Westminster Foundation for Democracy

Building Better Democracies

Why political parties matter

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The Westminster Foundation for Democracy works to achieve sustainable political change in emerging democracies. Most of its work is in the European Union's eastern neighbours and Africa, with an increasing interest in the Middle East. WFD develops partnerships with organisations in these regions – including political parties, parliaments, the media and representatives of civil society – and supports their development as vital elements of strong democracies.

At least half of WFD's programmes concentrate on party development work, across the political spectrum, and these are carried out through the Westminster political parties. Parliamentary, civil society and other non-partisan initiatives complement party work. Programmes include training members of local civil society organisations to lobby more effectively, encouraging politicians to deepen their connections with society, building MPs' capacity to scrutinise government, and increasing journalists' understanding of their role within a democratic system.

The Westminster Foundation for Democracy was established in 1992 by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Westminster Foundation for Democracy
125 Pall Mall
London SW1Y 5EA

Tel: +44 (0)20 7930 0408
Fax: +44 (0)20 7930 0449
E-mail: wfd@wfd.org
Web: www.wfd.org

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This report is based on presentations and discussions given at Wilton Park Conference WPS04/4, held in conjunction with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, on 'Achieving Sustainable Political Change in Emerging Democracies: the political party challenge', 15-17 March 2004. The 56 participants from many countries around the world included politicians, practitioners, academics, and senior representatives from several major democracy foundations and development organisations.

The views expressed in this report are not necessarily those of the author, or of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

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Foreword

Political parties are crucial for long-term political development in emerging democracies. Yet for many years they have been neglected by those working in the developing world who have preferred instead to concentrate on human rights and civil society as ways to deepen democracy.

Political parties haven't had a good press. In both mature and emerging democracies they are often held in low esteem, while the people who run them are viewed as pursuing their own interests rather than those of the people they seek to represent.

But it would be a mistake to write parties off just because they do not always work well. Political parties form a pivotal institution in a healthy democracy. Without well-functioning parties, governments and legislatures have little chance of representing wider society in a meaningful way. Parties are the bridge between government and society, both in the ways they translate society's demands into political ideas and programmes, and in the way they hold government to account on society's behalf.

And now, gradually, political parties *are* being taken more seriously. The United Nations Development Programme, the World Bank and the British Government's Department for International Development, for example, are all increasingly recognising the place of parties on the wider development agenda. They and other important development agencies understand that, in the pursuit of healthy democracies, political parties cannot be neglected.

The Westminster Foundation for Democracy has worked in political party development for more than a decade, alongside democracy-building organisations around the world. This new wider interest in political parties presents a unique opportunity to mobilise the ideas and experience of those working to promote democracy, and to share what we have learned more widely.

To this end, WFD, working with Wilton Park, gathered together some of the most influential figures in the field of democracy promotion for a two-day conference in March 2004. This publication is a distillation of the discussions they had and the conclusions they reached on how to build stronger parties in emerging democracies.

The ideas outlined here make an important contribution to the wider work of promoting democracy around the world. We hope it will be a useful tool for anyone who works, or takes an interest, in the field of political development.

I would especially like to thank Colin Jennings, Chief Executive, and Chris Langdon, Associate Director of Wilton Park for all their work on organising the conference, and Thomas Carothers of Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, who advised throughout on the programme and participants.

David French
Chief Executive, Westminster Foundation for Democracy

Summary

Viable political parties and effective party systems are fundamental to building democracy.

Supporting the development of parties and party systems in new democracies poses a major challenge that should be given high priority. This is increasingly being recognised by many international, multinational and bilateral organisations working in development.

Organisations that promote democracy – such as the Westminster Foundation for Democracy – face different options in how to use their experience and expertise to support party-based democracy.

Options include direct party-to-party work, multi-party work and promoting a favourable institutional environment within which party activities can flourish. These approaches are not mutually exclusive.

Different situations in different countries demand different approaches. The party challenge must be understood within a wider context of civil society organisations, state institutions, pro-poor development strategies and larger global forces.

The established democracies cannot be complacent about the standing of party politics at home. Their work with parties in emerging democracies should reflect this, and avoid the suggestion that western models and systems are perfect.

Meeting the party challenge in prospective, new and emerging democracies requires a concerted and sustained commitment from the international community.

Important, unanswered questions remain over how much the democracy foundations can achieve by prioritising party work and over the best approaches to adopt. But interest in finding answers and putting the lessons into practice has never been greater.

1. Parties on the agenda

Support for political party development is an established part of democracy promotion, particularly in central and eastern European countries. Generally speaking, however, in other parts of the world there has been more interest in supporting elections and in the development of civil society organisations, and this work has tended to overshadow the importance of political parties. This view is beginning to change, and it is now more widely accepted that to make democracy promotion more effective, political parties need a higher profile.

Key decision-makers around the world are starting to devote significantly greater attention and resources to this end. Political parties are now firmly on the agenda of many of the world's leading organisations committed to supporting democracy and development in the prospective, new and emerging democracies. These range from specialised democracy promotion foundations like the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) and the USA National Endowment for Democracy (NED), to bilateral development agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency (SIDA). The large multilateral development organisations including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and World Bank are also now taking a close interest in parties and their significance for issues in governance and social, economic and human development. In the UK the contribution that democratic progress can make to the broad range of developmental objectives, and poverty reduction in particular, has become an important feature of the close co-operation within government between the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and Department for International Development (DfID), especially at the country level.

Political parties are central to representative democracy and to the process of democratisation. They connect society and the state. They aggregate and represent interests. They recruit political leaders. They disseminate political information. They socialise citizens into democratic politics. They manage conflicts of interest and, very importantly in societies that have recently experienced violent conflict, they can offer a forum for social and political integration, a tool for nation-building. Democracy in the modern world is inconceivable without healthy parties and an effective party system. Such a system exists where the number of genuine parties is neither too small (a highly polarised system) nor too large (highly fragmented). It offers meaningful choices to the electorate. The relations among the parties display a responsible attitude towards the practice of political competition. And the parties connect with society.

