Understanding Support to Programmatic Political Parties

A Review of Approaches and Lessons Learned

September 2025

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Acronyms and Key Terms

ALPI – Advanced Leadership in Politics Institute

CMD – Centre for Multi-Party Democracy (Kenya)

CORDES – Corporation for Development Studies

CPD – Commission for Presidential Debates

CSO – Civil society organisation

DIPD – Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy

DLDP – Danish Liberal Democracy Programme

EECMD – Eastern European Centre for Multi-Party Democracy

FNS – Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom

IDEAS – Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS)

International IDEA – International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

ILDIS – Latin American Institute for Social Research

IRI – International Republican Institute

KAS – Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

NDI – National Democratic Institute

NGOs – Non-governmental organisations

NIMD – Netherlands Institute for Multi-Party Democracy

PAO – Party affiliated organisation

Position issues – Policy issues on which public opinion is divided

PPT – Policy Positioning Tool

PNDS – Party for Democracy and Socialism (Niger)

REPPAD – Pan-African Network for Democracy and Development

UP – Unidad Popular

VAA – Voting advice application

Valence issues – Policy issues on which there is broad public consensus

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Executive Summary

In many contexts, political parties do not compete primarily on the basis of distinct and credible policy platforms. Rather, they mainly appeal to voters by highlighting the personal qualities of party leaders, engaging in clientelism, or activating identity-based social cleavages. These forms of political competition are often associated with weaker service provision, fragility, and political violence. Therefore, supporting the development of programmatic political parties – that is, political parties which try to appeal to voters on the basis of a clear set of realistic policy positions – is often a priority for local and international partners. This report provides an overview of some of the common approaches that international partners have taken to supporting the development of programmatic parties, together with some of the lessons that have been learned from these initiatives.

Initiatives designed to support programmatic parties tend to fall into three broad and overlapping categories:

- Those focussed on developing the policy skills of politicians and party officials;
- Those focussed on strengthening parties' institutional policy tools and processes;
- Those focussed on supporting citizens to articulate and advocate for their policy preferences.

Providing training for party leaders, officials and aspiring politicians from marginalised groups is one of the most common approaches to supporting programmatic parties. These training initiatives aim to support party actors to develop credible policy ideas, to pitch those ideas both internally to party leaders and externally to voters, and to implement the policies when in office. But training by itself is usually not sufficient to significantly strengthen the programmatic capabilities of political parties and it is more effective when integrated into wider initiatives. But by combining training with other initiatives – like party dialogues, capstone projects, advocacy campaigns and international networking – democracy support partners can help to generate agreement among like-minded parties to develop credible policies (at least on valence issues). Training initiatives tend to be more successful when there is buy-in from party leaders. At the same time, successful training initiatives can help democracy support partners to build trust with party leaders which often leads to opportunities for further support.

Other party assistance initiatives aim to improve parties' institutional capacity for policy development and policy communication. These initiatives may be delivered on a multi-party or sister party basis, and they can focus on either valence or position issues. Typically, this kind of support focusses on one or more of three priorities:

1. Helping parties to better understand the policy preferences of key stakeholders (including voters, party branches, interest groups, think tanks and experts). This often involves harnessing insights from public opinion research or developing new digital technologies to help parties gauge voters' preferences.

2. Supporting parties to strengthen their policy development processes. This often involves supporting enhancements to the processes that parties follow when developing policy and campaign strategies and manifesto commitments.

3. Assisting parties to strengthen their issue-based messaging by weaving together symbolic and programmatic ideas into effective electoral appeals.

Initiatives that aim to strengthen parties' institutional capacity for policy development tend to be more effective when they are sustained throughout the policy and election cycle, and when they are informed by an understanding of the internal political economy of the party itself. But wider social and electoral factors can also affect parties' incentives to pursue programmatic strategies. For example, where there are deep social, ethnic, religious or other cleavages, and/or a high degree of electoral volatility, parties have strong incentives to pursue other, non-programmatic strategies. Moreover, it is not enough to support parties to develop electorally attractive policies if these are undeliverable in practice. It is important that these policy development initiatives support parties to interrogate and test the feasibility of implementing their policies once in office.

The third broad category of support aims to empower citizens and civil society to articulate and advocate for their policy preferences. Parties are more likely to engage in programmatic efforts when there is a vibrant marketplace for credible policy ideas and where there is public support for these ideas. Initiatives in this category often involve:

- Supporting civic organising and advocacy efforts throughout the electoral and policy cycles.
- Using applications like VoteMatch to help voters and parties understand one another's policy positions so that parties can develop policies that resonate with voters and voters can make more informed decisions.
- Supporting voters to hold parties to account through policy dialogues, broadcast debates, citizens' assemblies, transparency commissions and other mechanisms.

Initiatives that aim to support citizens and civil society organisations (CSOs) to better articulate their preferences also tend to be more effective when they are delivered on an ongoing basis throughout the policy and electoral cycles. Equally, supporting CSOs to work together through coalitions can be an effective way of amplifying their influence.

Beyond these three broad categories of support, there is also scope for democracy support partners to work with think tanks. Party assistance initiatives have generally not prioritised engagement with think tanks, but they play an important role in innovating and advocating for novel policy ideas. We consider three ways in which think tanks can support more programmatic forms of political competition.

1. They can provide a lifeline and refuge to opposition politicians, dissenting academics and civic actors during periods of authoritarianism. As happened in Chile following the 1973 military coup, think tanks provide space for opposition actors to make sense of the policy and economic shifts that are occurring, to collaborate with and build dialogue among pro-democracy actors, and to develop policy ideas for a future democratic government.

2. They can influence the public debate and raise the salience of particular issues, thereby nudging political parties to develop policy positions on those issues. They often do this by supporting election debates or publishing evidence to influence election campaigns and hold parties to account.

3. They can also build strategic partnerships with political parties by helping them to deliver on their strategic objectives (such as winning an election, preparing for government, implementing policy once in office, or holding the government to account when in opposition).

Supporting think tanks can be an effective way of influencing political parties to become more programmatic in democratic contexts. But engaging with think tanks is worthwhile in more authoritarian contexts as well, as doing so can help to maintain a degree of intellectual pluralism. In both cases, support is more effective when it helps think tanks to tailor their work to the political context, and when any funding provided does not compromise their credibility or autonomy.

