

## Harmony and resilience: US democracy promotion's basic premises

Poppe, Annika Elena

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

Hessische Stiftung Friedens- und Konfliktforschung (HSFK)

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Poppe, A. E. (2019). Harmony and resilience: US democracy promotion's basic premises. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isafpa/ory017>

### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

# Harmony and Resilience: US Democracy Promotion's Basic Premises

ANNIKA ELENA POPPE   
Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF)

Scholarship on US foreign policy regularly claims that US democracy promotion policy is informed by a coherent and harmonious set of basic premises. In this article, I first examine the validity of this claim for US post-Cold War administrations. I find operational in US foreign policy rhetoric three stable premises: that democracy is a universal (ly aspired to) principle, that external democracy promoters are legitimately involving themselves in another country's political affairs, and that this policy endeavor is in the best interest of all involved stakeholders. Following theoretical expectations that culture and cultural aspects are relatively stable and adaptable entities and promote stability in behavior, I then pursue the question of how these premises have fared in an environment particularly challenging to their validity, namely in the case of US democracy promotion in Egypt. I show how, even in light of contradictory evidence, the basic premises remain resilient and function as a discursive structure that enables and constrains policy options.

## Introduction

It has often been argued that a very significant influence on US democracy promotion policy is a powerful and compelling US national identity and a specific set of coherent and harmonious premises and expectations shaped by this identity.<sup>1</sup> It has further been speculated that these premises are so deeply entrenched and relevant that, against many odds and pressures for significant adjustments, US democracy promotion policy has been characterized by continuity rather than by change since

---

Dr. Annika Elena Poppe is a project director and senior researcher at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) <https://www.hsfk.de/en/staff/employees/annika-elena-poppe/>. Her research focuses on international democracy promotion, US foreign policy, and the global phenomenon of closing civic spaces. She is the coordinator of the German research network "External Democracy Promotion" (EDP) <https://www.external-democracy-promotion.eu/>, a member of the International Consortium on Closing Civic Spaces (iCon) hosted by CSIS <https://www.csis.org/programs/international-consortium-closing-civic-space-icon>, and worked as a consultant for the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) in 2016–2017. Recent publications include "The Contested Spaces of Civil Society in a Plural World: Norm Contestation in the Debate about Restrictions on International Civil Society Support" (*Contemporary Politics* 2017, with J. Wolff); "Recalibrating the Interest-Values-Nexus: US Democracy Promotion in the Middle East" (*Orient* 2017); and "The Nuclear Taboo, Battlestar Galactica, and the Real World. Illustrations from a Science-Fiction Universe" (*Security Dialogue* 2016, with M. Fey and C. Rauch).

*Author's note:* This article draws on empirical research conducted for my dissertation (forthcoming in the Routledge US Foreign Policy Series). An earlier version was presented at the 57th Annual Convention of the International Studies Association (ISA), March 16–19, 2016, in Atlanta. I would like to thank Nicolas Bouchet, Jakob Tolstrup, and Jonas Wolff, as well as the anonymous reviewers for valuable comments and suggestions. I would also like to acknowledge and thank the German National Academic Foundation for supporting my research with a dissertation scholarship, as well as the Leibniz Association, whose sponsorship of the German research network "External Democracy Promotion" (EDP) has allowed me to finish work on this article.

<sup>1</sup>For example, Campbell 1992; Monten 2005; Peceny 1999; Smith 2007.

the ending of the Cold War (e.g., Bouchet 2011; Carothers 2013). In this article, I set out to empirically trace the theoretical expectation that deeply entrenched basic premises are indeed robust and flexible in light of severe challenges to their validity. The difficult case of US democracy promotion policy in Egypt under the Bush and Obama administrations serves as an example, and I show how the basic premises were manifested and reproduced rhetorically. I argue that their resilience might thus plausibly account for the stability in US post-Cold War foreign policy.

This endeavor is empirically intriguing as it is difficult to conceive of how a largely optimistic set of premises could survive even passably intact the challenge ground of a problem-beset democracy promotion case such as Egypt. It is also theoretically relevant as it contributes to our understanding of the nexus between policymakers' assumptions and the policy and behavior they shape. Illuminating the robustness and flexibility of basic premises thus advances our understanding about the interaction between agency and structure in the sense of Giddens' structuration theory (1986). The basic premises, according to my argument, function as a normative structure that enables and restrains policymaking, while at the same time, this structure is reproduced and, potentially, changed by the agents responsible for foreign policy making. In this sense, then, the analysis also aims at assessing the flexibility and adaptability of the basic premises as the fundamental structure upon which agents act.

This article thus investigates the resilience<sup>2</sup> of basic premises when rhetoric is faced with reality and the implementation of policy. The three robust premises that I identify are: (1) democracy is a universal(ly aspired to) value, (2) external actors can and should support democratization, and (3) all good things go together. The empirical analysis is guided by this question: How do policymakers defend the premises against political reality, adjust and adapt them when convenient, and possibly even justify discarding them altogether when confronted with on-the-ground policy choices? The article focuses on the manifestation and flexibility of democracy promotion's basic premises in official statements by the Bush and Obama administrations and discusses these within the challenging and changing political context characterizing US democracy promotion policy in Egypt.

In a first step, I lay out what these basic premises of US democracy promotion actually are, theoretically and empirically. This is an important step, since, so far, the relevance of a specific mindset or of a specific "American culture" for democracy promotion policy is usually taken for granted, whereas a systematic and empirical analysis of the shape and content of this supposedly influential factor is still missing. In this section, I also consider from where challenges to the premises' validity should be expected. Secondly, I briefly lay out the rationale for choosing Egypt as a relevant case of US democracy promotion for my research question and outline the context of the bilateral relationship. In the main part of this paper, I then present the results of my empirical analysis of the basic premises' resilience in US policy toward Egypt under the Bush and Obama governments. Finally, I discuss these results' implications for US foreign policy.

## The Basic Premises of US Democracy Promotion after the Ending of the Cold War

### *The Theoretical Perspective*

Although there is a consensus among constructivist-leaning scholarship that culture—a "notoriously slippery concept" (Kowert 1999, 4)—has an impact on the formulation and implementation of foreign policy (e.g., Adler 2013), still relatively little is known about it. This article seeks to shed some light on this "cultural angle"

<sup>2</sup> I consider premises to be "resilient" if they are regularly reproduced in the face of challenges to their validity, their core remaining robust while still retaining some flexibility and adaptability to changing contexts. "Resilience" is thus not a term used in any specific theoretical sense.

in foreign policy by looking at language—and, in focusing on US democracy promotion, has chosen an area in which the relevance of deeply entrenched concepts, beliefs, and premises for crafting policy has regularly been presumed<sup>3</sup> but never, to my knowledge, been systematically assessed. On the other hand, however, there is no doubt that US democracy promotion rhetoric has rarely matched US democracy promotion practice “on the ground,” and charges of “double standards” and “cheap talk” are frequently articulated. Even those scholars emphasizing the significance of culture for democracy promotion policy will admit without hesitation that there is a large gap between rhetoric and implementation.<sup>4</sup> This article seeks to make better sense of this puzzling observation.

