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USAID POLITICAL PARTY ASSISTANCE POLICY

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USAID

Political Party

Assistance Policy

Role of Political Parties in a Democracy

Representative political parties are central to any democracy. They perform a number of functions that distinguish them from any other civic or social organization. Political parties recruit and nominate candidates for elected office with the intent to govern. In the process, they develop positions on issues of public concern, stimulate public discourse, aggregate interests, and formulate governing platforms during election campaigns. After an election, parties form either the government or the opposition. Governing requires a different set of capabilities to translate electoral platforms into performance.

A central purpose of political party assistance is to help parties become more representative and to reflect the interests of all social groups and citizens, not only a narrow elite. Parties that become more inclusive in their conduct, outlook, and internal practices can enhance respect for rule of law, strengthen democratic processes, and advance social inclusion in their societies. Representative parties that include meaningful participation by traditionally marginalized groups¹ can help to achieve gender equality and sustainable development milestones in their countries. The degree to which political parties respect the right of all persons to participate meaningfully in political life is an important indicator of the health of a country's democracy. Ultimately, the existence of representative parties strengthens both the country's commitment and capacity to govern in the interest of all, and therefore helps foster broader self-reliance.

¹ USAID defines 'marginalized groups' as "people who are typically denied full access to legal protection or social and economic participation and programs...whether in practice or in principle, for either historical, cultural, political, or other contextual reasons. Such groups may include but are not limited to: women and girls, persons with disabilities, LGBTI people, displaced persons, economic migrants, indigenous individuals and communities, youth and the elderly, religious minorities, ethnic minorities, people in lower castes, and people of diverse economic class and political opinions..." See: https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/additional_help_for_ads_201_inclusive_development_180726_final_r.pdf

Support for the United States National Interest

Political party assistance that fosters multi-party democracies and democratic governance supports U.S. national security and advances our foreign policy objectives. Countries with institutionalized multi-party systems are more resilient to democratic backsliding and the erosion of fundamental freedoms. Mature democracies make stronger allies, are good trade partners, and bring greater stability into the international arena. Parties and political leaders that are more democratic in their outlook and conduct are more likely to respect the rule of law, reject political violence, and work within democratic institutions to advance their policy priorities. Democratic political parties that are more inclusive, responsive, and accountable to the needs of their citizens can lay a strong foundation for sustainable development.² For these reasons, the U.S. Government encourages assistance to democratic political parties.

Goals of USAID Political Party Assistance

In line with Agency commitments to inclusive development and humanitarian assistance³, the goal of USAID's political party assistance is to develop and consolidate representative democracies with multi-party systems, by:

- Encouraging representative, inclusive, citizen-focused political parties;
- Encouraging parties' support for democratic processes, accountable governance, and rule of law; and
- Promoting the conduct of free, fair, and inclusive elections.

Principles and Guidelines of the Policy

The core of the policy is to support the fundamental principles of democratic political processes through political party assistance. This policy defines a political party as any entity that competes for elected office or aspires to compete for elected office, whether as a political movement, party, electoral coalition, or alliance. The policy also applies to emerging political movements, alliances, or other entities that operate as de facto political parties but may not be formally registered as a political party.

Two principles govern USAID's political party assistance policy:

- USAID programs support representative, multiparty systems; and
- USAID programs do not seek to determine election outcomes.

² USAID Policy Framework, "[Ending the Need for Foreign Assistance](#)," 2019

³ USAID defines 'inclusive development' as "the concept that every person, regardless of identity, is instrumental in the transformation of their own societies and their inclusion throughout the development process leads to better outcomes" ([Additional Help for ADS 201](#)). USAID articulates our commitment to [non-discrimination](#) and inclusive development throughout our policy framework. For links to relevant USAID policies see the USAID Policy Registry: <https://www.usaid.gov/results-and-data/planning/policy-registry>

From these principles flow the following guidelines:

- **USAID programs must make a good faith effort to assist all democratic parties with equitable levels of assistance.** Equitable is defined as fair, reasonable, and impartial. Levels of assistance to democratic political parties should be based on clearly articulated and objective rationale. USAID programs may provide different types of assistance to individual parties but must ensure that programs do not favor or help particular parties disproportionately.
- **Where there are too many democratic political parties to assist all effectively, USAID will assist all significant democratic parties with equitable levels of assistance.** The relevant USAID Mission will determine which parties are significant. See suggested criteria for determining significance below.
- **Assistance to non-democratic parties is prohibited.**
- **USAID offers technical assistance to political parties.** As a general practice, USAID does not provide material assistance to political parties. In the rare instance that limited material assistance (not to exceed \$50,000 per party during the life of an award) is necessary to achieve technical assistance objectives, it must be equitably provided to all political parties with which USAID is working.
- **Political party assistance directly related to campaigning should be suspended for a reasonable time period prior to voting.** Missions should consult local election law for official campaign period timelines and restrictions to help determine what a reasonable period of time is in a given context. Thirty days is a general guideline. Other forms of assistance, including those that are multi-party in nature, related to poll-watcher training or issue-based candidate debates, can proceed during the electoral period. Missions should consider how assistance during an electoral period could be perceived when making a determination about which activities should proceed.

