



## International assistance for political party development

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### U4 Issue

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# International assistance for political party development

## Assessing the standard method

As Western aid providers broaden and deepen their anticorruption assistance, they inevitably confront the domain of political parties in aid-receiving countries. Political parties are often enmeshed in corruption, both in attempting to gain power and in exercising power once they have it. Efforts to find systemic methods to reduce corruption without addressing the party domain are incomplete. More generally, attempting to support positive political reform, including greater accountability, without engaging with political parties leaves out a key set of actors in the overall political process. Yet many aid providers are wary about working with political parties. They are not sure what is possible to do with parties, which are often unfamiliar organizations for them, and also are concerned about being too political. At the same time, however, a significant body of international assistance to strengthen political parties has been carried out over the past 15 to 20 years, largely by Western political foundations.<sup>1</sup> Understanding this area of assistance is crucial for aid providers that are concerned about anticorruption and just now addressing the party domain. This two-part article seeks to facilitate such an understanding by providing an overview of the world of international party assistance. The first part considers the standard method of political party assistance, its main features, its strengths and weaknesses, and current areas of renovation. The second part – Party system aid – examines the emerging body of assistance relating to political party systems, assistance that goes beyond a focus on strengthening individual parties to tackling the question of political party strengthening on a broader, more systemic basis, that includes all of the major parties and the ways they relate to each other and to major political institutions.

### The standard method

Although international assistance to strengthen political parties in new and struggling democracies is growing ever more varied, it still often follows a standard method: organizations that implement party aid start by getting to know the parties in a new or struggling democracy, find that the parties do not conform to the ideas that the aid groups have about what constitutes a good political party, and design assistance programs to try to reshape them along those lines. This is done primarily by transferring knowledge through training on topics like party building or electoral campaigning. Although training efforts are diversifying over time, they have long relied on very conventional methods typified by the two or three-day workshop, seminar, or conference led by a few experts flown in from the sponsoring country.

Other common party assistance tools include exchange visits and advice. Exchange visits usually involve a group of representatives from one or several parties meeting for a week or two with people in political life in the aid-providing country, or can go in the opposite direction with a delegation from the aid-providing country visiting and perhaps training their counterparts in a developing country. Representatives of Western party foundations also often provide advice and counsel to party leaders on party building.

Although the many organizations involved in party aid draw from the same toolbox of methods, they have different styles of configuring their aid. Three distinct styles can be identified:

1. ***Flexible party resource.*** The aid provider serves as a resource center, conceived of as a long-term partnership with a party, offering a flexible mix of assistance: workshops and seminars, some material aid, occasional exchange visits, publications, and frequent advice.

2. **Concentrated training.** Other party aid providers emphasize concentrated training to help to achieve defined capabilities and characteristics in the parties they work with rather than a long-term, multifaceted partnership.
3. **Exchange Relations.** A less intensive mode of party aid, but very common among smaller European party foundations and where an aid organization has no field office, is one that features regular delegations to and from the recipient country.

## The fraternal and multiparty approaches

These three variations on the standard method are pursued using either the fraternal party approach or the multiparty approach. Under the fraternal approach, Western party aid organizations seek out ideologically like-minded counterparts. A conservative Western party foundation seeks a fellow conservative party in the aid-receiving country, for example, or a social democratic foundation builds ties with a social democratic party. The primary advantage of the fraternal approach is the common ideological link between the provider party foundation and receiver political party, which may be the basis for greater mutual understanding and trust, and allows for greater access and influence within the receiver party.

A major disadvantage, however, is the difficulty of finding ideological partners in countries where the European left-right spectrum does not define party life. The left-right spectrum has decreasing relevance in many parts of the developing world, especially in Africa, East Asia, and the Middle East, where parties instead mobilize around religion, ethnicity and other social affiliations, or personalities. Even in Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America, where the left-right spectrum remains somewhat in place, some parties at the edges of the spectrum mix rightist and leftist tendencies while parties in the center gravitate toward a technocratic reformist centrism. Thus even there the left-right divide often becomes quite hazy, such as in Argentina and Serbia.