The presence of an institutionalised party system means that society can hold elected politicians to account for their performance in office and their role as the people's representatives. The public standing of the political parties – and of politicians themselves – benefits when the parties and the party system are in good health. Strategies to establish and consolidate democracy that ignore the central role of parties cannot hope to be successful, no matter how much attention they pay to other vital matters such as building civil society and the institutions of good governance.

Parties in trouble

The need to address the party challenge is an urgent one, not least because people in many parts of the world today hold political parties in low esteem. There is much evidence from attitude surveys and the like to suggest that confidence in the parties has declined. Of course, some of the expectations of what parties should do, and the yardsticks by which they are being judged, might be unreasonable. It could be that parties are being blamed for problems for which they are not responsible. And not all the criticisms are easy to reconcile. Sometimes parties are criticised for being too reluctant to co-operate with each other; sometimes they are condemned when they show a willingness to share power in ways that seem to leave the voters with little choice.

And it is not just the parties that are in trouble. Political institutions more generally have seen a loss of public trust. This does not mean there is less support for democracy, in either the old or the newer democracies, but it is a cause for concern.

Notwithstanding the caveats, then, in the words of one keen observer, parties everywhere are "in deep trouble".* The signs can be found in declining memberships and electoral turnouts, even in the long-established democracies. It often seems that personalities and manipulation of the media matter more than party organisation. A valuable distinction can be made between the 'boredom of success' – as witnessed in mature democracies – and the 'anger of frustration' which characterises more the countries of the developing world. In neither case are the findings good for democracy.

In Africa, for instance, parties do not seem to be like their European counterparts. Many are little more than 'briefcase parties' or 'artificial parties',

*Thomas Carothers, Director, Democracy and Rule of Law Project, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

vehicles for advancing the personal ambitions of their leaders to win presidential office. As such, they fail to provide an institutionalised basis from which society can hold governments or elected representatives to account. Many parties in Africa are more distinctive in ethnic, religious or regional terms than in ideological ones. A large gulf exists between party elites and society, between leaders and party members or supporters. The membership base may be negligible. It is said in Africa that the people first and foremost want to see the rule of law established and some improvement in their basic living standards; by comparison the idea of competitive party politics is less important, even alien.

In Latin America, where political parties have a long history, parties in the 21st century seem to be facing crises of representation and mediation. They are experiencing problems in adjusting to the difficult social demands brought about by economic globalisation. The retreat of the traditional parties and disintegration of the party system in a country like Venezuela is particularly worrying. Where a regime shows illiberal tendencies, civil society is likely also to become vulnerable to repression. Moreover, repression can be contagious, spreading to other countries in the region.

Elsewhere there are countries with no history of stable, democratically organised party politics – in Afghanistan and Iraq for instance. Yet organisational shortcomings – non-transparent political funding, the under-representation of women, a lack of internal party democracy and weak capacity to contribute to policy deliberation on major issues like development – can be found almost anywhere. They are certainly not exclusive to the emerging democracies in the developing world. However, the impact there can be fatal to the creation of sustainable democracy. It is not just the individual parties that need help but whole party systems which have yet to become institutionalised.

Parties in new democracies often find it difficult to compete with civil society organisations for people's respect and for financial assistance from the international organisations. The population tends to see civil society organisations as 'where the action is', and 'clean' by comparison with parties. To some extent the aid donors have contributed to this trend, by concentrating their assistance on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) down the years. Yet the conceptual distinction between a civil society organisation and a political party can be hard to maintain in practice. NGOs often behave very politically; they may have formal or informal institutional links with parties, or even eventually turn into

parties. Many parties recruit their leaders from successful civic associations. Yet civil society organisations are not accountable to the electorate through the ballot box. And it is not they but political parties that are expected to form government and provide political direction to the country.

If the rationale for supporting political parties is clear, then the 'how' and the 'what' merit careful consideration next.

Key points

In the past, party work was relatively neglected because it was seen as too political. But trying to promote democracy is necessarily a political act.

Civil society on its own cannot offer a non-political way to build democracy, for two reasons: first, civil society organisations often behave just as politically as parties; and second, parties and party systems are fundamental to democratic government and to democratisation.

Parties everywhere recognise that parties are in trouble. There is general agreement that democracy promotion must raise the profile of party work. The key questions, then, concern how to go about addressing the challenge.

2. Different approaches to party work

Different democracy promotion organisations have their own choice of approaches to party work. Four possible approaches – party-to-party, multi-partisan, cross-party, and a focus on institutions – have distinct features. They should not be seen as mutually exclusive.

Party-to-party relations

Sometimes called 'fraternal' or 'sister' party work – working with ideological partners – this approach has the advantage that relations of trust and mutual understanding between partners can be built up over a long period, especially where there are shared ideological commitments. Through partnerships like these, a party can be brought into membership of one of the party internationals, further adding to possibilities of international co-operation and support. The several German party foundations or *Stiftungen* are well-established practitioners of this approach.

However, there can be drawbacks. In the early days of transition to democracy it might be difficult to single out the most obvious parties with which to develop a close party-to-party relationship. Where the identity of the new parties is not grounded in ideology at all, as for example in Africa's many ethnicity-based parties, the task of choosing an appropriate 'fraternal' or 'sister' party is difficult. Relationships will also be at the mercy of the partner parties' durability, which can be hard to predict.

Sometimes there are good foreign policy reasons for favouring certain parties over others. Very occasionally there may be situations where the only way to promote peace and democracy is through programmes that assist a single party, and partisanship is unavoidable. More generally, mainstream international development co-operation can be viewed as partisan as most of it goes to government and so is difficult to distinguish from support for the ruling party.

