

## **Informational Democracy Promotion? Electronic Gray Literature and Democratization**

*Toby S. James*

### **Abstract**

The promotion of democracy has long been a cornerstone of states' foreign policy and the work of international organizations. However, the online diffusion of gray literature on "best practices" by the international community is one method of democracy promotion which has been overlooked by the literature on democratization and international organizations. This essay provides a heuristic model for understanding the diffusion pathways, accelerants, and barriers to use for this democracy promotion method. The model is constructed using analysis of original data about the nature, volume, and direction of downloads from a major democracy promotion IGO between 2006 and 2017, alongside the process tracing of the impact of one key publication. The analysis suggests that the resources were more likely to be used by electoral management bodies lacking capacity as well as by universities worldwide with reduced educational and research resources. Internet access was a barrier to diffusion. The use of the materials in the policy process is found to be dependent on actors' strategically using them during decision-making policy windows. This notwithstanding, the production of gray literature provides a useful tool for democracy promotion.

**Keywords:** Democracy, democratization, digital divides, electoral integrity, electoral reform, policy transfer.

---

**T**he promotion of democracy and democratic institutions, such as the running of elections, has been a key flank of foreign policy among Western governments since the middle of the twentieth century. During the post-Cold War period, there was a renewed effort to foster democracy, with many state-funded international organizations (IOs) seeking to promote democracy worldwide. One strategy from the international community was the diffusion of gray literature about how to build democratic institutions, made possible by the simultaneous development of the internet. Gray literature refers to

---

**Toby S. James** is Professor of Politics and Public Policy at the University of East Anglia and Co-Director of the Electoral Integrity Project. <t.s.james@uea.ac.uk>

documents such as books, technical reports, and policy briefs that are not the product of peer review, but instead published by organizations to advance the understanding of a particular area of policy practice. This has the great potential to encourage policy transfer, lesson-drawing, and policy diffusion so that knowledge can be shared on, for example, how to design alternative electoral systems and constitutions as well as how to manage conflict. Yet, online democracy-promotion mechanisms have been overlooked in the literature to date, since they have tended to focus on infrastructural rather than informational assistance.

This essay opens a research agenda and provides a heuristic model for understanding how information is developed by the international community regarding “best practices” and then used in the policy process to promote democracy. The study is based on an initial analysis of the frequencies and patterns of supply as well as downloads from the website of one of the largest global international democracy-assistance organizations, International IDEA, from 2006 to 2017. This approach therefore uses highly innovative sources of data for tracing democracy-promotion activity. The supply of documents was predominantly focused on building electoral institutions, with significant attention to political parties and gender, but also to broader constitutional design. A considerable demand came from the academic sector, especially universities with limited resources, for which open-access educational/research options were valuable. However, governmental officials and other actors also were major users of the documents. Country-level analysis of the drivers of demand found that electoral management bodies lacking capacity were more likely to use the resources.

The essay also undertakes process-tracing analysis to study the “life journey” of one key electronic resource to show how it shaped the design of democratic institutions. It demonstrates that the most accessed documents can shape deliberations about the design of democratic institutions and the demands of civil society groups, but that this is contingent on several factors. Uploading information to the web, alone, does not automatically promote democracy. An information diffusion framework is then inductively generated from the empirical analysis to identify how the gray literature can promote democratization—and some of the dangers and barriers that are faced. The contribution of the study is therefore to establish a research agenda on an overlooked democratization method, providing the first empirical and theoretical examination of informational democracy promotion. The essay has important consequences for understanding how democracy and political institutions are designed, as well as the barriers to change, in a digital age in which democracy is increasingly fragile around the globe.

The essay begins by outlining the long view of democracy promotion and next addresses the literature on gray literature and policy change. Theoretical expectations are introduced about the likely patterns of diffusion, before the method, results, and analysis of download data are provided. A case study is introduced before the analysis maps out the new framework.

## The History of Democracy Promotion

Democracy promotion has come in many forms, including mechanisms to support “free and fair” elections, media assistance, civil society aid, rule of law reforms, and social democratic reforms.<sup>1</sup> There is also evidence that the international community has promoted democracy for many decades. In the sphere of elections, the United Nations was active in supporting overseas electoral assistance as far back as the 1940s, with the signing of article 21 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, and, in the Korean peninsula, the first U.N. observation of elections. Early work also was undertaken by the Organization of American States (OAS), which began to play a role in elections in 1962 when it provided support for the Costa Rican presidential and the Dominican Republic general elections.<sup>2</sup> Beginning in the middle of the twentieth century, American foreign policy focused on promoting democracy indirectly through a reading of modernization theory by trying to boost literacy and income levels.<sup>3</sup> There also were more direct interventions to promote the holding of elections and improved public administration. In 1966, the United States Congress passed Title IX, to tilt assistance toward “the encouragement of democratic private and local government institutions.” Programs included civic education initiatives to promote democratic values and voluntary participation.<sup>4</sup> The 1980s saw the U.S. government establish the National Endowment for Democracy (NED)—an alternative bipartisan idea from Congress. There was a step change in the nature and frequency of electoral missions in the 1980s and the 1990s, with landmark elections such as the Namibia 1989 contest, which involved the external supervision and control of the electoral process by international actors.<sup>5</sup>

However, the post-Cold War period ushered a proliferation of actors into electoral assistance at the international level, with a new range of methods. Building on what had been provided previously, this included the defining of common practices, technical support, knowledge building, network building,

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003); Sandra Lavenex and Frank Schimmelfennig, “EU Democracy Promotion in the Neighbourhood: From Leverage to Governance?” *Democratization* 18, no. 4 (2011): 885-909; and Paul Poast and Johannes Urpelainen, *Organizing Democracy: How International Organizations Assist New Democracies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> OAS, *Annual Report of the Secretary-General 1962* (Washington, DC: Pan American Union, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> Seymour Lipset, “Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy,” *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (1959): 69-105.

<sup>4</sup> Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad*, 19-27.

<sup>5</sup> ACE, “Electoral Assistance,” <http://aceproject.org/ace-en/focus/focus-on-effective-electoral-assistance/onePage> (accessed December 28, 2018).

legal reviews, and election monitoring.<sup>6</sup> The uptake of these methods was very uneven. Inken Von Borzyskowski used a cost-benefit analysis to argue that requests for technical election assistance were lower when the political costs to a regime were high because it was an autocracy, or the benefits were low because there were strong electoral institutions.<sup>7</sup> On the provider side, she argued that “international organizations are less likely to provide such technical assistance when the government appears to lack political will for reform and full project implementation is unlikely.”<sup>8</sup> Another policy instrument for improving elections was the use of international practitioner conferences, which the author has shown elsewhere also was skewed in terms of geographical and professional participation.<sup>9</sup> The uptake of election observation missions shared similar unevenness.<sup>10</sup>

Democracy promotion has come under pressure due to a combination of factors such as the rise of populist movements and the restricted availability of public funds owing to austerity agendas. Also, measures such as election observation have been more difficult during the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>11</sup> There has been a need, therefore, to evaluate and re-engineer the methods of democracy promotion.<sup>12</sup> Evaluations of past practices are rare. Analysis of overall patterns of foreign-aid spending frequently report that they had no effect,<sup>13</sup> but often the analyses do not differentiate between foreign and democracy aid—the latter is a subset of the former.<sup>14</sup> The majority of the literature, which has focused on the effects of electoral observation, shows that foreign aid could have some positive effect.<sup>15</sup> Anna Lührmann explored the effects of U.N. technical assistance, which includes mediation, support for electoral management, and

---

<sup>6</sup> Sead Alihodžić, “The Mechanics of Democracy Promotion Tools: Bridging the Knowledge-to-Practice Gap,” *Development in Practice* 26, no. 4 (2016): 431-443, and Toby S. James, *Comparative Electoral Management: Performance, Networks and Instruments* (London: Routledge, 2020), 184-195.