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1. Introduction

In many contexts, political parties do not compete primarily on the basis of distinct and credible policy platforms. Rather, they mainly appeal to voters by highlighting the personal qualities of party leaders, engaging in clientelism, or activating identity-based social cleavages. These characteristics can be associated with weaker service provision, fragility, and political violence. Local counterparts may therefore ask for assistance in supporting the development of policy-oriented (or 'programmatic') political parties. Within international co-operation, supporting a transition away from personality- and identity-based politics towards more programmatic forms of politics is often incorporated into wider efforts to build democratic resilience.

This report provides an overview of some common approaches to supporting the development of programmatic political parties, and it discusses the lessons learned from each of these approaches. It then considers the role of think tanks in influencing the policy orientation of political parties.

1.1. Definitions

A programmatic political party is one whose approach to electoral competition and policymaking is primarily based on a coherent political and policy programme.[1] There is no neat dividing line between programmatic and non-programmatic parties. A party may combine programmatic strategies with non-programmatic strategies (such as clientelism, ethnic/religious/regional identification, or charismatic leadership).[2] For instance, a party caucus may vote cohesively in the legislature according to the party's election programme while relying on the leader's charisma to rally votes ahead of an election.

A party is said to be generally programmatic when it:[3]

- Has developed a collection of policy positions by which it can be publicly identified;

- Enjoys a degree of internal coherence and agreement on that range of policy positions;

- Is able to deliver on its policy positions when in office; and

- Appeals to voters primarily on the basis of its policy programme.

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[1] Valladares, J., Sample, K. and van der Staak, S. (2014) Implications for Action: Enablers, Triggers, Lockers and Agents of Programmatic Parties, in Cheeseman, N. et al., Politics Meets Policies: The Emergence of Programmatic Political Parties, p.100.
[2] Bulut, A.T. (2020) How Clientelistic Parties Go Programmatic: The Strategic Logic of Responsiveness in a Least Likely Case (the AKP of Turkey), Comparative Politics 52(2), pp. 333-354.
[3] Valladares, Sample and van der Staak (2014), p.100.

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A programmatic party system is one in which all major parties are predominantly programmatic.[4]

1.2. Benefits of Programmatic Party Systems

Programmatic party systems are credited with improving (a) the quality of policymaking, (b) the provision of public goods and services, (c) the adoption of policies that benefit poorer social groups, and (d) the overall quality of democracy.[5,6] Programmatic party systems are associated with lower rates of invalid voting, higher confidence in parties and parliaments, and lower levels of corruption. In comparison, political parties which predominantly compete through patronage or clientelism may be more inclined to misappropriate state resources or engage in corrupt transactions to maintain power.[7]

1.3. Transitions to Programmatic Party Systems

Research indicates that there are four categories of factors which can influence the development of programmatic party systems.[8]

1. **Structural Enablers:** Party systems are more likely to become programmatic when (a) states have the capacity to deliver on parties' programmatic pledges and (b) social or ethnic group interests align with prospective party programmes.

2. **Triggering Events:** Sudden economic crises can create opportunities for parties to gain a competitive advantage by advocating for a programmatic response.

3. **Driving Agents:** Civil society organisations (CSOs), opposition parties and voters themselves can all play a role in promoting or demanding a programmatic approach to politics. Ultimately, however, party leaders themselves need to seize the opportunities to shift towards more programmatic strategies when they arise, and to deliver on their programmes when in office.

4. **Locking Factors:** Once parties have begun to compete on the basis of policy programmes, political institutions (such as candidate selection procedures or party finance rules) can sometimes help to lock in these gains.

1.4. Scope of Review

This report primarily reviews party support initiatives which were:

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[4] Valladares, Sample and van der Staak (2014), p.101.
[5] Cheeseman, N. and Paget, D. (2014) Programmatic Politics in Comparative Perspective, in Cheeseman, N. et al., Politics Meets Policies: The Emergence of Programmatic Political Parties, p.88.
[6] Luna, J.P., Rosenblatt, F. and Toro, S. (2014) Programmatic Parties: A Survey of Dimensions and Explanations in the Literature, in Cheeseman, N. et al., Politics Meets Policies: The Emergence of Programmatic Political Parties, pp.5-6.
[7] Valladares, Sample and van der Staak (2014), p.102.
[8] Valladares, Sample and van der Staak (2014), pp.103-112.

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- Carried out by a democracy support organisation or think tank;

- Designed to strengthen the policy function of political parties;

- Conducted in contexts where the party system is only weakly institutionalised or the country is transitioning away from authoritarian rule;

- Implemented in countries in the Western Balkans, Eastern Neighbourhood, Africa, Asia, or Latin America.

For the purposes of this review, a party support 'initiative' includes any support ranging from one-off activities to fully-fledged programmes.

1.5. Methods

This review was conducted on the basis of desk research and interviews with key stakeholders. We reviewed strategies, evaluations and other relevant reports on party assistance initiatives, as well as academic research on programmatic politics and the role of think tanks. Interviews were conducted with 14 democracy support experts and think tank leaders in September and October 2024.

1.6. Typology of Party Support Initiatives

While there is extensive research on the degree to which party systems have become programmatic, there is far less evidence regarding the impact of democracy support initiatives in facilitating the evolution of programmatic party systems. This report does not aim to fill this evidence gap. Rather, its goal is to (a) describe the various approaches that democracy support organisations have taken to strengthening programmatic party systems, and (b) synthesise the lessons learned from these initiatives.

We have divided the party support initiatives covered by this review into three categories, based on their objectives (see Table 1).