The projection of liberal values abroad and thus of promoting freedom and democracy have long been considered to be essential elements of US national identity and political culture. According to Peceny (1999, 217), “no phrase better captures the essence of America’s distinctive identity as a world power” than the label “leader of the free world,” and Monten (2005, 123) explains that “American national identity is inextricably linked with the liberal-exceptionalism premise of the United States as an agent of democratic change, that is, a promoter of democracy” (see also Campbell 1992; Rowley, Weldes 2012). While this does not mean that all foreign policy behavior is directed toward fulfilling this mission—far from it—what is perceived as national identity restricts the range of what is acceptable in foreign policy and, at the very least, compels policymakers to present their policies in a particular way.

What unites all of the different approaches to cultural and identity-related aspects—beliefs, attitudes, schemas, etc.—is the assumption that they are relatively stable and that change does not come easily. “[C]ulture promotes continuity in behavior,” according to Duffield (1999, 772), or, as Blyth (2013, 211) laconically notes, “[m]ere facts will (sometimes) not be allowed to get in the way of a good ideology.” If this is true, stability in the basic premises could plausibly account for the relative and quite unexpected stability of the overall post–Cold War policy of US democracy promotion (e.g., Bouchet 2011; Carothers 2013). The literature identifies numerous mechanisms on the individual and collective level for this phenomenon, among them the essential need to uphold central beliefs, particularly those upon which entire belief systems rest and “especially normative and emotional components” (Duffield 1999, 770).<sup>5</sup> It is, however, debated how strong an effect culture has on policy formulation and implementation—and under which circumstances. One argument assumes that culture is “not fixed nor unitary but in constant flux and need of reproduction” in order to remain valid and produce normalization effects and, thus, forms a constant but necessary background noise (Rowley, Weldes 2012, 183; Campbell 1992). Another argument suggests that culture becomes relevant predominantly in times of crises, when uncertainty and ambiguity reign and people turn to institutions and traditions they know well (Duffield 1999, 777; Legro 2000, 430).

Assessing the basic premises of democracy promotion, this article looks at a specific segment of US political culture. These premises have turned out to be a mixed lot, some expressing normative ideas, while others present causal beliefs, simple experience-based observations, or a mixture of these. They are thus not easily matched with any of the many concepts that the theoretical literature offers. Similar to Legro’s “collective ideas,” the basic premises considered here refer to “concepts or beliefs held by groups (i.e., states),” they “are social and holistic [and] not simply

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Desch, 2008; Goldsmith, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> I would, however, argue that talk is rarely cheap when it comes to leaders of states, particularly when accountability is high and, thus, a political leader’s actions are measured (also) against their rhetoric, as is the case especially (but not exclusively) in democracies.

<sup>5</sup> See also Lebow, 1981, 103–15, 200–5; Legro, 2000, 424–29.

individual conceptions that are shared or added together,” and they are “typically embodied in symbols, discourse, and institutions” (Legro 2000, 420)—of which the sphere of public discourse is most relevant for my research. My understanding of the basic premises of democracy promotion, further, is that they are collectively held assumptions expressed through individuals (not exclusively) at the forefront of policymaking. Articulating and reiterating these premises is a necessary element of cultural reproduction. Drawing upon a shared cultural background and expectations also serves to legitimize and justify policies, and, simultaneously, catering to an audience’s expectations can rally support for policies. Or, to address this assumption from a higher level of abstraction, “identities are concurrently both a product of and the justification for foreign policy” (Hassan 2013, 50; Quinn 2010, 24).

From this perspective, language is the “mechanism for the construction of social reality” and is not merely a vehicle and mirror of political thinking; it constitutes a form of acting in its own right and thus merits attention.<sup>6</sup> The language one uses defines the scope of policy options that one considers effective and appropriate. More fundamentally, ideas and beliefs—expressed through language—while not *determining* policy, have the function of *enabling*, *shaping*, and *constraining* policymaking as they limit the range of what makes sense and what is appropriate in any given case—an assumption going back to Giddens’s theory of structuration (1986<sup>7</sup>; Quinn 2010, 26). My argument is that the basic premises function as a resilient (discursive) structure in this way and that democracy promotion scholarship needs to pay more attention to this structure’s influence.

Following the argument that agency and structure are mutually constitutive, the assumption here is that a rhetorical structure is deeply entrenched and thus significant for policy *beyond* rhetoric if it remains intact—ergo upheld firmly by political actors—despite regular, heavy contestation and failure in practice. If this is the case, the gap between rhetoric and implemented policy is particularly high and can itself become a point of contention. In principle it should be noted, however, that dialogue, praise, or exhortation—all “just” rhetoric—are widely acknowledged forms of democracy promotion in their own right. From the perspective of prodemocracy actors, blatant contradictions between rhetorical practice and policy implementation, as lamentable as they are, can be read as a sign that a strong prodemocracy structure is still in place and exerting—even if limited—influence on policymaking. In the following, then, I examine the shape of this structure and lay out how it has been upheld under adverse conditions.

### *The Empirical Perspective*

What are the basic premises informing post–Cold War US democracy promotion policy? In order to answer this question, I first searched the existing corpus of literature on US democracy promotion for recurring themes and assumptions and found five premises regularly referred to as operational in US democracy promotion policy. In a second step, I operationalized these premises and conducted a thorough analysis of post–Cold War US foreign policy texts.<sup>8</sup> Three of these five

<sup>6</sup> Adler 2013, 125; Rowley, Weldes 2012, 185.

<sup>7</sup> Just as ideas and material factors are mutually constitutive from a constructivist-inspired theoretical angle, according to Giddens (1986) so are agency and environment (often referred to as “structure”). His theory of structuration holds that the study of social systems should be conducted by giving equal weight to the analysis of structure and agents.

<sup>8</sup> I conducted a content analysis with the help of the software MAXQDA on a sample of 105 key foreign policy documents and speeches by the respective presidents and the secretaries of state for the Clinton, Bush, and Obama governments (thirty-five texts for each presidency). Starting out from what state-of-the-art-literature generally assumes to be key assumptions, I developed a category system and a codebook based upon these premises (according to their different variations, their opposite assumptions, and the nuances in-between), as well as on the basis of a pilot study. The assignment of specific codes to all relevant text passages allowed me to quantitatively as well as qualitatively assess whether or not and how premises remained stable or changed over time.

literature-derived premises came out as salient and robust indeed,<sup>9</sup> affirming the often-voiced claim that US democracy promotion policy is informed by a coherent and harmonious set of basic premises. As regards key foreign policy documents and speeches, all three full-term post-Cold War presidencies—Clinton, Bush, and Obama—have firmly subscribed to the assumptions that

- (1) democracy is a universal (ly aspired to) value;
- (2) external actors can and should support democratization; and
- (3) all good things go together.