<sup>7</sup> Inken Von Borzyskowski, “Resisting Democracy Assistance: Who Seeks and Receives Technical Election Assistance?” *Review of International Organizations* 11, no. 2 (2016): 247-282.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>9</sup> James, *Comparative Electoral Management*, 177-181.

<sup>10</sup> Judith Kelley, *Monitoring Democracy: When International Election Observation Works and Why It Often Fails* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Erik Asplund, Lars Heuver, Fakiha Ahmed, Bor Stevense, Sulemana Umar, Toby S. James, and Alistair Clark, “Election Observation during the Covid-19 Pandemic,” *International IDEA* (March 17, 2020), <https://www.idea.int/news-media/news/elections-and-covid-19-international-electoral-observation-2020> (accessed June 17, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Carothers, “Rejuvenating Democracy Promotion,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (2020): 114-123.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Knack, “Does Foreign Aid Promote Democracy?” *International Studies Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (2004): 251-266.

<sup>14</sup> Carie A. Steele, Daniel Pemstein, and Stephen A. Meserve, “Democracy Promotion and Electoral Quality: A Disaggregated Analysis,” *Governance* 34, no. 2 (2021): 505-521.

<sup>15</sup> Kelley, *Monitoring Democracy*.

capacity development for nonstate actors.<sup>16</sup> Luca Uberti and David Jackson found a small, short-term, but statistically significant effect of election-support on the integrity of elections.<sup>17</sup>

## Gray Literature as a Method of Policy Diffusion

One method of democracy assistance that has not been explored is the use and distribution of “gray literature.” Gray literature is defined by Richard Adams, Palie Smart, and Anne Sigismund Huff as “knowledge artefacts that are not the product of peer-review processes characterizing publication in scientific journals.”<sup>18</sup> The origin of the term is the German phrase *Graue literatur*. The documents that are commonly considered to count as gray literature include “technical and project reports, working papers, discussion papers, technical manuals, information sheets [and] conference papers.”<sup>19</sup> There is some debate about what should be included, however, with the line between “working papers” and “drafts” being very blurry, for example.<sup>20</sup> The authors and consumers of gray literature are thought to include bodies such as “government departments and agencies, universities, think-tanks, non-government organisations, corporations and professional bodies.”<sup>21</sup> The impetus is a rapid need for information regarding “what works,” which can be used for commercial and public advantage.

Gray literature offers a potentially important method for policy transfer, lesson-drawing, or policy diffusion, which involves “knowledge about how policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political setting (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political setting.”<sup>22</sup> Harold Wolman and Ed Page developed a theory of policy transfer based on the spread of communications and information. They argue that much of the literature on policy transfer has an “inability thus far to penetrate the black

---

<sup>16</sup> Anna Lührmann, “United Nations Electoral Assistance: More Than a Fig Leaf?” *International Political Science Review* 40, no. 2 (2018): 181-196.

<sup>17</sup> Luca J. Uberti and David Jackson, “Does Aid Promote Electoral Integrity?” *Journal of Development Studies* 56, no. 6 (2020): 1067-1094.

<sup>18</sup> Richard J. Adams, Palie Smart, and Anne Sigismund Huff, “Shades of Grey: Guidelines for Working with the Grey Literature in Systematic Reviews for Management and Organizational Studies,” *International Journal of Management Reviews* 19, no. 4 (2017): 433.

<sup>19</sup> Amanda Lawrence, “Electronic Documents in a Print World: Grey Literature and the Internet,” *Media International Australia* 143, no. 1 (2012): 123.

<sup>20</sup> Lea Myohanen, Elizabeth Taylor, and Latrina Keith, “Accessing Grey Literature in Public Health: New York Academy of Medicine’s Grey Literature Report,” *Publishing Research Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2005): 49.

<sup>21</sup> Lawrence, “Electronic Documents in a Print World,” 123.

<sup>22</sup> David Dolowitz and David Marsh, “Who Learns What from Whom: A Review of the Policy Transfer Literature,” *Political Studies* 44, no. 2 (1996): 343-357.

box” of how it actually occurs.<sup>23</sup> Too much work has sought to simply classify types of policies that have been transferred. What is needed, they suggest, is research “that focuses on information networks, including producers, senders, and facilitators of information...as well as recipients.”<sup>24</sup> They argue that we should therefore first identify the communications network through which receivers and senders are linked. Second, we need to understand how information is processed. Information itself might be neutral, but the way in which it is processed never is. Third, we need to understand how information is assessed by recipients. Do they think that the information is of high-quality and treat it as valid and accurate? Fourth, how, if at all, are recipients using the information? There has been some research on the diffusion and use of gray literature in other policy or research areas.<sup>25</sup> However, no similar study of the diffusion and use of gray literature in the field of democracy and electoral assistance has been conducted. There has been a considerable effort to examine the effects of election observation reports, but research on “best practices” is different and outside the remit of this study. This is a major gap, given the importance that such research could be playing in spreading information in the age of globalization and the internet.

## Research Questions and Theoretical Expectations

This essay, therefore, considers the following research questions. First, what are the patterns of demand and supply in the gray literature concerning democracy promotion materials? The answer to this question will reflect a major step forward in the literature on democracy promotion, since it currently focuses on financial expenditure concerning democracy assistance. Second, what are the drivers of demand or barriers to diffusion? This is an important question for ascertaining where democracy assistance is present in the world, how knowledge is diffused, and how actors are digitally connected. Third, can the literature cause democracy promotion?

In answering questions one and two, it is possible to arrive at some conclusions by drawing on the literature that is centered on the drivers of internet

---

<sup>23</sup> Harold Wolman and Ed Page, “Policy Transfer among Local Governments: An Information-Theory Approach,” *Governance* 15, no. 4 (2002): 478.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Anne Gentil Beccot, “The Driving and Evolving Role of Grey Literature in High-Energy Physics,” in *Grey Literature in Library and Information Studies*, ed. Dominic J. Farace and Joachim Schöpfel (Berlin: De Gruyter Saur, 2010); June Crowe, Gail Hodge, and Daniel Redmond, “Grey Literature Repositories: Tools for NGOs Involved in Public Health Activities in Developing Countries,” in *Grey Literature in Library and Information Studies*, ed. Dominic J. Farace and Joachim Schöpfel (Berlin: De Gruyter Saur, 2010); and Lea Myohanen, Elizabeth Taylor, and Latrina Keith, “Accessing Grey Literature in Public Health: New York Academy of Medicine’s Grey Literature Report,” *Publishing Research Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2005): 44-52.

usage. There remains a significant digital divide in the world.<sup>26</sup> According to World Bank data, rates of internet usage varied around the world in 2016, from virtually universal coverage of 98 percent in Iceland to near nonuse of one percent in Eritrea.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, a fairly obvious hypothesis would be to expect downloads to be highest in countries where general internet use is high. Hence:

- H1: Downloads are greater in states with greater levels of internet access.