Table 1. Typology of Programmatic Party Initiatives

Type	Goal	Target	Examples
1	**Develop skills** Improve the policy skillsets of key party officials and think tank staff	Party leaders, party officials, youth wings, women's wings, think tank staff	• Party-to-party training and related capacity development • Multi-party training and related capacity development
2	**Strengthen parties' policy tools** Support parties to develop better tools for interest identification and policy formulation	Party leaders, by-laws, think tanks	• Strategic planning • Public opinion polling • Manifesto drafting • Inputs to party positions
3	**Empower citizens and civil society** Support citizens to define and express their policy preferences	Think tanks, CSOs, media, voters	• Organising multi-party debates • Advising on policy-driven campaigning • Supporting policy positioning • Civic organising • Supporting think tanks

Type 1 and Type 2 initiatives support political parties to develop clear policy programmes, while Type 3 initiatives aim to increase demand for programmatic politics by supporting think tanks, CSOs, the media and voters. It is worth noting that party support initiatives have generally not focussed on empowering think tanks. Nevertheless, think tanks play an important role in promoting policy agendas and donors should consider when and how to incorporate them into party support initiatives. We discuss the role of think tanks further in Section 3.

There are different models of support for programmatic parties. Some initiatives are 'partisan' in the sense that they build links with individual political groups. This is particularly the case where political parties or party foundations from supporting countries build links with similarly positioned parties overseas. In other cases, development partners (such as the UK) normally require support to be non-partisan. Often, party support initiatives are informed by some form of political economy analysis which has identified local sensitivities and key contextual issues.[9]

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[9] For more information on political economy analysis see FCDO (2023) Understanding Political Economy Analysis and Thinking and Working Politically.

2. Approaches and Lessons Learned

2.1. Policy Skills Training

One of the most common approaches to supporting programmatic parties is to provide training or other capacity building opportunities for party leaders, party officials, and aspiring politicians from marginalised groups, such as young people and women.

These initiatives aim to equip key party figures with the knowledge and skills they need to develop policy ideas, pitch these successfully to party leaders, and execute their policy programmes when in office. They typically consist of training, mentorship programmes or study visits. They are commonly organised with multiple parties concurrently, or between sister parties.[10] They usually cover specific policy issues that are relevant to each context, core policymaking skills (such as consultations, budgeting, and statistical analysis), and strategies for promoting policies with party leaders and/or the electorate. These initiatives typically take place outside of campaign periods. The National Democratic Institute's (NDI) message development module[11] and the Advanced Leadership in Politics Institute's (ALPI) training on issue targeting are good examples of these kinds of initiative.

Policy skills training may be delivered as a stand-alone activity or as part of a broader programme of party strengthening support. The policy skills initiatives that we reviewed predominantly targeted women and young people, although in some cases support was provided jointly to different groups. For example, the training provided by the Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy (DIPD) and the Centre for Multi-Party Democracy (CMD) in Kenya (see Box 1) involved both young party members and their more senior colleagues. WFD has run similar training in Southern Europe and Africa. This approach aims to develop a new cadre of party leaders from within traditionally marginalised groups, thereby strengthening the representativeness of political parties. Moreover, as members of marginalised groups typically have fewer vested interests, they may be more inclined to advocate for policies which serve broad segments of society.

Stand-alone training is not considered sufficient by itself to significantly strengthen the programmatic capabilities of political parties. As such, it is often incorporated into wider, multi-

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[10] Swedish affiliated programmes: Programme for Young Politicians in Africa (PYPA); Empowering Women in Politics (EWIP); Latin American Programme of Affiliated Organisations (PAOLA); Netherlands Institute for Multi-Party Democracy programmes: School of Politics and Democracy Schools; IRI programmes: Advance Leadership in Politics Institute (ALPI); Konrad Adenauer Asia: Konrad Adenauer School for Young Politicians (KASYP).

[11] NDI (2013) Message Development: Creating Powerful and Persuasive Messages, in NDI, Campaign Skills Handbook.

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faceted approaches.[12,13] As such, DIPD avoids delivering "stand-alone capacity-building events". Instead, they combine training with "dialogue sessions, peer exchanges, policy agenda setting, exposure visits, and capacity development".[14] Likewise, youth academy programmes run by Swedish party-affiliated organisations (PAOs) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kenya, Uganda, Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire included support to 'mini projects' whereby participants could apply their training in a real-world context by developing and advocating for gender equality policies.[15] When coupled with multiparty training, dialogue and networking can also be effective ways of generating cross-party policy campaigns.

Box 1. Multi-Party Training on Youth Issues in Kenya

In Kenya, party competition often centres on ethnicity and personality. Representatives of 11 parties sit on the board of the Centre for Multi-Party Democracy (CMD), which aims to strengthen political parties through policy influence and capacity building.

In the lead-up to the 2013 elections, the Danish liberal party, Venestre – through the Danish Liberal Democracy Programme (DLDP) – collaborated with CMD on a training and dialogue programme with the youth wings and executive committees of several Kenyan parties. This initiative focused on issue-based policymaking and participants were supported to develop party action plans on youth issues. CMD facilitated the discussions by providing a baseline study and policy proposals. They also arranged media outreach and exposure visits to Denmark.

As a result of this programme, several parties adopted youth action plans, and young party members became active in manifesto committees, ensuring youth issues featured prominently. In 2013, a new generation of young politicians was elected, and a former CMD chair was elected as Speaker of the National Assembly. CMD leveraged these connections to revive the Kenyan Young Parliamentarians Association and promote a National Youth Charter. As a result, the Kenyan Parliament debated new legislation which aimed to improve young people's access to government procurement opportunities.

CMD recognised that the initial draft of the bill contained mostly symbolic language, so they supported a network of young party members to advocate for more robust provisions. Collaborating with two other youth-focused organisations, CMD helped produce evidence to support these efforts.

A 2016 evaluation of the CMD initiative found that the resulting cross-party youth network was committed to issue-based politics. This was particularly true for members of smaller parties, which often need to transcend ethnic lines to win support. As one participant highlighted, "I am from a minority group. I can only win through issue-based politics".[16]

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[12] Gunnarsson, A. et al. (2020) Evaluation of Democracy Support through Swedish Political Party Affiliated Organisations – Part II: Methods for Supporting Women's Political Influence
[13] Holm-Hansen, J. and Haug, M. (2016) Evaluation of the Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy – Political Party Assistance to Build Democracy
[14] Holm-Hansen and Haug (2016), p.31.
[15] Gunnarsson et al. (2020), pp.30-32.
[16] Holm-Hansen and Haug (2016), pp.61-62.

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Lessons

- **Training achieves its objectives:** Training initiatives usually deliver their immediate intended outcomes. Participants gain new skills and are better able to influence party leaders. But there have been few assessments of their impact on higher-level outcomes, such as the policy orientation of their political parties.