However, a selective approach seems ill-suited to the development of a pluralistic party system. While parties that receive support may derive tangible benefits, the gains to democracy as a whole may be less obvious. Further, this approach can simply look too partisan, particularly to parties not selected, or those that simply 'fall through the cracks'.

Another danger is that close party-to-party relations can undermine objectivity: the parties providing support may get too close to allow them to assess the effectiveness of their assistance properly. A widespread perception that this is happening can add to a popular climate of mistrust in political parties more generally.

Obviously partisan attempts to influence the outcome of elections for public office by extending support to just one or a few parties do constitute improper political interference in many people's eyes. Some development organisations that promote democracy – such as USAID – have constitutions that explicitly forbid it. Instead, USAID's policy is to support representative, multi-party systems through assistance to all democratic parties in a country.

Multi-partisan approach

A multi-party approach – sometimes also called a cross-party approach – could support party development on broader constitutional issues such as the rights of women and minorities. But where party-to-party work is combined with a multi-party – and hence less obviously partisan – involvement, care must be taken to ensure that equal opportunities are offered to all parties. The Westminster Foundation for Democracy is an example of an organisation that seeks to combine close party-to-party relations with a cross-party approach.

One consequence is that parties in power as well as those in opposition are eligible for support. There are good arguments for this. In many respects the needs of a ruling party can be just as great as those of any other; after all, its competence and capacities are likely to be stretched as a result of the requirement to furnish government. However, it could also be argued that in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian situations preferential treatment should be given to 'pro-reform parties' in the political opposition – which means greater selectivity.

A multi-party approach is not necessarily an all-party approach. Some categories of party may be excluded on principle, because they are non-democratic or anti-democratic, or because they espouse violent methods. USAID, for instance, can apply for a waiver from the requirement to offer support to all democratic parties to exclude a democratic party that is xenophobic, exclusionary (of women, for instance), radically anti-American or involved in illegal practices. In multi-ethnic societies, especially where there is a recent history of significant inter-communal

violence, it could be important to decide whether to engage only with multi-ethnic parties. In some African countries – for example, Tanzania – the constitution does not allow parties to represent a single ethnic group anyway. But where ethnic or ethno-nationalist parties do exist, should there be favourable treatment for multi-ethnic parties if without it they would find themselves at a serious political disadvantage, as happens in Bosnia for instance? There is a difference between, on the one hand, insisting that each and every party must be 'inclusive' if it is to be eligible for support and, on the other, ensuring that all those parties chosen for support are inclusive *as a group*.

Sometimes, democracy foundations can contribute to peace-building and reconciliation by refusing to support parties whose leaders were involved in the recently ended violence or alleged human rights abuses. Parts of the Balkans are a case in point. In contrast, even some non-democratic parties might be candidates for support where it is thought the assistance would help them to reform.

Another issue is whether support should concentrate on 'significant' parties. How is that term understood? Does significance mean endurance? Does it mean that parties must be 'representative', or 'represent something more than themselves', if they are to merit support? The act of identifying significant parties involves making a judgement in a situation where there may be no previous record of party politics, or where a new party has no record to be judged by. Is it possible – or appropriate – for a foreign organisation to make judgements like this? Ill-chosen criteria could count against new entrants to the party system, or serve to perpetuate the under-representation of social groups which lack significant parties to speak for them.

Nevertheless, a decision to concentrate support on only some eligible parties, or perhaps to lend weight to a process of coalition-building between parties, is appropriate in some cases. One example would be a highly fragmented party system where a considerable number of voters choose parties that do not meet the threshold for parliamentary representation and have no chance of participating in government. Other cases include those where not every democratic or significant party deserves equal help. Even in some poor countries there may be one or two parties that are well financed, courtesy of very wealthy leaders, as in Nigeria. The rest could be disadvantaged if they receive no state funding and represent poorer sections of society.

Cross-party dialogue

Cross-party dialogue involves working across parties, bringing them together to discuss issues that bear on the development of an effective party system. Such issues include codes of conduct for election campaigning, use of the mass media and party funding. The object is not so much to promote one or another party as to encourage the parties collectively to pursue goals that will advance democracy. Joint activities by parties and inter-party programmes for developing 'roadmaps' for change can nurture collective responsibility for establishing and consolidating multi-party democracy.

Many democracy foundations can draw on a range of parties when putting together support teams to work on projects or programmes with overseas partners. In Michael Moore's words, working together in this way "sends a powerful signal to our sister parties… [of] parties working together in the interests of democracy, [and of] governing parties recognising the constitutional role of oppositions".*

This model in its entirety is associated with the Netherlands Institute for Multi-party Democracy (IMD) and its emphasis on encouraging 'dialogue', promoted with some success in several countries over the last few years. It can work well in societies with a recent history of violent conflict. There, the concept of a loyal political opposition may be unfamiliar, even potentially disturbing. The development of a culture of vigorous political competition between parties has to be balanced by encouraging the different parties to co-operate in devising the democratic 'rules of the game'. In that way stronger local 'ownership' of the rules should follow. Joint political dialogue over how to approach conflict management can lay foundations for longer-term party-to-party partnerships. This contributes to nation-building as well as to the building of democracy.

Another way to reinforce this message is by different democracy promotion organisations co-ordinating activities between themselves, especially in the field. This offers the further advantage of making it easier for new or weak parties to cope with the demands of co-operating simultaneously with different international partners. Democracy foundations can also encourage local partners to form umbrella bodies, for example in determining the distribution of financial and material support from international sources. In this way the supporting foundations can avoid suggestions of improper or partisan involvement.