More complex questions arise, however, when we begin to consider the nature of the regimes that are more likely to access the documents. It is often assumed that internet diffusion within a given polity corresponds to the stage of socio-economic development that society has reached. According to Manuel Castells, a society can progress toward becoming a network society, which is defined as “a society whose social structure is made up of networks powered by micro-electronics-based information and communications technologies.”<sup>28</sup> Such societies, which are globalized, have reached socio-economic development, and are internet- (and network-) rich. Internet usage, therefore, has been shown to be higher in countries where there is a correlation among income and GDP,<sup>29</sup> globalization, democracy,<sup>30</sup> education,<sup>31</sup> and infrastructure.<sup>32</sup> This assumes a relatively linear pathway of evolutionary development, akin to modernization theory, in which indicators of “development” all come together.

Drawing from this, we might expect that the downloading of documents might be higher in states with a broader level of democracy than others. This is because they tend to have richer levels of civil society that seek and download

---

<sup>26</sup> Pippa Norris, *Digital Divide? Civic Engagement, Information Poverty and the Internet Worldwide* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Panayiota Tsatsou, *Digital Divides in Europe: Culture, Politics and the Western-Southern Divide* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2011); and José Manuel Robles, Cristobal Torres-Albero, and Guillermo Villarino, “Inequalities in Digital Welfare Take-up: Lessons from E-Government in Spain,” *Policy Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2021.1929916> (accessed September 9, 2021).

<sup>27</sup> World Bank, “Individuals Using the Internet (% of Population),” [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?year\\_high\\_desc=false](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?year_high_desc=false) (accessed November 24, 2017).

<sup>28</sup> Manuel Castells, “Informationalism, Networks, and the Network Society: A Theoretical Blueprint,” in *The Network Society: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Manuel Castells (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2004), 3.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Beilock and Daniela V. Dimitrova, “An Exploratory Model of Inter-Country Internet Diffusion,” *Telecommunications Policy* 27, nos. 3-4 (2003): 237-252, and Phanindra V. Wunnava and Daniel B. Leiter, “Determinants of Intercountry Internet Diffusion Rates,” *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 68, no. 2 (2009): 413-426.

<sup>30</sup> Javier Corrales and Frank Westhoff, “Information Technology Adoption and Political Regimes,” *International Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2006): 911-933.

<sup>31</sup> Frederico Cruz-Jesus, Tiago Oliveira, and Fernando Bacao, “The Global Digital Divide: Evidence and Drivers,” *Journal of Global Information Management* 26, no. 2 (2018): 1-26.

<sup>32</sup> Wunnava and Leiter, “Determinants of Intercountry Internet Diffusion Rates.”

documents that can help them to diagnose and address any gaps remaining in their quality of democracy. There are fewer limitations on their ability to search for the information and fewer sanctions for doing so than in states with weak democratic prospects. State officials are freer to search for and use such documents and have a reasonable expectation that they will be able to use them. Democracy is often thought to be a driver of internet usage.<sup>33</sup>

- H2a: Downloads are greater in states with greater levels of democracy.

Yet, at the same time, democracy might have the opposite effect on downloads. Those states with greater democratic deficits than others have greater need for the documents. Civil society groups are known to be important agents for democratization.<sup>34</sup> They may therefore seek democratization to be able to mobilize and further download the material. Hence, we conversely could hypothesize that:

- H2b: Downloads are lower in states with greater levels of democracy.

Given the evolution toward digital, networked societies envisaged by Castells, we might expect other properties of societies to be important, too. One of these is that the size and quality of the university sector in each country may explain the download rates. More universities would mean more researchers writing on the topic and more students in undergraduate and postgraduate courses also using downloads for their essays and assignments. Hence:

- H3: Downloads are greater in states with stronger university sectors.

Moreover, other literature on internet diffusion suggests that the absence of English proficiency can be a driver of digital divides.<sup>35</sup> It therefore would be logical to expect that downloads are greatest in number in the English-speaking world. Hence:

- H4: Downloads are greater in states where English speaking is more prevalent.

---

<sup>33</sup> Corrales and Westhoff, "Information Technology Adoption and Political Regimes."

<sup>34</sup> Robert D. Putnam, Robert Leonardi, and Raffaella Y. Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), and Rollin F. Tusale, "A Boon or a Bane? The Role of Civil Society in Third- and Fourth-Wave Democracies," *International Political Science Review* 28, no. 3 (2007): 361-386.

<sup>35</sup> Matteo Grazi and Sebastián Vergara, "ICT in Developing Countries: Are Language Barriers Relevant? Evidence from Paraguay," *Information Economics and Policy* 24, no. 2 (2012): 161-171.



It is also possible, however, to consider that there might be factors specific to electoral policy shaping the patterns and contours of demand, which can be drawn from the literature on electoral integrity, raising more varied demands for the material. The extent to which electoral management bodies (EMBs) are autonomous and have capacity may also be important in how they download documents.<sup>36</sup> Being an organization that is autonomous from government could make an EMB more likely to seek policy solutions from other polities, since there would be a greater prospect of implementing what it might find and less likely that the EMB would be directed by the government. Greater organizational capacity might matter, too. A well-resourced EMB would have the time and ability to research different ways to run elections overseas and to seek further advice.

- H5a: Diffusion is greater in states where electoral management bodies (EMBs) are more independent, and
- H5b: Diffusion is greater in states where electoral management bodies (EMBs) have greater capacity.

## Methods

This essay charts the use of gray literature in democracy promotion through an analysis of publication download data from the website of one major international assistance organization, International IDEA (IDEA). The essay empirically focuses on just one organization—International IDEA. However, this organization was arguably the most central and proactive in using dissemination of knowledge as a policy tool, compared to organizations that focused on using election observation and other mechanisms.<sup>37</sup> Sharing knowledge through the use of gray literature was an early key strategy of the international community, and many international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were proactive in creating libraries shortly after they were established. The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) was founded in 1987, with support from USAID, to “monitor, support, and strengthen the mechanics of the election process in developing countries” and to “undertake any appropriate education activities which contribute towards free, fair, and

---

<sup>36</sup> Holly Ann Garnett, “Evaluating Election Management Body Capacity,” *International Political Science Review* 20, no. 3 (2019): 335-353; James, *Comparative Electoral Management*; and Carolien van Ham and Holly Ann Garnett, “Building Impartial Electoral Management? Institutional Design, Independence and Electoral Integrity,” *International Political Science Review* 40, no. 3 (2019): 313-334.

<sup>37</sup> James, *Comparative Electoral Management*, 160-196.

credible elections.”<sup>38</sup> One of IFES’s first steps after being established was to set up a resource center in 1989 in Washington, D.C., to provide information on electoral systems, such as books, file materials, periodicals, posters, videos, and other materials. These resources were used to service the needs of “IFES staff, consultants, and field officers, election officials, legislators and non-partisan civic groups.”<sup>39</sup> By 1997, the center covered 1,500 square feet.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy for Africa (EISA) was established in Johannesburg in 1996 as an NGO to promote “credible elections, citizen participation, and strong political institutions for sustainable democracy in Africa.”<sup>41</sup> When EISA was established, early work included setting up an Electoral Education Center in Johannesburg to house scholars.<sup>42</sup>

IDEA was founded as an intergovernmental organization in Stockholm in 1995. The institute’s announced aim was to promote “the advancement of sustainable democracy worldwide and within this context to improve and consolidate electoral processes.”<sup>43</sup> Other states joined the institute, including Benin, Brazil, Canada, Indonesia, and Mexico, bringing the total number of member states to thirty-one in 2016. The institute gained observer status in the U.N. General Assembly in 2003 and another office was established in Brussels. The IDEA dataset used in this research covers 2006 to 2017.

