



## The Case for Democracy:

# Does Democracy Improve Public Goods Provision?

### Scientific Evidence Shows:

- **Democracies with vibrant vertical accountability provide 23% more safe water access, 35% more immunization to young children, and up to 40% more electricity access, than autocracies.**
- **Democracy provides average citizens with an internet connection rate of more than 300% on average compared to autocracies.**
- **Democracy with strong vertical accountability mechanisms diminishes corruption.**

### More Safe Water, Immunization, Electricity, and Social Protection for the Poor

A large body of scientific research demonstrates that democratic elections induce governments to provide public goods. Already 20 years ago, Lake and Baum (2001) established that moving from the lowest to highest levels of democracy is associated with a 23% population increase in access to safe water and 35% increase in immunization against DPT (Diphtheria, Pertussis, and Tetanus) for population younger than age 1. A recent set of studies such as Boräng et al. (2016), have shown that when corruption is low to moderate, moving from the lowest to the highest levels of democracy, results in a 20-40% increase in electricity access/consumption.

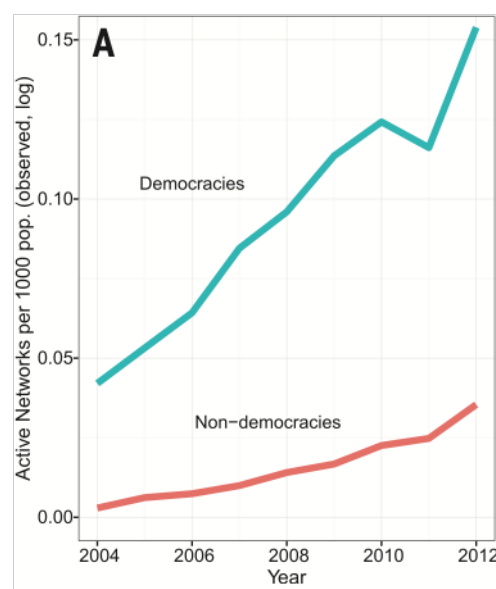
Democratization is also instrumental in bringing access to public goods for the poor and marginalized. Solid evidence now demonstrates that transitioning from a closed dictatorship to a full democracy leads, on average, to more than a 100% increase in social protection spending (Murshed et al. 2020). In reducing inequality, democracies provide public goods to more people.

The belief that democracy is better for people than autocracy is backed up with scientific evidence: in order to secure support from the majority, governments are forced to fulfill policies that increase the provision of public goods (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2001). Put simply, well-functioning vertical accountability mechanisms induce politicians to provide public goods.

### More and Free Digital Communication

A growing number of scientific studies demonstrates that democracies provide much greater internet access for their citizens as well as a freer environment for digital communication. These public goods are increasingly critical to citizens' communication, access to information, as well as usage of government services. A study published in *Science* by Weidmann et al. (2016) for example, demonstrates that Internet penetration increases at a much higher rate in democracies than autocracies (Figure 1). Already in 2012, democracies afforded their citizens on average a 300% higher access rate than in autocracies.

FIGURE 1: INTERNET ACCESS RATES IN DEMOCRACIES AND NON-DEMOCRACIES (WEIDMANN ET AL. 2016)



Autocratic governments have good reasons to limit access to these public goods. As King et al. (2013) show, autocrats censor content. Keremoglu and Weidmann (2020) bring evidence on how autocrats use technology to contain those challenging their rule. With their rigorous analysis, Lutscher et al. (2020) also demonstrate how frequently authoritarian governments use interference in online traffic, such as cyberattacks and temporary shutdowns.

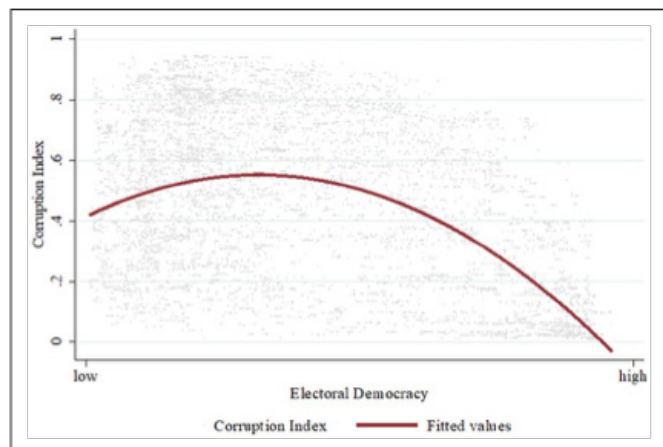
### Democracy Mitigates Corruption

A growing body of scientific studies now demonstrates that democratization mitigates corruption. For example, both Kolstad and Wiig (2016) and Pellegata (2013) show that being a democracy is robustly linked to lower rates of corruption.

In a rigorous study using the most comprehensive empirical data to-date, McMann et al. (2020) provide unanimous evidence of a solid curvilinear relationship between corruption and democracy (Figure 2).

