WESTMINSTER FOUNDATION FOR DEMOCRACY

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD | DPIR
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICS & INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

MORE THAN IDEOLOGY, MORE THAN ELECTIONS
A strategic approach to supporting sister-parties

Susan Dodsworth and Nic Cheeseman

Support to political parties is perhaps the most difficult, and most criticized, form of democracy promotion. Despite this, there is relatively little research identifying how it might be made more effective. This policy paper draws on the body of practice accumulated by UK political parties, through programmes funded via the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, to help fill that gap. It examines what their distinctive approach to political party strengthening contributes to democracy promotion and identifies where these approaches work best. The evidence suggests that the sister-party model – a model centred on relationships between parties with similar ideological positions – has value, but that it would be more effective if it were deployed more strategically. When adopting this model, democracy promoters should be more selective about who they work with, where they work, and the kind of work they do.

Africa Liberal Network 2015 visits Liberal Democrat Party Conference

Conservative Party International Office meet with Ghana NPP delegation

KEY LESSONS

- In the right circumstances the sister-party model can be a valuable means of strengthening political parties.

- The right circumstances are when: parties genuinely share ideology (at least at a high level of abstraction), parties share more than ideology (for example, similar structural positions in the political system), and other democracy promoters are addressing system level issues (such as the regulation of party finances).

- As democracy promoters, political parties tend to focus too much on election campaigns. This is understandable; elections are ultimately why political parties exist. However, it risks reinforcing certain problems and tends to produce only superficial change.

- The current funding model does not always create strong incentives for UK political parties to be selective about where they work, who they work with, and what they do. This renders a valuable tool – the sister-party model of party support – less effective than it would otherwise be.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- When employing a sister-party approach, democracy promoters need to be more selective about where they work and who they work with. The sister-party model works best when parties share not just ideology, but similar structural positions in the political system.

- Sister-party programmes also need to be more strategic about what they do. As well as focusing on election campaigns, they should focus on the foundations – party finances, membership, policy development – on which successful campaigns are built.

- Efforts to co-ordinate with other democracy promotion actors should shift from a mind-set of avoiding duplication to a mind-set of creating and exploiting complementarities between programmes.

- A more flexible funding model could create stronger incentives to be selective and, consequently, foster more effective party support programmes.

Why we need a more strategic approach

Political parties have, famously, been described as the 'weakest link' in new and less established democracies.[1] They suffer a range of problems: they tend to be centred on a handful of key individuals, disconnected from society, and internally undemocratic. Many are poorly managed and inadequately funded. Consequently, they struggle to develop coherent policies and, especially in the case of opposition parties, to mount effective election campaigns. In many countries, the personalization of politics and a lack of internal democracy means that parties struggle to manage succession processes, with the need to select new leaders often triggering internal fragmentation and in some cases collapse.[2] When this occurs it sets the process of party institutionalization back considerably. As if this were not enough, these parties also tend to exist in contexts where it is very hard for democracy promoters to operate effectively, countries where the rule of law is weak, poverty is widespread and the legacy of authoritarianism has created a population deeply disenchanted with politics. Political parties are a challenging target for democracy promoters. Yet they cannot be ignored; despite rising public disillusionment with political parties, most agree that they are an essential part of any robust and healthy democracy.

When providing direct support to political parties, democracy promoters have two main methods at their disposal. One is the party-to-party method; one political party provides assistance to a second. When those parties share a similar ideological foundation, this is called the fraternal or 'sister-party' approach (see Box 1). This forms 'the backbone of European party aid'[3] because it is employed by many European political party foundations, such as the German Stiftungen (see Box 2). It is also the method most commonly employed by UK political parties working with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD). Although many sister-party programmes are conducted on a bilateral basis, the approach can be employed at the network level. The Labour Party's support to Tha'era, the Arab Women's Network for Parity and Solidarity (Box 3), provides one example. The main alternative to the sister-party method, the multi-party approach, entails working with several parties at once, typically all main political parties in a country. This method is more commonly applied by the American party institutes, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI), and by the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD). Multi-party programmes – like those of NIMD (see Box 4) – often focus less on building the capacity of individual parties, and more on changing the political party system as a whole.

Many take a sceptical view of political party support. A review of research that others have conducted suggests that it is often seen as ineffective, results are at best limited, and rarely transformative. Complicating matters, it is often difficult to pin down what successful party support programme looks like (see Box 5). This is not simply because dramatic success is rare, but also because those who provide support sometimes refrain from claiming credit for the successes of their partners due to fears that this could undermine local ownership or trigger backlash from authoritarian regimes. Yet there are important examples that suggest that the right intervention in the right context can make a difference. In 2015, an evaluation of NIMD's work reported that it had achieved small, but significant positive results through its multiparty platforms.[4] Doubt remains more entrenched with regard to programmes that employ the sister-party method. This is partially because democracy promoters are often working in countries where the left-right ideological spectrum that has defined party life in the West is blurred or non-existent. In such a context, finding genuine sister-parties can be a stretch. To cope with this, some democracy promoters (such as the Stiftungen, Box 2) have adopted a more flexible approach, using a wider range of methods and working with a broader range of actors.