* Michael Moore MP, Vice-Chair, Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

Institutional approaches

The instituational approach considers parties and their weaknesses within the larger context of the institutions that influence and shape the party system. The electoral system is the first obvious source of influence. Second is the way parties are financed and any regulations concerning expenditure in elections. A third example is the regulatory regime that governs party registration and gives legal sanction to party political activities. Advice and other forms of support can be offered on all these matters. The objective is to strengthen the institutional environment for the party system as a whole, rather than to promote individual parties.

The degree of influence depends on the extent to which government power is concentrated in the hands of the executive, and whether the executive is properly accountable to the legislature, especially in presidential or semi-presidential systems. That in turn can have a bearing on whether MPs behave in ways that are accountable to the people. In social science jargon there can be 'agency loss'. 'Agancy loss' occurs between a series of principal agent relationships: from voters to elected representatives, representatives to government and government to individual ministers. In the last instance these delegate further to civil servants. At any point in this chain, the 'principals' may have too little control over the 'agents'.

In theory, all permutations of strong or weak executive, strong or weak parliament and strong or weak parties are possible. The established democracies exhibit a diverse range of combinations in their own practice. And whatever the formal constitutional position, the reality can be different. For instance, on paper a parliament could look strong, but a narrow political group routinely dominates it to the detriment of the party system, as in Yemen.

In practice, there are strong grounds for believing that weak parliaments lead to weak parties. Hence if the parties are to be strengthened, then one solution could lie in addressing weaknesses in parliament. Some parliaments have their powers severely restricted by the constitution, as in highly presidential systems; some are organisationally weak; some may be weak in practice even where the constitution suggests otherwise; some may possess weak legitimacy and low levels of public interest in their work. It may be that no party is weak: executive domination of the legislature is more likely where the ruling party dominates the party system.

However, it is difficult to build a strong plural party system in situations where the 'winner takes all' in elections and where the parties that do not capture the presidency have meagre prospects of exercising political influence. The rise and fall of *ad hoc* parties and rapid changes of party affiliation among politicians – not uncommon in Africa's heavily presidential systems – bring the parties into disrepute. Politicians give an impression of having few or no political principles. MPs cannot build experience of legislative office. The chances of making the executive accountable are diminished.

In these circumstances an indirect approach to supporting the development of sustainable parties and effective party systems could include strengthening the capacity of the parliamentary institutions. Parliamentary committees which scrutinise the executive – and the public accounts committee or its equivalent in particular – merit special consideration. Democracy foundations can help by providing training to committee members and improvements in their information facilities. Help for parliamentary research assistants, for example, could raise the quality of political debate. It might be helpful to brief new MPs on their rights and responsibilities in the chamber, especially where there is a high turnover of elected representatives.

That said, it is usually the case that institutions are the way they are because they serve some powerful interest, a dominant party that controls the executive, for instance. Reforms may then be thwarted. Or there might be a continuity of *informal* political institutions – customs, conventions, social practices – that continue to frustrate the objectives underlying more formal institutional reforms. As with more direct forms of party support, there are no guarantees of a successful outcome.

Political parties in the international party system

Parties learn from parties. They draw strength against the enemies of democracy by forming strategic alliances and combining forces across borders. There is considerable scope for bringing parties together from time to time on a sub-regional or a cross-regional basis or in larger pan-continental forums, to share concerns over the sustainability of democratic systems and the state of parties specifically. Membership of international federations of like-minded parties provides another avenue for exchanging advice and expressing solidarity. In these and other venues information on parameters such as national laws regulating

media freedoms and party finance can be pooled. Discussions can take place on the dominant development agendas of the international agencies and their impact at the party level. Lessons can be shared on best practice in democracy support generally and in party support specifically.

Regional organisations like the Inter-American Forum of Political Parties (of the Organisation of American States) would then be better equipped to support party initiatives at national and local level, not least in those countries where parties are most at risk from an illiberal or authoritarian regime. The established partnership arrangements with the international democracy organisations, ranging from the international Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) to the more partisan foundations, could be consolidated and extended. In Africa three institutionalised parliamentary groupings already operate within the frameworks of the African Union (Pan-African Parliament), East African Community (East African Legislative Assembly) and Southern African Co-operation Council (Southern African Development Community Parliamentary Forum). However, the development in Africa of all forms of party-to-party partnership and networking outside the reach of state control involves financial resources that many of the parties do not possess.

Supporting parties beyond elections

By now it will be clear that political party assistance can take different forms. There have been instances of direct financial subsidies in the past, but these seem to be relatively unusual and there are risks. Large-scale transfers, when not confined to the special circumstances of election campaigns, run the risk of creating dependent parties.

Alternatives include material support such as equipment and the funding of national, regional and international meetings of parties. There are many opportunities for technical assistance and training, such as in developing broadly based organisational structures and deepening policy analytical capabilities. The Institute for Multi-party Democracy's (IMD's) approach to 'facilitating dialogue' between parties, which responds to requests devised by the partner parties themselves, meshes well with the ideal of fostering local ownership. There are settings where what a party may need most is some gesture of international solidarity, protection even, especially if it is being harassed by an overbearing government. And after sub-state conflict the international community can

usefully provide a neutral space in which actors who were previously mutually suspicious will be able to start to talk.

Some people believe that it is especially important for the democracy foundations to work with young people and women specifically, the goal being to improve their chances of reaching significant levels within the party organisation (more on this below).

Informal pressure to observe good practice in the building of a party and in all its activities is a related aspect of party support. This raises important questions about how to assess good practice. Before turning to this, however, there are a number of key issues to introduce.

Key points

Party assistance may need a political edge if it is to be seen as relevant by the parties themselves. This does not mean that all party assistance must be partisan.

There are different arguments for different approaches. The variety of political situations found in emerging and prospective new democracies suggest that different approaches work well in different places. A combination of approaches may offer most promise.

