



Strengthening Democracy Support in Regimes With Dominant Parties

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Article

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Among the many factors driving an authoritarian resurgence around the world is a trend of increasing significance: the rise of regimes featuring dominant parties that engage in creeping autocratization. This trend covers a range of countries with different levels of overall democratic quality, from fragile democracies to more repressive regimes. The trend's common thread is that one party ensconces itself in power and effectively nullifies opposition parties. These dominant-party regimes present especially high-profile and thorny dilemmas for international democracy support in that they can often co-opt programs that offer support to state organs, election commissions, technical bodies, facilitators of intraparty mediation, and members of civil society.

Under the auspices of the European Democracy Hub, the authors and a group of country experts studied the contours of this trend and the concerns it has raised among democracy practitioners, foundations, and donors about democracy support. This article draws on and synthesizes the findings of four previously published case studies of different types of dominant-party regimes in Georgia, Mozambique, Nicaragua, and Zimbabwe. This research demonstrates that the dynamics specific to these types of regimes undermine the utility of many traditional forms of support for sound governance and democracy. The democracy support community has begun to respond to this challenge in some places, but the task is becoming more pressing and requires far more systematic policy attention than it has so far received.

Dominant Party Variants and Related Problems

Dominant-party regimes are not new and have been on the democracy support agenda for a long time. Analysts have debated the features of dominant-party regimes over many years and have not settled on a single, universally accepted definition. In broad terms, however, the competing definitions concur that such a regime features one party that clearly dominates a country's electorate, other political parties, the formation of governments, and the public policy agenda over a long period of time.

Some dominant parties have more pronounced effects than others. Some regimes with dominant parties are relatively benign in democratic terms—like with the long-running historical dominance of the Swedish Social Democratic Party and the Japanese Liberal Democratic Party. But more commonly, dominant-party systems have malign implications for democracy, as dominant parties tend to begin undermining democratic processes and actively preventing political challengers from gaining power.

Unlike outright dictatorships or full-on single-party states, dominant parties exist within political ecosystems that allow some electoral competition from which the party emerges victorious over multiple

electoral cycles. A dominant-party regime is therefore most aptly described as a political system in which “elections are meaningful but manifestly unfair.” The dominant party becomes a “party of power” by building such a close relationship with the executive that the party functions as an extension of state power rather than as an autonomous political organization.

Dominant parties are growing more numerous. Between 2011 and 2021, fifty-six states exhibited the features of dominant-party systems, up from forty-four in the previous decade; nearly two-thirds of the fifty-plus countries from the 2011–2021 period shifted in an authoritarian direction during the 2010s.¹ In this sense, dominant-party regimes can be understood as a subcategory of the broader autocratization trend that has spread with growing speed around the world. Within the more general surge in authoritarian politics, the defining specificity of dominant-party regimes is that democratic decay flows from the entrenched power of one political party.

The four cases in this project—Georgia, Mozambique, Nicaragua, and Zimbabwe—highlight different dynamics within the overall dominant-party trend. Table 1 below shows these four countries’ overall democracy scores. Georgia displays dominant-party dynamics in a relatively open polity in which one dominant party has been forced to relinquish power to another. Georgian Dream has consolidated its decade in power as the country’s increasingly dominant party, yet other avenues of pluralism remain open. Huge sums of money move through the dominant party to support clientelist networks, and the party has significant control over the justice system. Georgia’s electoral rules have long given disproportionate benefits to the dominant party; the opposition and civil society actors have recently forced the government to change these rules.

Table 1. The Regime Types of Four Countries With Dominant Parties

Regime Type (2010)		Regime Type (2020)	
<i>Hybrid Regime</i>	<i>Authoritarian Regime</i>	<i>Hybrid Regime</i>	<i>Authoritarian Regime</i>
Georgia 4.59	Zimbabwe 2.64	Georgia 5.31	Mozambique 3.51
Nicaragua 5.73	Mozambique 4.90		Nicaragua 3.6
			Zimbabwe 3.16

Note: The table above employs the ten-point scale from the Economist Intelligence Unit’s annual Democracy Index. The scale ranges from zero (completely authoritarian) to ten (fully democratic).

