Promoting More Policy-Focused Parties Through Civic Organizing: Executive Summary

NDI

CEPPS Strengthening Democracy through Partnership

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ABOUT CEPPS

Established in 1995, the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS) pools the expertise of three international organizations dedicated to democratic development: the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), the International Republican Institute (IRI), and the National Democratic Institute (NDI). CEPPS has a 20-year track record of collaboration and leadership in democracy, human rights, and governance support, learning from experience, and adopting new approaches and tools based on the ever-evolving technological landscape.

As mission driven, non-profit democracy organizations, IFES, IRI, and NDI differ from many development actors by maintaining long-term relationships with political parties, election management bodies, parliaments, civil society organizations, and democracy activists.

Through this work, IFES, IRI, and NDI:

- Promote meaningful participation of all citizens in their political systems, including women, youth, and other traditionally marginalized groups.
- Harness the comparative advantages of media and technology to promote citizen understanding and engagement, and transparent political competition.
- Support meaningful transition processes that establish positive precedents for effective democratic governance.
- Promote the integrity of elections as a sustainable vehicle for peacefully and democratically choosing leaders.
- Facilitate the ability of elected political actors to fulfill their responsibilities to citizens through better governance practices.
- Promote competitive and representative multi-party political systems.
- Ensure respect for the application of impartial legal frameworks and compliance by political actors.

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Cover photo: A community leader signs a pledge committing to promoting the priorities of the LWPP on the campaign trail, including to call upon candidates to promote women's policy priorities (August 2017).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The democracy support community implements a wide range of programming to promote more competitive and representative multiparty systems. Traditionally, these political party programs have focused on improving the capacity of party activists and political leaders to: conduct citizen outreach; represent different societal groups, including marginalized communities; develop and pursue public policy proposals; recruit and nominate candidates; compete in elections; and form governments. However, without strong incentives for change, greater organizational capacity alone rarely leads to more inclusive, responsive, and accountable political parties. As a result, assistance providers have started to supplement technical assistance to parties with interventions to incentivize more responsive, inclusive, and accountable parties.[1] Although the theoretical foundations for these approaches appear strong, comparative lessons learned and best practices from practical experiences are limited. A deeper understanding of the efficacy of these approaches would strengthen the effectiveness of political party programming and inform future strategies. This publication seeks to answer the following research question:

- Under what conditions have civic interventions incentivized more policy-focused parties?

THEORY OF CHANGE

Responsive policy-making requires informed and active citizens that express their policy preferences and hold their leaders accountable for those priorities. While civic organizing is valuable in its own right as a means to increase citizen participation in political processes, it can also serve an instrumental purpose in promoting more policy-focused parties. For instance, through issue-based voter education, debates, citizen platforms, and political process monitoring efforts, civic groups have tried to push political parties to: increase their focus on policies, involve citizens in policy processes, and improve service delivery.

This approach is based on the following theory of change, which is also outlined in Figure 1.

If citizens:

- recognize that parties should offer differentiated policies and govern based on those policy proposals, and are willing and able to cast their votes based on that understanding;
- have policy priorities and preferences, organize around them, and see parties as viable means for achieving/implementing those policy preferences; and
- are informed and have opinions about the extent to which parties/governments are implementing policies/providing services (public goods), organize around those views, and are willing and able to hold political parties/elected officials accountable for their policy performance;

Then:

- parties will recognize that policy proposals/processes and their ability to deliver them are important factors in how voters choose between candidates, and in determining electoral outcomes. As a result, political parties will place increased emphasis on developing and implementing policy proposals for the public good.

