

Democracy Assistance: The Question of Strategy

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The current expansion of efforts by most western donors to use assistance to promote democracy in other countries raises many questions about the forms and functions of such aid. This article addresses the question of strategy: what approach to democracy and democratization does such assistance embody? The analysis concentrates on US aid although the argument is advanced that the democracy-related aid of other donors does not differ substantially in terms of basic approach. The article finds that although US democracy assistance rests on a conventional model of western liberal democracy, it also rests on a less clearly-established model of democratization that can best be characterized as one of institutional modeling. The sources of this model of democratization as well as its practical strengths and weaknesses are examined. The article concludes with an assessment of the ways in which aid practitioners are attempting to move beyond the existing approach to more innovative, effective strategies of democratic promotion.

Introduction

External aid relating to the promotion of democracy has increased sharply in the past ten years. As democratic transitions spread through Latin America and parts of Asia in the 1980s, many Western donor agencies began to consider how they might widen their assistance portfolios to support this trend. Some donors began to carry out programmes which they specifically conceived of as pro-democratic, particularly relating to elections and human rights. The dramatic expansion of democratization in the early 1990s in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, Sub-Saharan Africa, and elsewhere fuelled this trend, prompting donors to undertake in earnest the development of democracy-related assistance programmes. The rapid growth of such assistance in the first half of the 1990s reflected not only the desire of donor governments to support what appeared to be an almost global democratic expansion, but also their greatly increased latitude to engage in politically-related work due to the end of the cold war and the decline of ideologically-oriented geo-politics.

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By the mid-1990s, most major western donors were undertaking significant activity explicitly concerned with the promotion of democracy. Canada had established the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, sponsored the creation of the Democracy Promotion Unit at the Organization of American States, and was incorporating a number of democracy-building initiatives into its official development assistance. The United States had enshrined democracy promotion as one of the four core priorities of its aid programme and initiated democracy-related programmes in almost every country receiving US aid. Germany was continuing its long-standing efforts to support democratic development in many countries through the *Stiftungen*, the political party foundations, and the German Ministry of Economic Co-operation was debating the possibility of itself pursuing democracy programmes. The Dutch, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish official aid agencies had all begun to sponsor democracy programmes in parallel with and sometimes overlapping with aid to promote human rights and good governance. The European Union had created special assistance funds for promoting democracy in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and Latin America. British official development assistance limited itself to a new emphasis on promoting good governance rather than democracy *per se*, although the British Parliament did establish the Westminster Foundation for Democracy in 1992, an organization devoted to democracy promotion in the developing world and the former communist societies of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.¹

A duality of purpose generally characterizes these recent western aid efforts aimed at democracy promotion. In some cases, they are based primarily on the idea of promoting democracy for its own sake, as a political good that will improve the lives of citizens by bringing more freedom, political representation, and governmental accountability. This outlook is most common with regard to Latin America and Eastern Europe, two regions where there exists a strong regional impetus to establish democracy as a prevailing political norm. In other cases, democracy-related aid is primarily rooted in the notion that democracy is a valuable goal of external aid because it will further social and economic development. In such a view, democracy is less an end in itself than one component of an overall approach to attaining sustainable development. This outlook has been more common in connection with democracy aid to Africa and Asia, regions where the overall normative status of democracy is relatively weak and where economic issues are paramount, due to the abysmal performance of many African societies and the strong performance of many Asian ones.

The rise of democracy aid presents many questions for inquiry and analysis, including the full range of motivations and interests behind such

efforts, the modalities of project implementation, and the all-important issue of the actual efficacy of the aid. This article concentrates on one particular facet of the subject, the question of strategy, that is to say, what approaches do donors take to promoting democracy? On what models or theories of democracy and democratization are these approaches based? If underlying models or theories are identifiable, what is their source? Western economic assistance to the developed world has passed through various theoretical frameworks over the years but in general the roots of economic assistance efforts in economic theory have generally been fairly clear. The question naturally arises as to whether political development aid has a parallel theoretical base.

This inquiry into the strategies of democracy aid focuses on the US experience. US democracy aid efforts do have various characteristics that are specific to US aid policy and US diplomacy generally. Nonetheless, as will be argued, the US experience in this domain is not fundamentally different from that of other donors and as such constitutes a useful entry point to the overall question of strategy in democracy assistance.

The Rise of US Democracy Assistance

The emergence of the current wave of US democracy assistance occurred in the early to mid-1980s and was part of or at least related to the heightened cold-war policy of the early Reagan years. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a government-funded but privately-run organization devoted to promoting democracy abroad, was set up in 1984 with an \$18 million annual budget (currently \$30 million). The idea for such an organization had germinated in the 1970s but found greater receptivity with the Reagan administration which saw democracy promotion as an essential tool for fighting what was known in the United States as the war of ideas with the Soviet Union. Although the Endowment was soon eclipsed in size and significance as a democracy promotion actor by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), its founding concretely marked the start of the new trend toward democracy assistance.²

Within official US development assistance, democracy programming got its start in the mid-1980s as a series of programmes sponsored by USAID in Central America relating to elections, judicial reform and civic education. These programmes supported the broader US effort to promote transitions to elected, civilian rule in Central America which in turn was one part (alongside an active programme of military aid) of an overall US policy that was primarily focused not on democracy but on combating leftist insurgencies in the region. The anti-communist roots of the US democracy initiatives at both the NED and USAID faded as the 1980s progressed, the

could war orientation of US policy diminished, and the democratic trend spread. US democracy assistance efforts in the second half of the 1980s in Chile, Paraguay, Haiti, South Korea, the Philippines and Pakistan, for example, reflected the growth of such assistance as a positive response to democratization wherever it appeared, with democracy a goal in and of itself rather than a means to an anti-communist end.³