Sources: Economist Intelligence Unit, “Democracy Index 2010: Democracy in Retreat,” 2010, https://graphics.eiu.com/PDF/Democracy_Index_2010_web.pdf; and Economist Intelligence Unit, “Democracy Index 2020: In Sickness and in Health?,” 2020, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020>.

Broadly similar dynamics have played out in Nicaragua and Zimbabwe. Neither domestic forces nor the international community have been able to stop Nicaragua’s slide into increasingly outright authoritarianism. Since 2007, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) has taken over state bodies, prevented any space for opposition parties, closed off other avenues of pluralism, and enacted legal restrictions on civil society bodies. Meanwhile, the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF) has ruled the country since independence in 1980 and continues to dictate the direction of domestic politics, despite a period of power sharing between 2009 and 2013 and the removal from office of long-time president Robert Mugabe in 2017. The country’s military has a more central role in underpinning the privileges of Zimbabwe’s dominant party than is the case in the three aforementioned countries.

The role of electoral authorities has been particularly problematic in these cases. Electoral management

bodies are essentially controlled by the dominant parties in Nicaragua, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe with no sanction or consequences for partisan behavior on the part of electoral officials. In Georgia, a recent EU-brokered agreement promises to reduce Georgian Dream’s influence over appointments to the country’s Central Electoral Commission.

These challenges are not unique to these case studies: other dominant parties demonstrate similar patterns of behavior. The National Resistance Movement in Uganda has cemented its hold on power over its rivals. The Justice and Development Party in Turkey has imposed increasingly severe restrictions on the work of journalists and civil society organizations. Meanwhile, the African National Congress in South Africa has used legitimate and democratic means to preserve its dominance but has on occasions also been accused of using state resources for the party’s own benefit.

Funding Responses to the Surge in Dominant Parties

All four of these cases present specific challenges for democracy supporters’ policy responses. In these types of regimes, institutional support, including to electoral management bodies and standard civil society support, has had limited impact: dominant parties easily capture these forms of external funding.

Through these detailed case studies, the authors heard local concerns in these countries that many standard kinds of democracy support programs can inadvertently play into rulers’ hands and accentuate dominant-party dynamics.² In Zimbabwe, local interlocutors report that donor support for institutions like the courts and parliament has ended up effectively instrumentalized by the country’s dominant party. A similar trend is apparent in Mozambique, where well-funded efforts to support bodies like the courts, parliament, and ombudsman have been appropriated by the Frelimo-led political system. In this case, donors pumped in significant amounts of funding in the early 2000s as part of a peace process, but these funds had little impact in terms of levelling the country’s partisan playing field.

In Nicaragua, donors have been forced to wind down most types of aid and have found it more and more difficult to get funding to civil society. Donors have been reduced to supporting more limited kinds of projects in local communities and with youth organizations. The authorities’ hostility to external actors means that donors have even struggled to work with the FSLN on apolitical issues. In Zimbabwe, generic programs for civil society have been largely unsuccessful in helping to create a more even political playing field.

Data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) indicates that—in Mozambique, Nicaragua, and Zimbabwe—the EU granted more aid for democracy support than it did support for state building between 2010 and 2019 (see table 2).³ However, for all OECD donors (which includes EU data), this only holds true for Zimbabwe, with more funds going to state building than democracy support in the cases of Georgia, Mozambique, and Nicaragua even if support for state building in Nicaragua and Mozambique has declined over time as these countries have autocratized.

