donors favors towns and villages where survey respondents report that they will likely vote for the President and the ruling party.

But donors can put due diligence procedures in place to make it more difficult for politicians in host countries to manipulate aid for domestic political purposes, and there is some evidence that autocratic donors may be less interested in adopting these types of safeguards. Dreher et al. (2019) use geocoded Chinese and World Bank project data to explore if these two donors—with widely divergent project appraisal systems—are differentially vulnerable to one particular form of political capture.⁵ They find that Chinese aid is disproportionately allocated to the home regions of political leaders (when they are in power), and that this effect is particularly strong in the run-up to executive elections and when executive elections are more competitive. However, they do not find that World Bank projects favor the home regions of political leaders.⁶ The most likely explanation for these heterogeneous effects is that the World Bank uses ex ante, cost-benefit analysis to screen candidate projects and it employs a simple rule—"the expected present value of the project's net benefits must be higher than or equal to the expected net present value of mutually exclusive project alternatives"—to safeguard its projects from political capture (Warner 2010). By contrast, Chinese development finance institutions are not known to have an analogous set of institutional safeguards in place to reduce the likelihood that politically motivated projects will be approved. They typically request project proposals from and negotiate project agreements with political leaders in recipient countries, which creates significant scope for leaders to exploit Chinese projects for political gain. Nevertheless, more research is needed to evaluate whether aid from other types of donors—e.g. bilateral donors from democratic countries with both strong and weak due diligence procedures—is equally vulnerable to this form and other forms of political capture.

⁵ The World Bank uses ex ante, cost-benefit analysis to screen candidate projects. It employs a simple project acceptability rule—"the expected present value of the project's net benefits must be higher than or equal to the expected net present value of mutually exclusive project alternatives"—as "a safeguard against project choices being captured by narrow political or sectional interests" (Warner 2010: 2). By contrast, the Chinese aid institutions do not have analogous institutional safeguards in place to reduce the likelihood that politically motivated projects will be approved.

⁶ The findings reported in Dreher et al. (2019) do not imply that World Bank projects are invulnerable to all types of political capture. On this point, see Briggs 2012; Marx 2018; and Rustad et al. 2019.

A second key insight from this literature concerns how autocratic aid may affect the quality of local governance. With data on the precise locations of Chinese aid projects and geocoded Afrobarometer survey data on the corruption perceptions and experiences of nearly 100,000 respondents in 29 African countries, Isaksson and Kotsadam (2018a) find higher levels of local corruption around active Chinese aid project sites but not near active World Bank project sites.⁷ These results are consistent with those reported in Brazys et al. (2017) and Findley et al. (2017). However, we still know little about *why* aid from these different donors results in different local governance outcomes. One potential explanation is that donor use and disuse of specific institutional safeguards (e.g. competitive bidding, citizen feedback mechanisms, blacklisting of corrupt firms) is consequential. Another possibility is that donors transmit heterogeneous values and norms to the politicians, firms, and citizens in the subnational jurisdictions where their aid projects are located. Isaksson (2017) marshals some evidence in support of the latter argument. She finds that individuals who live near World Bank project sites are more likely to report having attended a community meeting in the past year, but individuals who live near Chinese project sites are not.⁸ Gehring et al. (2019) also find that individuals who live in close proximity to World Bank projects are less likely to express support for authoritarian rule (i.e. one-man, one-party, or military rule), while those who live near Chinese project are more willing to embrace authoritarian rule. However, neither of these studies provides conclusive evidence that the heterogeneous effects they identify are the result of norm transmission (as opposed to another factor, such as the implementation of specific policies and practices by donors).⁹

A third strand of the literature speaks to the question of how aid from different types of donors may affect citizens' political attitudes and behavior. With a spatial difference-in-differences strategy, Briggs (forthcoming) analyzes a large sample of projects financed by autocratic and democratic donors in three African countries and finds that the local receipt of aid actually *reduces* support for political incumbents. This finding presents a paradox: why would political leaders steer aid to their most likely voters if doing so reduces their odds of (re)election? One possibility is that leaders expect to be rewarded for providing targeted benefits to voters, but the actual delivery of aid results in disillusionment because it fails to meet local expectations (Briggs forthcoming: 9-10).¹⁰ A related possibility is that aid reduces support for political incumbents in the aggregate, but different sources and types of aid register heterogeneous treatment effects. Briggs (forthcoming) does not test for differences across autocratic and democratic donors, but Findley et al. (2017) provide experimental evidence that Ugandan citizens prefer development projects financed USAID over those financed by China (due to concerns about transparency and corruption). Blair et al. (2018) also report evidence that broadly comports with the "disillusionment" hypothesis; they find that the *announcement* of Chinese development projects

⁷ Their spatial difference-in-differences identification strategy leverages variation in the timing of the rollout of Chinese aid projects by comparing survey responses from people who lived near Chinese aid projects that were already underway with survey responses from people who lived near Chinese aid projects that had not yet entered implementation.