The following activities are prohibited under this policy:

- Offering assistance to only one political candidate, party, or electoral coalition;
- Providing significant material assistance (valued over \$50,000) to any individual party or electoral coalition;
- Providing cash grants to any political party;
- Paying salaries, wages, fees, or honoraria to any candidate, political party leader, or campaign official during a campaign period;
- Paying for private polls for only one party or candidate;
- Organizing public meetings that endorse a candidate or political party;
- Helping to organize public meetings for only one political party; and
- Paying for a media message that specifically endorses or supports one candidate or political party.

When it serves U.S. foreign policy and national security interests, however, a waiver to the policy can be authorized. A waiver indicating Washington concurrence is required for activities deviating from this policy. Refer to the ‘Waivers of the Policy’ section below for additional information.

Implementation Guidance

USAID’s Political Party Assistance Policy sets forth implementation guidance to help USAID staff and decision makers in Washington and the field to:

- Determine if a program is subject to the policy;
- Define key terms used in the policy; and
- Elaborate standards that must be met if seeking a waiver to the policy.

It is a best practice for Missions to build in an annual review to determine if there has been any change in the parties that are deemed democratic or significant. Missions are encouraged to consult with implementing partners and the Embassy to inform their decisions on party selection.

Which Programs Are Subject to USAID’s Political Party Assistance Policy?

Direct political party assistance programs are subject to the policy. Also subject to the policy are assistance programs that indirectly benefit political parties, including—but not limited to—media assistance, get-out-the-vote programs, public opinion polling, voter education activities, and candidate training and political leadership development programs. All such programs must adhere to the principles of supporting representative, multi-party systems, and must not seek to determine election outcomes.

How Should USAID Determine Whether a Political Party is “Democratic”?

USAID has identified minimum indicators of a political party’s commitment to democratic principles which will be used to determine if a political party is “democratic.” This judgment should be based on party conduct within a time frame appropriate to the evolving conditions within a country. Other evidence that could be used includes written materials, such as party platforms and propaganda; broadcast messages, such as television and radio commercials; social media messages; and interviews with party leaders.

No waiver is needed for a Mission to designate a party as non-democratic. However, if a party is deemed non-democratic, documentation of this decision, cleared through the Chief of Mission and USAID Regional Bureau with an informational copy to the Center for Democracy, Human Rights and Governance (DRG Center), is required.

Key minimum indicators of a political party's commitment to democratic principles include:

- Support for peaceful, democratic means to obtain power
 - Does the political party eschew the use of violence as a political tool in practice as well as in policy?
 - If a party or movement endorsed or sponsored violence in the past, has it renounced these practices and broken ties to violent groups or organizations?
 - Does the political party commit to genuinely free, fair, and competitive elections as the sole means through which to attain political power?
- Respect for human rights and the rule of law
 - Does the political party reject the use of political terror, hate speech, stigmatization, unjustified imprisonment, exile, or torture in practice as well as in theory?
 - Does the political party obey the laws of the country and any regional and international human rights instruments ratified by the country?
 - Has or would the political party adhere to legitimate legal decisions rendered (recognizing that it is not uncommon for democratic political parties to be involved in legal action)?
- Respect for freedom of religion, press, speech, assembly and association
 - Do the political party's conduct and policies demonstrate religious tolerance and respect for religious liberty?
 - Does the political party respect freedom of expression and support the rights of a free and independent media?
 - Does the political party respect the freedoms of assembly and association and the rights of all political parties to participate fully in electoral and political processes?

The criteria above outline minimum or base characteristics of a democratic party. A fully democratic political party would display a broader range of practices and characteristics, such as transparency, accountability, fair and equitable participation opportunities for all citizens, including women and marginalized groups, and meaningful inclusion of political party members in its decision-making processes.⁴ Many political parties in countries where USAID works fall somewhere between fully democratic and non-democratic. For example, parties may lack internal democracy, or fail to be inclusive of women and marginalized groups, but these factors in isolation should not be used to exclude a party from assistance. In fact, addressing these factors may be an objective of USAID political party assistance programs.