USAID's democracy-related programming expanded rapidly in the early 1990s, reaching more countries in Latin America and Asia and spreading widely into Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union and Africa, and even to a limited extent the Middle East. Spending on such assistance by the US government grew to approximately \$400 million per year. It was in these years that democracy promotion was elevated to the status of a core priority of US foreign aid. Internal bureaucratic structures were developed to institutionalize democracy promotion within USAID, an agency that had long focused almost exclusively on social and economic development. The head of USAID in the first Clinton administration came to the job from a democracy promotion organization, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, and pressed for greater attention to democracy assistance.⁴

The Basic Strategy

Although US democracy assistance is carried out in a tremendously diverse range of countries, such as Guatemala, Egypt, Ukraine, Zambia, Nepal, Mongolia and Albania, the basic approach of the assistance is largely similar everywhere. The assistance programming is based on a set list of institutions and processes, primarily institutions, that US aid providers believe are the constituent elements of democracy. The items on the list are set forward as desired endpoints. Aid providers assess recipient countries in terms of how their major socio-political institutions compare to these endpoints. Aid programmes are then designed to address the gaps between the idealized endpoints and the actual state of the correspondent institutions and processes in the recipient countries.

The list of institutions and processes on which US democracy assistance is based consists of three main categories: the electoral arena, governmental institutions, and civil society. Within the electoral arena, the main emphasis of US democracy assistance is usually the holding of elections – presidential, parliamentary, and local – with the goal being free and fair elections. Such aid consists of technical assistance to electoral commissions to improve the administration of elections, support for voter education campaigns implemented by local civic groups or in some cases by electoral commissions, and election monitoring by international delegations or

domestic organizations formed for that purpose.⁵ A second area of assistance related to the electoral arena is political party development. In many countries US democracy assistance has included programmes designed to strengthen the main political parties, primarily through technical assistance and training on campaign methods and institutional development, with the aim being a party system marked by a limited number of national political parties differentiated by mild ideological shadings, with genuine national institutional reach, and strong campaign capacities.⁶

The second category, democracy aid relating to governing institutions, seeks to help build democracy from the top down. In countries where the political opening or democratic transition includes the writing of a new constitution, the United States often offers constitutional assistance, typically expert advice, conferences, exchange visits and seminars on constitutionalism and constitutional analysis, to help steer the country toward adopting a constitution that guarantees democratic government and a full range of political and civil rights.⁷ The most common type of democracy assistance within the category of governing institutions is parliamentary assistance. Such programmes, which usually consist of training for staff and members of parliament and technical assistance for parliamentary libraries, research units and public affairs offices, seek to strengthen the overall institutional capacities of parliaments and help them operate in a more effective, representative manner.⁸

Another major area of the US democracy assistance portfolio relating to governing institutions is judicial reform. Aid for judicial reform has grown to encompass a wide range of activities designed to increase the efficiency and independence of judicial systems, including training of judges, prosecutors and other legal personnel, technical assistance relating to court administration, underwriting the publication of court decisions, providing law books and legal materials, and supporting the establishment of arbitration mechanisms and other forms of alternative dispute resolution.⁹ A final type of assistance directed at governing institutions, local government strengthening, was not initially a large part of US democracy assistance but has been growing rapidly in the past several years. Such assistance typically consists of training and technical assistance that seeks to increase the capacity of local government officials to perform administrative, fiscal, and developmental functions, as well as policy dialogue with the central government to encourage it to devolve powers to local government structures.¹⁰

A notable characteristic of US democracy assistance aimed at governing institutions is that it almost always concentrates on all the institutions *except* those of the executive branch – that is to say, legislatures, judiciaries and

local government. The underlying idea is that democratization will be advanced not merely by rendering more accountable and effective each of the different sectors of governing institutions but also by a relative deconcentration of power away from the executive to other branches of government.

The third general category of US democracy assistance, civil society assistance, is potentially very broad given that civil society constitutes the whole range of intermediate associations and institutions between the citizens of a country and their government. In practice, however, US assistance explicitly directed at strengthening civil society in other countries largely falls into three relatively bounded categories: advocacy-oriented non-governmental organizations (NGOs), media, and unions. The single most favoured area of US civil society assistance is that of advocacy NGOs, such as human rights groups, election monitoring organizations, and environmental organizations.¹¹ In the view of US aid organizations, the crucial feature that distinguishes such organizations from social service-oriented NGOs, or from the many other intermediate associations and groups that usually exist within societies such as kinship organizations, sports clubs, and cultural associations, is that they seek to influence governmental policy on some specific set of issues. It is this policy-oriented advocacy function that US aid officials hold to be the crux of the pro-democratic function of civil society – advocacy is considered the key mechanism by which citizens interests are expressed to the government.¹² Reflecting this tendency to focus on this subset of civil society as though it is *the* essential part of civil society, USAID in recent years has begun to refer to advocacy NGOs as 'civil society organizations'.

Support for media development is a second area of US democracy assistance within the category of civil society assistance. The emphasis of such assistance, which generally consists of training programmes for journalists, and sometimes equipment donations to newspapers, radio stations or television stations, is on fostering the growth of independent, professionalized media. The third component of this category, aid to foreign labour unions, is an old form of US aid. During the cold war, US labour assistance followed a strict anti-communist rationale; it sought to build up unions not affiliated with leftist political parties or movements. In recent years the labour work is justified in pro-democratic terms under the argument that strong, independent unions are a crucial component of democracy.¹³

In attempting to promote democracy in any one particular country, US aid officials have generally attempted to develop programmes in all three of these general categories of democracy-related assistance, under the general notion that each category represents one leg of a three-legged stool that is

democracy. Each programme usually focuses on one component institution or process on the basic list. Particular institutions are of course emphasized more in some countries than others as a result of budget constraints, perceived opportunities, and the personal preferences of the particular aid officials involved. And specific programmes take on particular shapes in response to local conditions. The overall range of programme areas, types, and goals, however, is highly consistent. A certain evolution has occurred since the mid-1980s in the emphasis of US democracy assistance *among* the three categories. Elections were initially by far the largest area of US democracy assistance, as the United States responded to the wave of transitional elections spreading first across Latin America and then across various other regions. As transitional elections gave way to newly-installed, elected governments, US democracy assistance shifted to a greater focus on governmental institutions, particularly parliaments and judiciaries. And in the past several years, civil society strengthening has expanded rapidly, eclipsing governing institutions as the major focus of US democracy assistance. This latter shift is the result of several factors – some disillusionment with programmes in which parliaments and judicial systems absorb large amounts of assistance without evidencing much change; the arrival to power of the Clinton administration and the generally greater inclination among US liberals compared to US conservatives to support 'bottom-up' rather than 'top-down' approaches to democracy promotion; and the fact of cutbacks in US aid budgets, prompting aid officials to eschew large-scale government institution programmes for smaller NGO-focused efforts.