As party assistance extends beyond central and eastern Europe, arguments for multi-partisan or cross-party approaches and for helping institutional forces to impact more positively on the party system as whole look increasingly strong. If more narrowly based party-to-party work is to enhance democracy in the long run it needs to be part of a wider strategy.

The development of closer party-to-party relations across emerging democracies, and admission to the democratic club of party internationals worldwide, can help entrench a democratic culture.

Party assistance should be responsive to the needs as expressed on the ground.

3. Key challenges

Any strategy to meet the challenge of promoting political parties must address four issues. First, it must meet the need of all three 'faces' of parties, namely in parliament, as an organisation and in the country. Second, it must promote stronger women's participation. Third, it must establish an appropriate relationship between support for parties and support for civil society. And fourth, it must take account of parties' significance for the larger development process.

The three 'faces' of a party

Parties fight elections, and in the past much democracy support has concentrated on providing electoral campaign support. Modern political parties are often criticised for being top-down organisations, displaying little intra-party democracy. They are increasingly less likely to be participatory, and more likely to be divorced from society. So if parties are to be viable long-term institutions with roots in society, more attention must be given to issues of party structure and what parties do between elections.

In many African countries for instance, in the absence of strong extra-parliamentary organisations and because local government structures are usually very weak, the parliamentary group may be the only 'permanent' organ a party has. The party is a head without a body in the country. This magnifies the unfortunate tendency for a weak parliamentary institution to contribute to weakness in the parties, particularly those in opposition. Efforts to strengthen the party in parliament could have the unintended effect of increasing even further the distance between party elites and the membership, or its supporters in the country. Conversely, where there is already a degree of actual political participation at the local level – for instance in respect of the involvement of women – there may be anxiety about the possible centralising effects of co-operation between the international democracy foundations and party elites.

How accountable, between elections, a party's leadership should be to the extra-parliamentary party (where one exists), to members, to supporters or the wider electorate, is politically contentious. But the fact is that highly centralised processes for candidate nomination and selection – as exist in many new democracies – undermine local ownership of the party. The imposition of candidates by party headquarters is a common complaint almost everywhere. One clear inference is that efforts should be made to encourage participatory organisational structures that engender greater responsiveness by those at the

centre of the party, and which provide people at the grass-roots with more incentive to get involved and give their support. The public esteem in which the parties and politicians are held should benefit as a result. Thus, for example, SIDA has observed that much of Sweden's support for parties in the past has gone to build up central capacity, seldom facilitating the parties' contact with citizens. From now on, SIDA says, support should aim to move parties closer to citizens. A related exercise would be to strengthen the capacity of NGOs to influence party platforms, and to encourage parties to take account of representations from civil society as they develop their political agendas.

Women's participation

There is a universal consensus among democracy foundations that much more needs to be done around the participation of women in politics.

Women are under-represented in legislatures around the world. The global average is about 15 per cent, marginally greater in Europe but as low as 6.2 per cent in Arab states. South Africa and Mozambique, with around 30 per cent female representation, are exceptional. The more typical situation both reflects and helps perpetuate a low level of women's participation in political parties.

In most countries there are no legal barriers to women standing for election. Their under-representation is explained by other obstacles, in candidate selection, and in the broader political and cultural climate. Usually the prospects are particularly unfavourable in post-conflict societies. Parties show too little awareness of the importance of equitable participation of women alongside men in decision-making. Often, too few resources are made available to women candidates for elections.

Support for a greater role by women in political party development is something that can improve the status of the parties themselves. Participation by women in designing and implementing advocacy campaigns for recruitment and constituency support can boost the mobilisation of women party members, supporters and voters, which in turn can enhance the parties' representational credentials.

The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) has outlined various ways in which the international community can address the situation:

by conducting more research and offering advice on how different types of electoral system affect the chances of women winning elections, for example. So far the evidence suggests that proportional representation systems are the most 'women-friendly'. Positive action strategies include providing support for training and skills development for women candidates. Helping to reinforce networking among women MPs is another. Yet another – and quite high-profile – response is the adoption of electoral quotas. Today, 12 countries including Afghanistan and Iraq have quotas for women actually entrenched in the constitution.

Quotas can have negative effects however, such as the advancement of candidates with no political qualifications and who enjoy no real public support. The introduction of quotas at the stage of compiling lists of candidates does not guarantee election to the legislature. There is strong support for the idea that quotas can 'jump-start' the process of increasing political participation by women; and a corresponding acceptance that they do not offer a permanent solution. In fact, the issue of investing in women's political capacity-building draws attention to a broader and fundamental truth about attempting to promote the development of political parties and party systems. Major influences lie beyond parties and even parliaments. In the case of women these include wider social structures; in the case of parties more generally they include larger issues of development, the impact of global economic forces and the role of the international development institutions.

Supporting parties and civil society

The relationship between support for parties and support for civil society merits careful consideration, given that support to civil society actors is a well-established practice – one that should and will continue. While it is essential to encourage co-operation between parties and civil society organisations, a distance between them is necessary and healthy. Neither should be regarded as subordinate to the other. They have different functions, and the extent to which they overlap or come together in practice will depend on the political conditions at any one time. Carl Gershman has distinguished four political scenarios,* each entailing specific implications for how the international democracy assistance organisations should approach their task.

First, there is a dictatorship or truly authoritarian regime, where there can be no real party competition and party support is virtually impossible. In this setting

*Carl Gershman, President, National Endowment for Democracy, USA.

civil society can serve as a surrogate for parties and should push for a political opening. Giving support to human rights groups based in exile is an example of how the international community can create the political space or a secure environment for this to happen.