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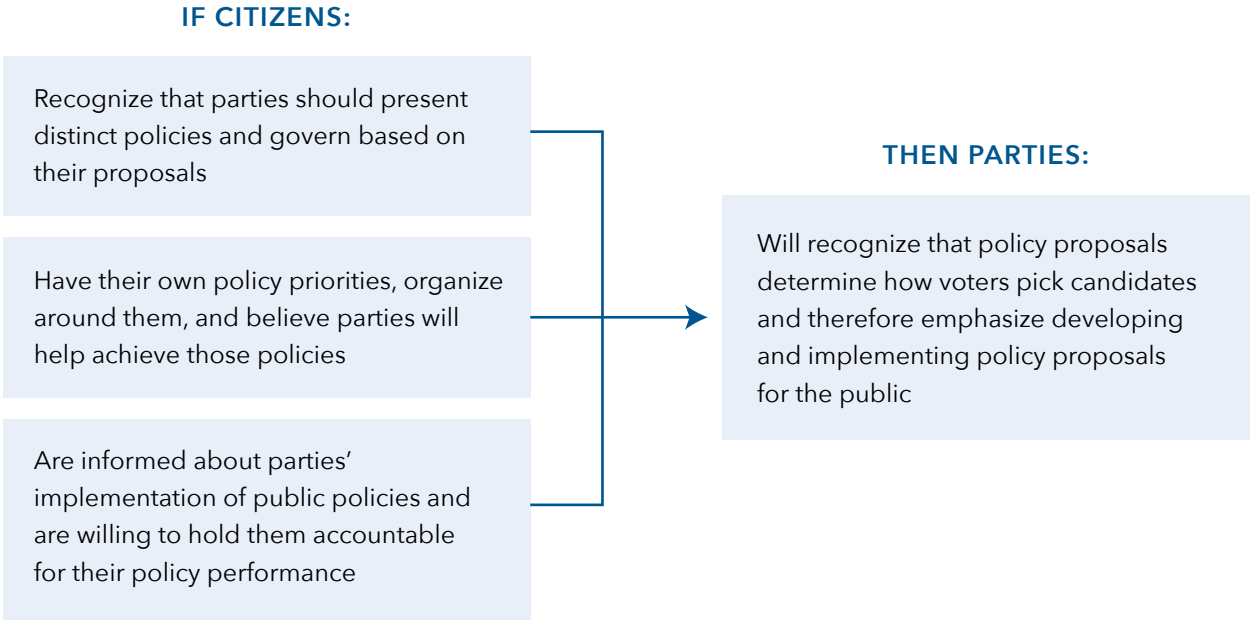
[1] Carothers, Thomas. (2006) Confronting the Weakest Link: Aiding Political Parties in New Democracies. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Washington, DC. pp 180, 214. https://carnegieendowment.org/2006/10/23/confronting-weakest-link-aiding-political-parties-in-new-democracies-pub-18808

FIGURE 1: PROMOTING MORE POLICY-FOCUSED PARTIES THROUGH CIVIC ORGANIZING: ABBREVIATED THEORY OF CHANGE



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Based on the overarching research question, CEPPS/NDI conducted a literature review outlining: the different types of civic interventions that have been used to incentivize more policy-focused parties, existing knowledge of the strengths and limitations of each, and priorities for further research. Based on the resources available, and to supplement the literature review, CEPPS/NDI identified four case studies.

Together, the case studies were selected to reflect different opportunities for lessons learned based on: the operating context (varying degrees of openness and party institutionalization), geographic diversity, the type of intervention(s) used, and the approach to the inclusion of women and other marginalized groups. Two case studies (Belarus and Slovakia) were developed based on desk research, and the additional two (Liberia and Uganda) involved field research.

Based on the literature review and the four case studies, this document highlights lessons learned from four programs in different environments and outlines recommendations to strengthen future programming.

FINDINGS

Experiences across programs in the four countries pointed to the following:

1. **A variety of factors influenced party responsiveness to citizen demands, including: international incentives, type of electoral system, and opportunities for positive media coverage**. Further, parties operating within the same country context made different calculations about how to respond to civic pressure based on their own circumstances and considerations. As a result, responsiveness varied by party. It also required the existence of well-placed, intraparty champions.

2. **Realigning the current relationships between political parties and citizens in favor of those based on different proposals for the provision of public goods requires deep behavioral changes on the part of both citizens and political parties**. These changes require investments throughout the entire political cycle, not only during election periods.

   Elections can serve as a strategic entry point for more policy-focused engagement between civic groups/citizens and parties, even where political space is constricted. However, beginning programs right before elections may not provide enough time for deeper civic education about the roles and responsibilities of parties/candidates, or to foster meaningful engagement between civil society and political parties in the post-election period. In fact, a heavy focus on election-related programming without complementary follow-on activities throughout the political cycle may inadvertently undermine the credibility of civil society organizations (CSOs) and contribute to citizen disenchantment with political processes.