Under the multiparty approach, the aid provider offers assistance to all the main political parties in a country, although the training and advice is often done with each party separately. Party aid providers usually exclude nondemocratic parties or parties that advocate violence, although the lines are often not so clear-cut. In addition to limiting accusations of partisanship, the multiparty approach is also advantageous because it facilitates efforts by the aid provider to think about the common overall problems of a party system. The main disadvantage of this approach is the greater difficulty in creating a closer party-to-party relationship between the provider and recipient.

## Strengths and weaknesses of the standard method

The standard method of party aid has a few clear strengths. It can be consistently applied to almost any recipient country with a certain ease and economy of execution, and it focuses on campaigning and managing large party organizations, which are often the strengths of the actors on the aid-providing side. At the same time, it has serious weaknesses, which come out regularly when one talks with people in the aid-receiving parties. Above all, they point to what they view as preset, standardized designs not well-adapted to their particular context and mechanistic methods of implementation.

Certain characteristic shortcomings can be identified from each of the three variants of the standard method described above – the flexible party resource, training-centered, and exchange relations approaches. Intended to be a part of a multifaceted and long-term partnership, aid under the flexible resource approach often ends up yielding a nonstrategic scattering of activities. The assistance is not guided by serious underlying research or analysis of what impulses for change actually exist within the party, the favorability of the political context for change, or the impact of technical assistance on internal party reform. Furthermore, senior people in these parties tend to describe the field

representatives of Western party foundations as pleasant friends, but distant outsiders to the real internal workings of the party.

Regarding party aid centered around training, complaints by people in recipient parties of “workshop fatigue” are pervasive and consistent across different parts of the world. Trainings are often short, one-off events without follow-up, and frequently led by “fly-in” experts who lack substantial knowledge of the local scene and teach from a set script. Since it is the leaders of recipient parties who choose the participants, they often use the workshops to reward cronies or occupy mediocre party members. Similar problems afflict the exchange relations method. Most study tours are not carefully designed and planned, and end up serving little purpose beyond relationship building.

More generally speaking, the standard method of party aid is problematic because it is guided by what can be described as a mythic model of political parties in established democracies. Few political parties in established democracies meet the ideal that party aid actors subscribe to and attempt to support in other countries. That is to say, few are managed in a rational, non-personalistic manner, highly inclusive of women at all levels, ideologically coherent, and committed to issue-based grassroots work. Furthermore, some party aid programs apply a model that harkens back to an earlier age, before the rise of television-driven, image-oriented campaigning, the diminution of the direct links between parties and voters, and widespread cynicism about politics. Nonetheless, fledgling parties today are plunging directly into this age without a century of gradual, grassroots-oriented development.

## Persistence of the standard method

The chronic weaknesses of the standard method are, in general, recognizable symptoms of any technical assistance that is supply-driven, externally designed, and externally implemented. As with other domains of technical assistance, there is often a failure to penetrate the sociopolitical fabric of the recipient society and engender locally-driven processes of change. Why then, does the standard method show such persistence? The most apparent explanations are that the method is simple and straightforward, and party aid is sometimes as much about relationship-building for political purposes as about stimulating reform.

This method also persists, however, because unlike in development assistance, the people that staff party aid organizations are political people: former party activists, political consultants, legislative aides, and politically-oriented lawyers. Their expertise is parties and politics, and they often pride themselves on not being part of the traditional development community. The instinctive methodological inclination of this mind-set is straight institutional modeling.

Another reason is party aid organizations rarely engage in or are required to take part in rigorous, independent evaluations of their work. In his pathbreaking study of the work of the German *Stiftungen* in Africa, Gero Erdmann points out that none of the *Stiftungen* has a policy or strategy paper that deals with party assistance.<sup>ii</sup> The U.S. party institutes are sometimes subject to external evaluations imposed by their funders, but these evaluations do not seem to produce much learning. They focus on whether or not promised activity outcomes were fulfilled, not whether the program actually contributed to substantial reform of the recipient parties.