- **Impact is often indirect:** Policy skills training can help strengthen parties' programmatic capacities in various indirect ways. This is particularly true when (a) training initiatives are incorporated into wider, multifaceted programmes; (b) the political party or its leaders are amenable to developing a more programmatic approach; and (c) when party assistance organisations take advantage of training initiatives to build broader partnerships.

- **Multifaceted initiatives can enhance the effectiveness of training:** When combined with dialogues, capstone projects, advocacy campaigns and international networking, policy skills training can produce a ripple effect, helping to generate consensus among like-minded parties to advance policy on valence issues (such as youth empowerment).

- **The support of party leaders makes a difference:** Training is generally more effective in producing a knowledgeable, skilled cadre of policy leaders when the party leadership is supportive and the party itself is policy-oriented at least to some extent. Democracy support organisations should assess the party's existing policy capacity and design policy training initiatives accordingly.

- **Training can help to build trust with party leaders:** Providing policy skills training can help party assistance organisations to earn the trust of party leaders. Organisations that enjoy this trust are in a better position to deliver higher cost initiatives, such as those which aim to improve parties' policy responsiveness and/or organisational capacities.

2.2. Supporting Parties to Develop and Communicate Policies

In addition to upskilling individual party officials, some initiatives aim to improve political parties' institutional capacity for policy development and their ability to communicate their policies effectively.

Support with policy development and messaging features prominently in both multi-party and sister party initiatives. Support is often provided throughout the party's policy development cycle. It may involve multi-party dialogues or tailored support to individual parties. Multi-party dialogues tend to focus on valence issues and are geared towards a clear policy goal. Party-specific support is typically provided to a range of parties, and these initiatives usually employ a customised policy development methodology, such as International IDEA's and the Netherlands Institute for Multi-Party Democracy's (NIMD) Strategic Planning Tool.[17] The delivery of these programmes may span

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[17] van der Berg, C.F. (2013) Strategic Planning for Political Parties: A Practical Tool.

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several months or years and they often involve a domestic partner to provide local expertise. [18] By contrast, sister party programmes tend to support parties to develop policy and messaging on position issues. They are usually delivered over shorter periods within the context of a wider, longer-term partnership.

These initiatives typically focus on one or more of three priority areas.

(1) Understanding citizens' policy preferences

Many initiatives support parties to better understand and respond to the policy preferences of different social groups. This often involves supporting parties to improve their use of public opinion research and other forms of analysis in order to understand the interests and preferences of a range of stakeholders, including citizens, party branches, interest groups, think tanks and experts.

Public opinion research can be an effective 'conversation starter' with party leaders. [19,20] It can inform how the party aggregates societal interests and how it positions itself on key policy issues. Party assistance organisations can also use this approach to analyse the congruence between parties' positions and voters' preferences.

Other approaches have also been developed to support parties in understanding and responding to societal preferences. For example, in 2012, NDI supported parliamentarians in Uganda to overcome resource and staff limitations by using low-cost technology, such as text messaging, to gauge their constituents' policy preferences. [21] Party assistance organisations may also support parties with strategic planning, which can include a focus on scanning and aggregating citizens' preferences. [22] This is a standard component of NIMD's multi-party assistance, for example. The evidence regarding the impact of strategic planning initiatives in improving the ability of parties to aggregate and represent citizens' interests is mixed. In some cases, these initiatives have prompted parties to engage on policy development in a more concerted way. In other cases, implementation of the strategic plans has been hampered by factors outside of the party assistance organisation's control. For example, in Burundi, NIMD found that there was "limited political space for parties to translate their internal transformation… [into] meaningful external impact". [23]

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[18] The co-operation of a local partner may also be a requirement of foreign funding regulations.
[19] This approach is standard in IRI's and NDI's support frameworks and can be made available to all interested parties.
[20] IRI (2024) What We Do: Political Parties [Website]. Last accessed: 12 May 2025.
[21] NDI (2013) Citizen Participation and Technology, p.44.
[22] van der Berg (2013)
[23] Ngenge, Y. (2023) Strengthening Democratic Infrastructure. A Conceptual Framework for Responsive Political Actors, p.26.

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Box 2. Incorporating Voters' Preferences into Party Decision-making in Ecuador[24]

Ecuadorian voters hold political parties in low regard. Parties are short lived, personality driven, and weakly institutionalised. In 2022, a field experiment carried out by a political party in eight Ecuadorian cities found that when parties incorporate citizens' preferences into their decision-making, voters' sense of efficacy, their interest in politics, and the likelihood that they will support that party increases.

The experiment consisted of conducting a baseline survey with a randomised sample of voters. A subset of the sample was then invited to answer a baseline survey, participate in a policy input activity, and answer a final survey. The policy input activities were of two types: a short deliberative meeting and an online survey, where each participant was asked to make recommendations of key priorities to be shared with the party. The party later acknowledged the feedback.

The results suggest that voters "appear to care about policy and the ability to define the programmatic priorities of a party" and that even low investment on the side of parties can help them define a programmatic identity that resonates with their electoral base and increases their popular support.

(2)   Strengthening parties' policy development processes

Party assistance organisations often aim to strengthen the policy development processes within parties, especially where these are underdeveloped or weakly institutionalised. This may involve supporting parties to develop policy and campaign strategies, to develop processes for drafting election manifestos, or to design new rules and procedures for developing policy. Indeed, "most successful political parties have a defined process for developing their policies".[25]

Multi-party initiatives often make use of standardised tools to assess the organisational capacities of parties (such as WFD's Mapping and Assessment of Political Organisations in Montenegro). These tools can be used to evaluate a party's rules, structures and practices, as well as the resources they have available for policy development. These tools can be made available to all parties. Where NDI has delivered this kind of support, its organisational assessments often combine low-cost recommendations (such as training or policy briefings[26]) with recommendations that entail higher costs for party leaders (such as rule changes).[27] To work effectively on rules, parties may benefit from short-term input by a consultant or peer. These consultants can offer recommendations for medium- to long-term follow-on assistance.[28]

Where policy development support is provided through sister party initiatives, it is less likely that these will make use of standardised tools and methodologies. For example, 70-80% of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) offices worldwide support traditional sister party cooperation (where there

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[24] Carter, L. and Poertner, M. (2024) Democratising Political Parties: Experiences of Political Participation and Efficacy (Working Paper)
[25] NDI (2013) Political Parties and Democracy in Theoretical and Practical Perspectives: Developing Party Policies, p.27
[26] Policy briefings may be prepared by think tanks rather than internal party staff.
[27] Interview with NDI staffer.
[28] Interview with NDI staffer.