(1) That democracy is a universal value—often framed as an entitlement or as a right—and that all human beings, when given a choice, opt for democracy as the best form of government is a basically unquestioned assertion among the US foreign policy elite, as the analysis shows.<sup>10</sup> There is a discernible trend under the Bush and particularly the Obama governments to rhetorically allow for more plurality in the way democracy develops in other countries. However, the regular falling back on emphasizing “democratic essentials” and “core principles” attests to rather strict limitations to what is still accepted as democracy. If one follows the first assumption, (2) an “imposition” of democracy on anyone becomes, conceptually, an impossibility. Consequently, not a single statement by either government puts a (potential) limit on the normative appropriateness of promoting democracy. That democratization from abroad can, under specific circumstances, be difficult is sometimes acknowledged, but overall strong reaffirmations of externals’ fundamental ability to bring about political change by far outweigh the occasionally articulated doubt.<sup>11</sup>

(3) The assumption that all good things go together—sometimes referred to as the unity-of-goodness belief by scholars (Bouchet 2013, 159)—considers democracy promotion to produce multiple benefits for all those involved in terms of advancing interests as well as values. While it satisfies demands of acting for the individual as well as for the global “good,” and as it can follow an altruistic impulse or might be owed to religious or secular commands, democracy promotion is easily embraced by political actors with different backgrounds, who often regard it as a panacea: when democracy gains (a stronger) hold, the respective country and the external promoter benefit from enhanced economic development as well as strengthened security and stability. And, above all, the spread of democracy supposedly leads to peace.<sup>12</sup> Democracy promotion is thus simultaneously *value* promotion and *interest* promotion—from the perspective of “donors” as well as “recipients.”<sup>13</sup> That democracy promotion entails a great number of positive developments is an “instinctive faith” (Carothers 2009, 7) held by US policymakers. In my analysis of the post-Cold War administrations, it is indeed noteworthy that—despite the occasional concession to short-term trade-offs—this premise stands largely unshaken.

These basic premises of US democracy promotion may appear simplistic and crude upon first glance, and, to a certain extent, they are. Two things need to be considered: On the one hand, basic premises operational in the back of policy-makers’ minds are, necessarily, simple and *basic* as their function is to help structure the world and give orientation for adequate responses. On the other hand,

<sup>9</sup>The other two premises the literature considers relevant were either not or not consistently articulated in actual foreign policy texts: (1) that democratization requires no preconditions and is a relatively smooth process was an assumption only occasionally articulated while the opposite claim was similarly often voiced, and (2) the premise that democratization is a struggle between good and bad resonated strongly in the analysis of general foreign policy texts but was mostly adapted, mitigated, or entirely absent when US policy addressed specific cases of democracy promotion.

<sup>10</sup>See also Bridoux, Kurki 2014, 65; Carothers 2009, 7; Monten 2005, 123; Quinn 2010, 2; Smith 2007, 127.

<sup>11</sup>See also Monten 2005, 114; Peceny 1999.

<sup>12</sup>It should be noted that concepts such as “democracy,” “peace,” and “stability” are frequently employed by policy-makers without further definition or explanation and often constitute ambiguous political goals.

<sup>13</sup>See also Bridoux, Kurki 2014, 38; Desch 2008, 21–22; Peceny 1999, 23–26; and Quinn 2010, 146.

these premises, as they find reflection in language, do often come in the form of more elaborate and sophisticated arguments. As my analysis shows, in any case, US policymakers in the post-Cold War era have refrained from publicly casting doubt upon their validity. The continuous affirmation and reproduction of the basic premises does, of course, not imply that policymakers also always *act* according to them and neither that they necessarily describe personally held beliefs, although they often do (Peceny 1999).

#### *Challenges to the Basic Premises*<sup>14</sup>

The identified premises are informed by a specific contemporary reading of US liberalism and have, in theory as well as in practice, frequently been challenged. And while the liberal “honeymoon phase” of the 1990s may have subdued controversial issues and policy problems, the more recent “backlash” to democracy (promotion) and the shrinking space for civil society globally have brought them into sharper relief (Carothers 2010; Poppe, Wolff 2017). In terms of theoretical and normative arguments, critics have pointed out the triumphalist nature of this set of assumptions (Smith 2007, 54–55) and have contrasted their rooting in a “liberalism of imposition” with the implications of a “liberalism of restraint” (Sørensen 2011). Some have even warned against this vindicationist interpretation of US liberalism as containing the seeds of imperial and illiberal behavior (e.g., Desch 2008).

Perhaps more difficult to contend with are the empirical challenges to the validity of the basic premises of US democracy promotion, since for policymakers they are much harder to explain—or to ignore. Probably the most often voiced criticism is, in political practice, the regular downgrading of democracy promotion as a goal when it gets into conflict with other interests, as it has done regularly “for the sake of useful friendships with autocratic governments” long before the end of the Cold War (Carothers 2013, 206). Similarly casting doubt on the validity of the third premise of all good things going together is the observation that democratization contains a high potential for conflict, especially but not only when relevant local actors are opposed to it and particularly during the initial phases of democratization (Mansfield, Snyder 1995), or that the US concept of democracy has always privileged political liberty over socioeconomic equality and that, indeed, “the latter has been consistently viewed as a threat to the former” (Hook 2002, 126). Moreover, as others have pointed out, it is only long-term convergence between the goal of democracy promotion and other goals that can be hoped for, whereas living with trade-offs in the short term is the norm (McFaul 2007, 224).

Casting doubt on the validity of the second premise, it has become obvious “that even a hegemon such as the United States in the 1990s could do little directly to drive democratization abroad” (Bouchet 2013, 171). And, maybe most difficult to come to terms with, not only governments but sometimes a large number of a country’s citizens as well reject any democracy support by the United States, putting into doubt the assumption that the US version of democracy is universal and aspired to everywhere (Bridoux, Kurki 2014, 105).

In sum, then, the harmonious set of basic premises somehow needs to accommodate the realization that “[t]ransforming the world through the creation of new democracies proved much harder to accomplish in practice than intellectual advocates of democratizing crusades had anticipated” (Brazinsky 2011, 262). As will be seen in the following section, many of these counterclaims and arguments have indeed severely complicated US democracy promotion efforts in Egypt.

<sup>14</sup> In this section particularly, but also throughout the remainder of the article, I often refer to criticism of US democracy promotion’s basic premises but also of specific political decisions. The criticism I here summarize comes from diverse sources, including scholars (particularly in this section), political commentators, and reporters at press conferences—domestic as well as international.

## US Policy Toward Egypt as a Challenging Case for Basic Premise Survival

While it might be easy to champion a coherent and harmonious set of basic premises under relatively undefined parameters and with regard to a general context, how does it fare under severe pressure? I have chosen to examine the expectation of the premises' resilience in US democracy promotion in Egypt, as it appears highly unlikely that they endure the manifold challenges to their validity there. As will be seen, however, they do, and the empirical section of this article will lay out how so. It is hence, so the overall argument, plausible to assume that the premises are extremely robust under strongly adversarial conditions and thus relevant for and operational in US democracy promotion policy globally.

What constitutes this challenging context? For the United States, Egypt has been and remains an important authoritarian ally in the Arab world, where the United States continues to have significant "hard" interests and considers the stakes to be high. \$76 billion in bilateral foreign aid from the United States between 1948 and 2015 and Egypt ranking second as recipient of US assistance in global comparison during this time period attest to this (Sharp 2016, 13). All post-Cold War administrations, however, considered Egypt a central case for democracy promotion and (claim to) have actively worked for Egypt's democratization, and a host of US democracy promotion organizations have set up shop there. Congress and the presidency have, furthermore, often heatedly debated aid policy toward Egypt, and, although there have been—even notable—attempts at democracy promotion in Egypt, they have been timid and/or were withdrawn after some time. Egypt thus is also a challenging case for US democracy promotion premises because—despite the steady claim to pursuing democracy promotion—the policy implemented in the bilateral relationship has only very rarely been genuinely driven by democracy concerns and can barely lay claim to having been successful (Brownlee 2012; McNerney et al. 2013).