⁸ Isaksson and Kotsadam (2018b) also provide evidence that the implementation of Chinese aid projects reduces public participation in trade unions in nearby areas.

⁹ Isaksson and Kotsadam (2018a) also demonstrate that Chinese aid projects do not increase local corruption through an expansion of economic activity around project sites, which increases the plausibility of their argument that local corruption is increasing due to norm transmission from the donor country.

¹⁰ The literature on how aid affects public expectations and opinions is still in its infancy. However, the studies that do exist suggest a complex and nuanced relationship. Parks et al. (2018) provide evidence from a high-frequency panel survey in more than 5,000 Afghan villages that the provision of "responsive aid"—aid that addresses that stated preferences of citizens in a given location—increases public confidence in government, but these public opinion benefits accrue to subnational leaders and not national leaders. They also report evidence of a non-linear relationship between the responsive aid and public confidence in government: that is to say, when government demonstrates its willingness and ability to provide aid that is responsive to citizen preferences, public expectations rise and it becomes increasingly difficult for the authorities to continue making popular legitimacy gains.

improves public opinion of China, but the *implementation* of Chinese development projects results in public antipathy towards China.¹¹ Whether these average treatment effects mask heterogeneity across different types of Chinese development projects is an open empirical question.¹²

There are also some reasons to believe that the local receipt of autocratic aid could set in motion a set of countervailing forces that both positively and negatively affect citizens' attitudes toward their own governments. Consider, for example, the ways in which Chinese infrastructure projects might shape public perceptions of the governing authorities. Previous research demonstrates that Chinese-financed connective infrastructure projects (e.g. roads, bridges, railways, seaports, and airports) have the effect of diffusing economic activity away from large urban centers and towards rural towns and villages (Bluhm et al. 2018), and theory suggests that these types of projects expand the territorial scope of the state's monopoly on the use of force by making it easier for agents of the state to provide law and order, levy taxes, and deliver public services in rural and remote areas (Mann 1984). Therefore, if Chinese aid increases the ease with which agents of the state can wrest control away from non-state actors (e.g. rebel groups, tribal leaders, gangs, and foreign-backed militias) who govern territorial enclaves, one would expect to observe higher levels of government repression and lower levels of violence in the geographical areas where Chinese aid projects are sited. Gehring et al. (2019) present a pattern of evidence that broadly comports with this expectation: Chinese aid projects reduce violent conflict—in particular, lethal violence against civilians—by increasing government repression and the deference of citizens to the state. At the same time, if agents of the state (e.g. police officers, judges, tax collectors) use their expanded capacity to engage in rent-seeking and predation, they could fuel local discontent and disloyalty to the state (Brazys et al. 2017; Isaksson and Kotsadam (2018a)).¹³ Blair and Roessler (2018) call this the “capacity-legitimacy tradeoff” hypothesis: the notion that Chinese aid increases the capacity of the state but erodes the legitimacy of the state. This hypothesis, we believe, merits greater attention. If it does stand up to empirical scrutiny, it might help explain the null effect of Chinese aid on public trust in government institutions.¹⁴ Understanding whether aid from other autocratic donors sets in motion the same set of causal processes should also be a priority for future research.

The Road Ahead

We are generally optimistic about the direction of this field. The increasing availability and precision of subnationally georeferenced project, outcome, and covariate data is fueling methodological innovation among those who study the intended and unintended impacts of aid from democratic and autocratic donors. This field would be particularly well-served by future

¹¹ We still know very little about whether and how the public opinion impacts of aid might vary over geographic space. However, there are some reasons to expect heterogeneous treatment effects. Blair et al. (2018) present evidence that Chinese development projects tend to be sited in subnational areas where public opinion about China is more favorable. Jones (2018) provides evidence that public opinion about China is more favorable in the home regions of political leaders in aid-receiving countries.