## Improving the standard model

Although the standard method persists, some party aid organizations, or at least some experienced practitioners within them, are making efforts to broaden it and correct some of its deficiencies. None of these efforts represents a dramatic breakthrough, but they are worth noting as possible building blocks for a better overall approach going forward.

Some organizations are starting to use more experienced trainers, who have specific country or regional expertise. A few are increasingly using “third-country” trainers – experts from another new democracy, such as a South African conducting a training in Mozambique. In a limited number of cases, party aid groups are employing trainer-of-trainer methods in which they identify and extensively train talented, energetic young activists who then carry out trainings within the party. Beyond improving training, some aid providers are looking to create more sustained long-term learning opportunities. Examples include a series of connected training events with a set group of participants, an intensive set of trainings sometimes billed as a “leadership academy” pitched at younger activists, and distance learning courses.

To address the lack of background research and analysis, a few groups have begun experimenting with ways to assess a political party situation more extensively to prepare a deeper analytical framework for party assistance. For example, the National Democratic Institute, working with the support of the UK Department for International Development, has carried out in-depth political economy studies of the party landscape in Bolivia and Peru.<sup>iii</sup> Several party aid organizations have mobilized the parties themselves in extensive information-gathering exercises. The Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy initiated its work in Georgia with an in-depth exercise in which Georgian parties analyzed their own strengths and weaknesses and suggested possible types of reform.<sup>iv</sup>

Another key challenge, especially under the “flexible party resource” model, is moving beyond the uncritical, autopilot pattern of assistance to make party aid more strategic about effecting change. Some representatives of the German *Stiftungen* are trying to inject some elements of challenge into these partnership relationships. In Guatemala, for example, one *Stiftung* opened up assistance to other parties and required them to compete for aid in order to confront the complacency of the main party with which it worked.

Some aid providers are paying greater attention to what contexts are favorable to positive change in political parties and stepping up aid decisively at these moments. Party aid providers naturally conduct campaign-related programs before elections, legislative capacity work after elections, and party organization work in between. Ripe moments for positive change, however, may occur immediately after a party performs poorly in an election or when a generational change is occurring in a party, allowing for the possibility of renewal in leadership. Changes in the overall political environment can also trigger favorable moments increasing the likelihood of party reforms. The various prodemocratic constitutional reforms in Indonesia during the first half this decade are an example of such a context. Identifying and taking advantage of favorable contexts for party change does not imply short-term opportunism, but rather the need to combine a sustained aid presence with a flexible design allowing aid providers to change the scale of the effort quickly to respond to opportunities that arise.

As party aid organizations seek to go deeper into the question of how parties can be strengthened, they confront the fact that parties in many new or struggling democracies lack much connection to civil society. NGOs in developing countries are often staffed by activists who entered the NGO sector as an alternative to working directly in the political sector. As a result they are often wary of working closely with parties. Meetings that party aid organizations sponsor between NGO representatives and political party people often simply bring out this mutual distrust. Instead, it is civil society groups oriented towards mobilization with wide membership, such as teachers’ organizations, informal ethnic associations, professional associations, and trade unions that are more likely to have the political interests and orientations to want to work closely with parties. Several of the European party foundations linked to social democratic parties, notably the Olof Palme Center and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, have done some useful work in helping center-left parties connect more effectively with trade unions.

In addition to the problem of connecting parties to civil society, there is the problem of parties being elite-focused organizations cut off from their own societies. Donors have pursued a whole host of programs designed to make local governments more responsive to citizens, but there have been only more limited efforts to connect citizens to parties. It is fundamentally difficult to change the incentive

structure that shape parties' behavior just through attitudinal shifts by some citizens. Still, this gap between elitist parties and civic activism deserves greater attention.

## Party system aid

During this decade, a new type of party aid has expanded rapidly: programs to support the development of party systems overall. Unlike other forms of party aid that proceed party by party, these programs seek to foster changes in all of the parties in a country at once, via modifications to the underlying legal and financial frameworks in which parties are anchored, or changes in how the parties relate to and work with each other.