Similarly, concerns about the effectiveness of the sister-party approach are also driving a trend towards multi-party methods and programmes

that integrate political party support with parliamentary strengthening. WFD is no exception to this. In its Strategic Framework for 2015-2020, WFD indicated an intention to make greater use of such approaches. This would not mean abandoning the sister-party model, but it would see greater emphasis placed on integrated programmes that strengthen the performance of parties in parliaments and cross-party work that encourages negotiation and compromise on major public policy issues. As a result, those who employ the sister-party method face increasing pressure to do so strategically. This makes it particularly important to understand what, precisely, sister-party methods have to offer, and

where they work best.

If we are to make sound, strategic decisions about where – and how – to use sister-party programmes, and where not to, we need a better evidence base. This policy paper uses the experience of WFD to begin building that foundation (see Box 6). It starts by providing some concrete evidence of the distinct value of sister-party programmes. Next, the paper identifies the circumstances in which sister-party support works best. It goes beyond previous research, which has tended to examine the best context for political party support generally, rather than specific types of party support. The

Box 1 - The means and ends of sister-party support

The sister-party approach typically involves the transfer of resources from one party to another. This may take the form of:

1. Funding for activities (such as training workshops), staff (such as the secretariat of regional networks), and equipment or materials (such as computers);
2. Knowledge, in the form of skills, expertise and contacts; or
3. Best practice, including role models for individuals, and examples of procedures and structures that are useful to parties as political organization

The first of these – funding – attracts the most attention, but is very often the least important component of sister-party programmes.

Sister-party programmes offer benefits both to the parties being assisted, and to those who provide support. Goals may include:

1. Sharing ideas and experience. Weaker parties benefit from the accumulated expertise of more established parties, while experts from those parties have an opportunity to share what they know.
2. Promoting party ideologies, many of which have an internationalist or transnational dimension.
3. Strengthening party structures, such as human rights committees, youth wings, or policy development centres.
4. Democratizing party structures, including the procedures for nominating parliamentary and presidential candidates.
5. Fostering transnational relations between political elites; sister-party programmes are about relationships between people, as well as parties.
6. Stabilizing party systems by improving party discipline among MPs and creating incentives that discourage 'break-aways' from the party.
7. Long-term democratization as stronger political parties and party systems contribute – in theory – to the consolidation of democracy.

The relative importance of each goal may vary; different people provide (and accept) sister-party support for different reasons. This – as well as potential contradictions between these goals – helps to explain why it is so difficult to pin down a definition of 'success' (see Box 5).

paper then moves to the type of work that is done through sister-party programmes, revealing an excessive, but understandable, emphasis on election campaigns. It also examines the difficulty of translating support to individual parties into change at the national level. Finally, the paper explores what might be done to encourage, and support, democracy promoters to be more selective in their use of sister-party methods.

The value of sister-party programmes

The experience of UK political parties, working within the framework of WFD, demonstrates that the sister-party method can be a valuable tool. Figure 1 shows some of its strengths (discussed here) and its weaknesses (discussed later). A shared ideological position, even if it only exists at a relatively abstract level, makes it easier to establish a relationship of trust and confidence between parties. It is that relationship – not the shared ideological position itself – that accounts for much of the value

of sister-party programmes. In political party support, the presence or absence of trust can make or break a programme – and this can be very difficult to build for actors who are not politicians themselves. Those who adopt a sister-party approach have a comparative advantage in this area: multi-party programmes often struggle because the parties they are designed to assist are reluctant to open up to groups and individuals with whom they do not have an established relationship.

Several examples from WFD's body of practice provide evidence of this. In Uganda, Conservative Party experts providing support to the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) in 2011 observed that party officials viewed some other democracy promoters – notably those who employed multi-party methods – with suspicion. This undermined the programmes of those democracy promoters: the FDC refused to participate in some of their initiatives, including an SMS vote tally operation designed to detect and prevent electoral fraud. In contrast, when pre-marked ballot papers (favouring the

Figure 1   Strengths and weaknesses of the sister-party approach

Strengths

Shared ideology provides foundation for building trust.

Party leaders willing to listen to advice, share plans.

Peers can speak 'hard truths.'

Can target individual opposition parties.

Formal sister-party status needs to be backed by substance.

Shared ideology alone is not enough.

Exacerbates gravitational pull of elections.

Hard to affect the political party system.