What Model?

There is little mystery about the model of democracy upon which the basic strategy of democracy assistance is based. It is what might be called the conventional western model of liberal democracy, or as will be discussed below, not just a western model but in some ways a quite US-specific blueprint. Democracy is equated with regular elections, a constitution guaranteeing basic political and civil rights, a three-part governing structure (made up of a reasonably competent, accountable executive branch, a relatively independent national legislature, and an independent judiciary), viable local government structures, national political parties, independent trade unions, independent media, and at least some advocacy NGOs capable of channeling citizens' demands to the government.¹⁴ This model is more institutionally-oriented and specific than the standard US political science definitions of democracy which tend to centre around elections and respect for basic political and civil rights.¹⁵ It stays clear, however, of the more

result-oriented, socio-economic models which maintain that democracy must entail a certain level of social justice and economic dignity for all citizens.

Although the model of *democracy* underlying US democracy assistance is quite clear, the assumed model of *democratization* is less obvious. Basically, democratization is to advance as countries progressively transform their major socio-political institutions to resemble those of western democracies. According to this model, the transformative process begins with a political opening in which a non-democratic regime opens up the political system, either due to its waning strength and legitimacy, rising popular pressure for political liberalization, or both. The political opening gains momentum and leads to national elections, and in some cases, to the drafting and adoption of a new constitution. Once an elected government is in place, the transition proceeds with the rationalization and democratization of government institutions and the simultaneous strengthening and diversification of civil society.

This concept of democratization can be characterized as one of *institutional modelling*, the underlying idea being that if each major socio-political institution can become like counterpart institutions in western democracies, the society as a whole will become democratic. As envisioned in US democracy promotion efforts, this transformative process has a naturalistic, self-reinforcing quality – it is to be a process of peaceful, gradualistic political change characterized by the habituation and socialization of an ever-widening range of socio-political actors in basic democratic norms and procedures. Potential conflicts over power and resources are to be defused by the progressive incorporation of all societal groups into the new system.

The presumed role of democracy assistance is to facilitate this process of modelling. Each democracy aid project in a particular country aims to shape a particular sector or institution along the lines of a western counterpart. This is why training and technical assistance are by far the most common modalities of US democracy assistance. Democracy assistance in any one country is a sea of training efforts – of judges, court administrators, prosecutors, police, parliamentarians, parliamentary staff, politicians, election commissioners, election monitors, mayors, city councillors, union officials, journalists, human rights advocates, civics teachers, and many others. US aid providers conceive of democracy assistance primarily as a process of knowledge transfer and behavioural training in which a wide range of persons in recipient societies are to think and act along the lines of what aid providers believe are essential for democracy.

An important distinction to note is that whereas the model of *democracy* underlying US democracy assistance is directly taken from US experience,

the model of *democratization* embodied in the assistance is not. The process of institutional transformation or modelling described above is not drawn from the US experience of democratization or the experience of other western democracies. In their project documents and internal discussions, US aid providers rarely make reference to how democratization occurred in the United States or western Europe. Despite the ever-present idea of US-style democracy as a desired endpoint of US democracy assistance efforts, little thinking about how democratization occurred in the United States – other than a vague sense of the importance of a good constitution and adherence to democratic norms by the early leaders – informs US providers as they grapple with promoting democracy abroad. And the complex political paths by which democracy arose in many western European countries, involving embattled aristocracies, and landlords, rising bourgeoisie, and emerging industrial working classes, seem historically remote and of uncertain relevance to US democracy promoters. With their armed struggles, ideological passions, economic conflicts and strong class divisions, such histories are quite different from the tranquil, gradualistic notion of democratization underlying US programmes.

The Sources of the Model

The model of democratization embodied in US democracy assistance is not drawn from the domestic political experience of the United States or other established democracies. Neither is it borrowed from the world of academic theory. During the same years that US democracy assistance was in full expansion, the late 1980s and early 1990s, US and other political scientists were producing a growing flood of academic writing on democratization, especially on the democratic transitions in Latin America and southern Europe.¹⁶ Yet that body of work, which has continued to prosper in the mid-1990s with 'consolidology' taking over where 'transitology' left off, has remained separate from the domain of US democracy assistance. In USAID's project papers, assessments, and strategy documents relating to democracy programmes, there is little reference to academic writings on democratization. There has been surprisingly little borrowing of concepts in the assistance programmes from the academic literature. A critical element of the 'transitology' literature on Latin America, for example, was the concept of national 'pacts'.¹⁷ Yet one would look in vain in the many US documents from the second half of the 1980s dealing with democracy assistance in Latin America for any reference to the concept of pacts. And neither would one find the concepts of pact formation or promoting pact formation implicit in the actual programmes.

