

Thomas Carothers

1 INTRODUCTION

Promoting democracy abroad has been an important element of United States foreign policy off and on throughout the twentieth century. The current high level of US emphasis on democracy promotion is the result of an evolutionary trend that began in the early 1980s. In those years President Ronald Reagan explicitly reintroduced the theme of democracy promotion in US foreign policy out of a desire to base his strenuous anti-communist policies on a positive vision, in contrast to the realpolitik anti-communism of the Nixon-Kissinger period. Despite a strong rhetorical emphasis on democracy promotion, the Reagan administration tended to subordinate democracy-related policies to its dominant anti-communist goals, such as in its policies toward Central America. It was not until the end of the 1980s that the renewed US emphasis on democracy promotion evolved significantly away from anti-communism. With the end of the Cold War and the dramatic surge of democratization in many parts of the world the Bush administration set about promoting democracy abroad as a significant policy end in itself. Democracy stood alongside security and economic prosperity as one of the three pillars of the overall foreign policy framework of President George Bush and Secretary of State James Baker.

The Clinton administration has placed a strong rhetorical emphasis on promoting democracy abroad. In the words of President Clinton's National Security Adviser, Anthony Lake, 'the successor to a doctrine of containment must be a strategy of enlargement – enlargement of the world's free community of market democracies' (Lake 1993). In practice the Clinton team has largely continued the Bush administration's approach of balancing democracy promotion with the security and economic components of US policy in different ways in different regions. In Russia, Latin America, Eastern Europe and Africa democracy promotion is seen to correlate positively with US economic and security interests and figures as a central element of US policy, in tandem with support for liberal economic reforms. In much of Asia and the Middle East, the Clinton administration does not emphasize democracy promotion, concentrating instead

on US economic and security interests which are seen to require good relationships with various non-democratic regimes.

The US government employs a range of policy tools in service of democracy promotion. Although references to democracy promotion in policy statements and speeches are sometimes mere rhetoric, the public exposition of a policy framework emphasizing democracy promotion is nonetheless a means of pursuing that goal. Diplomatic pressure is an additional mechanism for promoting democracy. Such pressure may be either formal, such as when the US president publicly affirms US support for an elected leader during an attempted coup, or it may be informal, such as when US officials quietly discourage a restless military from undertaking a coup.

The US government also uses economic measures for democracy-related ends. Countries making positive steps toward democracy are sometimes rewarded with higher levels of economic assistance, and democratic reversals are in some cases punished by the cutting off of assistance or even the imposition of economic sanctions. The US government also occasionally employs military force or the threat of force to promote democracy, ousting a non-democratic regime in favour of a democratic process or defending a besieged democratic government. And finally, the US government increasingly funds assistance programmes specifically designed to promote democracy abroad.

This article focuses on this latter policy tool, which will be called here 'democracy assistance'. Such assistance falls into four general categories: 1) programmes to promote democratic electoral processes, including domestic and international election observation, technical assistance for electoral commissions and political party-building; 2) programmes to strengthen the governing institutions of newly democratic societies, including parliamentary training and assistance, judicial reform and local government assistance; 3) programmes to foster the growth of civil society, including assistance to civic advocacy groups,

trade unions, media and other NGOs; and 4) educational programmes to increase public understanding of democracy, including support for school curriculum reforms, provision of books and materials, exchange visits and scholarships.

The principal US-government agencies involved in democracy assistance are the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the US Information Agency (USIA). USAID has funded activities in the first three of the four categories listed above while USIA has concentrated on the fourth category of activities. The Departments of State, Justice and Defence also have some relevant programmes but many fewer than USAID and USIA. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a US-government funded, private institution also sponsors a significant amount of democracy assistance. The total amount of such assistance programmes has grown fairly steadily from the early 1980s on, although exact expenditures are difficult to estimate due to the lack of clear budget categories and the proliferation of small programmes across different parts of any single agency's budget. In its current fiscal year USAID is devoting approximately \$400 million to democracy assistance programmes. The National Endowment for Democracy's current annual budget is \$35 million, all of which goes for democracy assistance.