Weaknesses

NRM candidate, President Museveni) were discovered on election day in 2011, FDC officials were willing to listen to a Conservative Party expert who advised them on how they should respond. This helped to ensure that the evidence of electoral malpractice was effectively documented and brought to the attention of EU election observers.

Other examples show that a sister-party approach can be valuable not just because it encourages party leaders to listen to advice, but because it encourages them to be frank with those who seek to help them. This can facilitate more accurate assessments of a sister-party's needs and, consequently, more effective programmes. This is important because the impact of party-support programmes often stems from the provision of expert advice, rather than the provision of material resources. In order to provide good advice, those supporting political parties need to know their plans. Yet party leaders are generally unwilling to share such information with actors they do not feel are on their side. A strong sister-party relationship can overcome this problem. For example, the relationship between the Liberal Democrats and the Republican Party of Georgia (RPG) ensured that the Liberal Democrats were given confidential information about their sister-party's strategic plans, specifically their decision to withdraw from the Georgian Dream coalition prior to the 2016 elections.

WFD's body of practice also reveals that a strong party-to-party relationship, built on the foundation of ideological similarity, can allow those providing assistance to tell their sister-party things it doesn't want to hear. The Liberal Democrats' work on LGBT rights with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in Serbia illustrates this. The relationship between the two parties meant the Liberal Democrats were able to tell the LDP that, when it came to LGBT issues, they were not as progressive as they thought they were. Many activists within the party were relieved to hear this. They agreed with that assessment but had found it difficult to communicate it to senior party leaders because of a tendency to see criticism as a betrayal of the party. This honest assessment of

Box 2 - Germany's political party foundations

Germany has six political party foundations – Stiftungen – that receive funding from Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development: the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Friedrich Naumann Foundation, Hanns Seidel Foundation, Heinrich Böll Foundation and Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. Like WFD, the Stiftungen work with a range of actors, including civil society and parliaments, as well as political parties. Collectively, they are probably the best known users of the party-to-party model of party support. While the Stiftungen have traditionally concentrated their support on sister-parties that share similar ideological positions, they have never used that criteria exclusively. In recent years they have also made greater use of multi-party approaches in selected countries. For example, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation has supported training workshops for women in politics in Uganda and Tanzania. The Stiftungen's more flexible approach means they have more tools in their toolbox. They also have a longer history of working with a broader range of social and political actors; political party work is just one component of what they do. This broader, more flexible approach may help to explain their relative success in building bridges between political parties and organisations such as trade unions. This is important advantage: in 2006, Carothers highlighted that this area – that of building links between political parties and society – was one where party assistance needed to go much deeper.

the LDP's weakness was a necessary precursor to the successful establishment of a Human Rights Committee within that party (see Box 7). Similarly, sister-party relationships sometimes allow democracy promoters to work in areas that would otherwise be 'off-limits' to outsiders. For example, the Conservative Party office is exploring the possibility of a programme that addresses corruption and transparency with-in one of its sister-parties. Unsurprisingly, this is an

extremely sensitive area, and likely one where it would be impossible to operate without the degree of trust conferred by the sister-party relationship.

Another advantage of a sister-party approach is that it can foster strong, personal relationships between key individuals in the parties. This does not occur automatically, or in all cases, but where those providing support can establish such relationships they are extremely valuable. This is because the success – or failure – of party support programmes of all stripes ultimately rests in the hands of those who lead the parties being assisted. No matter how well a programme is designed, if these key individuals do not support it, or at least tacitly accept it, it is unlikely to have a significant impact. As one might expect, in WFD's experience the more successful party programmes have generally been those where key party experts and officials were able to establish strong personal relationship with their sister-party counterparts.
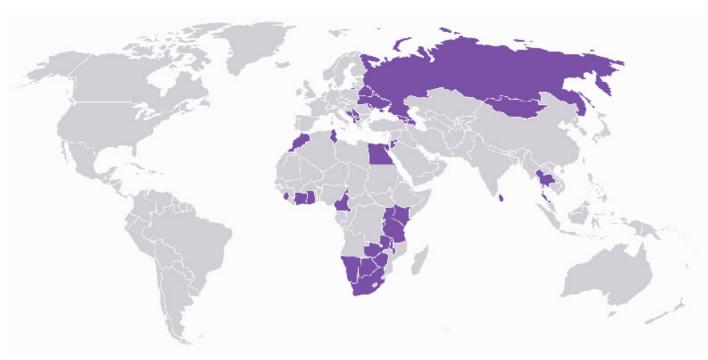
An important caveat is that the ideological similarity between the parties must be more than window-dressing. The similarity may exist only in a broad or highly abstract sense – sister parties do not have to agree on everything – but it must be genuine to at least some extent. In practice, many of those who provide political party support rely on membership of the relevant international party network to identify sister-parties. The Conservative Party generally views members of the International Democrat Union as sister-parties, while the Labour Party takes the same view of members of Socialist International. This is not enough; the most effective sister-party programmes are found where formal recognition as a sister-party is backed up by similar experiences and relative positions within the political system. Where there is no party with a credible claim to a shared ideology, democracy promoters will need to look to alternatives, such as the multi-party dialogues and 'democracy schools' established by NIMD (see Box 4). Failure to do so is likely to result in ineffective programmes in the short-term, and in the long-term will make it harder to justify the use of a sister-party approach where it is in fact warranted.