There are a number of reasons for this lack of connection between US

democracy assistance programmes and academic theories of democratization. In the first place, academic studies of democratization are generally backward-looking and explanatory rather than forward-looking and predictive. Yet the essential questions facing the aid practitioner confronted with the challenge of designing a democracy programme concern what can or will happen in the future. Academic studies attempt to explain the internal causes and dynamics of transition processes, not to examine how external assistance might be applied to affect a political process. In addition, even if academic studies do contain useful ideas for the practitioner about democratization, they present competing theories which the practitioner has little basis for choosing between. An aid official perusing the 'transitology' literature in the early 1990s to help identify the key causal factors behind democratic transitions, for example, might first learn from O'Donnell and Schmitter that such transitions are best understood as complex negotiating processes by state and opposition elites as well as newly-mobilizing civil society actors.¹⁸ Turning then to Przeworski, however, he or she would be instructed to think instead in terms of a strategic choice model focusing on socio-political actors responding to perceived societal opportunities.¹⁹ But then if he or she consulted *The Third Wave* by Samuel Huntington, the emphasis would be on the role of ideology, political culture, religion, socio-economic structures and an eclectic range of other factors.²⁰ The further the aid official delved into the literature the more he or she would be convinced either that almost everything in a society is crucial to a process of democratic transition or that academics have achieved no greater certainty on the subject than have practitioners.

Much more mundane factors than conceptual multiplicity contribute to the separation of academic work and assistance programmes in the field of democratization. Practitioners have a low tolerance for the political science jargon frequently found in academic analyses of democratization. Ideological rifts between the academy and the government have also played a role. In the 1980s, for example, many US academics grappling with issues of democratic change in Latin America had a fundamentally different political perspective from US officials (US Latin Americanists often having been much to the left politically of US officials in that period) and the two groups shared a fair amount of mutual antipathy. And perhaps most mundane of all, but perhaps as important as anything else, most US aid officials simply do not have the time to delve regularly into academic literature; their hours at work are filled with a series of pressing, short-term bureaucratic tasks that render very difficult the possibility of trying to find and read the academic literature that might be relevant to their work.

If the institution-modelling approach of US democracy assistance derives neither from US domestic political experience nor from academic

theory, from where then does it come? The basic answer is that it is drawn from the actual experience of the democratic transitions that the assistance is attempting to support. The many attempted democratic transitions of the 1980s and early 1990s in Latin America, eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, Africa and Asia, though varied in many particulars, seemed (at least initially) to share a basic pattern that was unlike the democratization processes of previous eras in what are now the established western liberal democracies: they were rapid openings in which elites embraced the idea of a democratic transition, led their countries through transitional elections and then set out on a path of democratic consolidation consisting of, at least rhetorically, reforms to shape the major socio-political institutions along the lines of similar institutions in established democracies. Two distinctive features of this pattern of transitions particularly shaped the western assistance response to it. First, as political openings spread quickly to a host of unexpected places where only a few years before the possibility of democratization appeared remote, it suddenly seemed that democracy did not depend on any deeper structures or underlying factors of social, cultural, economic and political life, only on the political will of the elites. Second, as political openings advanced across the various regions there seemed to be little disagreement about the forms democracy should take; societies everywhere seemed to be embarking on similar projects of achieving western-style democratic socio-political institutions. Western countries seeking to support these political transitions, therefore, were led by their perceptions of the transitions to focus aid on the processes of institutional transformation going on in the transitional countries.

The US approach to democracy assistance derives not only from the perceived nature of the democratic transitions themselves, but also from a certain common-sense logic that assistance officials apply to the task. When US aid officers or consultants are confronted with designing democracy assistance projects for a particular country, their response is usually the following: compare that society, institution by institution, sector by sector, with their own model of democracy, see where the discrepancies are between the model and the country in question, and then create projects that seek to bring the major institutions in line with the model. The focus, in other words, is largely on endpoints rather than process, with the purpose of assistance viewed as being to help reproduce the desired endpoints.

Assessing the Core Strategy

Some Strengths

A number of serious deficiencies afflict the basic strategy of US democracy assistance. At the same time, however, the strategy has several strengths that

have helped sustain it. Perhaps most importantly, it has an undeniable common sense appeal within the US context – it corresponds closely to a model of democracy with which Americans are familiar, it is easy to explain, and it seems feasible. Given the necessity of building support for democracy assistance within the US government, development community, media, and policy community generally, it has been crucial for US assistance providers to have a strategy that can be easily explained to a wide variety of persons: For example an independent, honest judiciary is critical to democracy; country X's judiciary is severely flawed, therefore we will help make it work better. An accountable, competent legislature is a foundation stone of democracy; country Y's parliament is weak, therefore we will help strengthen it, and so forth.

An additional attraction of the strategy, at least in terms of bureaucratic politics, is its broad-based, inclusive nature. It points to the need to do a bit of everything on a fairly long menu of potential programme areas. This allows assistance providers more easily, both within their own bureaucratic structures and within the recipient countries themselves, to reach agreement on assistance portfolios in particular countries.

Finally, the basic strategy has the useful quality of implicit certainty. Using the strategy, assistance providers can go to countries all over the world and settle very quickly on a set of democracy programmes. Although this certainty may at times be facile and even misplaced, and assistance can be criticized for its lack of connection to local realities (see below), the certainty has none the less been useful. Given the tremendous array in recent years of countries which donors perceive have a need of democracy-related assistance, and the great time pressure under which the design of such assistance is often carried out, aid providers have needed some widely applicable, easily comprehensible approach. The basic strategy has met that need.

The Problem of Overspecificity

Turning then to the negative side of the ledger, four major shortcomings can be noted. The first is the problem of overspecificity in the model of democracy. The list of institutional components making up the core strategy are intended to be a universalistic set of components that can be applied to any society undertaking a democratic transition. In fact, however, very US-specific ideas about democracy are present in almost every part of the list.

US efforts to strengthen legislatures in other countries, for example, invariably aim to make foreign legislatures more independent of their respective executive branch, more involved in exercising oversight of the executive, more engaged in public hearings, and more endowed with a large, powerful staff and a good library – in other words, they seek to help

them gain many of the principal distinctive features of the US Congress. Similarly, programmes to aid NGOs typically stress points particular to the US NGO world – maintaining independence from government funding, focusing on legislative advocacy as the principal means of affecting socio-political change, and emphasizing separating public interest issues. US media programmes often highlight separating news content from editorial comment, private rather than public ownership of electronic media, and investigative reporting – all cardinal features of the US media. Political party assistance programmes seek to promote a party landscape defined by a few broad-based parties organized along muted ideological lines rather than an ethnic or religious basis, with an emphasis on US-style campaigning involving extensive media outreach, polling and 'message development'.