2 EMERGING ISSUES

With the rapid, substantial growth of US democracy assistance in recent years there have emerged a number of overarching issues concerning the design and implementation of such assistance. One issue is the question of what sorts of institutional arrangements on the US side are best suited to manage democracy assistance. Within USAID for example, democracy assistance programmes have been the product of many small, separate initiatives within different regional bureaus only very loosely tied by any overall coordinating or review process. As these programmes multiplied, particularly in the early 1990s, a debate increasingly made itself felt within the agency as to whether it would be preferable to continue this decentralized approach to democracy assistance or to institute a strong central bureaucratic mechanism. The Clinton administration has moved somewhat in favour of the latter view, establishing a Centre for Democracy and Governance at USAID (within the newly created Bureau for Global Programmes). The Centre

for Democracy and Governance centrally directs some significant parts of USAID's assessment and design work relating to democracy assistance.

Questions regarding the optimal institutional arrangements for democracy assistance are also arising across US organizations as well as within them. Some critics argue for example that too many US organizations are working on democracy assistance; in particular they question the need for a National Endowment for Democracy when democracy assistance is funded by USAID and USIA. The NED was set up in the early 1980s when USAID was not involved in democracy promotion in any substantial way. The NED's creation stemmed from the belief of a number of people in the Executive Branch, Congress and elsewhere in Washington that there should exist a US-government funded organization exclusively devoted to promoting democracy abroad. The NED's quasi-autonomous structure was designed to give the NED greater latitude than a US-government agency to carry out politically sensitive assistance programmes, such as supporting dissident journals in repressive societies and carrying out political party-buildings (Carothers 1994).

With the increased involvement of USAID in the democracy field, the situation of the NED has become less clear. Although it remains the only major US-government-funded institution exclusively devoted to promoting democracy abroad, it is now much smaller, by a factor of approximately 10, than the democracy-related activities of USAID. In addition, USAID now gives direct grants to the four core grantee institutions of the NED (the Centre for International Private Enterprise, the Free Trade Union Institute, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs and the International Republican Institute). In recent years, USAID grants to some of these institutions have exceeded the funds these institutions have received from the NED, blurring the line between the NED and USAID. Despite these trends, the Clinton administration and Congress have decided for now at least that NED's continued existence is justified for various reasons. NED maintains a somewhat greater operational flexibility than USAID, both in the kinds of programmes it can carry out and in terms of moving quickly. Also the existence of the NED provides an alternative and sometimes innovative source of thinking and action regarding democracy promotion alongside USAID and USIA.

A second issue of rising importance concerning US democracy assistance is the question of how the effectiveness of particular assistance programmes should be evaluated. Political development assistance is notoriously difficult to evaluate (Golub 1993). The criteria for success are often difficult to formulate precisely. If an assistance programme aims to strengthen the parliament of a newly democratic country, for example, the resulting effectiveness or democratic quality of the parliament is not easily measured. Furthermore, the causal relationship between any single assistance programme and the political evolution of a society or major institution within that society is extremely difficult to ascertain given the complex thicket of factors inevitably involved in any process of societal or institutional change.

During the second half of the 1980s, when many of the US democracy assistance programmes were getting underway, relatively little attention was paid to the issue of evaluation in the general rush to get the programmes going. By the 1990s, however, pressure was beginning to accumulate in Congress and the foreign policy community generally for those organizations involved in promoting democracy to show results. The view is increasingly expressed in Washington that democracy assistance had been going on long enough that those doing it should be able concretely to demonstrate its utility.

In response, USAID has begun to carry out some large-scale evaluations of its democracy assistance such as of its programmes relating to judicial reform and civil society (USAID 1994a and 1994b). A general reaction of USAID and other assistance organizations to the increasing pressure to show results has been to try to build into the design of projects indicators of success that are relatively short-term and 'objective' or quantifiable. Although more careful attention to the goals of assistance projects is certainly valuable, there are significant dangers in trying to shape democracy assistance to conform to the twin demands of short-term results and 'objective' indicators of success. Democratic development is inevitably a long-term process. Attempting to produce highly visible effects over periods of months rather than years can lead assistance organizations to focus on areas in a particular country that will most easily show rapid change rather than areas that most need to change for democratization to occur. An over emphasis on

'objective' or quantifiable indicators can also be distortive. There is no good evidence that democratization processes in particular countries can in advance be broken down into clear-cut sequences of incremental, quantifiable milestones. Attempting to design programmes on the basis of such an assumption threatens to impose artificial blueprints onto fluid, internally-determined processes.