This study is possible because, between 2006 and 2017, IDEA asked users to provide key information when they downloaded publications. This user information was provided to the author under an agreement with IDEA for its analysis. This allows for the identification of patterns and trends in document usage in a way that is not possible for other INGOs or EMBs.

There are some limitations to the dataset. First, the dataset *underestimates* the total number of downloads because providing user information was optional; consequently, there are downloads that were not recorded. Also, over time, documents from IDEA began to appear on websites other than IDEA’s. This means that the actual usage and readership are higher than that which is estimable from the data.

Second, the dataset is not a complete data matrix because of how the information was recorded by International IDEA. Information about users included the publication that was downloaded, alongside the user’s gender,

---

<sup>38</sup> IFES, *Republic of Haiti General Elections December 16, 1990* (Washington, DC: IFES, 1990), 2.

<sup>39</sup> Ray J. Kennedy, “Clif White’s ‘Centre of Knowledge’ a Reality,” *Elections Today* 7, nos. 1–2 (Spring-Summer 1997): 14–15.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> EISA, “About Us,” n.d., <https://www.eisa.org.za/about.php> (accessed February 2, 2019).

<sup>42</sup> EISA, *Annual Report 1996-1997* (Johannesburg: EISA, 1997), 6–7.

<sup>43</sup> IDEA, *Declaration of the Founding Conference of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance* (Stockholm: IDEA, 1995), 2.

organizational type, and country. These data were provided in a crosstab, and it was not technically possible for IDEA to provide the information in a full data-matrix format. We can therefore determine how many downloads were from New Zealand, for example, and how many were from government officials, but we cannot say how many were downloaded by the New Zealand Government.

Third, precise geographical location is not known because an Internet Protocol (IP) address was not stored (country was), as collecting this information and using it for academic study would raise considerable privacy and security issues. Fourth, it is not possible to check the external validity of the dataset, as it is available from only one IGO. Hence, the data may not be perfect, but given real-world scenarios and privacy issues, the information still provides a new insight into the uncharted territory of the dissemination of a major NGO's democracy promotion material from a highly reputable organization.

Treating the volume of downloads as a measure for the demand for online democracy promotion materials, this essay explores the determinants of this demand, using a variety of independent variables. *Level of democracy* is measured using the V-Dem liberal democracy index.<sup>44</sup> This is an expert index which measures whether states have the *de facto* properties of electoral democracy as described by Robert Dahl in his concept of polyarchy. The index also measures whether the rule of law, respect for civil liberties, and constraints on the executive by the judiciary and legislature are observed.<sup>45</sup> The measure for liberal democracy is used rather than the measure for electoral democracy because we are interested in more than the quality of elections. The 2016 liberal democracy measure was used (unless stated otherwise), as this was the year in which the download data ended.

The *strength of the university sector* is measured by the number of universities in each country and the number of universities in the top 100, 200, and 500 universities as ranked by the Times Higher League Table. Data were taken from the “Webometrics Ranking of World Universities” for 2017, which was compiled by the Cybermetrics Lab, a research group belonging to the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC), the largest public research body in Spain. Further, *internet usage* was taken from the World Bank data—as the percentage of the population with access in 2016.<sup>46</sup>

*English language proficiency* was measured using Thomas Cook and Amy Liu's data on whether English was used in the school curriculum and taught as a subject in schools. These data have a binary coding of 0 and 1 in

---

<sup>44</sup> Michael Coppedge, John Gerring, Staffan I. Lindberg, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jan Teorell, David Altman, Michael Bernhard et al., *V-Dem [Country-Year/Country-Date] Dataset v7* (Gothenburg: VDEM, 2017).

<sup>45</sup> V-Dem, *Democracy Facing Global Challenges: V-Dem Annual Democracy Report 2019* (Gothenburg: V-Dem, 2019), 10.

<sup>46</sup> World Bank, *Individuals Using the Internet (% of Population)*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS> (accessed November 24, 2017).

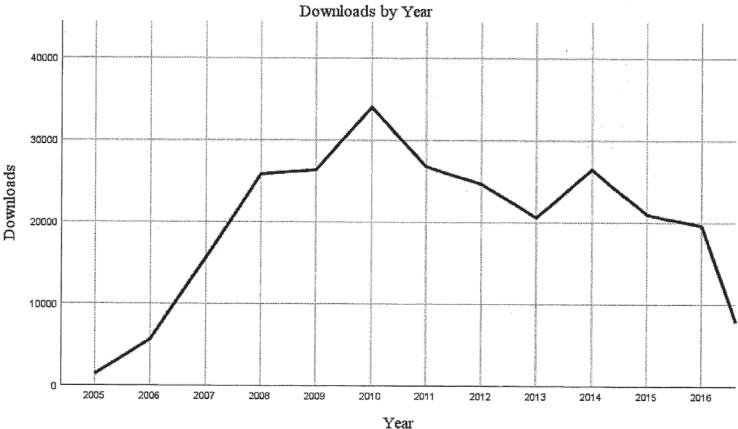
their dataset.<sup>47</sup> Their most recent measure in the dataset, typically for 2004, is used. An English-speaking additive index score between 0 and 2 was created by the author for each country. A score of 0 indicates that English was neither used in the school curriculum nor a subject in schools. A score of 2 indicates that both were in effect. A score of 1 indicates that one of the two possibilities was true. Finally, measures of *EMB capacity and autonomy* were taken from the Varieties of Democracy dataset for 2016.<sup>48</sup>

**Descriptive Analysis**

**Overall Usage**

The data reveal that there was enormous usage of the International IDEA literature between 2006 and 2017. Six hundred fifty-six documents were published and there was a total of 248,441 document downloads from the dataset. The volume of downloads increased significantly over time, as figure 1 demonstrates, peaking in 2010, but with a noticeable decline thereafter. This decline seems to indicate that the literature was being used less frequently. An alternative explanation is that, increasingly, the documents were posted on other websites. For example, at the time of writing, the *Electoral System Design Handbook* could be freely downloaded from external sites, including IFES, Election Observation and Support, GSDRC, and the Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform in Canada.<sup>49</sup> The data from 2017 ended in March of that year.

Figure 1. Total Downloads by Year, 2005–2016



<sup>47</sup> Thomas R. Cook and Amy H. Liu, “Using Linguistic Networks to Explain Strength of Intellectual Property Rights,” *World Development* 87 (2016): 128-138.

<sup>48</sup> Coppedge et al., *V-Dem [Country-Year/Country-Date] Dataset v7*.