Party system aid programs take a number of forms. Although electoral systems have significant effects on the shape of political party development, they are not usually the target of party system aid initiatives, for reasons discussed below. Programs may address the political party law, to help a country clarify the legal basis of its parties and stimulate changes in how the parties operate. There are also rapidly expanding efforts that target the endemic corruption in party systems by establishing or fortifying systems to regulate campaign finance and party finance. Initiatives to facilitate more productive interparty relations in different countries via formal or informal multiparty dialogue processes are also increasing. Finally, the myriad efforts by a wide range of party aid providers to increase the role of women in parties can be considered a further type of party system aid.

Party system work is the preferred approach of multilateral organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme, Organization of American States (OAS), Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), and the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) since this work accords with their inclinations or comparative advantages – their political neutrality and long-term developmental outlook. Some of the larger party foundations or institutes are also trying out programs that focus on systemic issues. Much of this growing domain of party system work is new and still in the experimentation and testing stage; specific methods are only starting to be defined and little is yet known about effects over time.

## Electoral system

The kind of electoral system a country emerging from nondemocratic rule chooses has major implications for the evolution of its political party system. Nonetheless, electoral system reform is not a major focus of party system initiatives. Most new or struggling democracies established and locked in their electoral systems during or soon after their break from dictatorial rule in the 1980s or 1990s. Thus party aid providers coming into the picture now often find a closed door in this domain. Moreover, the interest of party aid providers in electoral reform is indirect. Although electoral system choices can have fundamental effects on political party development along certain dimensions – namely the number and size of parties a country will develop – they are less likely to have direct effects on the issues that most concern party aid providers, such as parties' lack of internal democracy or the spread of political corruption. Furthermore, the implications of different electoral system choices for party development are only one of many factors that a government (or an aid organization working with a government) will consider as it engages in electoral law reform. Most of the international assistance that has gone into reforming electoral laws has been part of the electoral assistance domain and has focused much more on building free and fair elections than on party development per se.

## Political party law

Aid groups involved in political party assistance are giving increasing attention to political party law in new or struggling democracies. By party law it is meant state laws that concern “what constitutes a political party, the form of activity in which parties may engage, and what forms of party organization and behavior are appropriate.”<sup>1</sup> In a minority of cases there is a special political party law, but in most countries party law is embodied in a variety of laws.

The approach of aid providers working on party law reform depends on the particular political and legal context in a given country. In countries that have very little party law, aid providers push for the establishment of such laws, frequently in the form of a single overarching party law. Where countries already have a substantial body of party law, aid providers seek to support whatever impulse exists in the society for pro-democratic additions or reforms to the law. In the case of a country where power is monopolized by one group and challengers are blocked from even forming a party, party aid providers will try to ensure that party law is not a source of obstacles to party formation. Finally, if a country is one in which political power is highly dispersed or fragmented among dozens of parties, party aid providers may encourage provisions that set a higher threshold of requirements to start or register a party.

Regarding parties’ internal operations, party aid providers often urge the establishment of specific legal requirements for internal democracy within parties, including rules about holding party congresses, electing party officers, and maintaining a gender balance within the party’s management. Party aid work also now deals extensively with the issue of regulating party finance, which has become very large and is therefore considered separately in the next section of this chapter.

Most often, aid providers serve as a background supporter of a law reform process such as by providing comparative information to relevant political actors about party laws in other countries or sponsoring workshops during which the law-writing process can be debated and discussed. Aid groups sometimes, although much less frequently, take on a more active role in political party law reform. They can try to stimulate interest in it where the issue is not actively on the agenda and back or even help organize a coalition of actors who will push for such reform.