A third emerging issue concerns the underlying developmental strategy of US democracy assistance efforts. In the 1980s US democracy assistance programmes were informed only by fairly superficial thinking about how democratization occurs and how assistance efforts should relate to democratization processes. To the extent there existed a conceptual basis with regard to these questions it took the form of what might be called 'the endpoint approach'. USAID elaborated papers on democratization which were essentially all-inclusive lists of what US officials and political scientists considered to be the essential features of successful democracy: free and fair elections, an independent judiciary, a small number of national political parties, independent trade unions, independent media, etc. USAID officials would then compare transitional countries to these lists to determine on which features the countries fell short and to create programmes aimed at producing the various missing elements of the overall endpoint. Given that the endpoint was held to be the same for countries in all different regions of the world, in all different states of development, the resulting programmes tended to be fairly similar across widely divergent recipient countries.

Within USAID the endpoint approach has in recent years begun to give way, at least in some cases, to new forms of strategic thinking. USAID is elaborating a new strategic framework for democracy assistance that incorporates a stronger notion of process. The essential element of this framework is the idea of sequencing. The various essential features of democracy will not be conceived of as a list but rather as a sequence of developments that tend to occur in a certain patterns or in certain relations to each other. Democratization will be seen as a set of stages, involving first an opening of political space allowing some significant level of debate and mobilization, leading to the growth of parties and transitional elections, followed by a simultaneous building of civil society with the rebuilding of governing institutions. Assistance programmes

would be designed to match and promote this sequential framework.

USAID's effort to move away from a static, end-point approach to democracy assistance is overdue. Many questions remain, however, with respect to the value of a sequence-based framework. One major question is whether it is useful at all to try to elaborate a single model of democratization to underlie democracy assistance programmes in all parts of the world. USAID's new framework appears to be heavily influenced by the political developments of recent years in Eastern Europe and to a lesser extent Latin America. It is not clear how useful such a framework will be with respect to designing democracy assistance programmes in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. For example, the notion that the early stages of a democratic transition are primarily marked by events and processes which limit or even weaken the state, such as constitutional reform, decentralization and the strengthening of civil society, may not be easily transferred to some non-western societies.

3 ELECTORAL ASSISTANCE

Electoral assistance has been the most visible and by some measures most extensive form of US democracy assistance during the past ten years. The National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (a Washington-based institute funded by USAID) have been the principal US organizations involved. US assistance efforts to promote free and fair elections have developed significantly in complexity and sophistication. In the early 1980s such efforts tended to consist of little more than two-day observation missions by inexperienced delegations which proclaimed the validity of elections they knew little about. US elections assistance has grown into a comprehensive set of inter-related measures that include consultations on the drafting of electoral laws, technical assistance on the administrative arrangements for elections, support for the formation and training of domestic election monitoring groups, pre-electoral assessment missions and reports, a large, multinational observer team covering numerous regions of the country on election day, the establishment of parallel vote count mechanisms and monitoring the post-electoral resolution of electoral disputes.

This range of election assistance measures has become a kind of adaptable package that the US government offers to, or in some cases pushes on, countries undertaking important transitional elections. Major US electoral assistance programmes were carried out in a number of Latin American and Asian countries in the latter half of the 1980s, and in various Eastern European and African countries in the early 1990s.

One issue that remains problematic with respect to elections assistance is the relative balance which external actors give to the events of voting day as opposed to the campaign period. In many transitional elections the primary source of unfairness comes in the form of structural inequities in the campaign – unequal access to media, unequal campaign finance, the governing party's use of the logistical and financial resources of the state to further its campaign and the restriction of free speech and free assembly through harassment – rather than in the form of outright fraud on election day. Although electoral assistance efforts do sometimes include analysis of the campaign period, the preponderance of external assistance and attention almost always lies with the activities of voting day. And judgements that are rendered about the fairness of elections by foreign observers (as well as foreign journalists) tend to be based much more on an assessment of whether fraud occurred during the voting and vote-counting rather than on the overall campaign period.