Above: 2014 - Tha'era 'train the trainers' event with the Labour Party

Box 3 - Labour support to Tha'era

Labour provides support to Tha'era, also known as the Arab Women's Network for Parity and Solidarity. This is a regional network, established in 2013, that connects women from social democratic parties in the Middle East and North Africa, including parties in Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia. In helping to establish this network, the Labour Party aimed to include women from several different countries in the region, allowing those in more liberal states to share their knowledge and experience with those from less liberal ones. In 2014 Tha'era, with Labour's support, held a series of national workshops providing training to over 130 women. Training covered a range of topics and employed a 'train-the-trainer' model; participants in the national workshops will in turn deliver local workshops, dramatically expanding the number of beneficiaries. The programme has also built important relationships between women, within and across the parties involved. In 2015 a Tha'era member, Shaimaa el-Sabbagh, was killed by a police officer at a demonstration in Egypt. This event, though tragic, demonstrated the value of these relationships. Tha'era mobilised its members to hold protests in Tunisia and Morocco, and leveraged its connections to the Labour Party to have the issue raised in the British Parliament.

Figure 2   Where does WFD use their sister-party approach?

Ideology should be just the beginning

An important pattern to emerge from WFD and UK political party experience is that while shared ideology can provide a valuable foundation for party support, sister-party programmes work best when the parties share more than ideology. That 'something more' can be a number of things, but similarities between the structural position of the parties crop up again and again in successful programmes. 'Structural position' refers to several things, including the relative size of a political party, whether it is part of a coalition, and – in the case of opposition parties – whether it seeking to regain power (having been in government previously) or to gain power for the first time. Part of the reason the Liberal Democrats were able to give tough advice to the LDP in Serbia was that the parties shared a similar structural position. LDP leaders were wary of adopting a more progressive position on LGBT rights given strong opposition to them among large parts of the Serbian population. Yet a realistic assessment of the political situation suggested that the cost of adopting a more progressive policy would be minimal; as a liberal, progressive

party, a large part of the population was unlikely to vote for the LDP, regardless of its position on LGBT rights. This meant, in the words of one person familiar with the programme, that 'the key was getting them to accept that they were always going to be a junior party in any coalition or government.' This harsh truth was far more palatable coming from a party in a similar position to that of the LDP. Similarly, the Liberal Democrats have been able to forge a particularly strong and fruitful relationship with the Democratic Alliance (DA) in South Africa because they share very similar structural positions. From the perspective of someone within the DA, 'we both had to face the reality that if we get into power, it will be in a coalition,' something that provides 'extra glue' for the relationship between the parties.

Other similarities between parties can provide the 'something more' than ideology. One programme that demonstrates this is the Democratic Unionist Party's (DUP) support to the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) in South Africa, a programme managed via WFD's Multi-Party Office (Box 8). In recent years these two parties have been able to build a productive relationship because the DUP has taken a similar journey to that which the

ACDP is now trying to take. That is, the DUP has transitioned from being a political extension of the church, to a modern political party. This similarity not only contributed to a strong relationship between the parties, but meant that the DUP was able to provide concrete advice on the specific problems that the ACDP faced. For example, the ACDP has struggled to attract media coverage on issues other than those seen as having a moral or religious aspect, something the DUP experienced in the past. The DUP was therefore able to draw on the expertise that its communication team had developed to assist the ACDP to develop a stronger communication strategy, one that expanded the range of issues on which it received media coverage.

The advantage of having more in common than ideology has, paradoxically, made it easier for smaller parties to do effective sister-party work and harder for larger parties to do the same. Newer, less established democracies tend to have a lot of small parties, so smaller UK political parties have more options to choose from. The Scottish National Party's (SNP) support to the Forum for Democracy and Development (FDD) in Zambia provides an illustrative example (Box 9). In 2011, the SNP sent a delegation to Zambia to investigate a number of potential sister parties. It ultimately chose to work with the FDD because it is progressive, promotes equality, and favours greater devolution of power to regional governments. As a small but strategically positioned, potential 'third party' there was a sense of 'clear synergies' between the two parties.