¹² It is also important to keep in mind that this line of inquiry is relatively new, so further testing of the “disillusionment” argument—across a wide variety of donors and recipient countries—will be necessary to understand its generalizability and scope conditions. There are also some reasons to think that sectoral heterogeneity might matter. One possibility is that public confidence in individual donors—and/or host government institutions—will increase when the sectoral focus of incoming aid mirrors the sectoral priorities of local populations (Croke 2017; Parks et al. 2018).

¹³ Indeed, in one of the few systematic studies on subnational state legitimacy and conflict, Wig and Tollefson (2016) find that high-quality local government institutions are associated with lower levels of violence.

¹⁴ Blair and Roessler (2018) provide quasi-experimental evidence that local exposure to Chinese aid has no consistent effect on public trust in government institutions. They also suggest that countervailing forces may explain this null finding.

contributions that focus on the effects of aid from donors with different political institutions, operational policies and practices, and normative values. A stronger emphasis on sectoral heterogeneity, moderating variables, and mediation analysis would also increase the likelihood that these studies identify *how* and *why* aid from autocratic donors and democratic donors influences various outcomes of interest.¹⁵ It may be even easier to isolate the causal mechanisms that link aid to local governance outcomes if these observational studies are undertaken in conjunction with field and lab-in-the-field experiments (e.g. Blair and Roessler 2018).

Future studies should also engage more directly with the fact that impact estimates can be sensitive to the spatial units of observation that are selected and the distance thresholds that are used to assign treatment status (Fernandes et al. 2016). There are at least three ways to address this modifiable areal unit problem (MAUP). First, one can test robustness by using alternative spatial units of observation or multiple distance thresholds to assign treatment status (e.g. Bunte et al. 2018; Dreher et al. 2019). Second, one can use continuous, rather than dichotomous, measures of treatment exposure—for example, by constructing a weighted sum of proximity to treated locations (e.g. BenYishay et al. 2016). Third, one can use geoSIMEX to re-estimate treatment effects under varying conditions of spatial measurement imprecision (e.g. Runfola et al. 2017; Marty et al. 2019).¹⁶

Another potentially fruitful avenue for future empirical inquiry would be to focus on the causes and consequences of project co-location by autocratic and democratic donors. Whether geographical co-location is a coincidence or a reflection of donor coordination or competition, we know that it can influence local governance outcomes (Brazys et al. 2017).¹⁷ However, this spatial phenomenon remains understudied.

We would also be remiss if we did not acknowledge that future progress will depend on the extent to which longstanding data availability obstacles can be overcome. One of the most important constraints that social scientists face is access to geocoded aid data for a limited set of autocratic and democratic donors. There are some efforts underway to ease this constraint: Heidelberg University is leading an effort to geocode a comprehensive dataset of Indian development projects, while AidData is collecting project-level data on four autocratic donors (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, and Kuwait) that may be subsequently geocoded. Several of the largest bilateral donors in democratic countries have also formally committed—through the International Aid Transparency Initiative—to geocode their project portfolios and make these data public. Yet many of these commitments remain unfulfilled, which makes it significantly more difficult to study the local governance impacts of these donors' activities.

Another key constraint is the availability of data on local governance outcomes. While many of the studies reviewed in this essay rely upon geocoded household survey data that capture the perceptions and experiences of citizens related to local governance, we did not find many

¹⁵ At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that the decomposition of aid by sectors or other variables may make it more challenging to understand the aggregate effects of all types of aid (from different types of donors).

¹⁶ geoSIMEX is an R package that first simulates the effect of adding measurement error to a given spatial variable. Then, once the trend in measurement error has been estimated, it back-extrapolates to conditions of no spatial measurement error. The purpose of this simulation-based method is to reduce bias in estimates of causal impact that result from use of variables that are measured with spatial measurement error.

¹⁷ Brazys et al. (2017) find that the presence of Chinese development projects in localities within Tanzania is associated with higher levels of self-reported experiences with corruption by local residents. However, when World Bank projects are located in a given locality, self-reported experiences with corruption are lower. Yet, in cases where Chinese and World Bank projects are geographically co-located, the corruption-reducing effects of World Bank aid vanish.

studies that use observational or experimental data from public officials to measure the quality of local governance. This gap in the literature is notable because observational and experimental data from public officials can be used to measure a set of local governance outcomes—for example, responsiveness to citizen priorities—that are otherwise difficult to capture (BenYishay and Parks 2019). It also calls attention to a potentially important frontier for future research on the effects of autocratic and democratic aid.¹⁸

¹⁸ For examples of studies that rely upon leader surveys to measure local governance outcomes, see BenYishay et al. 2017d and Beramendi et al. 2018.

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