

Thomas Carothers

Confronting the Weakest Link. Aiding Political Parties in New Democracies

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A review by Gero Erdmann*

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This book is a required reading for all who deal with the assistance of parties and democracies, no matter if scientifically or practically. There are several reasons.

This book is the first monograph on this issue. This alone tells much about its importance. Even though the assistance of parties has been implemented for decades – especially by the German political foundations – there are only a few substantial publications on this issue, not to mention critiques. Beginning in 2004 a number of academic articles have dealt with fundamental questions of aiding political parties. As an autonomous term, “political party assistance” presumably appeared in 1999 in an earlier book from Thomas Carothers.

In his current book Carothers delivers a detailed review on fundamental questions and problems of political party assistance. This book is appearing – hopefully – at the appropriate moment, because political party assistance has been discussed more and more and Carothers deals with the elementary deficiency of political party assistance: the lack of strategies and concepts.

The author himself has practical experience as a consultant and advisor of projects and programs dealing with political party assistance in different regions of the world and especially in U.S. organizations. Nevertheless he keeps the necessary critical distance to his subject and is among the supporters of the political party assistance, notwithstanding his profound critique.

Apart from introduction and conclusion, the book is structured in two parts: the first part very briefly describes the fundamental characteristics and crucial problems of political parties within

young or fragile democracies in Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia. The second part analyzes how political party leaders deal with the parties' problems.

Carothers points out that the problems of political parties and the consequent obstacles, concerning the assistance of political parties, are very similar within the different regions. The parties are focused on single and dominating leaders and lack of organization; they are corrupt, ideologically indifferent, dependent on rich financier, and lack roots in their community. The author rightly defers the often-used argumentation for this phenomenon – the young age of these parties – to the field of popular errors. A reference to Latin America alone, with traditions of political parties rooted in the 19th century, unmasks this argument – at least in general.

Carothers recognizes the “Electoralist-from-the-start-Syndrome” as cause for the young parties shortcomings pointed out above: after the regime's transition to democracy, most of the young parties have had barely enough time to establish an efficient party organization which is based on civil society. Instead, they were required to perform as an “electoral party” and to operate as an organization for electoral campaigns – resulting in negative outcomes. In the old democracies, political parties have had decades to establish themselves as electoral parties, passing different forms of organization, as for example mass parties, before they turned into sheer organizations for electoral campaigns. Besides this focus on elections (“electoralism”), the author names other causes for these parties' failings, such as a lack in the rule of law, poverty, and presidential systems. Throughout the book Carothers warns against putting the equally perceived “parties' crisis” within the established democracies on one level with the shortcomings of the parties within the young democracies.

Here you could question if the shortcomings of the political parties across all continents – which are pointed out by Carothers very generally – are really and basically the same. The assumption is obvious that different shortcomings become valid in different dimensions and constellations, as the author himself points out for Central and Eastern Europe. For example multi-ethnic parties, as they are present in Africa, and which generally also are only focused on electoral campaigns, have their own dynamics and problems. But this is a case for the party research dealing with the problems of parties outside of Europe, which goes beyond the scope of this book that deals with the implementation of aiding political parties.

With these shortcomings of parties as a background, the second part analyzes the activities of those who aid political parties. First, the author reviews the actors, their history and limited financial resources. He concisely describes “political party aid”, its aims, and the different domestic and

international interests. Finally he analyzes the “concepts”, “standard measures”, and instruments of the assistance of political parties plus their effects.

As a result, Carothers concedes that the political party aid at best only has a minor effect. Most of the measures taken had no “transformational effect”. Only sometimes slightly positive effects could be perceived, concerning the electoral campaign process and the organizational strengthening of the parties. Carothers defines “transformational effects” – their pursuit is often more implicit than explicit to the supporters – as an identifiable change in the organizational and functional characteristics of a party, as for example the transformation of a leader-dominated and weakly organized party into a party with strong organization and internal democracy. Following the author, there is nothing pointing to such an effect. He points to the aid for Latin American parties: in the 1970s and 1980s they were in part substantially supported both organizationally and financially by German political foundations like the Friedrich Ebert Foundation or the Konrad Adenauer Foundation; today they are perceived as being in a serious crisis. Another example are the mid-right parties in Central and Eastern Europe that have been aided for over one and a half decade by U.S. and European supporters. Their conditions are almost the same as they used to be in the early 1990s.