## Party financing

The financing of political parties (including both financing for election campaigns and the regular, ongoing costs of running political parties) has grown rapidly this decade as an area of donor attention. A wide range of aid organizations – bilateral aid agencies, multilateral development banks, international NGOs, and private foundations – are flocking to this area out of their broader interest in trying to reduce corruption in developing countries. Money in politics is at the core of corruption; party financing is a core part of money in politics. Other organizations, like the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (now IFES), are motivated not just by the benefits lowered corruption will have for the overall socioeconomic development in a country but by an interest in bolstering political party development.

Problematic party financing creates or contributes to several major types of political distortion. First, corruption in party financing – such as candidates or parties taking contributions in return for favors or the illegal steering of state resources to party coffers or campaigns – harms parties by weakening their representational function and concentrating their resources at the top. Second, the scarcity of resources that is characteristic of party financing in many poor countries hurts party development: parties’ ability to build coherent, broad constituent-based organizations. Third, the inequality of resources leads to unequal or otherwise distorted representation allowing the rich to control certain parties, while politically alienating average citizens.

Although the legal and regulatory systems for political finance in new or struggling democracies vary widely in design and implementation, they are typically assembled from a common menu of measures, summarized very briefly here:<sup>vi</sup>

- ***Disclosure of income or expenditures.*** Candidates and parties may be required to report either income (donations or in-kind contributions from individuals, businesses, or other organizations) or expenditures, usually campaign related.
- ***Limitations or restrictions on income or expenditures.*** Contributions to candidates or parties may be limited in size and frequency. Certain sources of contributions, such as professional associations, unions, or foreign-owned entities, and certain types of expenditures, such as vote-buying or purchasing advertising time on television and radio, may be prohibited.
- ***Providing media access.*** Candidates or parties may be granted free, equal time on television and radio.
- ***Public funding.*** Candidates and parties may be reimbursed by the state for part or all of their campaign expenses, receive regular state funding for core party costs, or receive state funding on a matching basis with private funding.

Aid organizations are trying many things in their effort to help countries confront the inevitably stubborn set of problems surrounding their party finance systems. As with other areas of foreign aid that go through an early boom phase, many of these attempts have been hurried or superficial efforts. More serious efforts, however, are starting to take place. Looking closely into this swarm of activities, one can discern several distinct approaches:

- ***Encouragement and technical assistance to governments.*** Aid providers can encourage a government to give attention to party finance reform and then provide relevant actors with comparative information about practices and experiences from other countries.
- ***Building impetus for reform.*** An aid provider seeking a more active role can attempt to nurture a broader societal interest in and push for reform. One way to do this is by partnering with policy institutes or public interest NGOs in the country in question and supporting these organizations in researching party finance problems and developing activities to stimulate public awareness and mobilization for reform.<sup>vii</sup>
- ***Strengthening party capacity.*** Aid providers often work directly with the parties on party finance issues by strengthening their capacity to raise money, training them to adhere to new party finance laws and regulations, and providing them with information on ways to reform the existing party finance system.
- ***Strengthening enforcement capacity.*** Assistance is sometimes provided to bolster the governmental organizations that are responsible for enforcing the party finance system.
- ***NGO Monitoring.*** Some aid providers fund local think tanks, anticorruption NGOs, or other civic groups to carry out research, documentation, and publicity on the compliance of candidates and parties with party finance laws and regulations, usually in connection with an election campaign.

Several features of this burgeoning donor concern with party financing are worth noting. First, a very wide range of aid organizations have entered this domain, producing a large number of different approaches and a welcome amount of experimentation. The potential danger is that the multiplicity of underlying interests and philosophies of the many different aid actors in any one country will produce confused and sometimes contradictory efforts.

Second, as is often the case with a new donor enthusiasm, much of the initial programming on party finance work has produced plenty of rhetoric and high-profile conferences and exercises, but has been short on actual backing within the countries concerned. Third, aid providers working on this area are often swayed by the temptation of formalistic solutions – pushing other governments to quickly enact new laws and regulations and providing them with off-the-shelf models. Such formalistic approaches rarely have much positive effect because the new laws and regulations are not grounded in any real buy-in from the affected groups, capacity for implementation and enforcement is lacking, and there is usually insufficient knowledge about the law within the society.