It is often quite striking how unaware Americans involved in democracy assistance programmes seem to be about the variety of political forms and structures in other established democracies. Many common elements of democratic life in Europe, for example, are absent from and in fact run directly against basic tenets of many US programmes: parliaments that overlap with rather than seek independence from executive branches, civil law systems rather than common law systems, tripartite (business-labour-government) structures for labour relations instead of union-by-union bargaining with management, government funding rather than private funding for NGOs, public rather than private ownership of television and radio, religion-based political parties (as in Holland), and so on. Consciously or unconsciously, many Americans have a tendency to confuse the particular forms of American democracy with the basic idea of democracy itself, either out of hubristic belief that America is the most democratic country in the world or out of ignorance about the forms of political life in other democratic countries. This way of thinking is frequently present in US democracy assistance efforts.

The United States is scarcely the only donor country that bases its democracy assistance programming on country-specific models. Germans involved with the *Stiftungen*, the German political party foundations that devote part of their resources to promoting democracy abroad, talk fondly of the German social-market approach and its special utility as a model for developing democracies. Dutch officials state in private that the Dutch political system – with its large number of political parties and emphasis on tolerance and co-operation – is of particular value for transitional countries. British political party representatives working on international outreach efforts refer confidently to the Westminster model as *the* model for countries that wish to become democratic. It seems an endemic feature of western democracy promotion efforts that assistance providers promote what they know and admire most, which is almost always their own

country's particular approach to democracy.

A more radical critique would be not just that some of the concepts employed in US democracy assistance programmes reflect US-specific thinking about democracy but that the overall list of component institutions and processes of democracy, even if broadly interpreted, is itself a western conceit that does not allow for the non-western societies to develop their own methods and forms of democracy. Such a critique would be based on the proposition that there exist or may be coming into existence non-western forms of democracy that do not share the basic institutional and procedural features of western democracy such as elections, parliaments, judiciaries, independent civil society, and so forth.²¹ This issue of whether non-western forms of democracy are in fact developing lies beyond the scope of this article, although a point made above bears repeating in this vein: a striking feature of the wave of attempted democratic transitions of the 1980s and early 1990s is the common objective of many countries explicitly to adopt the basic institutional features of western liberal democracy.

The Missing Link of Power

A second problem with the basic strategy of US democracy assistance is that it tends to ignore the power relations that underlie and in many ways determine a country's political life. Programmes addressing the perceived shortcomings of the various institutional sectors are often constructed with little reference to the social, political and economic forces that actually shape those sectors. Democracy assistance providers operate as though it is possible to change the basic functioning of key institutions – to render a parliament representative and effective, to help unions become genuinely powerful and independent, to increase substantially the role of local government – without grappling with the deep-seated interests of the actors involved.

A different way of stating this problem is that democracy assistance programmes frequently attempt to treat the symptoms rather than the causes of the democratic deficit that donors perceive in any given country. Thus, for example, when US aid providers set out to provide judicial assistance in a country, the programme designers will assess the existing judicial system by identifying its operational and institutional shortcomings – cases move too slowly, judges are poorly trained and lack access to up-to-date legal materials, the infrastructure is woefully inadequate, and so forth. From this diagnosis will come programme components – technical assistance on court administration, training courses and legal materials for judges, equipment transfers for courtrooms, and the like. What tends not to be asked or examined in such a design process is why the judiciary is in such a lamentable state, whose interests it serves in its current form, and whose

interests would be threatened by reforms to the system. To the extent US aid officials consider the causes of the problems with the judiciary in question, or whichever institution is under scrutiny, they tend to focus on the lack of necessary financial resources and technical knowledge – the very things that the external donors can provide. The deeper causes of the failings of the institutions in question are not factored into the diagnosis and therefore not reflected in the assistance response.

This disconnection between power relations and democracy assistance programmes has been especially noticeable in the area of judicial reform. Many US judicial assistance programmes have been based on the conception of judicial systems as politically neutral domains operating in service of 'higher' legal principles and have been slow to incorporate even basic considerations of whether there actually exists any will to reform on the part of judicial authorities.²² The same basic disconnection, however, runs through most programme areas. Legislative strengthening programmes, for example, are typically based on little hard political analysis of the legislature in question. Instead, the legislature is assessed mainly in terms of its technical capacities and shortcomings – the state of its library and research unit, the numbers of public hearings it holds, the extent to which it makes use of committees, whether MPs have constituent offices, and the like. The aid response is aimed at the same level – providing books for the library, training staff researchers, instructing MPs on how to hold public hearings, supporting the use of committees, and underwriting constituent offices. These programmes are generally established with little underlying consideration given to which political groups will benefit from a strengthened legislature and how different political groups may or may not want the legislature to change.

By giving short shrift to the realities of political life in the countries in which they operate, US democracy assistance programmes take on an artificial technical quality. Political change is treated as a desiccated, pseudo-scientific process dominated by manuals, courses, 'log frames' specifying intended outputs, and outside consultants. The stubborn reality that politics involves competing interests, struggles over power, conflicting ideologies, and clashing values is ignored until it asserts itself, unwanted, at some later stage. Democracy assistance projects often founder on the shoals of this reality: training courses often fail to change underlying configurations of interests, transfers of equipment and technical expertise frequently are put to no use by entrenched elites with other plans, and planned modifications of institutions end up producing little change in their actual functioning.

This technical quality is actually appealing to US aid providers in a certain way. It has allowed them to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on programmes expressly aimed at changing the political life of other countries

without believing that they are engaged in any substantial political interventionism. AID officials cling to the idea that they can promote democracy around the world without actually becoming involved in politics or 'being political'.