The second scenario is where a democratically elected government committed to political reform comes into being. Here, groups representing civil society should help to fashion a democratic state responsive to popular needs and attitudes. Yet civil society can actually be weakened in this period as political parties and government recruit some of their leading activists. Kenya is a case in point. This need not be a problem from the perspective of building democratic governance, but it can give rise to tensions between the parties and NGOs, as each side endeavours to protect its autonomy. Here, parties can help develop NGOs as catalysts for civic advocacy campaigns, and make the most of the NGOs' capabilities to strengthen the policy analysis and policy development functions of parties.

The third scenario – that of post-dictatorial situations where the government has no commitment to democracy – is more difficult to manage. 'Semi-authoritarian regimes' – of which there are many – allow elections but manipulate them by outlawing opposition parties, controlling the media and so on. It is here that co-operation between civil society and opposition political parties is important if there is to be further political breakthrough. Material support to pro-reform coalitions of NGOs and parties can make a difference, and so can support for initiatives to link opposition groups to democratic political forces in the wider region.

Such support is even more critical in the fourth kind of political situation, in war-torn or post-conflict societies. In countries like Afghanistan, support for parties alone is not sufficient to bring democracy. The parties are poorly developed and have no previous experience of participating in democratic processes. It might then be useful to encourage a broad national civic and political coalition or movement, like the citizen movements that came together in central Europe in the immediate aftermath of communism. In time, a new party system could emerge, if the peace is stabilised.

Parties in the wider development process

On the one hand, the forces of globalisation put limits on what political parties can achieve with political power: they restrict the social and economic policy choices that parties can plausibly offer the electorate. In a country like Sierra Leone, the pre-eminent demand on parties is to attend to people's basic needs. The observation that "ideology is a luxury", made by Zainab Bangura, who founded Sierra Leone's Movement for Progress Party and contested the presidency in 2002, suggests that the scope for politicians to compete by offering alternative programmes is limited. Moreover, their ability to fulfil promises of material improvement is constrained by the country's situation in the international financial and economic systems. This is typical of most developing countries.

On the other hand, organisations concerned with pro-poor development, like the UK's DfID, are increasingly aware of the importance of political and governance factors. In countries where the main controversies are less over different policy initiatives than whether a party will put them into practice once elected, the potential significance of parties is coming to be appreciated more widely.

A central concern in many developing countries is the weak commitment of the governing institutions to reducing poverty, and the inability of the poorest members of society to apply the pressure necessary to make it a higher priority. The patronage basis of many political systems provides part of the explanation. A shift towards pro-poor development requires, among other things, a change in the way ordinary people see themselves – from subjects, or clients, to citizens who have entitlements, who will demand benefits as a right. Transforming the basis of collective action away from highly personalised modes of political interaction, and towards more institutionalised representation – such as by political parties – could make a positive contribution to change.

Those providing official development assistance can help in several ways. First, by a willingness to support a broader array of civil society organisations, especially those with inclusive arrangements for women and for the most vulnerable social groups. And second, by providing long-term support for critical institutions like legislatures and parties as well as civil society.

The development of sound public financial management systems involves more than making information accessible. There must be investment in local capacity for policy analysis – and that means among the parties too.

Parliaments – in contrast to the representatives of civil society – have only rarely been involved in consultations over poverty reduction strategy papers. Burkina Faso is one of just a handful of exceptions. It is essential that parliaments participate in governments' strategy for poverty reduction if the 'wish lists' for budgetary spending are to be transformed into realistic financial planning, and if power over decisions is not to reside solely in the hands of the finance ministries and foreign donors. Here DfID – from the world of development aid – and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) – the USA-based democracy foundation – seem to be in agreement. However, in practice their experience is very different. DfID has had less to do with parties than some other development co-operation agencies, while the NDI has programmes on the ground to involve parties in parliament in the poverty strategy decision process – in Malawi for instance.

All partners in international development co-operation should do more to consider what impact their economic policy and technical interventions will have on the political environment, and parties in particular.

Key points

Parties must connect with society if they are to perform their democratic function properly and if they are to gain the respect of the people. Democracy support to parties must not neglect this fundamental point.

One of the greatest challenges of promoting parties and party systems in emerging democracies is ensuring equitable representation and participation by women.

There is not a choice to be made between supporting political parties (or party systems) and supporting civil society. Instead, the question is how best to address the needs of both sectors and optimise relations between them.

Development agencies grapple with the problem of how to translate 'empowerment' at the local level into something that can have an impact at the national level of decision-making on finance and development. The idea that parties have a role to play here and that forms of party assistance could be mainstreamed into development assistance is attracting attention in organisations like USAID, the World Bank and the UNDP.

4. Does party support work?

What kinds of party support work best, under what conditions, and why? Can an approach that appears to work well in one situation be replicated and achieve equal success elsewhere? There are no definitive answers, but the first ten years of party work in central and eastern Europe and elsewhere have borne fruit, and provide some evidence about what works best, in what circumstances and why.

At the present time evaluating party assistance is an underdeveloped art. It can be difficult to distinguish the effects of party assistance on parties from other influences. Furthermore, isolating the effects on a party or parties is not the same as identifying the effects on a whole party system. And it requires another leap to then judge how party support affects sustainable democracy. Yet it is the consequences for democracy and democratisation that are at the root of all these efforts.

Moreover, notions of what constitutes successful support or failure might have to be tailored to the society in question. They will have to take account of trends in the larger environment; in the economy, for instance. The results will be sensitive to the timing of an evaluation.

However, despite the obvious difficulties, it will become increasingly necessary to develop methodologies to evaluate the effectiveness of party assistance for strengthening democracy. There will be political pressure to demonstrate good performance.

Developing a set of standards or benchmarks for party development is one suggestion. These could include levels of financial transparency, the development of a membership base, internal party democracy and opportunities for political progression by women. At the systemic level, public confidence and trust in the parties, and the degree to which political parties are at the heart of the country's democracy-building agenda, could be assessed.

