



## U.S. Democratization Assistance

By Elizabeth Cohn, Goucher College

With the end of the cold war, U.S. policymakers sought a number of rationales to justify continued engagement in the world and to promote American interests. Republicans and Democrats alike were attracted to a framework developed by the Reagan administration: the U.S. promotion of democracy. The Clinton administration went further than Reagan and Bush, announcing in 1993 that all U.S. foreign policy would be guided by the doctrine of “enlargement,” aimed at expanding the community of democratic states.

Although this rhetoric indicated a shift in thinking from the former policy of containment (no longer necessary after the collapse of the Soviet Union), it was not backed up with significant policy initiatives designed to implement it. There were minor bureaucratic rearrangements such as the creation of the Center for Democracy and Governance at the Agency for International Development (AID) and the Bureau for Democracy,

Human Rights and Labor at the State Department. Clinton’s attempt to create a position of Assistant Secretary of Defense for Democracy and Peacekeeping at the Department of Defense was thwarted by Congress, but a special Assistant for Democracy was named at the National Security Council (NSC).

Promoting democracy, the Clinton administration has argued, is valuable not only for its own sake but also because it enhances free trade and

economic growth and promotes global security. As President Clinton said in his 1994 State of the Union address, “Democracies don’t attack each other,” and therefore “the best strategy to insure our security and to build a durable peace is to support the advance of democracy elsewhere.” However, academic Michael E. Brown and others contend that this “democratic peace theory” is based more on wishful thinking than empirical evidence.

Among policymakers, analysts, and the public there is a broad consensus supporting democracy promotion. The consensus, which builds on the U.S. national identity in global politics and the idealist tradition in foreign policy, has emerged with little critical examination of

the objectives, methods, and impact of democratization programs. Since Woodrow Wilson, U.S. presidents have made a rhetorical commitment to democracy while supporting nondemocratic governments or forces if security or economic interests were at stake.

During the cold war, government democracy assistance programs were largely housed within the CIA and run covertly. Since the Reagan administration, a number of government agencies have begun democracy programs under the rubric of strengthening civil society. Although these programs are now overt and administered by a variety of agencies, the U.S. has continued the long-established model of funding—either directly or indirectly—foreign institutions such as the media, political parties, and trade unions.

Government agencies currently involved in the promotion of democracy include AID, the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), and the departments of State, Justice, and Defense. Also involved are quasi-governmental organizations, including the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the Asia Foundation, that rely almost exclusively on government funding. These democracy programs focus on the rule of law, the administration of justice, human rights, political processes including elections, civil society, government institutions, and civil-military relations. Though most of these government agencies target foreign institutions, USIA’s public diplomacy efforts—which are here considered part of U.S. democracy assistance—target foreign individuals regarding U.S. policy and U.S. values, including democratic principles.

The amount of U.S. financial support for democracy assistance is difficult to assess over time because of numerous changes in the categorization of aid programs and accounting practices. Government figures have not consistently included economic assistance projects as part of democracy building funding. Similarly, the USIA is not always included. Recent figures from the State Department indicate spending of \$580 million in 1998, with increases to \$623 million and \$709 million in 1999 and 2000 respectively. Nevertheless, these levels of democracy assistance have not reflected the Clinton administration’s grand commitment to a policy of enlargement. When compared with the 1999 appropriations of \$21.6 billion for International Affairs and \$276.7 billion for the Department of Defense, the dollar amounts are extremely small.

### Key Points

- U.S. democratization assistance is hard to evaluate because of a lack of clarity about what is considered democracy promotion.
- Historically, the U.S. commitment to promoting democracy has been more rhetorical than real.
- The objectives and impact of past U.S. political aid produces skepticism about current democracy programs.

The Clinton administration, even more than its predecessors, has emphasized that free markets and a strong private sector are integral to democracy. Indeed, the Clinton administration was the first to use the term “market democracies.” However, this definitional linkage of free market policies with political democracy is often more theoretical than real. Economic globalization, privatization, and free trade tend to widen the gap between rich and poor, and this can exacerbate crime, corruption, and instability, thus undermining efforts to build democratic institutions. As a result, U.S. democracy programs may have a negative impact on a country’s political democratization processes.