When Transition Begets Stagnation

A third problem with the basic strategy of US democracy assistance lies with the underlying idea of democratization as a naturalistic process in which a political opening leads to elections and elections are followed by a period of consolidation in which governmental institutions are rationalized and democratized while civil society is strengthened and diversified. Such a pattern did initially seem to be occurring in many of the countries which initiated political transitions in the 1980s and early 1990s. But the model has not held in many cases. Many of the recent 'transitions to democracy' have stagnated or even begun to slide backward. All around sub-Saharan Africa, democratic essays of the early 1990s have gone seriously awry, sometimes with horrifying violence as a result. In the former Soviet Union, many of the new republics have lapsed into authoritarian or semi-authoritarian rule. In the Balkans, autocratic patterns dominate the political life of a number of supposedly transitional states. In the Middle East, the quiet but promising trend of political liberalization that appeared in the late 1980s and early 1990s has largely died out. Democratic transitions have advanced significantly in some states, particularly in Latin America, Central Europe and East Asia. The putatively global trend toward democratization no longer looks so global, however, and has broken into discordant parts not unifiable around a common political pattern.²³

Where democratization has stagnated or begun to reverse, the basic strategy of US democracy assistance becomes problematic. Electoral aid does little for democratization when the elections in question are intended to legitimate the power of an entrenched regime. Without a will to reform on the part of governmental authorities, efforts to help governmental institutions end up as wheel-spinning exercises. And without real space for civil society to operate, programmes to help major institutions of civil society expand often prove fruitless. In short, an assistance strategy rooted in the notion of helping to propel gradualistic, progressive processes of institutional transformation does not work when such processes do not really exist.

The Political-Economic Divide

A common article of faith among US assistance officials involved in democracy promotion is that political and economic development, though in separate processes, are naturally complementary. Democratization is

viewed as crucial to economic development, with the precise formulation of this proposition varying by region. Regarding Africa, for example, the US optic is that bad governance has been a major cause of poor economic development and that democratization is necessary to change this pattern. Concerning Asia, it is conceded that substantial economic growth has been achieved in some countries without democratization, but it is held that democratization is necessary to sustain and further such development in the years ahead. At the same time, the other half of the equation is equally popular — US assistance officials contend that social and economic development contributes to democratization, in a number of only loosely-specified but commonly agreed-to ways, relating to education, the middle class, and declining severity of struggles over resources. In US strategy documents of the first half of the 1990s on democracy assistance, social and economic development is frequently portrayed as a large, undifferentiated box underneath the democracy objective, supporting it in a general fashion.

Yet despite this strong assumption of the complementarity of political and economic development, a striking characteristic of the basic strategy of US democracy assistance (and a significant shortcoming) is its disconnection from economic concerns. The strategy is essentially a purely political one in which democratization stands or falls on exclusively political facts and events. Socio-economic explanatory accounts of democratization — whether derived from Barrington Moore, Renschmeyer, Stephens and Stephens, or any other source — are absent from view.²⁴ Not only at the plane of general strategy but also at the level of specific programmes, US assistance officials have generally made little effort to build bridges between democracy assistance efforts and the often close-at-hand world of economic and social assistance. They have not, for example, widely explored the possible political implications of agricultural programmes that aim to give peasants a stronger stake in their land or to help small farmers obtain credit together in co-operative arrangements. They have left largely unexamined the political implications of privatization programmes that create new classes of small business owners. They have only rarely tied literacy programmes to democratic development. In general, the whole question of how changing patterns of land ownership, business ownership, income distribution, educational levels, social co-operation arrangements, and other issues affected by social and economic assistance would influence democratic development has been left out of US democracy assistance programming.

Beyond the Basic Strategy

The basic strategy of US democracy assistance emerged out of the

mushrooming of such assistance in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the past several years, that strategy has begun to evolve, although only very gradually and partially. Aid officials have started to accumulate significant practical experience in the field and to feed those experiences back into the process of strategic design. There is growing recognition within the US aid community that the US approach to democracy assistance was put together rapidly and with relatively little reflection as a reaction to the trend toward democracy in many countries and that there is considerable room for improvement. Furthermore, the sharp reduction in the US foreign aid budget during recent years (at \$7.36 million in 1995 US official development assistance was behind that of Japan, France and Germany) has increased the perceived need within the aid bureaucracy for more refined strategic thinking, both in order to be able to 'do more with less' and to give aid officials better tools than the menu-like approach of the basic strategy for making hard choices between competing programmes.

Much of the learning has occurred at the programme level, with each of the major component areas showing progress in the design and implementation of projects. Elections assistance has gone from a domain of haphazard observation missions and technologically inappropriate technical assistance efforts to a relatively well-developed field in which the United States, along with other bilateral and multilateral actors, can do a great deal to facilitate the holding of elections, even in extremely difficult conditions. Programmes aimed at strengthening democratic governmental institutions have started to take seriously into account both the need for a strong local will to reform and for a much more comprehensive, long-term approach to aiding complex institutions such as judiciaries and legislatures. In the realm of civil society development, US assistance efforts are beginning to look past simply the funding of urban-based advocacy NGOs that have few real roots in the broader society to programmes that support more local, rooted forms of civil society.²⁵ Alongside these developments at the programmatic level, some advances in the broader area of strategy have begun to occur in response to all four of the general problems analysed above.

To start with, US aid practitioners have begun to move away from the tendency to base democracy assistance programmes on specific US models. The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs has been a leader in this area, making extensive use of non-US experts in training programmes – bringing, for example, Philippine and Chilean experts on domestic election monitoring to many other countries facing difficult transitional elections. Other US organizations have started to rely more on local or third-country trainers, to incorporate multi-country comparative analysis into technical assistance, and more generally to design assistance

efforts to help local groups find their own path rather than to shape them in the image of US counterparts. This tendency still has far to go, however, and much of US democracy assistance still reflects the conscious or unconscious idea that the American forms and methods of democracy are the preferable approach. Moreover, the movement toward a less US-specific approach runs against the increasing efforts in the past few years by USAID to pursue 'management by objective', involving highly specific even quantifiable programme objectives, and elaborate processes of project design and evaluation to match. This corporate-style reorganization of USAID, carried out for broader political reasons having to do with the tenuous position of foreign aid in the US governmental agenda, tends to reinforce those more inflexible aspects of the foreign aid process that lock programmes into simplistic US-specific models.