Table 2. Donor Aid for State Building and Democracy Support (2010–2019)

	All Official Donors (including the EU)		EU Institutions	
	<i>State Building/Good Governance</i>	<i>Democracy Support</i>	<i>State Building/Good Governance</i>	<i>Democracy Support</i>
Georgia	\$779.7 million	\$336.6 million	\$281.0 million	\$71.2 million
Mozambique	\$962.8 million	\$518.8 million	\$40.1 million	\$41.1 million
Nicaragua	\$277.5 million	\$276.3 million	\$24.0 million	\$30.3 million
Zimbabwe	\$263.7 million	\$633.2 million	\$38.4 million	\$70.3 million

Table 2. Donor Aid for State Building and Democracy Support (2010–2019)

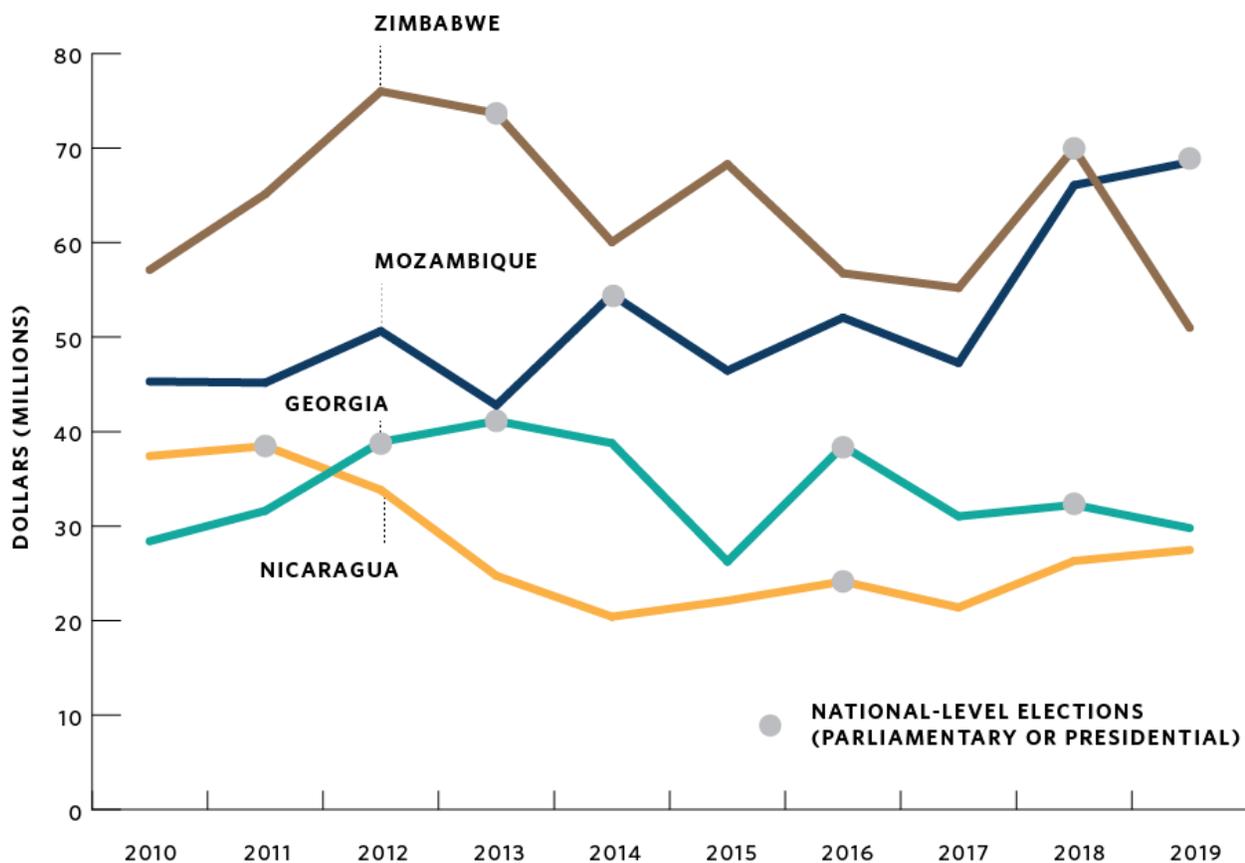
All Official Donors (including the EU)		EU Institutions	
<i>State Building/Good Governance</i>	<i>Democracy Support</i>	<i>State Building/Good Governance</i>	<i>Democracy Support</i>

Note: These calculations are based on data from the OECD Creditor Reporting System database in millions of U.S. dollars in 2018 constant prices. Subcategories of the “Government and Civil Society” category used by the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee have been subdivided into two separate, subcategorized datasets, one focused on state building and good governance and one focused on democracy support.