<sup>49</sup> The following are the sites: <http://www.eods.eu/library/IDEA.Electoral%20Systems%20Desi>

### ***Substantive Publication Focus***

Table 1 details the number of downloads for the five most frequently downloaded publications. *The Electoral System Design* handbook was by far the most popular publication, with nearly double the downloads of the next most downloaded publication. This English-language volume was especially influential, given that it was translated into ten other languages (Arabic, Burmese, Myanmar, Portuguese, Sinhala, Tamil, Nepali, Spanish, Indonesian, and Thai). It was written by three academics and describes the range of different electoral systems around the world, some criteria for evaluating them, and their likely consequences (see below).

Table 1. Most Downloaded Publications

Publication Title	Downloads
<i>Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook</i>	12,470
<i>Funding of Political Parties and Election Campaigns</i>	5,558
<i>Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers. A Revised Edition.</i>	5,113
<i>Assessing the Quality of Democracy: A Practical Guide</i>	4,341
<i>Democracy and Deep-Rooted Conflict: Options for Negotiators</i>	4,309

Rather than focusing on the popularity of a single title, the number of downloads for publications on a theme provides a better overall view of the demand and supply for online democracy-promotion gray literature. A coding system was deployed by the author by which each publication was coded into one of fifty-two categories, according to its substantive focus. The code categories were developed inductively from the publications' titles, but the concept of the electoral cycle was used to differentiate among possible categories of election-focused materials;<sup>50</sup> however, the substantive focus went beyond this, so the scheme was only partially useful. Publications were coded according to the single category to which they were best suited, although multiple themes may have been covered to some extent in the title.

Figure 2 is a scatterplot mapping the number of downloads for each theme on the x axis, against the number of publications in that theme on the y axis. It demonstrates that publications on the topic of political parties received the greatest number of aggregate downloads, followed by electoral systems, gender, constitutional design, and then conflict. As might be expected, there

---

gn%20EN.pdf; [https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/esd\\_english\\_0.pdf](https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/esd_english_0.pdf); <https://gsdrc.org/document-library/electoral-system-design-the-new-international-idea-handbook/>; and <http://www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca/en-CA/docs/Intermediate/IDEA%20Handbook.pdf> (accessed April 1, 2020).

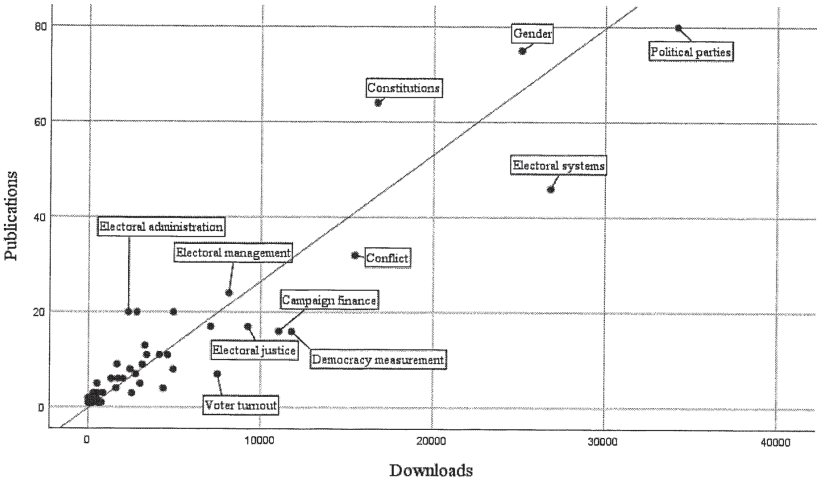
<sup>50</sup> ACE, *Electoral Cycle*, <http://aceproject.org/ero-en/topics/electoral-management/electoral%20cycle.JPG/view> (accessed July 2, 2020).

was a clear correlation between the supply of publications on a topic and the demand (downloads), with an  $r^2$  of 0.861. The line on figure 2 maps the expected number of downloads if demand met supply, according to a linear equation ( $y=55.82+3.76E2*x$ ). There was a relatively low number of downloads of publications on gender, constitutions, and electoral administration—all of which are above the line. However, there was a higher ratio of demand for publications on electoral systems, conflict, democracy measurement, and campaign finance. Some publications were translated into multiple languages, which might have skewed the results. Therefore, an identical analysis was undertaken of the English-only publications. This showed the same trends of demand and supply.

**Organizational Use**

Data were captured on *who* downloads the documents. Responses were translated and coded into categories. Some information was incomplete and had to be discarded. However, data for 241,957 downloads were usable, which was 97.4 percent of the overall dataset. Table 2 demonstrates that the vast majority of downloads were by individuals describing themselves as academics (48.8 percent), with NGOs the next ranked category (15.5 percent). This suggests that, although much of the gray literature developed by International IDEA was designed with practitioners in mind, there has been a huge transfer of knowledge to the academic sector. Searching for selected IDEA publications using Google Scholar helps to illustrate this point. As of June 2020, the first version of the *Electoral System Design* guide was cited 315 times and the second edition 2008 version was cited 551 times. Knowledge transfer to practitioners remains high, however. For example, documents were

Figure 2. Demand and Supply in the Download of Publications



downloaded nearly 25,000 times by government officials around the world. Internationally, academics are more numerous in population than practitioners, NGOs, and INGOs. Moreover, although the category “academic” was selected by many, this likely includes *student* downloads—which could be a high volume given that reading can be downloaded without charge and the material is suitable for teaching material, such as classes on electoral systems which relate to comparative politics. Nonetheless, the analysis shows considerable knowledge transfer from IOs to the academic sector, which was not the primary goal of the publications.

Table 2. Downloads by User Type

User Category	Percentage
Academic	48.8
NGO	15.5
Other	12.0
Government	10.2
International Organization	8.1
Political Party	3.1
Parliament	1.3
Library	1.0

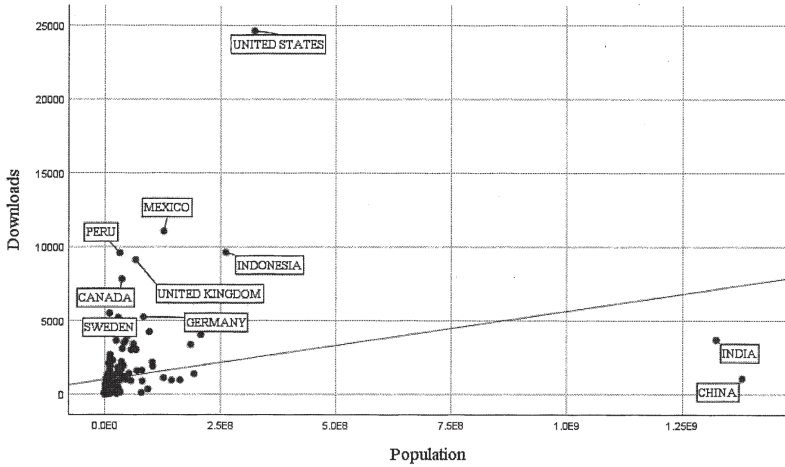
### ***Geographical Distribution***

Downloads were most numerous in the United States, followed by Mexico and Peru. Peru’s relatively high download rate can be explained by the presence of some country-specific publications on Peru. The percentage of downloads in the United States accounted for a tenth of those in the world. It makes sense to account for population size in such estimates because large countries are likely to download documents more frequently, having more people to do so. However, as figure 3 illustrates, the relationship between population and downloads was weak, with a very low  $r^2$  value of 0.070.