While corruption increases slightly with the initial stages of democratization, levels of corruption curve downward as democratic freedoms grow stronger. Critically, McMann et al. (2020) also show that reductions in corruption is driven especially by effective vertical accountability that comes with high-quality, free, and fair elections.

**FIG. 2 EFFECT OF ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY ON CORRUPTION (MCMANN ET AL. 2020)**



As an example, corruption was very widespread in Brazil until scores on the Electoral Democracy Index hit 0.7 on a 0-1 scale in 1989, at which point corruption finally began to abate. Enhanced vertical accountability enables voters to throw out corrupt politicians. Long-term strategies to strengthen this mechanism (quality of elections and freedom of expression) in newly established democracies are critical to reducing corruption.

## Better at Accurate Statistics

Finally, robust scientific evidence shows that democratic governments provide more accurate official statistics (e.g., Magee and Doces 2015, Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2011). Official statistics, such as census data, provide essential information needed for public goods provision (Jerven 2018). Democratic institutions constrain executive authority from manipulating data (Magee and Doces 2015), while electoral competition incentivizes the ruling elite to disclose policy-relevant data (Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2011). Taking all these into account, it can be concluded that democratization leads to higher-quality official statistics, which in turn help inform public goods provision, resulting in better outcomes in this area.

## REFERENCES

- Boräng, F., Jagers, S.C., & Povitkina, M. (2016). Political determinants of electricity provision in small island developing states. *Energy Policy* 98: 725-734.
- Bueno de Mesquita, B., Morrow, J. D., Siverson, R. M., & Smith, A. (2001). Political competition and economic growth. *Journal of Democracy*, 12(1), 58-72.
- Hollyer, J. R., Rosendorff, B. P., & Vreeland, J. R. (2011). Democracy and transparency. *The Journal of Politics*, 73(4), 1191-1205.
- Jerven, M. (2018). Beyond precision: embracing the politics of global health numbers. *Lancet* (London, England), 392(10146), 468-469.
- Keremoğlu, E., & Weidmann, N. B. (2020). How dictators control the internet: a review essay. *Comparative Political Studies*, 53(10-11), 1690-1703.
- King, G., Pan, J., & Roberts, M. E. (2013). How censorship in China allows government criticism but silences collective expression. *American Political Science Review*, 107(2), 326-343.
- Kolstad, I., and Wiig, A. (2016). Does democracy reduce corruption?. *Democratization* 23(7), 1198-1215.
- Lake, D. A., & Baum, M. A. (2001). The invisible hand of democracy: political control and the provision of public services. *Comparative political studies*, 34(6), 587-621.
- Lutscher, P. M., Weidmann, N. B., Roberts, M. E., Jonker, M., King, A., & Dainotti, A. (2020). At home and abroad: The use of denial-of-service attacks during elections in nondemocratic regimes. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 64(2-3), 373-401.
- Magee, C. S., & Doces, J. A. (2015). Reconsidering regime type and growth: lies, dictatorships, and statistics. *International Studies Quarterly*, 59(2), 223-237.
- McMann, K. M., Seim, B., Teorell, J., & Lindberg, S. (2020). Why low levels of democracy promote corruption and high levels diminish it. *Political Research Quarterly*, 73(4), 893-907.
- Murshed, S. M., Bergougui, B., Badiuzzaman, M., & Pulok, M. H. (2020). Fiscal Capacity, Democratic Institutions and Social Welfare Outcomes in Developing Countries. *Defence and Peace Economics*, 1-26.
- Pellegata, A. (2013). Constraining political corruption: an empirical analysis of the impact of democracy. *Democratization*, 20(7), 1195-1218.
- Weidmann, N. B., Benitez-Baleato, S., Hunziker, P., Glatz, E., & Dimitropoulos, X. (2016). Digital discrimination: Political bias in Internet service provision across ethnic groups. *Science*, 353(6304), 1151-1155.

**To contribute to building a scientific evidence base for democracy, the European Union signed a contract with University of Gothenburg/V-Dem Institute to develop “The Case for Democracy”, and make it available to the European Union as well as its collaborating partners. On November 30th to December 1st, 2021, 26 scholars and over 400 policymakers and practitioners participated in a hybrid onsite/virtual conference held in Brussels on the Case for Democracy. Scholars presented scientific evidence on the dividends of democracy across six broad areas. This is one of a series of eight policy briefing papers summarizing the collated evidence.**



Co-funded by  
the European Union



Department of Political Science  
University of Gothenburg  
[contact@v-dem.net](mailto:contact@v-dem.net)  
+46 (0) 31 786 30 43  
[www.v-dem.net](http://www.v-dem.net)  
[www.facebook.com/vdem institute](https://www.facebook.com/vdem institute)  
[www.twitter.com/vdem institute](https://www.twitter.com/vdem institute)  
[www.linkedin.com/company/vdem institute](https://www.linkedin.com/company/vdem institute)