Internal developments and conditions in Egypt, on the other hand, underline the challenging situation for US democracy promotion even further. Egypt is one of those countries in which the backlash against democracy (promotion) became palpable but also where an authoritarian regime was toppled in the course of the "Arab spring," and free elections were held, then to be followed by a coup d'état and what some have termed an "Arab winter" (McNerney et al. 2013). There are thus a number of "democracy-related" instances for studying the US response.

In gauging robustness and flexibility of the basic premises, a number of questions guided the research: How are the basic premises of US democracy promotion manifested and reproduced under the challenging conditions of the Egyptian case? How are premises (and the expectations they generate) justified and adapted, and how are other, maybe more immediate interests taken into consideration by policymakers? How are the premises accommodated with the conflicts and contradictions they are confronted with? How do policymakers present and deal with value- and interest-trade-offs and other tensions? Not least, how are critical questions handled or avoided? In short: how do policymakers defend the premises against political reality, adjust and adapt them when convenient, and possibly even justify discarding them altogether when confronted with on-the-ground policy choices?

### The Basic Premises in the Challenge Ground: US Democracy Promotion in Egypt

Even in this presumably unlikely case of basic premise survival, the analysis finds these premises largely alive and intact, even at the end of the time period of consideration, when the al-Sisi regime was in the process of reasserting authoritarian structures. In the following, I consider the Bush and Obama administrations respectively, both of which afforded special attention to Egypt and the Middle East during their terms. I first briefly give an overview of democracy promotion policy



and other relevant policy interests in Egypt during the respective time period and, second, summarize the results of the analysis of the three basic premises. I then turn to specifically looking at how the premises were reproduced and defended when in immediate conflict. For the assessment of relevant statements by US officials with regard to Egypt's political development in the broadest sense, I have conducted a qualitative content analysis of all documents and speeches with Egypt-related content by the presidents and secretaries of states as well as other administration officials.<sup>15</sup>

What is the general background against which US-Egyptian bilateral relations operate? Security cooperation with Egypt is considered indispensable, and security and stability concerns play a major—most of the time the central—role in word and deed. The relevance of the Israel-Egyptian Peace Treaty especially is a significant constant. Moreover, economic progress in Egypt is on the agenda of all US governments—with the purpose of inducing reform, stabilizing and rewarding the regime, or creating markets for US products. And whereas, to different degrees, the issue of democratization played a role in the relationship, at no point was strategic cooperation between the United States and Egypt put into danger (Brownlee 2012, 8).

### *The Bush Presidency*

President Bush's has so far been the only US government that, by its own volition, ventured a brief but serious reform push in its policies toward Egypt. It was during the first half of the 2000s that the widely shared policy consensus on supporting the Egyptian regime—while mostly disregarding and downplaying democratic issues—was subjected to serious questioning for the first time in decades. Beyond public statements about the need for democratization, sometimes in the form of strong criticism, the following constituted the most noteworthy elements of reform pressure: the refusal to extend aid in light of human rights violations 2002, the secretary of state's delaying of a trip to Cairo 2005 and of free trade negotiations 2006, and the secret funding of unlicensed NGOs beginning in 2006 (McInerney et al. 2013, 258).

The new policy paradigm, often labeled "Freedom Agenda," was, however, eventually stymied by the (increasing) US dependence on close cooperation with Arab regimes. Reform pressure was most notably released when, in the first free and fair parliamentary elections toward the end of 2005, the Muslim Brotherhood's political party made stunning gains, and the US administration was concerned with the rise of political Islam (Hassan 2013, 136). In the realm of policy implementation, the Bush administration in 2006 returned to the stability-first imperative that had characterized US policy for decades. In terms of democracy rhetoric, however, there was no turning back. Having raised the democracy profile so visibly, the Bush presidency scrambled to officially maintain that democracy support remained central as well as to find ways to explain the less-than-democratic development of its close ally—a legacy that would also come to haunt the Obama administration's policy toward Egypt.

References to the validity of the first premise are ubiquitous in the Bush administration discourse on democracy promotion in Egypt. Particularly during the relatively strong US push for reform, I found persistent repetitions of the argument that all people, no matter where they live, have a desire and a right to certain basic

<sup>15</sup> 270 texts were collected in total; 89 for the Bush and 181 for the Obama presidency (until June 30, 2014). The basis for the analysis here is not a sample but extends to all available statements made with regard to Egypt in high profile settings that involved the presidents and their secretaries of state (official statements, speeches, press conferences, etc.) and includes a large number of second-rank US officials as well. Coding was done similar to the first content analysis, but more attention was paid to the qualitative dimension and specifically to how the validity of the basic premises was argued and upheld in light of, arguably, contradicting reality and interests.

freedoms that form the basis of democracy—although the people may not have realized it yet.<sup>16</sup> Equally important was the official emphasis that, while certain democratic principles were desired, deserved, and achievable everywhere, the United States was not expecting Arab democracies to look like itself and that “every single democratic revolution, if you will, will have an indigenous character” (2005.03.01 Rice). Nevertheless, US officials increasingly demanded, albeit usually in friendly and soft terms, that the Egyptian people were granted their universal rights by the government. Official rhetoric toward Egypt thus strongly affirmed the validity of universal rights and values and demanded their observance.

An important corollary to the assertion of this universal desire—one which indicates the relevance of the mostly implicit, sometimes explicitly articulated second premise—was the emphasis on democracy promotion being *demand*-driven. Statements with regard to democratic reform in Egypt were characterized by careful language that emphasized that the United States was merely engaged to support a locally driven and locally demanded reform process. US rhetoric was taking pains to emphasize that it was not trying to impose or dictate anything, and officials frequently referred to Arab sources that underlined local demand (e.g., 2004.06.24 Powell). Not only were the Egyptian people portrayed as demanding reform; the Egyptian government was as well (e.g., 2005.06.20b Rice). US language became more critical in tone and more demanding after the crackdown on reformers toward the end of 2005, but the argument that US involvement was demand-driven and thus legitimate remained.

As regards the third premise, the Bush government conducted a curious and—to observers who had initially considered the president to be a realist—unexpected move: democracy promotion in the Middle East, and later globally (2005.01.20 Bush), became the linchpin of US security policy in the president’s Freedom Agenda. Considering democracy promotion to be a boon to US national security was, of course, not a new assumption. The forcefulness and extent to which the Bush government moved democracy to the security center was, however, unforeseen—especially in a region where for decades US administrations had been content to embrace the bargain of supporting authoritarian regimes in appreciation of their cooperation and stability. According to Bush in 2003 (11.06), however:

Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe—because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty. As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready for export.

This also meant that, from the administration’s point of view, placing greater emphasis on democracy promotion did not at all constitute a preference for promoting values over promoting interests—democracy with its security benefits was *at the heart* of the US national interest in the Middle East, thus constituting an unequivocal affirmation of the third premise. And indeed, this narrative remained at the center of US rhetoric toward Egypt and the Middle East during the Bush administration despite the decline in reform pressure over the years and despite mounting criticism at home and abroad. Particularly Secretary Rice was vocal in defending this paradigm against charges that democracy promotion had contributed to instability, was responsible for the rise of political Islam, and had thus damaged US interests in the region.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, echoing other dimensions of the unity-of-goodness premise, it was frequently emphasized that democratic progress brought many benefits to

<sup>16</sup> According to Secretary Rice (2005.06.20c): “We are just encouraging that the people themselves within this region take up what we know are their deeply felt aspirations for democracy and liberty.”