This imbalance tends to occur because voting day is the most visible and apparently pivotal part of an electoral process. Campaign periods are lengthy and somewhat diffuse by comparison. It also occurs because it is much harder to assist another country to hold a fair campaign than it is to assist a country to organize and carry out voting day procedures. The fairness of campaigns depends primarily on the political will of the government involved, a much harder target for assistance than the technical issues involved in administering the actual voting.

Another issue concerning electoral assistance that continues to engender debate in the United States is the question of the political neutrality of electoral assistance. In the 1950s and 1960s the US government intervened covertly in numerous countries to try to swing elections in particular directions believed favourable to US anti communist goals.

The US electoral assistance of the past ten years has been consciously designed as a break from that past. It is overt assistance and it is at least putatively non-partisan. It aims to foster free and fair elections rather than to influence the outcome of elections, in recognition of the contradictions inherent between manipulating electoral processes and promoting democracy.

An important exception to the non-partisan approach, however, has been made in a particular category of elections, elections which the US considers to be a contest between democrats versus non-democrats rather than between competing democratic parties. In some such elections the US government has attempted to strengthen the hand, through campaign training, equipment transfers and other assistance, of the side perceived to be the democrats. One example of such assistance was the US aid to the Chilean opposition coalition in its 1988 plebiscite campaign against General Augusto Pinochet. Another example was the assistance to the Nicaraguan National Opposition Union in the 1990 elections which unseated the Sandinistas. In Eastern Europe in the early 1990s the NED and USAID funded a number of programmes carried out by the International Republican Institute to support political parties perceived by the US-government to be pro-democratic parties in electoral campaigns against political parties dominated by former communists.

The main problem with a special category of partisan electoral assistance is the difficulty of distinguishing between elections which pit democrats against non-democrats and those which are just contests between parties the US government likes and parties the US government does not like. Chile in 1988 was a fairly clear-cut case. Nicaragua in 1990 was somewhat less so. And some of the Eastern European elections of recent years, such as the 1992 Romanian national elections (where the US government strongly supported the campaign of the opposition coalition), have also been less than clear in this regard.

The third significant issue concerning US election assistance is the uncertain utility of elections as a national conflict resolution mechanism. In recent years the US government has invested considerable amounts of assistance in foreign elections in the hope that the elections would serve to resolve ongoing civil conflicts or bridge wide socio-political

divides. In many such cases, such as the 1990 Haitian elections, the 1992 Cambodian elections, the 1992 Angolan elections and the 1993 Burundian elections, these efforts have failed even when the elections have actually been successfully held. Behind the unrealistically high level of US optimism surrounding these electoral processes has been some confusion over elections serving as the **capstone** to a process of national reconciliation and elections serving as the actual **mechanism** of reconciliation. In cases where elections have been associated with successful processes of national reconciliation, such as in El Salvador in the early 1990s and South Africa in 1994, the elections were more the result than the progenitor of the process of conflict resolution and reconciliation.

4 ASSISTING CONSOLIDATION

Although elections-related programmes have been a visible, active part of US democracy assistance in the past ten years, US assistance has by no means been limited to this area. US policy makers have generally internalized the lesson that was much discussed in the late 1980s that elections do not equal democracy. And the tide of first-time, transitional elections has largely passed in most parts of the world. The dominant question with respect to democratization in Latin America and Eastern Europe and at least in some parts of Asia, Africa and the former Soviet Union is how to go beyond transitional elections to consolidate nascent democratic political systems. And in parallel fashion, the central question for US organizations involved in promoting democracy abroad is how to support such consolidation processes.