Secondly, US aid officials have begun to focus specifically on how to take underlying power factors explicitly into account in democracy promotion efforts. In the early 1990s, USAID funded two initiatives that advanced its thinking in this domain. Both the Africa and the Middle East bureaus of USAID contracted teams of academic specialists to produce a series of country assessments in Africa and the Middle East for use in planning democracy programming. The methodologies employed by the two groups differed from each other in various ways but both incorporated a significant element of interest analysis. The assessments analysed the political life of the subject societies in terms of what interests drive particular groups, how different groups do or do not have an interest in greater reform, how the different groups are able or not able to pursue their interests, and so forth.²⁶ This focus on interests was a departure from the conventional method of assessing the status of democracy in terms of the standard list of component institutions and focused attention on the underlying power relations in the societies under study and the conformance of those power relations to a democratic outcome.

These two series of political assessments of African and Middle Eastern countries did not end up having much impact on the actual democracy-related programming that USAID sponsored in those countries. The assessments proved too academic, too detailed, and sometimes too complex for USAID officers to make much use of. Their political analysis, though penetrating, often did not point to clearly operationalizable conclusions. And precisely because the assessments dealt directly with issues of power and interests, they proved too politically sensitive for some USAID missions and US embassies fearful of offending their host governments.

None the less, the use of more openly interest-oriented methods of political assessment stimulated thinking within USAID about the need to take more account of underlying power relations in designing and

implementing democracy assistance. US aid officials are working on new methods of assessment that will move away from the conventional menu approach to incorporate issues of interest and power while still being easily usable by field officers needing straightforward guidance on what to do in a given situation to foster democracy. A recent democracy assessment carried out by USAID in Kenya reflects this new line of thinking. The assessment focused fairly directly on the issue of power, particularly regarding which groups outside the power structure have both the will and at least the potential capability to challenge seriously the government's hold on power. The assistance programme resulting from the assessment targets selected civic organizations with the goal of strengthening them for this purpose.

Third, US aid officials have begun to react to the growingly obvious fact that the basic democratization model of elections plus consolidation is much too general, and often inapplicable. The rising number of countries in which political openings have stagnated or slid backward has impelled aid officials to consider alternatives to the basic strategy. Although USAID has not formally declared an alternative approach for politically stagnant or backward-moving countries, the outlines of such an approach can be discerned from actual practice. The approach USAID has begun to take in such countries is what could be called the civil society approach. The basic idea is that where a democratic transition is seriously faltering due to disinterest or resistance from the power structure, the most likely source of pro-democratic initiatives or values is likely to be civil society. Democracy assistance should therefore concentrate on civil society strengthening, not broad-brush programmes aimed at fostering civic education or advocacy generally, but more targeted efforts designed to help those groups willing to fight to maintain genuine independence from the government and to challenge the government's power. The assistance programme in Kenya mentioned above is an example of such an approach. In Central Asia, USAID recently funded a major programme to support NGOs involved with the legal education, human rights, and the environment, shifting away from the governmental institutions and elections-oriented programmes that characterized its initial, more optimistic approach to democracy promotion in that region.²⁷

The emergence in US democracy assistance of what is becoming an identifiably separate strategy for countries experiencing blocked or faltering democratic transitions marks the beginning of what may become a typology of strategies corresponding to a typology of political transitions, replacing the early appealing but simplistic conception of a unified strategy for a common global pattern of democratization.

Finally, there exist at least tentative efforts within US assistance to

bridge the divide between democracy assistance on the one hand and the more established domain of economic and social assistance. In a few cases, economic assistance programmes are now being carried out that specifically embody a concern with democratization. In Malawi, for example, a US programme to help organize agricultural co-operatives is tied by the USAID mission in the country to efforts to broaden political participation by helping the newly-formed co-operatives gain a political voice. In the Philippines, a programme to promote the deregulation of the airline industry was also conceived as an opportunity to increase political participation of local business groups and NGOs. And in Indonesia, a programme to strengthen microenterprise development includes a significant effort to increase the level of interaction between government officials, businesses, and policy NGOs and foster improved policy-making processes.

These efforts represent only a very small start on what remains a potentially enormous area of synthesis and development within US foreign assistance. Though obviously valuable from a conceptual point of view, bringing US democracy promotion efforts into close relation with US economic assistance remains difficult. There is a lack of knowledge and thinking within the aid bureaucracy about how to combine economic and political concerns, beyond hortatory declarations about economic and political development going hand-in-hand. Aid officials involved in democracy promotion have long been, and remain, concerned that the removal of the separation between democracy assistance and the much larger realm of economic and social assistance will mean the absorption and extinction of democracy assistance *per se* — economists will simply declare that all their economic assistance programmes are supportive of democracy and pay no real attention to the subject. And many aid officials involved in the economic and social sides of the assistance picture have been disinclined to try to blend democracy concerns into their programmes. Many have been and still are sceptical about the whole enterprise of democracy promotion and are concerned about politicizing their programmes.

Conclusions

Although this article focuses on US democracy assistance, a relatively similar analysis could apply to most western democracy assistance efforts. Other donors or actors — whether European bilateral agencies or international institutions — may often believe their democracy assistance efforts to be unique, or at least very different from American undertakings. Certainly differences do exist. The methods of project implementation vary, with some donors operating with a more long-term approach and relying more on direct grants than on training and technical assistance. The

particular institutional forms that donors view as desired endpoints vary from country to country. And of course the political profiles and legacies of different donors are not the same. None the less, the types of programmes that are carried out under the democracy promotion rubric are generally quite similar; most of the actors involved in democracy assistance operate from basically the same menu of activities. Moreover, the implicit conception of institutional modelling as the critical process by which external assistance advances democratization is also widely prevalent.