<sup>17</sup> E.g., 2005.03.01, 2005.06.20, 2006.02.17.

Egypt and the Middle East in its wake—mostly a stable and more peaceful region but also economic progress and “national success and dignity” (2003.11.06 Bush).

### *The Obama Presidency*

The Obama administration initially left untouched its predecessor's return to the old bargain of accommodating Mubarak while only applying mild rhetorical pressure on the regime. It was clearly pushed into forming democracy-adequate policy responses to the Egyptian uprisings. The Obama administration had not even defined a position on democracy in the Middle East yet when confronted with the Egyptian upheaval and the need to decide on whether or not it would “now put democracy at the core of its policy in one major region of the world” (Carothers 2013, 207). For Obama, the challenge was not only to try to unite democracy promotion with other interests that remained important as ever in Egypt; more fundamentally, the US administration had to first figure out what democracy promotion would actually mean under the respective phases of government change in Egypt. And although the administration strongly committed itself rhetorically and developed budgetary and bureaucratic responses, in the end and in light of democracy-frustrating developments in Egypt, it once again allowed itself to not care too much about democratization while embracing the reliable cooperation the old-new regime offered.

In the Obama record of statements, the close nexus between the first and second premise comes into even sharper relief than under the Bush administration. Beginning with the uprisings, references to the universal validity of certain rights abounded. In great similarity to the Bush period, pointing to Egyptians' universal rights and their struggle to achieve these regularly became the basis of US involvement in the political process being appropriate and legitimate, even necessary.<sup>18</sup> Notably, both major political turning points in Egypt during the Obama administration—the ouster of Mubarak and of democratically elected Morsi—were, despite all their differences, interpreted in the same light, namely as necessary responses to the unfulfilled legitimate aspirations and needs of the Egyptian people.<sup>19</sup> References to US support of universal rights and international standards were also particularly frequent during the so-called NGO crisis (late 2011–early 2013), which culminated in the sentencing of Egyptian and foreign prodemocracy NGO workers for illegal political activity. When the verdicts of one-to-five-years imprisonment were issued, Secretary Kerry (2013.06.04) condemned the trial as being “contrary to the universal principle of freedom of association” and “incompatible with the transition to democracy.”

If democracy and democracy promotion are what everybody allegedly wants, the unity-of-goodness-premise should certainly not—conceptually—run into much difficulty. And although the uprisings of 2011, in particular, posed a severe challenge to the assumption that democratization and stability went hand in hand, the Obama government—in a similar way to its predecessor—quickly found a narrative that unequivocally confirmed the democracy-stability-nexus for Egyptians as well as for the United States. In the immediate uprising period, the strong US interest in the stability of the reliable and US-friendly Mubarak regime temporarily caused “mental and policy dissonance generated by the upwelling of popular demands for Mubarak's departure” (McInerney et al. 2013, 241). Two conflicting parameters account for this, namely the strong impetus of fulfilling the role of being “leader of the free world” and the not openly stated US preference to indeed have Mubarak stay in office. Two instances brought this tension into sharp relief. When Vice President Biden let it be known on *PBS NewsHour*, “I would not refer to him [Mubarak]

<sup>18</sup> 2011.02.14 interview 2 Clinton; 2014.06.22 Kerry.

<sup>19</sup> 2013.09.24 Obama; 2014.04.24 Kerry; 2014.04.28 Kerry.

as a dictator” (2011.01.27), this elicited strong criticism in the press and among Egyptian protestors, as well as arguably angered the president, who was concerned about public effect (Cooper et al. 2011). And when special envoy to Egypt Wisner declared, “I believe that President Mubarak’s continued leadership is critical” and that “[t]he president must stay in office to steer those changes” (2011.02.05 BBC), the White House immediately distanced itself from him (2011.02.06 Clinton NPR; 2011.02.14 Clinton interview 2).

But beyond this brief period of dissonance, the administration quickly found its feet again. It was especially Secretary Clinton who kept reminding her audiences that one major cause of instability was the Middle Eastern regimes’ denial of democratic and economic progress to their people (e.g., 2011.01.13). And, in the case of Egypt, this denial was, so the US administration argued, the reason that Egypt had been thrown into turmoil in the first place (2011.05.19 Obama). Thus, overall, the long-term assumption of democracy and stability going hand in hand—and the denial of democracy leading to instability, respectively—was once again reaffirmed from the US perspective. Statements emphasizing this nexus were a constant in the Obama government from the uprisings to the end of the period under analysis.

When the administration made a strong case for democratic progress and democratic values in Egypt to be going hand in hand with stabilizing the region, benefits to the “recipients” were already implied—as well as, by extension, an advancement of US security and economic interests. The Obama administration also explicitly and repeatedly emphasized the strong nexus between democratic and economic progress. In a few cases, US officials drew the connection more specifically. Kerry (2013.11.03) was, for example, demonstrably clear on democracy’s benefits for Egyptian society: “One thing I can’t stress strongly enough, and that is the link between Egypt’s progress in its democratic transition and its overall economic success.” In general, a great number of statements from Obama officials addressed this connection. Echoing the validity of the second premise, Obama (2011.05.19) on one occasion also declared that “[w]e will continue to do these things, with the firm belief that America’s interests are not hostile to people’s hopes; they’re *essential* to them [my emphasis]”—a statement that amounted to a rhetorical stepping up of the usual declarations of common interests.

#### *Major Challenges to the Premises’ Validity—and How the Premises Absorb Them*

As demonstrated, the basic premises were notably “present” as they were regularly and strongly articulated—during quieter as well as during the more turbulent times of US-Egyptian relations. Most instructive for an assessment of how policymakers reproduced the basic premises—and evaded or countered immediate attacks on their validity—is looking at how administration officials have dealt with criticism and immediate conflict. This is what the following paragraphs do jointly for the Bush as well as Obama administrations. Three general and recurring themes have become discernible during the analysis: (1) the charge of double standards and hypocrisy of promoting democracy and at the same time cultivating friendly relations with the authoritarian regime, thus merely using democracy as a smokescreen; (2) the—related—charge of doing too little in terms of democracy promotion; (3) and the charge of interfering in the political affairs of a sovereign country.

(1) While the tone varied, both governments consistently repudiated the charge of using democracy merely as a fig leaf for a productive friendship with Mubarak—though they, when pressed hard, at least occasionally conceded to certain trade-offs. For the Bush government, Rice routinely emphasized that the United States would, even after the brief “spring” of 2005, continue to speak out on values of freedom and democracy but that it would do so “in a respectful way” and without passing judgment (2006.10.03 Rice; also 2008.01.07 Rice). “Speaking candidly and frankly among friends” became a catchphrase to suggest that issues such as the

lack of reform and human rights abuse were raised at meetings but that the strong partnership was “broad enough and deep enough to bear it” (2007.06.05 Bush). The Obama administration also insistently portrayed the United States as having been a consistent good friend to Egypt; a friend who has always honestly, albeit unsuccessfully, spoken on behalf of democratic progress (e.g., 2011.02.14 interview 1 Clinton). The need to be able to engage with Egypt on a variety of pressing issues despite its lack of democratic credentials and progress was often emphasized under both governments, sometimes alongside the somewhat irritated remark that the United States “cannot wave a magic wand” (Clinton 2011.02.05)—a frequently recurring post-uprising expression. The United States, so the argument went, was nevertheless consistent in its support and demand for democracy.<sup>20</sup>

There were, occasionally and increasingly, though still rarely in comparison to the many and multifold affirmations of the unity-of-goodness premise, moments in which this consistency was qualified, more so under the Obama than the Bush administration. When a reporter challenged her with alleged “contradictions” in US foreign policy supporting democracies and authoritarian regimes at the same time, Secretary Clinton on one occasion gave a spirited defense of US consistency, which was then decidedly curtailed by the acknowledgement that “at the same time, we live in the real world” (2011.04.07). On another occasion, Clinton (2011.11.07) frankly acknowledged that “there will be times when not all of our interests align. We work to align them, but that is just reality. As a country with many complex interests, we’ll always have to walk and chew gum at the same time.” It should also be noted that US officials did not attribute Egypt’s mounting problems and conflicts after the uprisings to a conflict between democracy promotion and other goals and values either (e.g., 2012.06.20 Clinton).