Source: OECD, “Credit Reporting System,” 2019, <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=crs1>.

Funding for democracy support has tended to peak during nationwide election years in all four countries (see figure 1), indicating that support for democracy is strongly linked to elections, which are still seen as a key avenue for change in dominant-party states.⁴

FIGURE 1
Evolution of Donors' Democracy Support Funding



SOURCE: OECD, "Credit Reporting System," 2019, <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=crs1>.

NOTE: These calculations are based on data from the OECD Creditor Reporting System database in millions of U.S. dollars in 2018 constant prices. The data divides subsectors of the "Government and Civil Society" category used by the OECD's Development Assistance Committee into two separate, subcategorized datasets, one focused on state building and good governance and one focused on democracy support.

Policy Considerations

This on-the-ground empirical research reveals three policy considerations of specific importance in dominant-party regimes: party support and talks, elections, and direct activism.

Party Support and Talks

The distinctive and defining feature of dominant-party regimes makes one area of the traditional democracy support repertoire especially relevant: political party programs. There is a particularly acute need for donor support aimed at giving rivals to the dominant party an ability to compete. Yet the four cases demonstrate that outside actors have struggled to make any headway in this regard and have generally eschewed direct backing for opposition parties.

Rather, they have focused increasingly on creating the rules of a more level playing field. They have done so most notably through pushing for, funding, and mediating talks between incumbent dominant parties and opposition parties. In Mozambique, donors have put sizable amounts of funding behind interparty talks as part of a peace process since the early 2000s. In Zimbabwe, donors also pressed for interparty

talks capable of generating some kind of cross-party consensus even in the years following the end of the country's government of national unity (which was in power from 2009 to 2013). In both countries, donors had previously provided direct support to political parties, but they have since shied away from this tactic in recognition of the political risks it entails.

In Georgia, the EU has recently played the role of mediator to bring together the dominant and opposition parties around a list of agreed reforms, complementing the legwork undertaken by political party support organizations. However, this agreement has only been partially implemented. The United Nations Development Programme brought together different parties in Nicaragua before having to close these programs in 2016 after accusations of political meddling by the government. So, while party support organizations have had success with multiparty dialogue in other political contexts, this approach is clearly much more difficult in dominant-party regimes. This research points to the need to combine and expand this approach with other forms of direct support to parties and longer-term electoral support so as to better level the political playing fields in these countries.

The nature of regime structures means that support for parliamentary strengthening is equally difficult. This type of democracy support may provide a potential avenue for capacity-building support to members of parliament from across the political spectrum. However, the dominance of the ruling parties in many such countries means that support to parliamentary structures as well as to members of parliament must be very carefully designed to avoid reinforcing an already uneven political landscape.

In the case-study research, the authors heard strong demands from local democratic reformers for more direct forms of protection for party activists and parliaments against government attacks in more closed contexts. The EU and other actors have taken impressive steps in recent years to protect vulnerable civil society leaders from government attacks. They need to extend this kind of approach into the realm of political parties, through fully developed programs of support for party cadres in danger and targeted by hostile regimes.

Elections

Funders have increasingly worked to address the kinds of election distortions that underpin dominant parties' advantages, even if the relevant data shows that a majority of their resources are dispersed close to election day rather than over the longer electoral cycle. In Zimbabwe, EU donors focused on supporting an election code of conduct in 2018 and getting major political parties to sign it. In Georgia, donors have tailored their programs to the country's specific dominant-party problems by pressing for changes to the structure of the election commission. In Mozambique, donors worked to remove the 5 percent threshold for entry to parliament to help opposition parties.