### **Multivariate Analysis**

To identify the underlying drivers of the demand for online democracy-promotion materials, correlations were run against the number of downloads per capita and are reported in table 3. The unit of analysis was country, using data on the log of all publication downloads. Table 3 presents data from all countries, but the United States was removed as a robustness check. The U.S. may have a higher level of downloads because, first, since IDEA has U.N. General Assembly observer status, it is possible that when people meet in New York for a U.N. session there is discussion about new IDEA reports. The

Figure 3. Relationship between Downloads and Population



second consideration is that there are a number of international students who are interested in democratic diffusion and write about this for their class papers and theses. This might cause an American academic bump.<sup>51</sup> Removing the United States did not alter the results, however.

The table provides some support for H1, which suggested that internet usage would be an important driver ( $\beta = .222, p < 0.01$ ). There is a small amount of evidence for H2a, that downloads are greater in democracies, but the correlation is not significant. Interestingly, this became significant ( $\beta = .167, p < 0.05$ ) when the United States was removed. A correlation was therefore run against all data using the VDEM Polyarchy measure instead, which revealed a marginal effect ( $\beta = .153, p < 0.05$ ).

Analysis in table 3 runs counter to H3. Having more universities per capita substantially increased the volume of downloads ( $\beta = 519, p < 0.01$ ), but states with high-quality universities were less likely to download the documents.

The correlations between speaking English and downloads were also counter to expectations. The English-speaking index that was constructed was negatively associated with downloads ( $\beta = -.196, p < 0.01$ ). To test for robustness, correlations between downloads and the two separate measures used by Cook and Liu were run. These also demonstrated a strong negative relationship. The analysis, therefore, also ran counter to H4. Finally, there was no evidence to support H5 about the role of EMB capacity and independence.

Multivariate analysis was introduced to better understand the drivers of usage. Table 4 provides an OLS regression with the log of the number of

<sup>51</sup> The author is grateful to a reviewer for these points.



Table 3. Pearson Correlations between Log of County-Level Downloads and Independent Variables

Variable	Correlation with Downloads
Internet usage	.222**
Liberal democracy (VDEM, 2016)	.146
Top 100	-.162
Top 200	-.175*
Top 500	-.225*
Top 1,000	-.275**
Total number of universities	-.437**
Total number of top 1,000 universities per capita	-.068
Total number of universities per capita	.519**
English rating	-.196**
EMB autonomy (VDEM, 2016)	.088
EMB capacity (VDEM, 2016)	.004

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

downloads per capita as the dependent variable. All cases were included, but separate models were run to test whether including the United States had any effect, which it did not.

The level of democracy and EMB autonomy remain insignificant factors. The effect of the internet usage continues to be statistically significant and strong ( $\beta = .346, p < 0.01$ ). The quantity of universities per capita has a strong positive effect, but not the quality<sup>52</sup> of those universities. English proficiency continues to have a strong negative effect ( $\beta = -.239, p < 0.01$ ), but the capacity of the EMB ( $\beta = -.629, p < 0.01$ ) has the strongest impact.

Overall, the results provide support for H1, that internet access is an important determinant in shaping access to gray literature—and that lack of internet access therefore remains a barrier to the spread and usage of gray literature, in general. Only a small amount of evidence was provided to support H2, that democracy is important. There was no evidence for H5a, that EMB autonomy is important.

There was strong evidence to disprove H3, H4, and H5b, which generates important findings. Contrary to H4, downloads were higher where English proficiency was lower, even though roughly half (51.2 percent) of the documents were in English. This might be because IDEA successfully

<sup>52</sup> The number of top one thousand universities per capita.

Table 4. OLS Regression with Log of Country-Level Downloads as the Dependent Variable

	Standardized Beta	Standard Error
Internet usage	.346**	.003
Liberal democracy	.193	.648
Number of universities per capita	.581**	7,021.862
Quality of universities	-.065	.014
English proficiency rating	-.239**	.091
EMB autonomy	.037	.095
EMB capacity	-.629**	.091
Constant	-3.959	.200
R2	.497	
N (countries)	211	

\* Significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\* Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

translated a sufficiently high volume of these documents, preventing the lack of English proficiency from becoming a problem.<sup>53</sup> Language, therefore, should not be ruled out as a barrier altogether, but there was no evidence to support the initial hypothesis. A correlation between democracy and English proficiency may partially explain this.

Contrary to H3, downloads were more numerous where the *number* of universities was high, but not where their quality was high. It already has been noted that there was a large informational transfer to the academic sector. Resourcing might be one explanation for why the lower-ranked universities are downloading more. The IDEA materials were all free and openly accessible, whereas academic books and articles are usually behind paywalls. A positive effect of the gray literature, therefore, might plausibly have been to boost knowledge in less economically developed states.

Contrary to H5b, downloads were higher where EMB capacity was lower. One positive lesson that we could take from this initial analysis for democracy promotion is that the literature was being used by EMBs most in need of informational support because they lacked the capacity to develop the data in-house. This suggests that the provision of gray literature by international organizations is an important democracy-promotion tool.

---

<sup>53</sup> IDEA's working practice was to translate when this was initiated and done by end users, when it was agreed to be part of the original package/design (subject to budget), or it was translated post-facto by IDEA based on the popularity of the product. Source: Email correspondence with IDEA staff, June 2021. The vast majority (71.3 percent) of downloads were English-language documents.

## The Effects of Gray Literature

Did the literature help democratization? Further research was undertaken to provide a detailed examination of the impact and use of one document by policy makers through process-tracing techniques. Process tracing involves the “systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analyzed in light of research,”<sup>54</sup> which would include qualitative materials. It is suggested by Tasha Fairfield and Andrew Chapman that this should involve the development of “clearly specified, mutually exclusive hypotheses”<sup>55</sup> at the start of the study. The examination of these hypotheses against the evidence can enable carefully reasoned inferences and generalizations. Hence, it can be considered that:

- H6a: Gray literature downloads were influential in bringing about policy change, which supported democratization.
- H6b: Gray literature played no role in bringing about policy change, which supported democratization.

Thus, this essay now focuses on the case study of the *Electoral System Handbook*. Interviews and correspondence were undertaken with the publication’s authors to identify the effects of the handbook from their personal experience. These interviews were then triangulated against other sources, including interviews with members of the international electoral assistance community and practitioners from electoral management bodies.<sup>56</sup> The *Electoral System Handbook* is the document that was most frequently downloaded. Therefore, if the gray literature was to have any impact, it most likely would have done so by means of this text.

The handbook was one of the earliest publications of International IDEA. It was the brainchild of Andrew Reynolds, who joined the organization in 1996 as a post-doctoral appointment shortly following the completion of his Ph.D. at the University of California. International IDEA had been founded only recently and the instructions given were relatively light. Reynolds was asked to “just do something” that he thought would be the most useful resource for

---

<sup>54</sup> David Collier, “Understanding Process Tracing,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 44, no. 4 (2011): 823.

<sup>55</sup> Tasha Fairfield and Andrew E. Chapman, “Explicit Bayesian Analysis for Process Tracing: Guidelines, Opportunities, and Caveats,” *Political Analysis* 25, no. 3 (2017): 379.