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is an eligible sister party) or dialogue with external organisations in systems that lack strong parties. But they do not make use of standard methodologies or tools. Rather, each regional programme and country office develops its own work plans and methods, which are tailored to the specific contexts in which they operate.

(3)   Supporting parties' issue-based messaging

Parties tend to value advice on campaign messaging as it helps win elections. However, supporting parties to develop issue-based messaging – that is, messaging which communicates the party's policy positions – is less straightforward. Issue-based messages allow voters to choose between parties based on their policy positions and, in turn, to hold politicians accountable for delivering (or failing to deliver) against their policy commitments. Moreover, the actual development of these messages is difficult. Parties must skilfully weave together symbolic and programmatic ideas into effective appeals. For these reasons, political communications consultants may try to 'sell the candidate' rather than promote the parties' policies.[29] Nevertheless, support for issue-based messaging remains an important feature of policy development initiatives, and it features prominently in training curricula and policy development toolkits.[30,31] Public opinion research is also sometimes used to test the effectiveness of different issue-based messages, as well as to identify the best communication channels for reaching different demographic groups.[32]

Lessons

- **Support needs to be sustained throughout the electoral cycle:** Supporting parties to improve their institutional policy capacity requires sustained input throughout the electoral cycle. Providing support in time for election campaigns can help party assistance organisations to establish relationships with parties, but these then need to be maintained over time.

- **Partners need to understand the party's political economy:** Understanding who has power within a political party is as important as understanding its policy infrastructure. In contexts where political competition is limited and policymaking power does not reside primarily within parties, partners may need to work with multiple powerholders over longer periods.

- **Parties need sufficient capacity to develop policy programmes:** If parties are to develop viable policy programmes, they need adequate skills, resources and organisational structures to do so. Engaging with party leaders significantly increases the success of capacity-building efforts.

- **Social and electoral factors influence parties' incentives:** Parties are less likely to commit to capacity-building initiatives where social structures (such as deep ethnic cleavages) create strong incentives to pursue other, non-programmatic approaches to political competition (such as clientelism or personality-based campaigning). The same is true with respect to electoral

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[29] Interview with former KAS staffer.
[30] IRI (2022) From Winning to Governing Effectively
[31] Interview with NDI staffer.
[32] Interview with NDI staffer.

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competition: where electoral volatility is high, parties may pursue other, non-programmatic strategies. Scoping and assessment exercises can be used to understand the impact of these structural factors on parties' incentives.

- **Leaders can be sceptical of policy development processes:** Some interviewees suggested that party leaders do not always view election manifestos, or the processes by which they are produced, as politically significant. Where this is the case, party assistance providers should try to understand the reasons underlying party leaders' scepticism.

- **The feasibility of policies also matters:** Parties do not only need to be able to fight elections; they also need to be able to implement their policies if they win power. Policy development initiatives should consider how parties test or interrogate the feasibility of implementing their policies in practice. When developing policies, parties should make informed choices about cost, capacity, policy trade-offs and the potential risks involved. Party leaders and policymakers need to be able to weigh up these various considerations and make policy decisions accordingly. This aspect of policy development is an important component of overall capacity support, as it will influence the way that parties aggregate societal interests and craft their policy messages. Think tanks can also test and challenge the feasibility of a party's policies and explore the implications of different policy choices.

2.3. Empowering Citizens and Civil Society

Parties are more likely to engage in programmatic efforts when there is a vibrant marketplace of credible policy ideas and when the public is receptive to these ideas. Civil society organisations can influence both of these dimensions: they can encourage and support parties to make programmatic appeals[33] while also persuading citizens to vote on the basis of policy issues rather than personalities or clientelist promises.

CSOs and loosely organised groups who advocate on issues of broad public interest (such as human rights or transparency) may find it effective to target particular government officials. But organisations representing the interests of specific groups (such as workers, businesses, or consumers) often seek to get political parties on their side, particularly during election campaigns.

Several programmes aim to empower citizens and civil society groups to advocate for specific policies and to hold parties accountable for delivering against their policy commitments. These programmes use a range of approaches, three of which are discussed below.

(1)   Civic organising and advocacy

Supporting citizens and CSOs to organise and advocate for particular policies can be an effective way of increasing the salience of policy issues. For example, ahead of the 2020 elections in Niger,

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[33] Kitschelt, H. and Wang, Y. (2014) Programmatic Parties and Party Systems: Opportunities and Constraints, in Cheeseman, N. et al., Politics Meets Policies: The Emergence of Programmatic Political Parties, p.63.

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NIMD and the Pan-African Network for Democracy and Development (REPPAD) ran a campaign called 'My Vote, My Priority'. The campaign encouraged citizens – especially women and young people – to rank their priorities from a list that included education, peace and security, food and agriculture, health, justice, democracy and the rule of law. The results were shared with political parties to inform their campaign promises, and the initiative successfully influenced the election platform of the incumbent Party for Democracy and Socialism (PNDS).