US assistance aimed at supporting democratic consolidation takes both top-down and bottom-up forms, that is to say, it consists of programmes to help reform and strengthen governing institutions and programmes to build civil society. At least until very recently, US assistance tended to emphasize the top-down over the bottom-up, although the balance has varied from region to region and country to country. A top-down emphasis has been particularly evident in Latin America. US democracy assistance following the electoral transitions in that region has been strongly oriented toward institutional reform, particularly judicial and police reform. In Asia, parliamentary and judicial reform programmes have been a major component of US democracy assistance in a number of countries.

There exists a current trend in US democracy assistance to give greater relative attention to bottom-up programmes. Promoting the development of civil society has become a new priority for USAID in Latin America, Eastern Europe and Africa. This trend partly stems from the accumulation of experience in the field where a strong demand for civil society assistance is making itself felt in many countries. It also reflects the arrival to power of the Clinton administration. Within the field of democracy assistance US liberals tend to favour a relatively stronger emphasis on grassroots development and bottom-up programmes generally than do US conservatives.

Governing institutions

The principal targets of top-down US democracy assistance programmes have been judicial systems, parliaments and local government. The fact that US attention tends to be concentrated on the branches of government other than the executive branch reflects a US tendency to believe that a strong separation of powers and decentralization of political power are critical features of democracy. This is a long-standing element of US thinking about democracy promotion, one rooted in the US national experience with democracy. In his book analysing US political development assistance of the 1950s and 1960s, Robert Packenham highlighted as one of the controlling dogmas of US assistance the notion that 'distributing power is more important than accumulating power' (Packenham 1973). The emphasis over the past ten years on programmes to strengthen the branches of governments other than executive branch is in some way an expression of the continuing validity of this observation.

Various lessons have been learned, or at least encountered, in recent US assistance efforts to reform and strengthen governing institutions. One very fundamental lesson is that such assistance tends to produce only slow, incremental change, at best. In Latin America, for example, since the mid-1980s USAID has invested large amounts of assistance in judicial reform, in the range of \$200 million to \$300 million. Even though this assistance has been substantial and has been concentrated in the smaller countries of the region (Brazil and Mexico have not, for example, been recipients) it is difficult to discern dramatic positive effects. Wherever USAID has supported assistance to judiciaries, parliaments and local governments the experience has been that only very long-term efforts show results and what

results do appear are much more modest than the high expectations that often accompany the programmes.

A second, related lesson is that such assistance will not succeed at all if it is not matched by a clear will for reform on the part of the recipient government. During the 1980s, when excitement over the rising tide of democratic transitions was high, US officials tended to assume that the mere fact of an electoral transition from authoritarianism to pluralism in a particular country was a sufficient guarantee of fertile ground for assistance programmes to reform and strengthen judiciaries, parliaments and local government. They have since, however, learned otherwise. It turns out to be perfectly possible for a newly elected government to represent the apparent triumph of democracy but not to be genuinely interested in strengthening either the independence of the judiciary, the autonomy of the parliament or the power of local administrators. And US officials have learned that in such contexts, efforts to assist governing institutions are likely to be of little avail.

A further lesson is that it is possible and perhaps necessary when seeking to help strengthen governing institutions in a democratizing country to develop assistance programmes that pursue the objective from outside the institutions as well as from within. Thus, for example, to strengthen a parliament it is useful not simply to carry out training programmes and equipment transfers for parliamentarians but also to support efforts by NGOs to pursue their interests directly with parliamentarians and to find ways to increase contacts between citizens and parliamentarians. A similar finding holds for judicial reform (USAID 1994a). Stated differently, areas of assistance traditionally conceived of as strictly top-down can benefit from an approach that incorporates both bottom-up and top-down elements.

Civil society

The potential range of assistance programmes to promote the development of civil society in other countries is very broad. Much US economic development assistance, for example, involves assistance to local NGOs in different service sectors and this could be broadly construed as civil society assistance. The type of programmes involving civil society that the US government categorizes explicitly as democracy assistance, however, is relatively narrow. One important type of such assistance is

aimed at building NGOs devoted to civic advocacy and civic education. The National Democratic Institute for example has helped sponsor the establishment in a number of countries of NGOs which monitor elections and carry out programmes to increase citizen awareness of and participation in basic democratic processes. USAID and the NED do support other types of civil society institutions in the name of democracy promotion, such as independent media and independent trade unions.