A logical corollary of this is that the democracy foundations themselves adopt benchmarks against which to measure their own performance in extending support to parties and aiding the party system. There are several views on how this might and should be done. One view is that the key to evaluation is to make sure that objectives of party support are clearly set out in advance. The methodology will then follow more easily. Another is that the purpose of evaluation should not be just to pass judgment, but should be seen as a tool for learning. The point is to make sure that the practice of support improves and that

better results are produced next time. A third consideration is that easy-to-measure indicators of performance, while they have their attractions, may not be the most revealing ones and could actually give rise to misleading accounts.

Finally, in a context framed by democratic goals and objectives, the evaluation methods themselves should provide opportunities to embody the values of democracy. Partner organisations in the emerging democracies must have the opportunity to participate in devising the analytical framework and in implementing the evaluations. The process will then be a learning exercise for all partners. Ideally evaluation should take place throughout the life of a project instead of being left to the end, allowing the benefits to be incorporated in a timely fashion. Ideally, the lessons should be shared among the democracy promotion foundations. This is another reason for the foundations to work together more closely.

Key points

Demands for rigorous evaluation of party assistance are likely to increase.

Democracy promoters need to be clear about what they hope to see from party assistance in order to know how to evaluate it.

Democracy foundations need to be clear about the reasons for evaluating. Evaluations can serve as an instrument of accountability and they can provide a valuable learning tool for all partners. Too much emphasis on accountability may make them less valuable as a learning tool.

5. The way forward

Traditionally, international development co-operation has shied away from involvement with political parties. However, the last decade has seen considerable emphasis put on governance issues and on creating or recreating state capacity. And in post-conflict societies development work inevitably includes state-building. In addition, there has been a growing momentum for democracy promotion to be mainstreamed in international co-operation more generally.

There is an emerging consensus that mainstreaming party support in democracy assistance has to be the new frontier. Parties have been called the weakest link in the democratic process. It is time to move the focus of attention beyond elections, to explore ways of maintaining and building party organisations that are democratically organised and representative of society, serving democracy between election campaigns too. They should gain in public trust and support as a consequence.

It is important to note that representatives of democratic political forces in emerging democracies are themselves calling for more international support for their efforts to build viable parties and sustainable party systems, in the cause of democratic advance. The demand is there, and it is authentic.

Although the general direction is clear, there are probably still more questions than answers about the best way to go forward. But a significant number of organisations in international development co-operation and democracy promotion are coming to the view that delay will push back – perhaps terminally – the advancement of sustainable democracy. The relevant question then is not about whether party support is desirable but about how to do it, and where to start. For there is so much to do; and so much that can be done.

As international party support increases, both the need and the opportunity to share experience will increase. Parties, especially fragile new parties, have limited capacity to develop quickly. Improved dialogue and co-ordination among democracy foundations can make life easier for them. The 2004 Westminster Foundation for Democracy/Wilton Park conference on 'Achieving Sustainable Political Change in Emerging Democracies: The political party challenge' – on which this publication is based – is an example of how this can be done. Naturally, different foundations might want to offer their own distinctive approach, as befits each organisation's individual mandates, strengths and traditions. There is talk of developing a specifically European profile. At the same time, and in the words of a leading American player,* "there is more that brings us together than divides us".

* Kenneth Wollack, President, National Democratic Institute.

It is important not to inflate expectations about how much party support can achieve and how quickly. In some places durable results will need a lengthy and sustained commitment. At the same time, it will be increasingly necessary to demonstrate results. That means developing the methodologies for evaluation, which in turn rests on having a clear sense of the objectives. Different regions and countries pose different scenarios and call for differences of approach, so a good understanding of the local specifics is absolutely essential. For example, in Russia the challenge right now is to keep opposition parties alive; whereas in Africa there is scope for inter-party dialogue over how to move beyond the dominant party situation. By contrast, in Latin America there are entire party systems in retreat, and needing reconstruction. The most daunting challenges of all probably lie in the Middle East, where there are virtually no precedents of party support of any description, and where for most of the countries the idea of liberal democracy is unfamiliar.

Providing training opportunities is one obvious approach to the weaknesses that afflict individual parties, but it is no panacea. Attention must also be given to the underlying conditions that hold back the development of coherent and effective party systems as a whole.

Everywhere, the purpose should be to provide support to local initiatives, not to export some model of a party or party system that may reflect an image that no longer exists – perhaps never did exist – even in the well-established democracies. The goal is to share democracy's values and democratic principles, not to transfer party blueprints or models. And for democracy assistance organisations to go out 'party hunting' would make no sense at all.

Party work should not be conceived in isolation but must take account of the relationships with other major components of the political system as a whole, including civil society, the media and legislature. Bringing parties and parliaments into policy deliberations with donors on strategies for pro-poor development offers opportunities to bring democracy and development agencies closer together. This will help parties improve their capability to analyse policy. And because building parties and party systems that can sustain democracy is a long-term commitment, the democracy foundations themselves need an appropriate and secure financial base.

There are good political, security and other reasons why the established democracies should support the spread of democracy. To do this effectively means giving greater consideration to the crucial contribution parties make to democracy and democratisation. The international community should now put more emphasis on exploring and supporting political parties as part of the challenge of achieving sustainable political change in emerging democracies.