<sup>56</sup> Interviews with the authors were: a teleconferencing interview with Andrew Reynolds, May 20, 2020; an email exchange with Benjamin Reilly, June 2, 2020; and an interview of a former IDEA official in February 2018. In addition, ten semi-structured interviews were undertaken with past or present senior members of international organizations during 2017 and 2018 as part of a broader project on the work that international electoral organizations undertake (see James, *Comparative Electoral Management*, chapter 8). Names and organizations have been anonymized.

the organization. He therefore developed a voter turnout website and started to work on the handbook because “there was a huge gap—there was simply no handbook or cookbook with a menu of options.” Benjamin Reilly later joined Reynolds on the project. The handbook was first published in hardcopy format, with copies circulated without prior request, but later posted online for download.

An informational approach was a key pillar of the International IDEA strategy. Although there was a variety of organizations that were providing electoral support, often with on-the-ground logistics, International IDEA took a different approach by being

not so hands-on in countries, but the niche that International IDEA came into at that time—the mid-’90s—was this idea of empowering practitioners through applied research information at your fingertips. So, it was very much a way of thinking that with these handbooks, websites, and so forth, you would be able as an election practitioner to directly access prepared knowledge on how to run elections.<sup>57</sup>

According to another official, “some of the books were given away, but there was equally some attempt almost to sell books as a commercial publisher.”<sup>58</sup> The development of the internet meant that hopes of an income stream dissipated:

There’s now a recognition that knowledge resources and databases are produced as global public goods. The organization exists in order to disseminate stuff to people involved in processes of democratic change.<sup>59</sup>

The handbook would be used in a variety of settings. It would become key material as part of a training course for electoral officials called BRIDGE, which was offered on electoral systems 127 times between 2001 and 2017.<sup>60</sup> It also would be embedded in academic courses by virtue of being freely accessible, as suggested by the high usage within universities shown in table 2.

---

<sup>57</sup> Former/current employee of international organization(s), interview by author, online interview, February 23, 2018.

<sup>58</sup> Former/current employee of international organization(s), interview by author, online interview, March 1, 2018.

<sup>59</sup> Former/current employee of international organization(s), interview by author, online interview, March 1, 2018.

<sup>60</sup> BRIDGE, *BRIDGE Statistics Summary*, <https://www.bridge-project.org/statistics/> (accessed June 1, 2020).

The handbook would lead to invitations for both Reynolds and Reilly to advise actors around the world in the design of an electoral system. Reynolds was invited to be an advisor in over thirty countries between 1995 and 2018, where he was employed by organizations including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), as well as by national electoral management bodies. Reilly was invited to Asia (Indonesia and Kyrgyzstan), Africa (Senegal and Namibia), and the Middle East (Lebanon). Importantly, the handbook was used in all of these missions. “Every time I go, I take the handbook,” said Reynolds. The handbook would then be translated, if necessary, and made available to those on the ground. It was the basis for the introduction to different electoral systems. The handbook took on a cult status. Reynolds recalled, “I remember being in Omar, Jordan—and there was literally a line of people out of the door asking [me] to sign it.”<sup>61</sup>

There are specific cases in which the handbook was instrumental to change. For example, in 2000, Reynolds was contracted to advise the Guyana parliamentary oversight committee on electoral system reform, after being proposed by the U.S.-based NDI. There had been violence following the 1997 general elections, but a peace accord was brokered which involved constitutional reform. A Constitutional Reform Commission had been established in 1999.<sup>62</sup> Reynolds produced a report, wrote several clarifying documents, and met with stakeholders in Georgetown. His report presented the options for reform, drawing from the handbook.<sup>63</sup> The oversight committee asked him to make proposals which would maintain proportionality, establish districts, and add gender equity. Although he recognized that there was little support for gender equity among some politicians, in his report to the parliament, Reynolds recommended that it adopted either a 50 percent ratio or a 33 percent ratio, based on the handbook. He anticipated that both percentages would be declined, but the latter was adopted since it was lower in value, and became law: “I just pulled out a paragraph from the handbook and they didn’t question it further. I had no power, but as an ‘international official’ and ‘expert’ the handbook had some weight.”<sup>64</sup>

The handbook also was heavily cited in a government report in Tonga, published in 2009.<sup>65</sup> A commission had been established to make

---

<sup>61</sup> Andrew Reynolds, teleconference interview by author, May 20, 2020.

<sup>62</sup> Arif Bulkan, “Democracy in Disguise: Assessing the Reforms to the Fundamental Rights Provisions in Guyana,” *Georgia Journal of International and Comparative Law* 32, no. 3 (2004): 613-655.

<sup>63</sup> OSCR, *Fourth Report on the Oversight Committee on Constitutional Reform* (Georgetown, Guyana: Georgetown Oversight Committee on Constitutional Reform, 2000).

<sup>64</sup> Reynolds, teleconference interview by author.

<sup>65</sup> CEC, *The Constitutional and Electoral Reform Commission’s Final Report* (Nuku’alofa, Tonga: Constitutional and Electoral Commission, 2009).

recommendations on constitutional and electoral reform, following a prodemocracy movement that sought to reduce the powers of the monarch. The report republished three pages of the handbook that defined the Single Transferrable Vote electoral system and recommended that it “is used as the fairest and most representative system of voting.”<sup>66</sup> Only eighteen of the eighty-two recommendations were accepted without amendments and nineteen were rejected outright. The electoral system proposal was not adopted—a mixed member system was used instead.<sup>67</sup> In this case, it was the hardcopy handbook that was used rather than the electronic version. Reilly explained that “my sense is that there is now so much out there online that it can often be more of a hindrance than a help, overwhelming electoral reformers with information.”<sup>68</sup>

There also were anecdotal cases of influence, in which the authors were approached while in their home universities. Reynolds explained,

Someone from Liberia once phoned up and asked how big the Liberian parliament should be—I looked at the Matthew Shugart formulae which predicts the size of assemblies, which was found in the handbook. So I pulled down the handbook and said that I suppose in theory that we could plug the numbers of voting age population, literacy rates and working age population into the algorithm. I took the book and I did that...and that’s how big the Liberian parliament is.<sup>69</sup>

More broadly, the handbook had an agenda-setting and awareness-raising power. It was not designed to foster a single preferred system, “but it is agenda-setting for outlining the choices.”<sup>70</sup> It therefore helped to establish the decision-tree that countries needed to consider. It would also bring comparative and global knowledge where there was little knowledge outside parochial settings. Reynolds explained:

I was always stunned at the insular nature of electoral administrators and party people who might know little of electoral systems over the border. Everyone thinks that they are unique and no one else has done what they are doing. The handbook gave evidence of similar and different experiences.<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>67</sup> I. C. Campbell, “The Nettle Grasped,” *Journal of Pacific History* 47, no. 2 (2012): 211-225.

