



## The Case for Democracy:

# Are Democracies Better for Social Protection of the Poor, Gender Equality, and Social Cohesion?

### Scientific Evidence Shows:

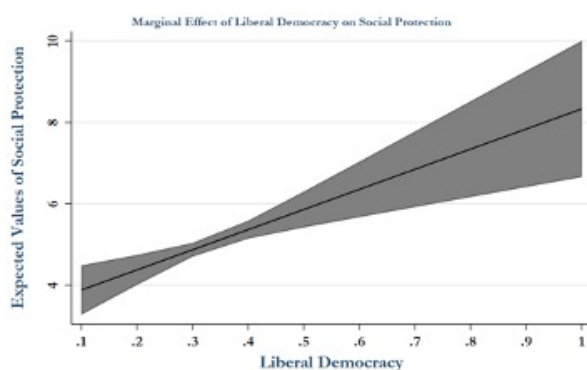
- *Full democracies spend 100% more than closed dictatorships on social protection policies benefitting the poor and vulnerable.*
- *The degree of democracy is more important than governance (fiscal capacity) for increasing spending on social protection policies.*
- *Democracy is a significant factor in achieving higher levels of egalitarian gender attitudes.*
- *Democracy facilitates social cohesion and makes cooperation for the common good more likely.*

## Democratization Increases Social Protections

A large body of rigorous scientific studies demonstrate that democratic institutions have a positive effect on increasing public expenditures on social protection policies, in favor of poor and vulnerable groups in society.

Strong, robust evidence demonstrates that democratization, alongside fiscal capacity, leads to a substantial increase in spending on social protection. Fiscal capacity<sup>1</sup> *alone* has only minor positive effects on the expansion of social protection policies and increased spending that protect the poor and vulnerable. **Yet, transitioning from a closed dictatorship to a full democracy leads on average to more than a 100% increase in spending on social protection policies.**

**FIG 1. POSITIVE EFFECT OF DEMOCRACY ON SPENDING ON SOCIAL PROTECTION** (COURTESY OF M. MURSHED AND B. BERGOUIGI, BASED ON RESULTS FROM MURSHED et al).



This dividend of democracy is of great policy significance since the positive impact of social welfare programs in areas such as poverty and inequality reduction, human development, and economic growth is evidenced by a large body of scientific literature (Murshed et al. 2020). Evidence also shows that the strong relationship between democratization and increasing social protection is due to the vertical accountability

mechanisms inherent in well-developed democracies. “Pressure from below” in strong democracies creates strong incentives for elected-politicians to deliver public services (Acemoglu & Robinson 2006; Sen 2001). **The democracy-support community should be aware that mediocre levels of democracy are not enough.**

Evidence demonstrates that democracy also helps to improve the provision of public goods such as electricity. For such goods, democracy only delivers when corruption in the government is not widespread. A country needs to be below 0.7 on V-Dem’s 0-1 corruption scale in order for democracy to deliver. (Boräng et al. 2021) For illustration, 124 countries in the world were below that threshold in 2022. Countries like Bolivia, Kenya, Philippines, and Ukraine are just around the threshold while Ghana, Mexico, Sri Lanka, and Romania are clearly below.

## Gender Equality and Social Cohesion

Evidence from recent empirical studies demonstrates that gender equality is much more likely to be the norm in democratic countries. **Flawed democracy leads to almost 33% lower levels of egalitarian gender attitudes compared to fully democratic countries, and hybrid as well as authoritarian regimes to over 60% lower levels** (Zagrebina 2020).

The driving factor for egalitarian gender attitudes seems to be higher levels of high-quality education. Importantly, the positive effect of education is conditional on the strength of the democracy. Education is much less likely to improve gender-equality attitudes in non-democratic countries (Zagrebina 2020, Shu & Meagher 2018), with obvious policy implications.

More broadly, democracy facilitates social cohesion, which holds societies together. This is because democratization also changes the social organization of a society and its relationship with the state (Zagrebina

<sup>1</sup> 1% increase in fiscal capacity increases social protection spending by 0.387%, both as share of GDP.

2020). **Democracies include mechanisms and institutions that provide social cohesion, such as allowing for trustful relationships in society**, for accommodating competing interests and the inclusion of diverse identities through political equality. Empirical evidence indicates that individuals **cooperate more for the common good** in democracies than in less democratic societies. In addition, democracy is decisive for public policy-making in times of crises like the current Covid-19 pandemic. In socially cohesive democracies, **policies turned out to be less harsh and more sustainable** (Leininger et al. 2021, Leininger forthcoming 2021).

Trust in the government is another important factor. Studies show that citizens' confidence and trust in the government's ability to administer public goods is essential for the provision of the goods (Rothstein 2011). Autocratization typically erodes trustful and predictable relationships

between the state and society. The current wave of autocratization involving increasing polarization and exclusionary politics, therefore poses a risk also to social cohesion.

Democratization should not be expected to translate immediately into more gender-equal representation, but it has effects in the long term. Fallon et al. (2012) show that over time with each successive democratic election, political cultures eventually transform and women's participation increases (Fallon et al. 2012). Previous studies also show that political and cultural factors rather than socioeconomic factors contribute to increased political participation of women (Paxton & Kunovich 2003), and it is with high levels of democracy that political cultures are transformed (Fallon et al. 2012).

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The *Case for Democracy* week 22-25 March 2021 set out to gather evidence on what democracies deliver with a focus on: economic development, human development, domestic and international security, and combating climate change. With increasing levels of autocratization around the world, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute in collaboration with the Directorate-General for International Partnerships of the European Commission initiated this joint project. The objective is to build a strong case for policy makers and other development actors to continue their engagement for promotion and protection of democracy. The 'Case for Democracy' week was partly funded by the European Union and was organized by Nazifa Alizada, Dr. Vanessa Boese, Prof. Staffan Lindberg, Martin Lundstedt, Natalia Natsika, and Shreeya Pillai.

## ABOUT V-DEM INSTITUTE

V-Dem is a unique approach to conceptualization and measurement of democracy. The headquarters – the V-Dem Institute – is based at the University of Gothenburg with 23 staff, and a project team across the world with 5 Principal Investigators, 19 Project Managers, 33 Regional Managers, 134 Country Coordinators, Research Assistants, and 3,500+ Country Experts. V-Dem is one of the world's largest data collection projects on democracy.



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