3. **Increasing marginalized groups' ability to share skills and information with other members of their community and to have the potential to speak with a stronger, collective voice is critical**. However, people experience the world differently based on overlapping identity markers, and efforts to help groups that share a common identity need to be sensitive to these differences. Further, entrenched socio-cultural norms may influence party leaders' receptiveness to demands from marginalized groups. Marginalized groups can benefit from joining with other organizations to build their numbers, broaden support for their priorities, and increase their political power.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above findings, the following recommendations could help improve the effectiveness of future programming.

At the design stage, donors and implementers should:

1. **Consider how a range of factors might create opportunities or risks for the successful use of civic organizing to promote more policy-focused parties.**

   Figure 2 outlines a number of issues that programs should consider in identifying potential opportunities, risks and entry points for using this approach in their country context. The figure groups issues to consider in the following categories:

   - Political space (including the security environment, inclusion issues, opportunities for civic and political organizing);
   - Institutional and structural factors (for instance, electoral systems and other features of the political system, the reach/authority/legitimacy of the state, and the structure of the economy); and
   - Party and civil society capacities and interests (such as political parties' and civil society's perceptions of each other, and their respective capacities to formulate and advance their policy priorities).

FIGURE 2.1: POLITICAL SPACE

ISSUES TO CONSIDER	IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING
• To what extent does the security environment facilitate or restrict public political activity and access to the media? • To what extent does the political environment facilitate or restrict citizens' ability to freely assemble, associate, collectively organize, and voice their priorities? • How competitive are elections and to what extent are they perceived as being a meaningful expression of the voters' will? • To what extent are citizens knowledgeable about the roles and responsibilities of different governance institutions, elected officials, and their roles in holding these institutions/individuals to account? Are citizens able to access credible information about politics and policy? • What broad themes characterize the context (e.g., conflict/violent extremism, ethnic/religious diversity, economic prosperity/crisis/inequality)? How have these conditions come to exist, and by whom where they created/influenced? How do these conditions affect parties and CSOs? • To what extent are some social groups marginalized (formally or informally) on the grounds of gender, ethnicity, religion, language, region, age, disability, sexual orientation, etc.?	• The potential (real or perceived) security, reputational, or financial risks to CSOs/citizens of appearing to criticize the government or particular parties. • Civil society's tolerance for, and ability to withstand, any potential backlash for activities/ statements that could be perceived as critical of the government. • Citizens'/CSOs' ability to access, analyze, and disseminate information about public policies and services. • Citizens' readiness/ability to act on information and to do so in a coordinated manner that exerts pressure on parties. • Capacity of groups that represent the interests of marginalized groups. Extent to which these groups are networked with/have allies in other communities. • Parties' perceptions of the extent to which elections are decided fairly and based on competing policy proposals. • Parties' ability to disseminate policy messages through various media platforms and engage in constructive dialogue over policy options. • Parties' interest in developing policies in ways that are inclusive of, or responsive to, the priorities of women and other marginalized groups. • How the relative competitiveness of elections incentivizes/disincentivizes parties to be responsive to citizens/CSOs in order to win elections.

FIGURE 2.2: INSTITUTIONAL AND STRUCTURAL FACTORS

ISSUES TO CONSIDER	IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING
• Reach, authority, and legitimacy of the state. • Structure of the economy and sources of state revenue. • What formal institutional and structural conditions define the political system? • Where, when, how, by whom, and why are decisions made about legislation, policy, and other governance issues? • In what ways does the state currently interact with citizens and vice versa? • To what extent do parties in government use state resources for patronage?	• CSO and citizen perceptions of political party engagement (versus engagement of other stakeholders or sources of power) as a reasonable/effective strategy for getting their concerns/priorities addressed. • The most strategic entry points for different groups to place meaningful pressure on political parties/government. • Parties' perceptions of the extent to which they have a role in shaping public policies. • Parties' perceptions of party platform/policy proposals as significant in shaping voters' choices and determining their success as parties. • Parties' willingness to formulate policies on a range of issues. • Parties' ability to deliver on these policies if in government.