While civic engagement with political parties during an election campaign can be an effective way of encouraging parties to pay closer attention to their policies, the development of a programmatic party system requires citizens and CSOs to engage with parties over longer time horizons. Party assistance organisations may support parties to administer citizen surveys, organise public consultations, or hold expert roundtables. There are several examples of successful multi-party initiatives which have provided coaching to party stakeholders throughout consultative exercises such as these.[34] In Georgia, NIMD and their local partner, the Eastern European Centre for Multi-Party Democracy (EECMD), supported dialogues and informal meetings in which CSOs could present issues and discuss policy ideas with internal party stakeholders.[35]

According to EECMD, in contexts where party structures are weak and civil society plays a significant role in shaping policy, engagement between parties and civic actors can be particularly impactful at the local level. Engagement at the local level can sometimes shape opposition parties' national policy agendas.[36]

A study of civic organising in Uganda, Liberia, Slovakia and Belarus identified several factors which influence the impact of civic organising on parties' policy programmes. These factors include the design of the electoral system, the nature of media coverage, the timing of the initiatives, and the receptiveness of policy champions within the parties.[37] The study found that the transition to programmatic politics requires "deep behavioural changes" from both citizens and parties which, in turn, requires ongoing investment throughout the political cycle, not just during election campaigns.[38] The effectiveness of demand-side initiatives – that is, those initiatives which support citizens and CSOs to communicate their demands to parties – also depends on the capacity of parties themselves to absorb and act upon these demands, which cannot be taken for granted.[39]

The strategy of supporting civil society actors to participate in dialogues with political parties emerged as way of offsetting the limitations which beset party-only dialogues. These limitations include a lack of engagement by senior party officials and a lack of engagement outside of election

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[34] Interview with NDI staffer.
[35] Interview with EECMD staffer.
[36] Interview with EECMD staffer.
[37] CEPPS (2019) Promoting More Policy-Focused Parties Through Civic Organizing: A Guidance Note, p.31.
[38] CEPPS (2019), p.32.
[39] Zuijderduijn, M. et al. (2020) Final Evaluation of the NIMD Strategic Partnership Dialogue and Dissent Programme: Final Report

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periods.[40] But there are also risks to supporting multistakeholder dialogues. In particular, parties may be reluctant to engage with CSOs that they see as politically compromised.

(2)   Voting advice applications and policy positioning tools

There are several notable examples of citizens and CSOs using 'voting advice applications' (VAA) (such as VoteMatch in the Netherlands and Wahl-O-Mat in Germany) to influence parties' policy positions.[41] These applications work by asking voters a series of questions about different policy issues and using the voter's responses to help them identify which parties share similar policy positions as them. In 2006-07, NIMD and ProDemos supported the development of a VAA to be deployed in Georgia. This was subsequently adapted into a 'Policy Positioning Tool' (PPT), which parties can use in order to (a) contribute to the development of VAAs in their countries; (b) encourage public uptake of these applications; and (c) develop and frame their own policy positions in a way that resonates with voters.[42]

The PPT was piloted during local elections in Georgia in 2007 and Lima, Peru in 2014. In Lima, two think tanks – the Institute of Peruvian Studies and Lima Cómo Vamos – invited political parties and their candidates to define their policy positions on 60 issues of significance for the city. Twelve out of thirteen candidates responded. The think tanks used the candidates' responses to develop a VAA which they deployed for three weeks leading up to the election. This initiative attracted the attention of several thousand voters and generated significant media coverage and social media discussion.

(3)   Holding parties accountable

If the transition to a programmatic form of politics requires parties to develop distinct and credible policy positions, informed by the preferences of voters, then just as importantly voters must be able to hold parties accountable for delivering (or failing to deliver) against their policy promises.

Elections provide the most obvious and impactful way for voters to reward or sanction parties and their candidates, but democracy assistance organisations can also support other accountability initiatives. For example, NIMD has supported communal dialogues, broadcast debates and citizen assemblies in Mali; the development of parliamentary 'scorecards' in Kenya; and the creation of a citizens' transparency commission in Guatemala.[43] In Niger, the 'My Vote, My Priority' campaign described above became a springboard for the development of an accountability tool called Presi-Metre which allows citizens to monitor and measure the implementation of the president's election programme.[44]

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[40] Interview with NDI staffer.
[41] Habben Jansen, E. et al. (2016) The Policy Positioning Tool for Political Parties: A Facilitator's Guide
[42] Habben Jansen et al., p.13.
[43] Ngenge and Brouwer (2023)
[44] Ngenge, Y. and Brouwer, F. (2023) Promoting Responsive Politics Via Accountability Actions: Lessons from Niger, Guatemala and Kenya.

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Lessons

- **Ongoing support is more effective:** Elections create opportunities for societal groups to influence parties' policy programmes, and party assistance organisations can capitalise on these opportunities. However, providing support to civil society only during election campaigns can be disadvantageous. Isolated initiatives carried out shortly before an election may be seen as opportunistic, and parties' trust in the CSOs engaged may deteriorate as a result. Equally, in some contexts party assistance organisations and CSOs are required to suspend or reduce their activities during election campaigns. Therefore, it is often advisable to integrate support to civil society into longer-term programmes that operate throughout the policy and electoral cycles, not least because this more sustained engagement can help to build trust between party leaders and civil society actors.

- **Civil society can engage on position issues:** During election campaigns, civil society actors often try to pressure parties to pledge their commitment on valence issues, such as poverty or corruption. But it is also worthwhile for CSOs to engage parties on their more distinct position issues.

- **Coalitions can amplify the influence of CSOs:** Several initiatives have supported CSOs to form coalitions. The broader and more united a coalition, the harder it is for parties to ignore them. This strategy appears to be particularly effective in contexts of democratic decline and political hostility. However, care must be taken in convening civil society coalitions, as these can sometimes be co-opted by one or two of the more powerful organisations involved.

3. The Role of Think Tanks

Think tanks are groups of policy specialists which provide research, analysis and advice to influence – directly or indirectly – public policy. They primarily target office holders but often engage with political parties where these play a significant role in shaping public policy.

Party assistance initiatives have not generally prioritised support to, or engagement with, think tanks. Research from Latin America indicates that linkages between think tanks and political parties are neither necessary not sufficient for institutionalising programmatic politics.[45,46] Nevertheless, think tanks often play an important role in innovating and advocating policy ideas.