Conference participants

Speakers

Zainab BANGURA, Chair of the Advisory Board of the Network for Collaborative Peace Building, and Political Leader, Movement for Progress Party, Sierra Leone

Peter BURNELL, Professor of Politics, University of Warwick, UK

Thomas CAROTHERS, Director of the Democracy and Rule of Law Project, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA

Gordon CRAWFORD, Senior Lecturer, School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds, UK

Karen FOGG, Secretary-General, International Institute for Democracy and Assistance, Stockholm, Sweden

Jadranka FOSTER, Programme Director, EU Neighbours Team, and Deputy to the Chief Executive, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, UK

David FRENCH, Chief Executive, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, UK

Mike GAPES MP, Chairman, Westminster Foundation for Democracy Board of Governors, UK

Carl GERSHMAN, President, National Endowment for Democracy, USA

Colin JENNINGS, Chief Executive, Wilton Park, UK

Chris LANGDON, Conference Director, Wilton Park, UK

Michelle SCHIMPP, Senior Elections Adviser, USA Agency for International Development, USA

Lars SVÅSAND, Professor, Department of Comparative Politics, University of Bergen, currently visiting Professor, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia

Sue UNSWORTH, Chief Governance Adviser, Department for International Development, UK

Those attending

Dr Haifa ABU GHAZALEH, Regional Programme Director, United Nations Development Fund for Women – Arab States, Jordan

Georgina T ASHWORTH, OBE, Trustee, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, UK

Hon. Lydia BALEMEZI MP, National Assembly of Uganda, Uganda

Jon BENJAMIN, Head, Human Rights Policy Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, UK

James BEWSHER, Director, James Bewsher Associates, UK

Helena BJUREMALM, Democracy Assistance Co-ordinator, Division for Democratic Governance, Swedish International Development Agency, Sweden

Philippa A BROOM, Westminster Foundation for Democracy Programme Director, Conservative Party, UK

Rachel M COWBURN, International Manager, Labour Party, UK

Frances D'SOUZA CMG, Executive Director, The REDRESS Trust, UK

Ben M DICKINSON, Governance Adviser, Department for International Development, UK

Chris DOYLE, Director, Council for Arab British Understanding, UK

Jonathan M DUNN, Head, Democracy Section, Human Rights Policy Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, UK

Olawale A FAPOHUNDA, Managing Partner, Legal Resources Consortium, Nigeria

Alan C GEORGE, Principal Consultant, Calibre Learning Ltd, UK

Dr Scott L GREER, Research Fellow, Constitution Unit, University College London, UK

Professor Robert J D HAZELL, Director, Constitution Unit, University College London, UK

Milica HOWELL, E-democracy Programme Co-ordinator, Hansard Society, UK

Professor Mary KALDOR, Director, Centre for the Study of Global Governance, London School of Economics, UK

Howard A KNIGHT, Consultant, Howard Knight, UK

Gordon LANE, Finance Director, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, UK

Sonja A LICHT, President, Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence, Serbia and Montenegro

Elizabeth McCALL, Civil Society Adviser, Oslo Governance Centre, United Nations Development Programme, Norway

Michael K MOORE MP, Vice-Chair, Board of Governors, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, UK

Médard MULANGALA LWAKABWANGA MP, National Assembly, Democratic Republic of Congo

Dr Oras S NAJI MP, Parliament of Yemen, Yemen

Marina NARNOR, Programme Manager, Africa, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, UK

Matthew NEUHAUS, Director, Political Affairs Division, Commonwealth Secretariat, UK

Richard E C NORMINGTON, Executive Secretary, International Democrat Union, UK

Dr Michael PINTO-DUSCHINSKY, Chair, Political Science Association, Brunel University, UK

Anja RIISER, Head, Secretariat, Norwegian Centre for Democracy Support, Norway

Alex ROMANIUC, Programme Officer, Europe, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, UK

Professor Mohamed A SALIH, Department of Political Science, University of Leiden / Institute of Social Studies, Netherlands

Christopher M SANDS, Director, Strategic Planning and Evaluation, International Republican Institute, USA

Nabila SATTAR, International Projects Manager, Labour Party, UK

Kristian SORENSEN, Chief Executive Officer, Dialogue Development, Denmark

David A THIRLBY, Smaller Parties International Project Manager, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, UK

Robert W THOMAS, Research Analyst, Central Europe and Eastern Adriatic Research Group, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, UK

Roel H R VON MEIJENFELDT, Executive Director, Institute for Multi-party Democracy, Netherlands

Carla WELCH, Programme Manager, Europe, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, UK

Kenneth D WOLLACK, President, National Democratic Institute, USA

Dr Richard A YOUNGS, Senior Fellow, Department of Politics and International Studies, University of East Anglia, UK

Dr Daniel ZOVATTO, Regional Director for Latin America International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Costa Rica

Abbreviations

DfID	Department for International Development (UK)
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office (UK)
IDEA	Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
IMD	Institute for Multi-party Democracy
NDI	National Democratic Institute
NED	National Endowment for Democracy
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SIDA	Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
WFD	Westminster Foundation for Democracy

Westminster Foundation for Democracy

Building Better Democracies

Why political parties matter

Peter Burnell is Professor of Politics at the University of Warwick

Democracy in the modern world is inconceivable without political parties. They recruit leaders, disseminate information, connect society and the state and manage conflicts of interest. But political parties around the world have suffered a crisis of confidence in recent years. Sometimes seen as corrupt, run by people more interested in their own advancement than the good of those they represent, parties are often dismissed altogether as the last institution able to contribute to democratic development.

It would be a mistake to give up on political parties. But what is the best way to rehabilitate this crucial institution? How can parties in emerging democracies be supported to take their place in healthy, representative political systems? And how can development agencies reconcile their political neutrality with support for the development of overtly partisan organisations?

The Westminster Foundation for Democracy and Wilton Park gathered together key thinkers and practitioners from the world of democracy development to address these questions, in a conference in March 2004. This publication – based on the discussions they had and the conclusions they reached – makes a key contribution to the wider work of promoting democracy around the world. It will be useful for anyone who works, or takes an interest, in the field of political development.

"One of the most worthwhile, productive and interesting events I have attended in a long while… In the future, when political party subjects are being addressed, the Wilton Park discussion will be referred to as a milestone."

Ken Wollack, President, National Democratic Institute, USA

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