<sup>68</sup> Benjamin Reilly, email exchange with author, June 2, 2020.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Reynolds, teleconference interview by author.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

Was it Reynolds and Reilly’s broader scholarship, rather than the handbook, that was important in achieving the invitations to be experts as well as policy change? Both men subsequently authored monographs and journal articles on electoral system design. Invitations were previously extended, however, while they were employed at International IDEA. As Reynolds observed, the handbook gave the authors further gravitas to take forward the message:

The handbook helped. I was associated with that and it opened doors—and I was often introduced as one of the authors of the handbook. I was often introduced as a leading world expert on electoral systems, and they would hold up the handbook and say “this is proof!” So, it was a powerful door-opener.<sup>72</sup>

Yet, the handbook was not always a positive force for democratization. Political leaders and parties often used the handbook to work out the outcome that would suit them—and then pick the system accordingly. “They are not necessarily interested in the altruistic niceties of electoral system design,” Reynolds explained.<sup>73</sup> In cases in which a democratic system was not the key goal for decision makers, advisors were not welcome. For example, following the Arab Spring and the collapse of the Mubarak regime in Egypt, there was a need for a new constitution, but expert advisors were not welcome:

The military had absolutely no interest in thinking about this at all and wouldn’t let us get in. I was sent by the U.S. National Security Council and Mike McFaul, who was one step away from Obama, couldn’t get me in, despite all the foreign aid the U.S. was providing.<sup>74</sup>

However, in other cases, the handbook could help civil society and opposition groups identify the mechanisms that would assist them to realize their goals. “I was in a lot of cases where the groups did not know what they should be fighting for,” Reynolds said.<sup>75</sup>

Overall, there is good evidence that, in support of H6a, gray literature downloads were influential in bringing about policy change which supported democratization, but this was conditional on circumstances. From the download data, the case study, and the prior literature discussed, the essay now inductively proposes a theory of how gray literature could promote democracy by understanding the dissemination pathways, accelerants, and blockages (figure 4).

---

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

Gray literature can be published by democracy promoters independently or in collaboration with academics (stage 1). Information can reach users directly via download (stage 2), but there will be some demand accelerants. The statistical analysis above shows that low EMB capacity causes EMBs to use the resources. The open-access nature of the literature means that it also will be used by the academic sector rather than expensive paywalled materials, or to complement them. The case study shows that gray literature will also reach audiences through practitioner courses and invitations for the authors to provide advice or to speak at events. In the case study above, it was the authors of the publication who were involved but it also could have been the publishing organization. Passively making information available, however, often is an insufficient step toward building readership. There will therefore usually be a need for proactive promotion, as the case study reveals. This could include writing directly to policy makers, submission of evidence to parliamentary committees, or potentially the use of social media (stage 2). Additionally, there are clear windows of opportunity that arise when constitutional commissions are established to evaluate options for reform. At this point, entrepreneurial organizations are given the chance to submit evidence or propose an expert, which can lead to the use of gray literature. The ability of organizations such as the U.N., NDI, and IDEA to promote gray literature is therefore important through their organizational reputations, resource capacity to identify strategic opportunities, or broad political back-channeling.

There are various barriers to gray literature usage (stage 3). The analysis in this essay of the download data suggests that internet access has been important. Language could be one barrier, but this is not supported by the quantitative evidence provided above. The case study indicates how the strategies of actors is important, too. External literature on change in electoral institutions also points to how the incumbent's partisan interests shape policy blockages, but so can other act-contingent considerations.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, there is a finite limitation on policy makers' time, which prevents them from taking what they have learned and reading further—as well as political limitations on their power. Consequently, dissemination may never occur; indeed, there will be no democracy promotion because of these barriers.

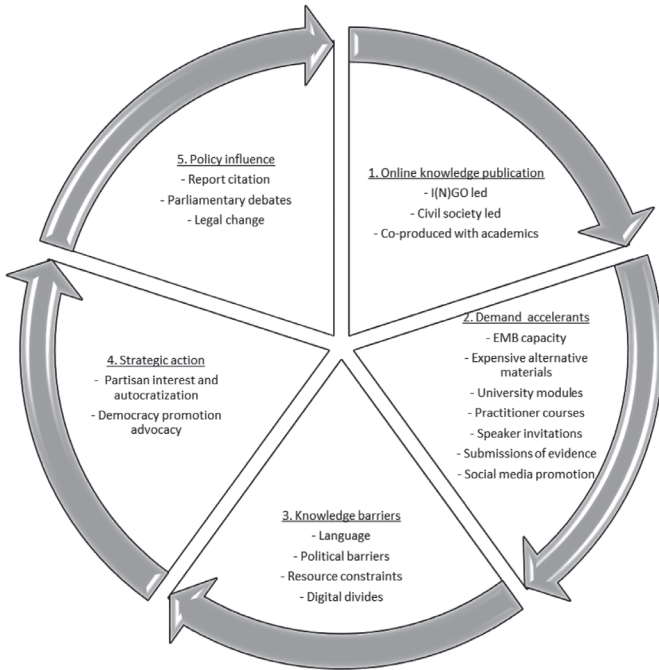
If documents are used to change the actions of actors (stage 4), it might be in a way that *adversely* affects democracy. The case study suggests that autocrats might consult gray literature to locate the institutions that will maximize their power and promote them. Yet, there also will be occasions in

---

<sup>76</sup> Kenneth Benoit, "Models of Electoral System Change," *Electoral Studies* 23, no. 3 (2004): 363-389; André Blais, *To Keep or to Change First Past the Post? The Politics of Electoral Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Toby S. James, *Elite Statecraft and Election Administration: Bending the Rules of the Game* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); and Alan Renwick, *The Politics of Electoral Reform: Changing the Rules of Democracy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).



Figure 4. Information Pathways and Barriers to Democracy Promotion



which they may consider that their interests are not adversely affected and so they will continue to implement reform. Additionally, members of civil society seek to be equipped with new knowledge that will help them to formulate and advance their demands. Democracy promotion may therefore occur through the citation of gray literature in parliamentary and related reports and eventually in the passage of new legislation in stage 5.

## Conclusions

There have been enormous volumes of resources and political will invested in democracy promotion around the world since the middle of the twentieth century. This accelerated in the post-Cold War period. One major plank of democracy promotion was the use of gray literature, which suddenly became much easier to diffuse following the widespread availability of the internet. This essay has charted this development for the first time by undertaking the first empirical analysis. The study indicates that there has been a global diffusion of gray literature produced by international organizations. The analysis suggests that the resources have been used by electoral management bodies that lack capacity, as well as by universities worldwide that may have lacked educational

and research resources. This study is therefore an important advance in the understanding of how the international community has promoted democracy—and how this has changed over time. It shows the importance of digital network connections. The existing literature on electoral governance has focused on the physical interactions among actors and personnel across national EMBs, members of the international community, and other stakeholders.<sup>77</sup> This focus on digital gray literature offers opportunities to consider the nature of informational networks in future research.

At the same time, the research focuses attention on the barriers to informational policy transfer. Actors cannot simply upload information and wait for policies to change. Internet access seems to remain one barrier—a well-documented problem in the literature on digital divides—bringing an underestimated issue in the democracy promotion literature to the fore. The research also reveals that the use of even the most widely read and downloaded information is contingent upon political factors. The case study shows a “successful” outcome whereby the information helped to inform stakeholders about the range of options available for democratic design; however, there will be many cases of nonuse of the materials. As was noted, an increasing volume of information in some subject areas may make it difficult for electoral reformers to identify the most reliable and accurate material in an age of misinformation. I(N)GOs, therefore, play a vital role in supporting the transmission of the information to polities through the deployment of experts, quality assurance, and proactive lobbying. Democracy cannot be promoted by information alone—it requires financial and political support, but the strategic deployment of information can help. The model presented also may broadly apply to the use of gray literature in other policy areas.

---

<sup>77</sup> James, *Comparative Electoral Management*.