(2) Sometimes the officially embraced imperatives of merely being reactive to universal demands and of allowing an indigenous character of the political process to unfold was taken further and used as an argument against charges of doing too little. This was, for example, the case when a DOS spokesperson defended the release of reform pressure by the Bush government, saying that “fundamentally, they are going to have to arrive at their own decisions about the pace and the direction of this reform” (2008.04.07 McCormack). In a similar situation, Secretary Clinton (2011.02.14 interview 2) declared that it would be “inappropriate for us to do more than say what we have always said” so that Egyptians could figure out and design their democratization by themselves. For the Bush administration after 2005, it also became a habit to point out that, whereas progress might be painfully slow, democratization was indeed a difficult process and that it was normal to go through ups and downs. That this was to be an entirely Egyptian-led process and that it would be inappropriate to *actually* interfere became a regular trope used against charges of doing too little. When convenient, then, and without contradicting the set of basic premises, the United States could also employ the principle of noninterference, which regularly constituted the basis for criticism of US policy—but these instances are comparatively rare.

(3) The charge of illegitimate interference—and thus an attack on the validity of the second premise—was probably the most frequently voiced as well as the most emphatically rejected. The reference to indisputable universal rights as well as international standards usually formed the defense. As mentioned, the US-Egyptian relationship was regularly portrayed as one in which friends spoke honestly with each other and in which democracy support was driven by demand, thus rendering the charge of interference pointless. The accusation became more insistent during the NGO crisis, during which the central conflict focused on US foreign funding for civil society organizations as well as on-the-ground activities by US (and other) NGOs (cf. [Poppe, Wolff 2017](#), 11–5). In reaction, US officials also frequently

<sup>20</sup> For example: 2011.02.14 Clinton interview 1; 2011.05.19 Fact Sheet; 2013.05.04 Burns.

pointed out that adherence to universal rights and standards and the existence of a vibrant civil society were absolutely necessary for a successful transformation. Once again, US policymakers publicly acknowledged no conflict between what Egyptians and what external democracy promoters wanted. Since democratization was in everybody's interest and since external partners offered essential assistance in this process, their involvement was legitimate. Deputy Secretary Burns ([POMED 2012](#)) explained the legitimacy of US NGO work in Egypt:

We don't interfere in the politics of any other country. . . . What we do is to make available the benefits of America's experience with democracy to those civil society groups that might be interested in taking advantage of it. That is consistent with our practice in many countries around the world and it is consistent with international standards.

US officials concerned with Egypt thus did not acknowledge, at least not publicly, the political dimension of the work that democracy promoters do. A response by Senator McCain to the questioning of US prodemocracy NGO work can be considered to represent the dominant perspective of the administration: "It's hard to believe. . . . They're like mechanics. They come in and tell you how to organize voters, how party registration works, and that kind of stuff. They're not advocates of anybody" (quoted from [POMED 2012](#)). On several occasions unrelated to the NGO crisis, Secretary Kerry resented the charge of undue interference in unequivocal terms, as he "emphasize[d] again as strongly as I can, we're not here to interfere. I'm here to listen" (2013.03.02).<sup>21</sup> Overall, then, there were no signs that the United States took seriously the emphatically brought-forth charges of undue interference in the political process. This does *not* mean that the United States rejected the principles of noninterference or national sovereignty; US involvement, so the argument went, simply did not constitute interference. Thus, no revisiting of the appropriateness or feasibility of external democracy promotion was discernible.

### Summary and Comparison

The premise most frequently and most explicitly articulated by US officials of the Bush and Obama administrations—and with no sign of questioning at all—was the first. Democracy was what the Egyptian people wanted, and it was, moreover, a right that Egyptians deserved to exercise and to see respected. Both presidencies were also united in the belief that the denial of democracy and freedom inevitably led to major problems; from the Bush administration's perspective, the "freedom deficit" was the root cause of terrorism and extremism, whereas the Obama team, in light of the Arab uprisings, focused more on the argument that the "freedom deficit" eventually destabilized whole regimes. In either case, instability—with implications for the whole region as well as the United States—was the result. That the call for democracy as well as the designing of democratization was in theory as well as in practice *demand*-driven was a central and recurrent theme, and both governments managed to point to Mubarak's willingness to concede to reform pressure until his obvious recalcitrance on the matter swept him from office in 2011. It was the supposed demands of the Egyptian people that the Obama government then elevated to becoming the straightedge for all political developments.

While the United States' emphasis on the demand-driven nature of (presumably imminent) democratic change in Egypt, on the one hand, affirmed the first premise, it, on the other hand, also invalidated counterarguments to the (second) assumption that the United States should play a role in Egypt's political

<sup>21</sup> Similarly: 2014.06.24 Kerry.

transformation. The often-issued charge of external and illegitimate interference was rendered pointless once the claim was made that the United States only responded to “what the Egyptians want” (mostly under Obama) or that “talking honestly with friends” could not be interference (a penchant of Bush rhetoric). Whether charged with interfering or not, officials regularly pointed out that democracy promotion was a practice that helped bring about another peoples’ universally valid rights and was thus legitimate. That the United States *could* in fact help bring about democracy in the case of Egypt was an assumption rarely articulated as such by either administration but was clearly and generally implicated in the general discourse on Egyptian developments. That external democracy promotion was a *necessity* for the local process to be successful was indeed occasionally emphasized during the NGO crisis.

The matter of mutual reinforcement of values and interests in the policy of democracy promotion in Egypt was more complicated. Policymakers sometimes made opposing claims in this regard. Whereas the Bush team was more hesitant in acknowledging a conflict of interest between democracy promotion and other goals, this was more openly addressed in what Obama officials said. In the succinct words of Secretary Clinton (2011.04.07), the United States was consistent in its beliefs and convictions, but “[a]t the same time, we live in the real world.” And this means that, not infrequently, the goal of democracy promotion got into conflict with other goals—which, however, could not be acknowledged explicitly.

On the other hand, with neither of the two recent governments was there a shortage of statements that unequivocally reaffirmed the validity of both dimensions of this premise: having Egypt become a democracy would not only be good for Egyptians but also for the region as well as for the United States and its manifold interests. Democracy in Egypt *was* in the US interest, it was often argued. And whereas it seemed that it was mostly stability and security concerns that got in the way of actual democracy promotion policy, this was also the dimension most frequently and vehemently addressed as being *significantly aided by* the promotion of democracy. The Bush administration, early on in its term, declared democracy promotion to be at the very heart of America’s national security interest. And, even more conspicuously, the Obama administration, which was after all the first US administration confronted “with the practical implications of supporting democracy and breaking partnerships” most relevant for US security during the Arab uprisings (Hassan 2013, 174), strongly reaffirmed the assumption that a regime could only be stable if it granted its people universal rights and economic freedom. The increasingly simultaneous acknowledgement of real-world conflicts and the frequent reference to the democracy-security-nexus are indeed puzzling and, possibly, not easily explained away by a differentiation in short-term and long-term categories. And, curiously, the long-term/short-term differentiation played no discernible role in US democracy promotion discourse toward Egypt.