⁴ A party's internal democracy can be determined by examining to what extent democratic principles and processes are applied within a party structure. This could include the party's governing rules (formal or de facto), decision-making and consultation processes, organizational structures, and the overall degree of transparency, inclusion and accountability in the party's functioning and processes.

USAID should lean towards inclusion of parties and exclude a party only when there is clear and convincing evidence that it is non-democratic. Parties making a good faith reform effort should be eligible for assistance. Non-democratic parties are ineligible for assistance, but engagement and communication with these parties is not prohibited.

How Should USAID Determine If a Political Party is “Significant”?

In some countries where USAID works, there may be dozens of legally registered political parties. Where there are a multitude of parties, especially a large number of small political parties, providing assistance to them all may not be practical or cost-effective. Moreover, in such an environment, support for all parties could encourage a fractured political system. Determining whether a democratic political party is, or has the potential to become, an important force within the political system and therefore “significant” is a judgment to be made by the USAID Mission. Factors used to determine the significance of a democratic party may vary from country to country depending on the local context. However, the judgment should be based on transparent, objective indicators of a party’s current or potential level of public support, such as national and local election results, opinion poll results, and/or demographic data.

Criteria to determine whether a democratic political party is significant include:

- The level of success in previous elections compared with other political parties
 - Is the number of votes won nationally or regionally by the party high relative to other parties?
 - Does the party currently hold seats in national, regional, or local government?
- The size of the party’s base of support, not just its electoral success. This is particularly important in countries where elections have been unfair or where parties’ electoral opportunities are negatively affected by closed political space.
 - Do polls, political analysis, or other objective information show that the party has the potential to gain seats in local, regional, or national governing bodies?
 - Does the party represent an underrepresented but important group?
 - Does the party have significant grassroots support throughout the country or in a certain region?

Waivers of the Policy

When it serves U.S. foreign policy and national security interests, a waiver to the policy can be authorized. Waivers should be the exception and must meet certain standards to justify any program or activity that:

- Excludes a significant democratic party,
- Includes a non-democratic party, or
- Supports a single democratic party or coalition.

While it is impossible to anticipate every eventuality, the following situations could merit a waiver from the policy:

- Reasons to exclude a significant democratic political party:
 - The party represents a danger to particular demographic groups or countries.
“Democratic” political parties may also be xenophobic, exclusionary, radically anti-American, involved in illegal practices (such as transnational criminal activity, including narcotrafficking) or otherwise act counter to U.S. national security interests. Waivers to exclude democratic political parties on these grounds, if supported with substantial evidence, will be favorably considered.
- Reasons to include a non-democratic political party:
 - The party’s exclusion would place democratic parties and USAID implementers at risk. If by excluding the non-democratic party, it is impossible to assist democratic political parties without putting them and implementers at risk, inclusion may be justified. However, in such cases, the Mission should carefully assess safety and security risks for beneficiaries and partners, in keeping with a “Do No Harm” approach, and consider whether political party assistance in this environment is warranted at all.
 - There is evidence that the non-democratic party may reform through assistance. If there is a strong likelihood that democratic reformers within the party will use assistance to reform the party and, as a result, the party will take steps to become democratic within the program period, then assistance may be merited if supported with substantial evidence.

Assistance to non-democratic parties under these circumstances need not meet the standards for equitable assistance to democratic parties.

- Reasons to support a single democratic party or coalition:
 - Fragmenting assistance may undermine democracy goals. Competition is essential to democracy. However, in a strict authoritarian system, a fragmented opposition may be counterproductive to democracy goals. Thus, an appropriate response may be to assist democratic parties in their efforts to establish a new coalition.

What is the Process for Requesting a Waiver of the Policy?

To obtain a waiver, an Action Memorandum must be submitted to the USAID Administrator for approval. The Action Memorandum will be drafted by USAID (in Washington or in the field). The Action Memorandum must be cleared by the Center for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG Center); the relevant USAID Regional Bureau; the Bureau for Development, Democracy, and Innovation; the Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning; and the Office of the General Counsel. The Department of State should be consulted, and Chief of Mission clearance should be obtained.

The Action Memorandum must identify and provide a rationale for the specific aspects of the policy to be waived. It must also describe the proposed program and how it will be implemented, and explain how the proposed deviation is consistent with U.S. Government policy in the country in question.

A waiver must be obtained before funds are obligated or sub-obligated into a new political party assistance program, or, in the case of an existing award, prior to the implementation of activities that would require a waiver. All practicable steps will be taken to ensure that the waiver approval process does not exceed three weeks.

A waiver has a maximum life of three years, but can be renewed by the Administrator. Waivers should be reviewed at the Mission level on an annual basis. Documentation of these reviews should be added to the waiver/program file.

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