

Africa, Democracy and the Role of International Political Party Assistance

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Given their indispensable role in elections and governance, political parties are widely seen as social forces crucial for expanding democracy. Research has nevertheless shown that, in Africa, parties tend to have weak grassroots ties and offer little in the way of policy differences. Opposition parties in particular are often based on the personalities and interests in what Claude Ake once referred to as a “power elite” who are involved in opposition politics as a “tactical maneuver” rather than a commitment to advancing democracy. Coinciding with broader patterns of international involvement in elections, political party weaknesses in Africa has led to a proliferation of organizations engaging in direct/indirect support to the Continent’s parties. At the same time, much of the party aid research has been focused on demonstrating successful program implementation rather than evaluating program contributions to democratic governance.

Constituting the preliminary research for a larger party funding project entitled “Hearty Parties: The Donors’ Search for Political Accountability”, this proposed paper will begin consolidating an empirical understanding of the role – if any - that international political party assistance plays in helping to consolidate democracy in sub-Saharan Africa generally, and enhance citizen capacity to participate in politics specifically. The paper will begin by briefly sketching the theoretical link between political parties and democracy and seek to identify the ways in which parties in Africa have been insufficient mechanisms for advancing democracy. By taking a broad survey of the actors and programs for political party assistance in sub-Saharan Africa, the paper will then assess the successes and failures of an assortment of aid designs in helping to advance democratic governance. The cluster of questions to be addressed fit squarely into the theme of ESAS 4. First, how are assistance priorities and programs defined, constructed and implemented? Are these priorities and programs driven by the visions and interests of donors, party leaders or internal democratic bodies? Secondly, which particular aid efforts – youth training programs, financial and technical assistance in campaigns, interparty consortiums, etc. - show the most promise in facilitating internal party democracy and grassroots penetration?