

Study analyzes what leads U.S. citizens to support intervention abroad

November 17 2020



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When it wants to promote democracy in other countries, the U.S. has several options, ranging from foreign democracy aid and economic sanctions to military intervention. But, what do North Americans think

about these different strategies for promoting democracy? What features of authoritarian countries determine their preferences when wanting one or another form of intervention?

The opinion of U.S. citizens on [foreign policy](#) is very important because it often influences the type of tools that their leaders end up using when it comes to promoting [democracy](#) abroad and the type of state in which they are applied. This subject has been little studied, and often leads to major dilemmas within the U.S. government and public controversy surrounding whether to intervene or not, and if so, how.

Research conducted by the researchers Abel Escribà-Folch and Toni Rodon, at the UPF Department of Political and Social Sciences, together with Laia H. Muradova, of the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium), sheds light on these questions. "In our work, we examine in what kind of autocracies North Americans are most likely to support the use of military force or economic sanctions and in what kind of regimes they are more likely to provide economic aid for democracy," they explain.

The study by the authors who recently signed an article in the blog American Politics and Policy (U.S. Center, London School of Economics), based on their article published last August in *Foreign Policy Analysis* (Oxford University Press), was carried out based on a conjoint experimental survey. Its goal is to help determine what shapes these preferences of the North Americans and they conclude that the citizens of this country give greater support to coercive measures (military interventions and sanctions) in highly personalistic and consolidated autocratic, mostly Muslim countries, that do not hold elections and are not U.S. allies. However, support for giving foreign aid is greater for autocracies with (strategic or financial) ties with the U.S. and that hold multi-party elections.

However, the authors add that "experience shows that intervening in

countries with these characteristics often leads to the growth and progress of democracy." In addition, the authors note that although the U.S. has punished some countries after human rights abuse, by invading countries and imposing sanctions (e.g., Haiti, Iraq, Cuba), it has refrained from doing so in others, despite the presence of similar violence against human rights (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Russia).

A survey to determine North Americans' foreign policy preferences

The survey, conducted on a sample of nearly 1,500 U.S. citizens, includes an experiment that randomly varies nine different characteristics of the potential targets and estimates the effects of each of these characteristics on people's opinions about the instruments for promoting democracy abroad. This design allows the authors to test the effect of an institutional feature (for example, a regime governed by a personalistic leader, such as the former leader of Iraq, Saddam Hussein or Russian president, Vladimir Putin).

It was shown that these countries, whose regimes are a far cry from those that have civilian governments, elected by the citizens and with institutional balances (such as the U.S.) are perceived as more threatening by U.S. citizens, and would lead to adopting more coercive foreign policy instruments (military intervention and sanctions). And the opposite is true; countries that seem more legitimate, that hold elections with more than one party and have ties with the U.S., would be rewarded with a positive incentives, such as foreign democracy aid.

In addition to the institutional characteristics, the target country's alliance with the U.S. and military force are important drivers of public support for war. U.S. respondents responded that they would support a war when the regime is not an ally of the United States; and this support

decreases significantly when the country is militarily strong.

The cases of Saudi Arabia and Egypt illustrate that despite having certain characteristics which, in theory, would push citizens to favor more coercive measures, both are U.S. allies, which is an important attribute that, in itself, is capable of reducing support for punitive measures against these regimes.

"Our results show that people are more likely to support tough measures against personalistic autocratic regimes that do not hold elections and do not have ties to the U.S., such as Iraq and Libya. However, as we know from experience, these measures have proved ineffective, and have often not led to democracy but to civil war or state failure," the researchers conclude.

More information: Abel Escribà-Folch et al, The Effects of Autocratic Characteristics on Public Opinion toward Democracy Promotion Policies: A Conjoint Analysis, *Foreign Policy Analysis* (2020). [DOI: 10.1093/fpa/oraa016](https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/oraa016)

Provided by Universitat Pompeu Fabra - Barcelona

Citation: Study analyzes what leads U.S. citizens to support intervention abroad (2020, November 17) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-11-citizens-intervention.html>

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