Historically the U.S. has had a very ethnocentric concept of democracy that focuses almost exclusively on elections—even if these elections occur in highly volatile and controlled conditions, as in El Salvador in the 1980s or Cambodia in the 1990s. The U.S. employs a limited definition of democracy, modeled on the American form of government: free and fair elections, the protections guaranteed by the American Bill of Rights, and competition among institutions in civil society.

In Tanzania, Kenya, and several African countries for instance, the push for multiparty elections has often fanned domestic tensions through the rapid proliferation of ethnically, regionally, or religiously based political parties. In recent years policymakers have correctly begun to recognize that multiparty elections are necessary but not sufficient for creating a democracy. Indeed, democratically elected governments may rule in an undemocratic manner, and this reality has led some observers to caution that there may be a proliferation of “illiberal democracies,” such as in Peru, Romania, Bangladesh, and Ghana.

The democracy buzz words today are “strengthening civil society,” which independent analysts have described as supporting a free press and free speech, the right of NGOs and labor to organize, an independent judiciary, and a civilian-controlled military. The need to strengthen civil society—although not necessarily all these components—has now been officially embraced by AID, but it is usually narrowly construed as building societies that embrace U.S. values and U.S.-style democracy.

In practice, strengthening civil society can be used to support one political group or party over another. This occurred in Nicaragua under a media spotlight in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the U.S. funded conservative forces against the Sandinistas, and it

continues to occur today, although not on as grand a scale. Conservative and centrist, pro-U.S. and pro-free market forces are strengthened and helped into power, while other indigenous forces are marginalized. Thus the political map of a target country becomes reshaped by U.S. involvement. When promoting democratic movements would mean countering U.S. allies—as with the Zapatista peasants’ struggle against the Mexican government—funding is denied.

Currently, U.S. NGOs are tapped for projects, such as funding opposition leaders, that could be damaging to bilateral relations if done directly by the U.S. government. In Romania, for instance, the International Republican Institute—one of NED’s core grantees—“carried significant water” for the U.S. government, according to a State Department official. Indeed, although NED is technically a nongovernmental organization, the U.S. State Department has in the past reviewed NED grants before money is allocated, and the two still work together closely. The political way in which the U.S. government uses NED, and the many other U.S. NGOs it funds, damages both U.S. democratic credentials and democratic processes abroad.

Government agencies and NGOs contracted to administer democracy assistance argue that they seek to avoid even the appearance of interference in a host country’s politics. According to Thomas Carothers of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, “AID officials cling to the idea that they can promote democracy around the world without actually becoming involved in politics or ‘being political.’” However, in practice, democracy programs often do interfere in the political affairs of other countries. Although far less dramatic than the use of military force, training union organizers, publishing elementary school texts, or funding political parties and movements produces a long-term impact on a country’s political life. Further, as the furor surrounding China’s contributions to U.S. political parties highlights, the U.S. government does not tolerate foreign interference in American political campaigns or elections.

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## Key Problems

- The U.S. definition of democracy narrowly focuses on free markets and U.S.-style democracy.
  - The U.S. government funds U.S. nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to carry out politically sensitive projects that could damage U.S. bilateral relations if U.S. government funding went directly to foreign nongovernmental organizations.
  - U.S. policymakers fail to acknowledge that democracy promotion may constitute political intervention.
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### Editors

Tom Barry (IRC)  
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### Production

Grant Moser (IRC)

### Communications Director

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### Orders and subscription information:

Mail: PO Box 4506  
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Fax: (505) 246-1601

Email: [resourcectr@igc.apc.org](mailto:resourcectr@igc.apc.org)

### Editorial inquiries and information:

#### IRC Editor

Voice: (505) 388-0208

Fax: (505) 388-0619

Email: [resourcectr@igc.apc.org](mailto:resourcectr@igc.apc.org)

#### IPS Editor

Voice: (202) 234-9382/3 ext. 232

Fax: (202) 387-7915

Email: [ipsps@igc.apc.org](mailto:ipsps@igc.apc.org)