It is harder for larger political parties to find this kind of match. In the countries where political party support is needed, large parties with experience in government tend to be the ruling (and often distinctly authoritarian) party. The opposition is often fragmented into a number of smaller parties such that no large opposition party exists. There are some exceptions – the Conservative Party's support to the New Patriotic Party (NPP) in Ghana provides a case in point (Box 10) – but in many cases larger UK parties have ended up providing support to sister-parties with just a handful of MPs. These programmes can succeed, but they face an

Box 4 - NIMD's multi-party approach

The Netherlands Institute for Multi-party Democracy (NIMD) was founded in 2000 by seven Dutch political parties. Its approach to political party support is characterised by working with all political parties, regardless of affiliations and standing. Ideally, this means engaging with all main political parties in a country. In practice it often means engaging with those parties represented in the Parliament. NIMD's most distinctive instrument is that of setting up and managing locally owned multi-party dialogues, such as the Centre for Multi-party Democracy in Malawi (CMD – Malawi). The core objective of these dialogues is to build tolerance and trust between different political parties. Often the organizations supported by NIMD engage in advocacy on issues affecting political parties, such as the regulation of party membership and finances. CMD – Malawi has, for example, lobbied the Malawian government to introduce rules to increase the transparency of party finances. An important difference between this method of party support and the sister-party model is that it allows NIMD to foster change at the level of the political party system, rather than the level of individual political parties. In recent years, NIMD has expanded the range of instruments it employs, making use of direct capacity strengthening and political skills training, often in the form of 'democracy schools.' One limitation of NIMD's approach is that it is unable to target individual political parties, nor to focus on specific groups of parties, such as a coalition of opposition parties. In political systems dominated by strong ruling parties, this can be a significant limitation.

Box 5 - What does success look like?

While it is tempting to assume that all of the goals listed in Box 1 are mutually reinforcing, experience suggests that this is not the case. Tensions can arise between them, for example between the goals of strengthening parties and party systems, and the goal of long-term democratization. A stronger ruling party might turn that strength to authoritarian ends – Mozambique's political trajectory provides a case in point – while increasing internal party democracy might lead to splits that destabilize the party system. An important area for future research is to work out how the different goals of party-support programmes (and in particular, sister-party programmes) interact. This makes it hard to determine what 'success' looks like.

Scale also complicates definitions of success. The feasibility of achieving the more ambitious goals set out in Box 1 (in particular the last two) may depend on both the size of party support programmes and the size of the parties they assist. This could put those goals beyond the reach of sister-party programmes, which tend to be more limited in terms of financial flows and which often provide support to very small political parties.
We have classified programmes as more or less effective based on whether they:

- Achieved most of their stated goals; and
- Led to changes (such as changes in the behaviour of individuals or the structure of parties) that have the potential to contribute to democratization in the longer term.

Classifications were based on WFD's internal programme reports, external evaluations of programmes (where available), and interviews with key staff members (both at UK political party offices and WFD central office). One weakness of this approach is that it relies heavily on self-assessment and so could be biased towards classifying programmes as successful. With this in mind, future research will incorporate a larger fieldwork component.

uphill challenge, and many not always represent the soundest investment. Moreover, given the disconnect in terms of structural position, particular care must be taken to ensure that the expertise and advice provided to such sister-parties is relevant to their circumstances.

One tactic that UK parties can (and in some cases, do) use to overcome a lack of structural similarities between themselves and their sister-parties is to leverage the regional networks which they support. These networks – such as the Africa Liberal Network (supported by the Liberal Democrats) and the Women's Academy for Africa (supported by the Labour Party) – allow UK parties to facilitate the sharing of expertise between sister-parties even when the circumstances of those sister-parties are dramatically different from their own.

The gravitational pull of election campaigns

WFD's body of practice suggests that a disproportionate amount of party support is geared around transferring skills and knowledge relating to electoral campaigns. Compared to the number of programmes that strengthen campaigning skills and strategies, relatively few programmes deal with issues like party finance, policy development or building a membership base. This is understandable: elections are ultimately why political parties exist. It's also where developed political parties have accumulated hard-won expertise, expertise that they want to share with their sister-parties and expertise that other democracy promoters are not in a position to offer. Activities linked to election campaigns are also popular with sister-parties, so they often appeal as a means of strengthening local ownership. Perhaps more importantly, they can create windows of opportunity to deal with broader issues such women's political participation. Though these are good reasons to do work linked to election campaigns, the cumulative result is that the sister-party model reinforces the tendency, shared by almost all democracy promoters, to focus very heavily on elections. This creates two problems, both of which have the potential to

undermine the utility of political party support.

The first problem is that campaigning expertise does not always travel well. While the people involved in party support programmes are generally aware of this, many struggle to adapt their knowledge and advice to local contexts. Given the reluctance of most beneficiaries of party support programmes to give negative feedback,[5] training sessions on campaigning skills attract a significant amount of criticism. In African countries, beneficiaries of WFD programmes have complained that sessions on designing effective campaign literature were not useful in their predominately rural and illiterate constituencies. In other regions, such as the Balkans, beneficiaries have expressed doubt that that campaign strategies developed for single member constituencies elected on the basis of a simple majority were useful in a party list proportional electoral system with large (often national) multi-member constituencies. There are, of course, exceptions; sometimes campaign strategies and techniques do translate well. This has tended to be the case in more economically developed, politically open states with electoral systems closely resembling those of the UK. This is one reason why the Liberal Democrat's support to the Botswana Movement for Democracy (BMD), support centred on campaign strategy and techniques, has been particularly successful.