While the findings that I present here underline the great similarities that characterize the Bush and Obama administrations in their statements on democracy-related issues in policy toward Egypt, the analysis has, of course, also brought to light major differences. Among them was, for example, the well-known penchant of Bush government officials to speak in vivid Manichean terms, whereas President Obama and his team tended to be much more moderate and congenial, sometimes notably humble, in their choice of words. And whereas for the Bush team the connection between democracy promotion and fighting terror was the most resounding one, Obama officials gave only little credence to democracy’s terror-reducing qualities and instead focused more on stability and economic benefits. But, as the analysis has shown, that is just the extent of it: these are differences in tone and style but not in the basic substance of the underlying premises that structure thinking about US democracy promotion.

### Analysis and Implications

The optimistic and harmonious set of basic premises of US democracy promotion encompasses the assumptions that democracy is a universal (ly aspired to) principle, that external actors can and should support democratization in other countries, and that, minor and temporary conflicts notwithstanding, all good things go together. This thought structure has proven to be remarkably robust and even able to accommodate contradicting “realities.” This is, as seen, due in large part to the premises’ flexibility and adaptability in principle but also to the flexible way that policymakers are using them. To give but a few examples, when the United States was charged with not doing enough, it was entirely possible for representatives to argue that it would be inappropriate to interfere; when confronted with democratization failure—partly because of its own retreat—it was possible to argue that democratization took time and one had thus to be patient; the resistance to serious reforms on the part of the Mubarak regime could be glossed over with the argument that, indeed, the president was in favor of reform but needed more time; and when US security interests were challenged by potentially destabilizing proreform protests, one could argue that it was not democracy that had created this moment of instability but that the *denial* of it had led to this point.

However, does this *flexibility in words* not once again point to the *irrelevance of words* and thus confirm “cheap talk” allegations? Going even further, in light of the overall result that, most of the time, US governments were quite complacent in leaving an autocratic ally alone as long as the regime served other US interests, is democracy promotion not indeed only a nice add-on to make policy more digestible? Is democracy promotion, in other words, really just talk with very little action—ignored every time “real” interests get in the way?

It clearly is not. The analysis has shown that the United States is constrained in its foreign policy toward an autocratic regime. Discursively, the United States is committed to democracy promotion in Egypt and has been, at a minimum, since the early Bush administration. Operationally, it has much more leeway—to the extent that it can still somewhat convincingly *claim* to be acting according to the basic premises of democracy promotion. This requirement, one can argue, even generates and underlines a certain policy continuity in the bilateral relationship with Egypt. When the administration notably pulled its commitment, it faced major criticism and discontent from affected political groups and concerned observers and time and again got into conflict with the US Congress, which demanded more aid conditionality (Hassan 2013, 138). Similarly, the Obama administration has mostly been criticized for its “too little, too late” democratic engagement in reaction to Egyptian developments (Bouchet 2011, 586). Concerns, particularly in the White House, about how US reactions would be perceived and, specifically, about the reputational loss of being “on the wrong side of history” (Cooper et al. 2011) pointed toward a more pronounced prodemocracy engagement. Moreover, the United States’ preference for keeping the close ally in power could not be uttered too loudly. When officials hinted at Mubarak’s significance for the political process, they were snubbed or, in the case of special envoy Wisner, who openly said that Mubarak was still very much needed during the uprisings, were notably disavowed.

This shows how strongly the basic premises that US policymakers have subscribed to<sup>22</sup> constrain the political space of what one can say and, to a lesser degree, also what one can do. At a minimum, policymakers need to present a chosen policy as firmly rooted in the basic premises and justify their policy against this template.

<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that I am not arguing that policymakers are necessarily following a *personal* conviction here—although many seem to do so. The noteworthy observation here is that, once in office, all political actors under review have begun to argue on the basis of this thought structure—regardless of political affiliation or prior standing on the issue of democracy promotion.



Certain potential policy responses to the uprisings were thus simply beyond the purview of appropriateness, and, one way or the other, the United States had to satisfy the expectation that it would come down on the side of those calling for freedom. This leads back to the question of adaptability and flexibility discussed above; policymakers go to great lengths to extend and bend the framework so that it encompasses a wide range of behavior. They can also, as the turnover from Bush to Obama highlights, shift the arguments' emphasis and adjust the general tone as a reaction to changed political circumstances. But the embedding of US foreign policy behavior toward Egypt within a democracy promotion impetus is a requirement.

On two occasions in particular did it become palpable that US democracy promotion was considered the only normatively appropriate behavior even in light of unwanted or challenging outcomes. When the Muslim Brotherhood asserted itself at the polls in Egypt in late 2005, Secretary Rice was asked whether she was sorry that the United States had supported the political opening that led to these results. Her (2006.02.17) response was: "Absolutely not. It was the only thing to do. It was—first of all, from the point of view of the United States, the only moral thing to do." And she added that it would have been "morally reprehensible" had the United States *not* supported democratization. In a similar situation, when President Obama was asked whether he had any regrets about deciding as early as he did [*sic*] that "it was time for President Mubarak to go," the president (2012.10.23) responded: "No, I don't, because I think that America has to stand with democracy. The notion that we would have tanks run over those young people who were in Tahrir Square—that is not the kind of American leadership that John F. Kennedy talked about 50 years ago." Standing on the side of democracy is what is required of America, whether by morals or Kennedy's demand or any other reason, and it is the standard against which US rhetoric and foreign policy is regularly evaluated. These statements are in this sense a reflection of a reproductive process: although not always in such unequivocal terms, they reproduce and confirm the standard of normatively appropriate policy behavior.

### Conclusion

Overall then, the basic premises of US democracy promotion have turned out to be remarkably resistant in light of severe and repeated challenges to their validity in US relations with Egypt. Since they have proven relevant and valid even in this particularly challenging case of US democracy promotion policy, it is plausible to assume that they are operational and effective in other US democracy promotion cases as well. In order to make sure that the case of Egypt is not, by chance, a peculiar outlier, further research could focus on other cases of US democracy promotion to bolster, nuance, or revise the findings of my analysis.

My analysis has thus given further credence to the assumption of duality of structure in Giddens' sense. Rather than focusing on allegedly objective structures that policymakers react to and have to deal with, one should focus on "how agents define situations and structures" and design their responses accordingly (Kaarbo 2015, 7). The basic premises of US democracy promotion are a good example of a fundamental, nonmaterial structure that enables and constrains policy; while actors are not entirely independent of this structure, neither are they mere "near bearers of structures" or even "cultural dupes" (Barnett 1999, 7). In the case of US democracy promotion, this policymakers' middle position has, for example, become discernible in the *constraining* effect the democracy promotion premises had by ruling out outspoken support for Mubarak during the uprisings; it moreover became discernible in the *enabling* effect of allowing policymakers to vocally put themselves on the "side of democracy" and thus allow for more effective coalition building. As seen, on the one hand, one can plausibly make the argument that foreign policymakers are subjected to the democracy promotion thought structure they so frequently reproduce.