Carothers provides several reasons for these limited effects: parties are “difficult organizations”. The leadership that normally holds the most power within the organization is not interested in the democratic reforms that its supporters want. These are: internal democracy, financial transparency, and the delegation of power. Political party assistance is hardly possible without collaboration of the leadership, because the leadership can only pursue approaches for democratic reforms in a hidden or indirect manner, if at all.

Further, the model of an idealized “mass party”, which is the conceptual basis for the supporters from the established democracies, is an outdated myth from past decades. Since the supporters of this myth are not sure of it (due to the fact that it is also no longer existent in their home countries) the measures they offer for aiding young parties are lacking in coherence and self-confidence. In addition, there are lots of methodical deficiencies, for instance training are too short and too schematic, questionable short-term employment of “experts” without knowledge about the local situation, as well as putting the emphasis on assistance for electoral campaigns instead of long-term support. Many of these methodical deficiencies – especially due to the lack of context sensitivity – seem to concern the inexperienced U.S. institutions and actors. Though the special characteristics of the work of representatives of German Foundations are not appreciated, adequately, this critical overview seems valid for German foundations, as well. This counts, for

example, for vast number of low-level activities: each one of them useful, but their real effect remains doubtful. Also the difference in the reception of the political parties assistance between the local parties' representatives and external supporters – that sometimes is diametrically opposed – must be considered: Following the author, the latter tend to overestimate their own influence.

Finally, Carothers shows the dilemma of eliminating structural deficiencies among the political, economic, social, and cultural conditions – which define the framework for the parties within their communities – with institution-focused and mostly financial limited measures.

Carothers' critique of the missing "effects of transformation" could be easily rejected as overdrawn and unrealistic – especially since the aim of transformation is rarely formulated in an explicit manner. On the one side, there are not enough studies and surveys that would allow verification of Carothers' critique or its rejection (he refers to this lack of information and also shows the supporters' point of view, who regularly portray their projects as much more successful). Conversely, all party leaders operate without explicit strategies and concepts that could quote their aims, the measures, and the instruments used to achieve these goals at a particular point in time. Such criterion would at least indirectly allow substantiation of the efficiency of political party aid. That is a small inadequacy of Carothers' book: he does not sufficiently clarify the voluntarism and deficiencies of political party aid.

Finally, Carothers makes the case against the ambitious and often only implicit goals for transformation for a more modest and realistic approach. He argues against the narrow understanding of political party assistance. If the parties only have a small area for maneuver in a political system the direct aid for political parties yields poor results. At this point the question emerges: is "political party assistance" not conceptually overstretched? Since this point of view deals with the context and framework of the political system in which the parties act. For me, a more proper response seems to be a more integrated and consistent strategy of democracy promotion with political party assistance as one branch.

This book also encourages reconsidering the practices and standard tools of the German political foundations, especially to foster the new discussion on strategies and concepts and thereby rethink some fundamental questions. Part of this discussion is the choice between the sister-party assistance and the multiple party approaches. One reason for this is the ideological and programmatic vagueness of many parties in young democracies or hybrid regimes that complicates close cooperation. Finally, this book clearly shows the boundaries of political party assistance, which must also be part of this debate. That also leads to the question of dealing with dominant governing parties in fragile democracies or hybrid regimes, which hold the absolute

majority in the parliament and support their government's retention of power, and the question for the chances to foster democracy in this situation as an external actor. Eventually, the political foundations' – marginally reviewed – experience in cooperation with hegemonic or authorial parties could deliver instructive results.

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