In the end, lasting progress on party finance will only be made when a whole set of factors come together from within a society, including political will for change amongst key elites, the necessary underlying institutional base to support reform, and a lack of powerful spoilers. Where such factors emerge largely on their own, well-targeted assistance can help a long-term process of party finance reform move ahead. Where the broader constellation of positive factors is not present, well-crafted and even vigorous external assistance almost always bounces off.

## Interparty dialogues

Another form of party system aid is support for interparty dialogue processes in which representatives of the political parties meet regularly over several months or even years to discuss and work on matters of mutual interest. Such dialogues can be formal high-level processes involving party leaders or less formal meetings amongst mid-level party cadres. They may be directed at a pre-specified goal or they may be open-ended; they may be highly public and accessible or closed-door and quiet. The aims of such dialogues are generally twofold. First, the sponsors of interparty dialogue seek to create dialogue processes as a protected space aside from the conventional political arena, where parties can communicate and build a basis for cooperation. Second, they intend parties to use the dialogue process to work together on political reform measures.

The role of external organizations as supporters of such dialogues varies. Sometimes an outside group will actually plant the idea and build a dialogue process from scratch. In other cases it will respond to an initiative coming from the parties. Outside groups can serve as a broker among the parties to keep the dialogue on track, provide technical expertise or strategic advice, and underwrite workshops or seminars.

## Women in parties

Another area of party aid that has grown rapidly and seeks to effect change in party systems overall is assistance to foster greater inclusion of women. Women-focused political party aid seeks to get more women into parties and to bolster their power once in, while also getting women's policy concerns included in party platforms. Almost all aid providers are active in this area. The wide embrace of this work in this domain reflects a general consensus on the part of aid organizations that women in new or struggling democracies are significantly underrepresented in political parties (and political life generally), resulting in adverse effects on women, parties (their capacity for representation), and society generally. The growing ubiquity of this work reflects the fact that such efforts can fairly easily find a place in almost any political context.

Much women-focused work is, like all party aid, rooted in training – for women party cadres on how to be effective within parties, for all party cadres on the importance of including women fully in party life, and for women candidates on campaigning. Aid providers also push for key institutional reforms in parties, such as the creation of women's leagues within parties and opening of management structures to women. Party aid providers sometimes foster collaboration amongst women from diverse parties and political groups within a country or a region through networking events or associations.

This aid to promote the greater inclusion of women in parties is one part of the much larger domain of assistance to promote a greater role for women in politics generally.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> The largest political foundations or party institutes are the German *Stiftungen*, such as the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, and the U.S. party institutes—the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs. Many European countries have political foundations connected to their main political parties. Several European countries have established multiparty institutes that engage in international political party assistance, such as the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy.

<sup>ii</sup> Gero Erdmann, *Hesitant Bedfellows: The German Stiftungen and Party Aid in Africa. An Attempt at an Assessment*, Working Paper no. 184/50 (Warwick, UK: Centre for the Study of Globalisation and Regionalisation, December 2005).

<sup>iii</sup> National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, *Peru's Political Party System and the Promotion of Pro-Poor Reform* (Washington, D.C.: NDI, 2005), and National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, *Bolivia's Political Party System and the Incentives for Pro-Poor Reform* (Washington, D.C.: NDI, 2005).

<sup>iv</sup> Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy, *Political Institutions Interactive Assessment* (The Hague: NIMD, 2005).

<sup>v</sup> Kenneth Janda, *Political Parties and Democracy in Theoretical and Practical Perspectives: Adopting Party Law* (Washington, D.C.: National Democratic Institute, 2005), 3.

<sup>vi</sup> Alan Ware, "Conclusion," in *Funding Democratization*, eds. Peter Burnell and Alan Ware (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1998). Also see Reginald Austin and Maja Tjernström, eds., *Handbook on Funding of Political Parties and Election Campaign* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2003).

<sup>vii</sup> Sefakor Ashiagbor, *Party Finance Reform in Africa* (Washington, D.C.: National Democratic Institute, 2005).





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