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In 1995, President Clinton called democracy promotion “one of the central pillars of the United States’ security strategy.” But democracy needs to be promoted for its own sake, not simply as an instrument to further U.S. security or economic interests. The U.S. can play a positive yet limited role in supporting democratic

## Key Recommendations

- Redefine democracy so that free markets are not conflated with democracy and so that reducing economic inequality is considered a fundamental element.
- Limit U.S. government involvement in the strengthening of civil society.
- Utilize multilateral and regional organizations when possible.

processes in other countries, but only if democracy assistance is delinked from furthering U.S. security and economic interests. One way to accomplish this is for U.S. democracy assistance to be channeled through multilateral and regional organizations.

The U.S. government needs to recognize that democracy can take many forms, and the U.S. political model should not be imposed on other countries. Democracy could

follow a social democratic model, as advanced by Social Democratic parties in Europe, where social and economic rights are regarded more seriously than they are in the United States. In this model the government plays a stronger role in protecting people from the excesses of the market and in ensuring a more equitable distribution of resources. Indeed, any definition of democracy must include a lessening of inequalities, since, in the long run, such inequalities undermine democracy and can lead to a return to authoritarian government.

Policymakers should recognize that when the U.S. engages in “strengthening civil society” it acts to further its interests, and that the furthering of these U.S. interests is not necessarily in the best interests of democratic development in the target country. If the U.S. government is truly interested in promoting democracy, then it must be willing to accept leaders and institutions supported by the country’s own residents—even if they are not favored by the United States. U.S. democracy programs should be directed away from the new emphasis on strengthening civil society and instead should be limited to technical support for elections and campaigns, judiciaries, and other governmental institutions.

The U.S. government should be more transparent in its democracy assistance. Extensive government funding of NED and the Asia Foundation should be ended, and these groups should reconstitute themselves as true nongovernmental organizations. Close consultation between the U.S. government and nongovernmental groups should stop. NGOs should set their own goals and not be servants of U.S. national interests, as NED is by congressional mandate.

When possible, the U.S. should use international and regional organizations, such as the United Nations and the Organization of American States, for its democracy assistance. These international organizations are better placed to address the democratization processes in other countries without promoting a U.S. security or free

trade agenda. Isolationism should not be a policy alternative. In an interdependent world, the U.S. government is rightly concerned about the political and economic processes in other countries.

But U.S. policymakers must realize that emphasizing free markets and privatization above all else destroys democracy’s long-term prospects. AID can play a positive role in democracy building by addressing socioeconomic problems in poor countries and thus create a strong base for democratization. Or AID can support human rights and reconciliation, as it did with its \$1.75 million funding of Guatemala’s Historical Clarification Commission in 1997 and 1998. However, AID should not be drawn into advancing short-term U.S. policy interests.

The U.S. needs to recognize that building stable democratic institutions takes time, as witnessed by America’s own experience. Democracy programs should be geared toward supporting democratic reforms—such as an independent and well-trained judiciary, a civilian-controlled military, and a multiparty electoral processes—over the long haul, recognizing that, in the short run, these efforts may cause political unrest.

*Elizabeth Cohn is the Director of the International and Intercultural Studies Major at Goucher College.*

### FY 1999 State Department Democratization Funding\* (millions \$U.S.)

Africa	106.4
East Asia & Pacific	15.2
New Independent States	214.2
Europe	95.4
Near East	18.0
South Asia	5.9
Western Hemisphere	88.2
<b>Non-regional/global</b>	
International Orgs. & Programs	4.5
Economic Support Funds	19.0
Contributions to International Orgs.	25.1
Natl. Endowment for Democracy	31.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>622.9</b>

\* Includes funding that State Department categorizes as democracy building by USIA, AID, and State Department itself, but does not include other democratization programs administered by other U.S. departments, most prominently the Defense and Justice departments.

Source: Department of State, *Congressional Presentation for Foreign Operations, Fiscal Year 2000* (Washington, D.C., 1999).

# Sources for More Information

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