It should not be surprising that the basic strategy of democracy assistance is essentially similar among most of the donors involved in the field. The strategy is derived in significant part as a response to the pattern of democratic transition that, initially at least, seemed to be spreading widely in the late 1980s and early 1990s: that of rapid democratic openings followed by progressive institutional transformation across a wide range of sectors. It also has roots in the common tendency of persons living in established democracies, when they decide to engage in democracy assistance programmes, to focus on endpoints over process; to conceive of fostering democratization in terms of helping transform the major socio-political institutions of other countries in the image of such institutions in their own countries.

In sum, US democracy assistance, and western democracy assistance more generally, has been operating over the past ten years on the basis of a strategy that while easily comprehensible and operationalizable, is superficial and too generic. As donors move beyond their initial phase of enthusiasm and as the global democratic trend fragments into a highly varied collection of successes, failures, and in-between cases, the question of strategy is beginning to receive more direct attention and to evolve. This process of evolution will likely be slow and uncertain but should gradually help move the reality of democracy assistance closer to its promise.

NOTES

1. See Larry Diamond, *Promoting Democracy in the 1990s* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, 1995), pp.12-38; Gordon Crawford, *Promoting Democracy: Human Rights and Good Governance Through Development Aid: A Comparative Study of the Policies of Four Northern Donors* (Leeds: University of Leeds Centre for Democratization Studies, 1995), pp.3-34; Michael Pinto-Duschinsky, 'Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies: Trends and Challenges: The International Dimension' (unpublished paper, 1995).
2. Thomas Carothers, 'The NED at 10', *Foreign Policy*, No.95 (1994), pp.123-38.
3. Thomas Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy: US Policy Toward Latin America in the Reagan Years* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), pp.196-236.
4. See Larry Diamond, 'Promoting Democracy', *Foreign Policy*, No.87 (1992), pp.25-46; Thomas Carothers, 'Democracy Promotion Under Clinton', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol.

5. See generally Michele Wozniak Schimpf, *The US Agency for International Development and Elections Support: A Synthesis of Case Study Experiences* (Washington, DC: USAID Centre for Development Information and Evaluation, 1993).
6. See Joshua Muravchik, 'US Political Parties Abroad', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol.12, No.3 (1989), pp.91-100.
7. For reflections on assisting the rewriting of constitutions in Eastern Europe, see Herman Schwartz, 'Shaping the New Eastern Europe', *Legal Times* (10 Feb. 1992), p.19.
8. See Ryan S. McCannell, *Legislative Strengthening: A Synthesis of USAID Experience* (Washington, DC: USAID Center for Development Information and Evaluation, 1995).
9. See Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy*, pp.210-15; Harry Blair and Gary Hansen, *Weighting in on the Scales of Justice: Strategic Approaches for Donor-Supported Rule of Law Programs* (Washington, DC: USAID Program and Operations Assessment Report No.7, 1994); *Evasive Justice: The US Administration of Justice Program in Latin America* (Washington, DC: Washington Office on Latin America, 1990).
10. See *New Partnerships Initiative: Democratic Local Governance* (Washington, DC: USAID, undated).
11. For an analysis of the guiding concepts of US civil society assistance to central and eastern Europe, see Thomas Carothers, *Assessing Democracy Assistance: The Case of Romania* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment, 1996), pp.64-74.
12. See Harry Blair, *Civil Society and Democratic Development* (Washington, DC: USAID Center for Development Information and Evaluation, 1994), pp.4-10.
13. See Carothers, *Assessing Democracy Assistance*, pp.74-80.
14. See, for example, the elements of democracy set out in the USAID democracy strategy for Asia, *Asia Democracy Program Strategy* (Washington, DC: USAID Bureau for Asia, 1993), pp.9-13.
15. The classic example being Dahl's definition of polyarchy; see Robert Dahl, 'Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition' (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971).
16. A few examples of this large literature include Larry Diamond, Juan Linz and Seymour Martin Lipset (eds.), *Democracy in Developing Countries* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner and London: Adamantine Press, 1989); Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); and Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave* (Norman, OK and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).
17. See O'Donnell and Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, pp.37-47.
18. *Ibid.*
19. See Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
20. See Huntington, *The Third Wave*, pp.31-108.
21. In this vein, see Bhikhu Parekh, 'The Cultural Particularity of Liberal Democracy', in David Held (ed.), *Prospects for Democracy: North, South, East and West* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp.156-75.
22. See Carothers, *In the Name of Democracy*, pp.210-15; Blair and Hansen, *Weighting in on the Scales of Justice*, pp.49-50.
23. Larry Diamond, 'Is the Third Wave Over?', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.7, No.3 (1996), pp.20-37; Thomas Carothers, 'Democracy Without Illusions', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.76, No.1 (1997), pp.85-99.
24. See Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1967); and Dietrich Rueschmeyer, Evelynne Huber Stephens and John D. Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
25. See Thomas Carothers, 'Recent US Experience with Democracy Promotion', *IDS Bulletin*, Vol.26, No.2 (1995), pp.62-9.
26. The overall approach taken by the assessment teams in Africa was set out in *Improving Democratic Governance in Africa* (Washington, DC: Associates in Rural Development, 1996). An example of one of the assessments of Middle Eastern countries is *Political Economy Review of Tunisia* (Washington, DC: Chemonics International, 1993).

27. For a description of the Central Asian NGO programme see *Innovations and Impacts: Success Stories of Central Asian NGOs* (Almaty, Kazakhstan: American Legal Consortium, 1996). Unlike the Kenya civil society programme, the Central Asia programme was not designed as a wedge to force a political opening but rather as a gradualistic effort to support independent civic activity.