The extent to which think tanks collaborate directly with parties depends on a range of factors:

- **Experience with democracy:** As a country gains more experience with democracy, this does not necessarily guarantee that programmatic parties will emerge.[47] In authoritarian contexts, think tanks can serve as a vital resource for politically active academics and inquisitive politicians. During transitions to democracy, think tanks may find further opportunities to establish mutually beneficial partnerships with political parties.[48,49]

- **Party system institutionalisation:** Where party systems are stable and parties can reasonably expect to alternate in and out of government, they are often more inclined to align themselves with (or seek policy advice from) think tanks.[50,51]

- **Parties' organisational structures:** Parties with horizontal organisational structures are more likely to foster close partnerships with think tanks than parties with highly hierarchical structures.[52]

- **A marketplace for ideas:** In societies with extensive knowledge networks, parties may be more inclined to take on board evidence-based information from a variety of sources. Equally, when external groups – including think tanks – outperform parties in aggregating societal interests and defining popular policy options, parties have a strong incentive to collaborate with these

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[45] Garcé, A. (2009) Panorama de la Relación Entre Think Tanks y Partidos Políticos en América Latina, in Mendizabal et al., Dime a Quién Escuchas: Think Tanks y Partidos Políticos en América Latina, pp. 23–58.
[46] Luna, J.P. et al. (2014) Programmatic Parties: A Survey of Dimensions and Explanations in the Literature, in Valladares, J. et al., Politics Meets Policies: The Emergence of Programmatic Political Parties, pp. 1-41.
[47] Kitschelt and Wang (2014)
[48] McGann, J.G. (2010) Democratization and Market Reform in Developing and Transitional Countries: Think Tanks as Catalysts.
[49] Nylen, W. (2018) The Demand for 'Critical Research' in a Competitive Authoritarian Regime: Think Tanks in Mozambique.
[50] Baier, G. and Bakvis, H. (2001) Think Tanks and Political Parties: Competitors or Collaborators? Canadian Journal of Policy Research, 2(1), pp. 107-113.
[51] Mendizabal, E. and Sample, K. (2009) Thinking Politics: Think Tanks and Political Parties in Latin America.
[52] Mendizabal and Sample (2009)

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groups.[53] The media plays an important role in this regard as well. If journalists are putting pressure on political parties to explain their position on a particular policy issue, parties may be more inclined to turn to think tanks for options and advice.

- **Civil service capacity:** Where the civil service is strong and well-resourced, governing parties may have less demand for external policy inputs, although opposition parties may still rely on think tanks to support their oversight functions.

- **Party leadership:** The value that individual leaders place on receiving diverse, evidence-based information will affect their engagement with think tanks. In some cases, political leaders may establish think tanks of their own to project their leadership.[54]

Think tanks contribute to the development of programmatic party systems in at least three ways. In contexts where political contestation is weak or absent, think tanks can provide a **lifeline** to politically active citizens and leaders who are denied access to other sites of power. Where pluralistic competition over public policy does exist, think tanks can **influence** the public debate and public opinion, thereby coaxing parties into developing serious policy programmes. Finally, think tanks and political parties may develop **strategic partnerships** when they share an ideological foundation, a membership base or other incentives.

3.1. Think Tanks as Lifelines

The Chilean Experience

In 1973, the military seized power in Chile. Opposition parties were banned, dissenting academics were exiled, and civic space was severely restricted.[55] During this period, a vibrant community of think tanks emerged, supported by funding partners in Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands and the United States. These think tanks came to serve as a vital refuge for politically active citizens and leaders, as well as for those with academic and policy expertise who had been denied access to the formal political institutions. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, they played four main roles:[56]

- They provided a livelihood for opposition figures.

- They interpreted key changes, including the policy and economic shifts imposed by the military regime; the failure of the former governing party, Unidad Popular (UP); and the breakdown of democracy.

- The created opportunities for dialogue between the left, the Christian Democrats, and the opposition.

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[53] Mendizabal and Sample (2009)
[54] Echt, L. (2019) Partisan Think Tanks: Between Knowledge and Politics
[55] Cociña, M. and Toro, S. (2009) Think Tanks and Their Role in Chile's Political Arena, in Mendizabal, E. and Sample, K., Thinking Politics: Think Tanks and Political Parties in Latin America.
[56] Cociña and Toro (2009), p. 33.

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- They developed policy ideas for a future democratic government.

When democracy was restored in the 1990s, many think tank alumni took on government roles. Funding for the think tanks established during the military regime declined and new think tanks emerged in their place. One of these was the Instituto Libertad y Desarollo, created by former political officials in the military regime who wanted to defend and expand their ideas. The influence of think tanks in Chile today is the legacy of a policy-based political culture that emerged in the late twentieth century.[57,58]

Think Tanks in Today's Autocracies

Setting aside those think tanks bankrolled by autocrats to legitimise their rule at home and abroad, a number of contemporary initiatives continue to support think tanks in a range of contexts. For instance, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNS) has supported think tanks as a means of complementing its efforts to strengthen liberal political parties. In Jordan, FNS supported party members to harness think tanks' analysis and evidence to influence decentralisation debates in the legislature. FNS has also partnered with the Arab Center for Scientific Research and Humane Studies to launch the Ibn Khaldun Initiative for Free Thought. "This initiative aims at gathering intellectuals, mainly economists, from around the region and creating a reverberating economic, political discussion through articles, policy papers, conferences, and trainings."[59,60]

3.2. Influencing the Public Debate

Think tanks can prompt parties to develop policy programmes by influencing the public debate and raising the salience of policy issues. However, their ability to do this effectively depends heavily on their positioning and the degree to which the media amplifies their messaging and bolsters their reputation.[61]

Think tanks may exert influence through either confrontational techniques (such as 'naming and shaming') or persuasive and co-operative techniques. They are often best able to influence parties in the run up to an election. Common tactics in the pre-election period include:

- **Organising election debates:** NDI and the US Commission for Presidential Debates (CPD) have supported domestic groups or media organisations to organise around 370 candidate debates in 35 countries.[62] Debates create an incentive for candidates and parties to develop and communicate robust positions on salient policy issues.[63]

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[57] Interview with academic.
[58] Interview with former KAS staffer.
[59] Interview with former FNS staffer.
[60] FNF (2021) The Ibn Khaldun Initiative for Free Thought, [Website]. Last accessed: 21 May 2025.
[61] Mendizabal, E. (2024) Would a UK Think Tank "Success" Work in South Africa?
[62] NDI (2024) Public Debates, [Website]. Last accessed: 21 May 2025.
[63] Kramon, D. (2020) Debates in New Democracies and Hybrid Regimes: A Scoping Paper

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- **Using evidence to influence campaigns:** Along with various interest groups (including trade associations, chambers of commerce, unions and NGOs), think tanks use evidence and analysis to influence election campaigns. For example, they may provide agendas, blueprints or roadmaps that outline specific challenges and propose policy solutions. Where think tanks have direct access to candidates' and/or parties' campaign teams, they will enjoy substantially greater influence.