The second problem created by the over-emphasis on election campaigns is that it risks reinforcing some of the weaknesses (or perhaps more appropriately, the pathologies) of political parties in less established democracies. One of the reasons why these parties are weak is that they experienced 'compression' as they developed; there were very quick transitions to electoral competition, giving parties little time in which to organize and contest elections.[6] In this context, parties prioritized campaigning over investment in organizational infrastructure or establishing a long-term supporter base. In theory, there was time for this later. In practice, the initial over-emphasis on elections has proved habit-forming. It is one reason that parties tend to have weak internal structures, something that in turn increases the prospects of internal fragmentation around key policy and leadership changes. Political party support that invests too much time and too many resources in election campaigns risks entrenching this habit further. This is not to say the democracy promoters should abandon all work related to election campaigns. Rather, more care needs to be taken to ensure that political party support is balanced. Work centred on election campaigns should be an exception, done selectively when circumstances warrant it, rather than the 'default' that it is at present.

Avoiding an over-emphasis on election campaigns could have a number of benefits. For a start, those programmes that do centre on election campaigns will ultimately be more successful (both in terms of impact, and in terms of sustainability) when they can be built on stronger foundations. A case that illustrates this is the Liberal Democrat's support to the BMD in relation to Botswana's 2014 general election. That programme – geared around constituency level campaigning – worked because the BMD had already invested in organizational infrastructure. It had recruited volunteers,

Box 6 - Where's the proof? WFD's body of practice

Since 1992 WFD has worked to support and encourage the development of pluralistic democratic practice and political institutions around the world. Support to political parties – delivered by UK political parties – constitutes a central component of this work. This policy paper draws on the body of practice that WFD and UK political parties have developed over time, relying primarily on evidence from 2010-2015. This includes, but is not limited to, the programmes featured below. As illustrated in Figure 2, UK political parties delivered bilateral programmes supporting political parties in many countries in Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East in that period. They also provided support through a number of regionally-focussed networks.

Box 7 - Liberal Democrat support to the Liberal Democratic Party in Serbia

In Serbia, the Liberal Democrats provide support to the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). While the LDP is formally liberal, in recent years it has fallen behind on human rights issues, in particular on LGBT rights. In one recent programme, the Liberal Democrats aimed to help the LDP address this by providing training for local party members on LGBT rights and establishing a LGBT rights committee within the party. Ultimately, the sensitivity of this issue in Serbia meant that the establishment of such a committee was not political feasible. The programme was adapted, successfully establishing a human rights committee whose mandate encompasses LGBT rights. This concrete result has not clearly translated into broader social change, in part because the LDP remains a minor player in the national parliament. However, it may have helped the LDP to win back more progressive voters. In the most recent election (April 2016), the LDP increased its share of the popular vote and won four parliamentary seats. This is a small gain, but a significant one given that the party had performed very poorly (losing all its parliamentary seats) in the 2014 election.

Below: Grant Haskin, Head of Communications for the African Christian Democratic Party meets Ian Paisley, MP for the Democratic Unionist Party in a WFD Multi-Party Office study visit

compiled a database of voters and established local offices in key constituencies. These prior investments could – with advice from Liberal Democrat experts – be leveraged during the election campaign. A more selective approach to the provision of support linked to election campaigns may have other positive side-effects. It may, for example, reduce the risk that political party support will be perceived as an attempt, by external actors, to interfere in domestic politics. More sustainable change requires programmes that target the foundations on which electoral campaigns are built. One example of this kind of work is provided by the SNP's support to the FDD. In helping the FDD to sell membership cards and develop a membership database, the SNP has contributed to a gradual shift in attitudes to how FDD should generate funds (from members rather than leaders). The extent of change should not be overstated: the membership drive raised about £5,000, a tiny amount compared to the total party budget. Yet it represents a significant step forward, an in-principle demonstration of the ability of the party to move towards a more sustainable funding model. It also seems to have contributed to improved electoral outcomes. In many of the constituencies where the membership drive was implemented, the FDD witnessed a substantial jump in its vote in the 2015 Presidential by-election.

Reducing the focus on election campaigns and increasing the focus on the foundations of political parties will create some complications. In particular, it will make it harder for those providing political party support to find clear, quantifiable indicators of success. One appeal of programmes centred on election campaigns is that election results provide a handy measure of impact. Focussing on more fundamental issues will require democracy promoters to think more critically, and more creatively, about how they can detect and measure success. This would need to be accommodated in programme design and may require further investment in monitoring and evaluation systems.