FIGURE 2.3: POLITICAL PARTY CAPACITIES AND INTERESTS

ISSUES TO CONSIDER	IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING
• Where and how have parties made a difference politically, either locally or nationally? • How are various parties placed in terms of access to influence people and relationships with significant CSOs, trade unions, the business community, the military, etc.? • To what extent do parties see it as their role to engage citizens or civil society as part of the policy process? To what extent do they find it helpful/beneficial to do so? • Are there prior instances of CSOs successfully influencing party platforms and holding them to account? • What is the extent of party capacity (i.e., individuals with the relevant skills and technical expertise, or the internal systems to aggregate interests and develop policies) for such tasks as development of platforms, legislation, strategy, and policy? • How do policy/platform-making processes incorporate public or constituent input/feedback, if at all?	• CSO and public perceptions of whether political party engagement is a reasonable/effective strategy for getting their concerns/priorities addressed. • CSOs' willingness to engage particular parties or parties as a whole on policy issues. • Parties' ability/willingness to respond to policy demands from CSOs and the broader public.

FIGURE 2.4: CSO CAPACITIES AND INTERESTS

ISSUES TO CONSIDER	IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING
• To what extent do CSOs have the capacity to educate/mobilize citizens and organize around priority issues? • Are CSOs considered credible representatives of citizen concerns? • What types of civic associations, coalitions, or networks exist, either formally or informally? What is the history of their collaboration? • What are the current and historical relationships between CSOs and parties? What type of roles have CSOs played in party platform development, citizen mobilization, debates, etc.? • Where and how have CSOs had success in influencing service delivery or policy change, either locally or nationally? • What are the barriers impacting the organizing of CSOs led by women, young people, ethnic and religious minority groups, people with disabilities, LGBTI communities, and other historically marginalized groups?	• Parties' perceptions of different CSOs as legitimate representatives of citizens' interests or educators. • Parties' perceptions of CSOs as credible experts on policy issues. • Parties' perceptions of CSOs and their interventions as influential in shaping public perceptions, including citizens' voting choices. • Are there diverse CSOs with the capacity to play different roles (e.g., policy research, infomediaries, advocacy, etc.)? • To what extent is there a breadth of /the potential for strategic alliances that allow CSOs to: access information, collaborate with complementary groups, and withstand/forfend possible backlash? • Parties' perceptions of CSOs that represent historically marginalized groups as credible, influential political actors.

2. **Based on analysis of country contexts, set realistic expectations for progress towards more policy-focused politics.** This includes supporting or developing risk management strategies that recognize the potential for unintended consequences and resistance to change, and regularly monitoring social, political, and economic developments in order to adjust program strategies and expectations where needed.

3. **Plan for medium to long-term efforts that incorporate a variety of interventions, and use multiple entry points that can be sustained over time.** This includes identifying strategies for sustaining support to civil society and political parties throughout the political cycle, not solely during elections.

   As part of these efforts, donors should consider:

   - How to ensure adequate time in the run-up to the polls and for sustained follow-up in the post-election period when using elections as an entry point;
   - Ways to build in a sustainability focus from the conception phase. This may include combining organizational capacity building for CSOs – fundraising and financial management, for instance – with technical assistance; and
   - Interventions and partnerships – with universities, the media, and appropriate government agencies – that can be replicated and sustained in a given country context.

Implementers and CSOs should:

- Ensure that messaging content and delivery methods are designed to promote meaningful participation by diverse citizens, especially those from marginalized communities;
- Link monitoring and information-sharing efforts with initiatives that involve strategic, citizen-led collective action that helps citizens exert pressure on their political/elected leaders;
- Explore ways to facilitate alliances and constructive engagement between different types of CSOs; and
- Use the media to expand the reach of civic education and advocacy campaigns and explore the potential for media coverage as an incentive for political parties to engage in more policy-focused communications.

4. **For programs targeting marginalized groups, donors, implementers, and CSOs should consider how entrenched social norms may influence power relations and party responsiveness to demands from these groups. They should also carefully examine the appropriateness of opportunities to unite identity groups around shared issues and consider strategies that may be needed to build trust with the relevant community(ies).**