- **Using evidence to hold parties to account:** Think tanks can hold parties to account by using evidence and analysis to constructively challenge the viability of their policy promises. In some countries, think tanks partner with media outlets to fact-check the claims parties and candidates make during an election campaign. For instance, during Chile's presidential election in 2017, the think tank Espacio Público partnered with two television networks to fact-check candidates' statements and generate public discussion on key issues. Initiatives like these can encourage parties to use evidence more rigorously when developing and communicating their policy positions.

3.3. Building Strategic Partnerships with Parties

Think tanks sometimes support political parties with their strategic objectives, such as winning an election, preparing for government, or holding the government to account in opposition. This usually requires think tank leaders to build close relationships with party officials to understand their motivations and priorities.

This is easier to achieve for internal think tanks which are organisationally linked to the party. For external think tanks, the closer their collaboration with a particular party, the greater the risk that their credibility as a non-partisan, expert stakeholder will be undermined. External think tanks must therefore strike a delicate balance between influence and independence.[64]

There are several ways that think tanks can support parties in achieving their strategic objectives, a sample of which are discussed below.

Technical support for policy development

Where political parties are well-institutionalised, they often draw on think tanks' technical expertise and recommendations when drafting their own policy positions (see the discussion of think tanks in Chile in Section 3.1 above).[65] However, parties with weak internal institutionalisation tend "to depend more on ad hoc groups appointed by party leaders than on think tanks".[66]

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[64] Garcé (2009)

[65] Barreda, M. and Ruiz Rodríguez, L.M. (2022) Think Tanks y Partidos Políticos: Relevancia Estratégica en América Latina.

[66] Toranzo Roca, C. (2009) Political Parties and Think Tanks in Bolivia, in Mendizabal, E. and Sample, K., Thinking Politics: Think Tanks and Political Parties in Latin America, pp. 27-31.

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There have been some initiatives by international partners to support collaboration between parties and think tanks in this regard. For example, KAS in Germany endeavours to serve as a 'transmission belt', facilitating information sharing between think tanks and parties.[67] However, in contexts of weak party institutionalisation, international efforts to support technical collaboration between think tanks and parties have struggled to generate impact. For example, in Ecuador the Corporation for Development Studies (CORDES) and the Latin American Institute for Social Research (ILDIS) both received support from international partners to help domestic political parties with policy development (among other things). However, in both cases:

> *"Collaboration on public policy and political action has been scant because of weaknesses on the part of both the parties and the think tanks. The organisational weakness of political parties makes it difficult for think tanks to establish successful relationships with them, while their lack of internal democracy and debate is an obstacle to the competition of ideas and proposals. Parties also tend to focus on elections, paying little or no attention to programmatic proposals. There is therefore little demand from parties for the kind of work done by think tanks."[68]*

Support to parliamentarians

Parliamentarians, and especially those in opposition parties, often require advice and technical support to help them scrutinise government decision-making. External think tanks can tap into that demand in order to gain access to influential politicians. For example, in Malaysia in 2022, the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS) began to propose reforming the political finance system. It partnered with a member of parliament to table a Private Member's Bill, and it helped to establish an All-Party Parliamentary Group on Political Finance. The group became a platform where MPs, CSOs and international experts could discuss political finance reform and broader anti-corruption issues. IDEAS became the group's secretariat.

Convening policy dialogues

Think tanks that build a reputation for producing credible and relevant analysis are well placed to convene dialogues and discussions with political parties and parliamentarians. Dialogues and discussions, whether held publicly or behind closed doors, "provide valuable opportunities for politicians to exchange knowledge and refresh ideas around policy agendas".[69] They also allow politicians to meet with representatives of interest groups and businesses without undermining their own credibility in the eyes of the electorate.[70]

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[67] Interview with KAS staffer.
[68] Belletini, O. and Carrion, M. (2009) Political Parties and Think Tanks in Ecuador, in Mendizabal, E. and Sample, K., Thinking Politics: Think Tanks and Political Parties in Latin America.
[69] Ruiz Rodríguez, L.M. and Barreda, M. (2022) Six Ways Think Tanks Support Political Parties
[70] Interview with On Think Tanks staffer.

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The ability of think tanks to convene diverse political stakeholders in these dialogues depends on their own credibility, which stems not only from the quality of their analysis and the reputations of their staff and boards, but also from their funding structures, which should not compromise their ability to pursue their own agendas and produce impartial, evidence-based policy research.

Revolving doors

Another way that think tanks can build strategic partnerships with political parties is by sharing personnel. External, independent think tanks may maintain their organisational non-partisanship while allowing staff members to assume government positions in their personal capacity.[71] Likewise, politicians and senior party figures may take on positions within think tanks. This revolving door allows former government officials, parliamentarians and party staffers to share their expertise and experiences with the wider policy community, whilst also allowing think tank specialists to more directly influence the design of public policy.

Although this bidirectional movement of staff can be advantageous for think tanks trying to build strategic partnerships with parties, it also carries risks. The flow of former political officials into think tanks can damage their credibility as independent, evidence-based organisations. Think tanks need clear codes of conduct, as well as a transparent and pluralistic approach to recruitment, to offset this risk.

Lessons

- When deciding whether and how to integrate support for think tanks into their wider party programming, democracy support organisations should consider the country's experience with democratic pluralism; the stability of the party system; the capacity of parties to absorb external policy input; the civil service's capacity to support policy design; and the attitudes of party leaders towards receiving external policy advice.

- Support to think tanks should include advice on how to tailor their work to the political context in order to maximise impact.

- In contexts where political space is closed, support to think tanks can help maintain a limited form of intellectual pluralism. Think tanks can continue to develop analysis and recommendations which may become the foundation for future policy debates, should the political space begin to open.

- Party support initiatives could more explicitly and consistently work with influential (external) think tanks to help them engage in partnerships with political parties throughout the electoral cycle.

- Funding to think tanks should not compromise their credibility or autonomy.

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[71] Cociña and Toro (2009)

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