On the other, however, they can also use arguments based on the premises strategically, adapt them, or even—occasionally and at their own risk—act against them. Going back to the theory section of this article, my findings moreover support the literature that emphasizes mechanisms of continuous cultural reproduction and its stabilizing and normalizing effects (Rowley, Weldes 2012), while it runs counter to the expectation that cultural factors gain particular salience only in crisis situations (cf. Duffield 1999, 777–78).

In light of the theoretical expectation of culture promoting stability, these findings of simultaneous robustness and flexibility also offer one potential reason for democracy promotion's curious staying power on the US foreign policy agenda in light of severe challenges and repudiations—in Egypt and globally. The premises' resilience implies that, indeed, this cultural factor might be one important aspect working against foreign policy change. It also neatly ties in with two regularly discussed explanations for the difficulty in (foreign) policy change: domestic as well as bureaucratic politics, two explanatory strands not independent from political culture. Congress, in fact, was an important player in keeping democracy high on the agenda in US policy toward Egypt, often demanding stronger conditionality. And, at a minimum, the “democracy promotion industry” (Bridoux, Kurki 2014, 34) is not only a strong bureaucratic stumbling block against change but is also a likely candidate for strong internalization of the harmonious set of premises. It remains to be seen whether President Trump, who came into office with marked rhetoric against US democracy promotion, will actually be the first post-Cold War president to make good on his promise and sustainably adjust or, at least, silence the basic premises against these odds.

### Supplemental Information

Supplemental information is available at the *Foreign Policy Analysis* data archive.

### References

- ADLER, E. 2013. “Constructivism in International Relations: Sources, Contributions, and Debates.” In *Handbook of International Relations*, edited by W. Carlsnaes, T. Risse and B. A. Simmons, 112–44. London: SAGE.
- BARNETT, M. 1999. “Culture, Strategy and Foreign Policy Change: Israel's Road to Oslo.” *European Journal of International Relations* 5 (1): 5–36.
- BLYTH, M. 2013. “Paradigms and Paradox: The Politics of Economic Ideas in Two Moments of Crisis.” *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions* 26 (2): 197–215.
- BOUCHET, N. 2013. “Bill Clinton.” In *US Foreign Policy and Democracy Promotion: From Theodore Roosevelt to Barack Obama*, edited by M. Cox, T. J. Lynch and N. Bouchet, 159–77. New York: Routledge.
- BOUCHET, N. 2011. “Barack Obama's Democracy Promotion at Midterm.” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 15 (4): 572–88.
- BRAZINSKY, G. A. 2011. “Policy Makers, Intellectuals, and Democracy Promotion in Twentieth-Century American Foreign Policy.” In *The Dynamics of Democratization. Dictatorship, Development, and Diffusion*, edited by N. J. Brown, 245–65. Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press.
- BRIDOUX, J., AND M. KURKI. 2014. *Democracy Promotion: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Routledge Chapman & Hall.
- BROWNLEE, J. 2012. *Democracy Prevention: The Politics of the US-Egyptian Alliance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- CAMPBELL, D. 1992. *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- CAROTHERS, T. 2013. “Barack Obama.” In *US Foreign Policy and Democracy Promotion: From Theodore Roosevelt to Barack Obama*, edited by M. Cox, T. J. Lynch and N. Bouchet, 196–213. New York: Routledge.
- CAROTHERS, T. 2010. “The Continuing Backlash Against Democracy Promotion.” In *New Challenges to Democratization*, edited by P. Burnell and R. Youngs, 59–72. London: Routledge.

- CAROTHERS, T. 2009. "Democracy and Human Rights Promotion under Obama: The Complexities of Reengagement." Event Transcript, Carnegie Europe Event Brussels.
- COOPER, H., M. LANDLER, AND D. E. SANGER. 2011. "In US Signals to Egypt, Obama Straddled a Rift." *New York Times*, February 12, 2011.
- DESCH, M.C. 2008. "America's Liberal Illiberalism. The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in US Foreign Policy." *International Security* 32 (3): 7–43.
- DUFFIELD, J. S. 1999. "Political Culture and State Behavior: Why Germany Confounds Neorealism." *International Organization* 53 (4): 765–803.
- GIDDENS, A. 1986. *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- GOLDSMITH, A. 2008. "Making the World Safe for Partial Democracy? Questioning the Premises of Democracy Promotion." *International Security* 33 (2): 120–47.
- HASSAN, O. 2013. *Constructing America's Freedom Agenda for the Middle East: Democracy or Domination*. London: Routledge.
- HOOKE, S.W. 2002. "Inconsistent US Efforts to Promote Democracy Abroad." In *Exporting Democracy: Rhetoric Vs. Reality*, edited by P. J. Schraeder, 109–28. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- KAARBO, J. 2015. "A Foreign Policy Analysis Perspective on the Domestic Politics Turn in IR Theory." *International Studies Review* 17 (2): 1–28.
- KOWERT, P. A. 1999. "National Identity: Inside and Out." *Security Studies* 8 (2–3): 1–34.
- LEBOW, R. N. 1981. *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- LEGRO, J. W. 2000. "The Transformation of Policy Ideas." *American Journal of Political Science* 44 (3): 419–32.
- MANSFIELD, E., AND J. SNYDER. 1995. "Democratization and War." *Foreign Affairs* (May /June 1995).
- McFAUL, M.A. 2007. "The Promise of Democracy Promotion." In *Power and Superpower: Global Leadership and Exceptionalism in the 21st Century*, 209–34. New York: Century Foundation Press.
- McINERNEY, S., M. EL FEGIERY, M. DUNNE, I. EL AMRANI, AND K. BASSUENER. 2013. "Can Egyptians Build a Consensus for Functioning Democracy?" In *A Diplomat's Handbook for Democracy Development Support*, edited by J. Kinsman and K. Bassuener, 231–65. Waterloo, ON, Canada: The Center for International Governance Innovation and the Council for a Community of Democracies.
- MONTEN, J. 2005. "The Roots of the Bush Doctrine: Power, Nationalism, and Democracy Promotion in US Strategy." *International Security* 29 (4): 112–56.
- PEGENY, MARK. 1999. *Democracy at the Point of Bayonets*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- POMED, 2012. "Backgrounder: The Campaign against NGOs in Egypt." <http://pomed.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Egypt-NGO-Backgrounder.pdf>.
- POPPE, A. E., AND J. WOLFF. 2017. "The Contested Spaces of Civil Society in a Plural World: Norm Contestation in the Debate about Restrictions on International Civil Society Support." *Contemporary Politics* 23 (4): 469–88.
- QUINN, A. 2010. *US Foreign Policy in Context: National Ideology from the Founders to the Bush Doctrine*. London: Routledge.
- ROWLEY, C., AND J. WELDES. 2012. "Identities and US Foreign Policy." In *US Foreign Policy*, edited by M. Cox and D. Stokes, 178–94. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- SHARP, J. M. 2016. "Egypt: Background and US Relations." CRS Report (Congressional Research Service).
- SMITH, T. 2007. *A Pact with the Devil: Washington's Bid for World Supremacy and the Betrayal of the American Promise*. Routledge.
- SØRENSEN, G. 2011. *A Liberal World Order in Crisis: Choosing between Imposition and Restraint*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.