Box 8 - Democratic Unionist Party support to the African Christian Democratic Party in South Africa

The DUP's relationship with the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) began in 2009. Since 2012 the DUP has provided the ACDP with support to modernise their party. Drawing on the DUP's own experience in this area, it advised the ACDP on the development and implementation of a modernisation road map. Activities included a roundtable meeting of party leaders and several follow-up activities in the wake of that meeting. More recently, the DUP has provided expert communication advice, helping the ACDP to expand the range of issues on which it is able to attract media coverage.

Box 9 - Scottish National Party support to the Forum for Democracy & Development in Zambia

The SNP has worked with the Forum for Democracy and Development (FDD) since 2008. The SNP has provided the FDD with advice on campaign strategy and tactics, but most of its work has been directed towards more foundational issues, such as the development of local branches and the recruitment of party members. To date, the most tangible result to flow from this programme has been linked an initiative to sell party membership cards, launched in 2012. This has expanded the membership base of the party and moved it a small but significant step towards a firmer, more sustainable financial footing. The initiative also triggered changes in the FDD's internal structures: following the membership drive local branches are more visible and appear better organized. These changes appear to have led to increased electoral success. The party increased its vote share in many of the areas where the programme was implemented.

From parties to party systems

Perhaps the biggest challenge to the utility of sister-party programmes is that of moving from stronger, more democratic political parties to stronger, more democratic political party systems. Changes in the nature and behaviour of individual parties do have the potential to lead to systemic change. Research commissioned by International IDEA observed that, in some countries, the adoption of programmatic platforms by long-term opposition parties had triggered a re-structuring of the broader party system: once one party successfully employed programmatic strategies, campaigning on the basis of issues rather personalities, other parties were encouraged (or forced) to emulate them.[7] Yet, evidence connecting the support that democracy promoters provide to individual parties to subsequent changes at the level of the political party system remains scarce. This policy paper – which relies on internal WFD reports and evaluations, as well as interviews with staff based (primarily) in London – is not in a position to fill that gap. That material does however, reveal a few salient points.

The first of these is a need for realistic expectations. In the right circumstances, sister-party programmes can be very effective. However, they are rarely transformative. Good sister-party programmes are about a series of small, but important, steps in the right direction rather than dramatic change. The harsh reality is that these changes will contribute to progress at the national level only at the margins. This is particularly true of programmes that provide support to smaller parties: some have only a handful of MPs (and sometimes have no MPs) in their national parliament.

The second point worth noting is more positive: those engaged in party support may be missing some opportunities to more effectively link sister-party work to system level changes. Proposals from UK political parties, and comments on those proposals from WFD's Board and FCO staff at overseas posts, suggest that democracy promoters often approach coordination as requiring them to avoid any

duplication or overlap in their work. Programme proposals take great care to identify the gap that an intervention will fill but rarely explain how it might reinforce (or be reinforced by) the efforts of other democracy promoters. More could be done to complement and reinforce different forms of democracy promotion, and in particular different forms of political party support. It may be worth the while of WFD, and other organizations that use the sister-party approach, to prioritise work in countries where other actors are doing work at the level of the political party system. Designing sister-party programmes to feed into, or link up with multi-party programmes may significantly increase the likelihood that these programmes will foster change not just at the level of individual parties, but at the national level.

How to encourage more strategic sister-party programmes

The analysis above suggests that the sister-party method has value where it is used strategically. Ideally, this would mean using the sister-party approach only where parties share more than ideology, where programing does not over-emphasise election campaigns at the expense of other more fundamental issues, and where other democracy promoters are doing work that targets the political party system. To achieve this, we need to identify what can be done to encourage those who provide party support to sister-parties to be more selective in who they work with and what they do.

WFD's experience suggests that political parties are choosier about who they will support, and where, when they face more constraints. It was easier to find examples of programmes that really leveraged the strengths of the sister-party model in the portfolios of smaller parties. Part of this was linked to one of our earlier observations: it is easier for smaller parties to find sister-parties with whom they share more than ideology. However, it also appears to reflect the fact that the smaller parties are more motivated to be selective. They have fewer resources and often can support only one sister-

Box 10 - Conservative support to the New Patriotic Party in Ghana

The Conservative Party has a long-standing relationship with the New Patriotic Party (NPP) in Ghana; it has worked with that party since 1995. The sister-party relationship has encompassed periods in which the NPP has been in power (2000-2008), and periods in which it has been in opposition (prior to 2000, and since the beginning of 2009). Conservative Party support to the NPP has tended to take the form of training workshops, including communications training, training for parliamentary candidates and training for regional organisers. In the past, topics addressed in these workshops have often related to election campaigns, covering subjects such how to localise national campaign messages, canvass voters and prepare effective campaign literature, as well as strategies for getting out the vote on election day. In the future there is likely to be a shift away from campaigning as the Conservative Party is exploring the potential for new programmes with a greater focus on thematic issues such as the political participation of women, youth and other vulnerable groups, or the issue of corruption and transparency within the party.