A frequent element of US assistance for civic advocacy NGOs is the idea that such assistance is non-partisan, or more broadly, that it seeks to increase the amount of non-partisan political activity in a particular society. This idea derives from the strong role that public interest and civil advocacy organizations have in the United States and the conception that the activities of at least some of these organizations represent non-partisan political engagement, an alternative to party politics. For many US persons engaged in promoting democracy abroad this idea of non-partisan engagement is appealing because it holds out the prospect of US groups being able to involve themselves intensively in other countries' political development in a pro-democratic but non-partisan manner.

It remains unclear how accurate or useful the notion of non-partisanship is with regard to civil society assistance. In at least some countries the majority of civic advocacy NGOs are direct or indirect extensions of opposition political parties or groups. External assistance to those organizations may accordingly be seen from within the society as assistance to the opposition. This is true in some Asian countries, such as Indonesia and Bangladesh, and in a number of East European countries.

Another issue which remains unsettled concerning US civil society assistance is whether it is preferable for donors to focus on civic advocacy organizations or to try instead to strengthen NGOs in the service sector. The arguments in favour of the former approach centre around the idea that civic advocacy is the generative element of democratic participation and therefore of democratization itself. At least two arguments exist on behalf of the latter approach. One is that service sector NGOs will build ties at the local level between citizens and government on bread and butter issues of indisputable relevance to citizen's lives,

such as health, agriculture and education, and that from such ties democratic processes will be born. A second argument is that service sector NGOs have a much better chance than civic advocacy NGOs of becoming self-sustaining over the long-term because they can potentially earn money through the sale of services whereas civic advocacy NGOs tend to rely on foreign donors.

A final unresolved issue which has emerged with respect to US civil society assistance is how a large governmental donor, such as USAID, can foster heterogeneity in its programmes aimed at strengthening NGOs in other countries. This issue is becoming of greater importance given the movement toward increased centralization of US democracy assistance mechanisms. In Eastern Europe, for example, USAID has recently shifted to an approach in which it will have a single US grantee organization be responsible for democracy-related civil society assistance in each recipient country. The implications for the heterogeneity of the resulting civil society assistance programmes could be significant.

5 CONCLUSION

Over the past ten years programmes to promote democracy in other countries have become a sizeable component of US foreign assistance, as part of a generally increasing emphasis in US foreign policy on promoting democracy abroad. The accumulation of learning about democracy assistance within the relevant US organizations has been slow and even somewhat elusive. This is in part because the organizations involved generally spend much more time looking toward their future activities than sifting through their past experiences. It is also because the operational lessons from such assistance tend to be learned more by the recipients than the donors and do not often get passed back up the assistance chain. Nevertheless, with regard to elections assistance, strengthening governing institutions and fostering the development of civil society, US assistance organizations have in recent years begun to learn significant lessons or at least to encounter significant patterns with respect to how such assistance tends to work and the ways in which it can be made more effective.

US democracy assistance will face various countervailing pressures in the near future. The

new Republican-controlled Congress may impose deep cuts in the already-reduced US foreign aid budget, cuts which would likely affect all forms of US foreign assistance. The inability of democracy assistance programmes to show dramatic results may render them particularly vulnerable to budget reductions. More generally, the current emphasis on democracy promotion in US foreign policy may fade somewhat as the global democratic trend of recent years shows little further expansion and as the limitations of democratization as a means of resolving the world's economic problems, armed conflicts and humanitarian crises become clearer to US policy makers (Carothers 1994b).

Nevertheless democracy promotion has long had at least some role in US foreign policy and it will continue to do so in the years ahead. And democracy assistance will likely continue to be an element of US foreign assistance both in service of the broader policy goal of democracy promotion and in recognition of a basic transition which has occurred in US thinking about economic development: it is now a fairly common assumption among US officials involved in foreign assistance that it is a mistake to attempt to help other countries develop economically without paying explicit attention to their political development and without attempting to integrate economic assistance with at least some forms of political development assistance.

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