Below: Colin Bloom, Conservative Party Director of Outreach, addresses conference of the Africa International Young Democratic Union in Accra.

party at a time. All their eggs are in one basket, so they have reason to take care in choosing that basket. In the UK context this represents a challenge. Funding for party support is allocated by reference to the electoral success of UK political parties rather than the success of their party support programmes. As a result, the WFD programming cycle provides only weak incentives for the larger parties to be strategic when choosing which sister-parties to support and what kind of support to provide. Addressing this need not involve dramatic shifts in the amounts allocated to any particular party. Options could, for example, include offering parties a 'top-up' on their core funding if they are able to demonstrate the achievement of certain goals, or maintaining a base level of funding allocated according to the existing formula while establishing a separate pool of funds available on a competitive basis.

UK political parties have already taken some steps towards a more strategic approach to party support. Since 2012, when WFD's core funding shifted from a one-year to three-year cycle, they have made use of longer-term programmes. It has, however, taken time for this change to become meaningful; some of the first multi-year programmes were effectively a series of successive one year projects rather than an integrated longer-term model. In those programmes, time horizons had been extended, but a clear strategy was often lacking. Recently, this has begun to change. For example, there has been a decline in the use of ad-hoc training workshops delivering standardized curricula. UK political parties have also become more alert to some of the limitations of past programmes, particularly those that have focussed on elections. It is now more common for those delivering political party support to discuss the need to link election-centred work to party structures that continue to operate between elections, aiming to reduce the tendency of parties to go dormant between campaigns. The adoption of a more strategic approach to political party support remains a work in progress, a work that this policy paper will hopefully assist.

One important issue that this policy paper has not addressed is the question of whether sister-party programmes – and democracy promotion more broadly – can work in highly authoritarian settings. The first wave of democracy promotion took place in countries that had experienced reasonably clear-cut transitions from authoritarianism to democracy. In that context, the challenge was (to borrow a well known line from Thomas Carothers) that of speeding up an already moving train.[8] Today, an increasing amount of democracy promotion takes place in countries where political space is severely restricted or receding. This makes it necessary to consider whether there is an authoritarian threshold beyond which democracy promotion does not work. If that were the case, it might sometimes be better for democracy promoters to do nothing. But even in such less promising environments it may still be worth staying engaged in order to maintain a presence and sustain networks, in the hope that this allows us to take advantage of future opportunities to promote reform, should they arise. The complex pathways through which countries move towards and away from democracy means that this remains an issue on which there is little clarity, and certainly no consensus. Yet it is an essential question that future research must answer if we are to best target the time and resources of those who provide political party support and other forms of democracy promotion.

Endnotes

1   Thomas Carothers, Confronting the Weakest Link: Aiding Political Parties in New Democracies (Washington, D.C.:   Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006).

2   Nic Cheeseman, 'African Elections as Vehicles for Change', Journal of Democracy 21, no. 4 (2010): 139–53.

3   Carothers, Confronting the Weakest Link, 116.

4   Laure-Hélène Piron, NIMD Country Programme Evaluation, Synthesis Report (The Hague: NIMD, 2015).

5   In feedback forms, an overwhelming (and implausible) number of participants assert that there was 'no least useful session' in any given workshop.

6   A more comprehensive explanation of this concept is provided by Carothers, Confronting the Weakest Link, chap. 3.

7   Nic Cheeseman et al., Politics Meets Policies: The Emergence of Programmatic Political Parties (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2014), http://www.idea.int/publications/politics-meets-policies/index.cfm.

8   Carothers, Thomas. 1999. Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Further reading

Burnell, Peter, and André Gerrits. 'Promoting Party Politics in Emerging Democracies.' *Democratization 17*, no. 6 (2010): 1065–84.

Carothers, Thomas. *Confronting the Weakest Link: Aiding Political Parties in New Democracies* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006).

Erdmann, Gero. 'Political Party Assistance and Political Party Research: Towards a Closer Encounter?' *Democratization 17*, no. 6 (2010): 1275–96.

Piron, Laure-Hélène. NIMD *Country Programme Evaluation,* Synthesis Report (The Hague: NIMD, 2015).

Svåsand, Lars. 2014. *International Party Assistance – What Do We Know about the Effects?* Report to the Expert Group on Aid Analysis (Stockholm: EBA, 2014).

Wild, Leni, Marta Foresti, and Pilar Domingo. 2011. I*nternational Assistance to Political Party and Party System Development.* Synthesis Report (London: ODI, 2011).