Yet electoral support has struggled to gain traction in these regimes. Support programs that improve the professionalism of electoral management bodies, for example, tend to have little impact on the democratic quality of an election due to dominant-party leaders retaining de facto control of political patronage. The case studies suggest that outside powers need to use the full range of their diplomatic instruments and funding lines to focus on electoral reforms, and they need to home in much more systematically on the kinds of redesigns of election systems most capable of offsetting the disproportionate weight of dominant parties.

Planning for this type of support should start immediately after an election rather than having donors disburse funding only a year or six months before the next ballots are cast. Such planning also requires that international and domestic observers join reflections on wider democratic practices within in such countries in addition to those focused on the electoral cycle itself. Any domestic coalitions for reform should be given as much long-term support as possible—electoral reforms take time, but consistent public pressure can make a big difference, as shown in Georgia in recent years.

Direct Activism

Across all four countries, many of the authors' interlocutors insisted that donors need to try supporting out-

of-the-box ideas, nontraditional organizations, and new forms of mobilization. Protests have flourished as a distinct element of democratic expression in all these cases. Protests in Nicaragua were brutally suppressed in 2018, like those in Zimbabwe in 2019. Protests have periodically swept various policy issues to the forefront of Georgian politics and prevented the country from experiencing a deeper authoritarian turn. Donors are notoriously wary of supporting protest movements beyond statements in favor of freedom of assembly. Yet in dominant-party regimes, they can be one of the few paths toward positive change.

These case studies suggest that international democracy support should dedicate more attention to the local level to create a fabric of organizations that can mobilize when needed and that can foster greater awareness of democratic principles among a wider array of citizens. At the same time, core funding to local organizations is vital for making the most of opportunities when they arise. In the most difficult contexts, donors need to support exiled voices like those of Nicaraguans based in Costa Rica. As dominant parties have become so adept at closing off other paths of pluralism, international support needs to systematically hunt out more insurgent or outsider forms of mobilization and engagement. Such support needs to be flexible and might often be best provided at arm's length from formal governmental actors.

Conclusions

International democracy support has to contend with many different menaces to democratic politics. One challenge among the many surging problems is that an increasing number of countries are falling under the sway of dominant-party regimes. These countries present generic difficulties for international democracy support that are fairly common across all nondemocratic regimes, but they also raise some more specific dilemmas that flow from the defining features of dominant parties.

Crucially, several forms of standard international support struggle to work as intended within dominant-party regimes. The types of international engagement that might have a positive impact in some other contexts tend to have limited or even counterproductive effects in these regimes. Donors and international organizations interested in fostering democracy need to be more fully aware of these risks. The risk of dominant parties capturing nominally pro-democracy initiatives is an increasingly real one; support to state institutions themselves in such political contexts usually filters into de facto support to one political party.

There is no easy way around this problem. But international powers at least need the frameworks capable of mapping and monitoring the risks. Donors need to compile precise indicators to help ascertain the likely impact of their standard kinds of democracy support in this kind of regime. More comprehensive approaches are needed for party support, electoral reform, and civic activism; moreover, greater attention needs to be focused on the links between all three areas. Still, different types of funding initiatives or novel approaches to local actors are unlikely to be enough by themselves. Diplomatic engagement will need to be stronger and donors must be more willing to take risks in these contexts if they are to support pro-democratic change.

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Notes

¹ This information is drawn from the authors' calculations based on Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) data. See Michael Coppedge, John Gerring, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Staffan I. Lindberg, and Jan Teorell et al., "V-Dem Dataset - Version 11.1," Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), 2021, <https://www.v-dem.net/en/data/data/v-dem-dataset-v111>. Out of 135 countries that hold at least constrained multiparty elections (according to V-Dem's "elections multiparty" indicator), fifty-six of them saw a party winning at least three times in a row between 2011 and 2021. This frequency is greater than it was during the prior decade (2000–2010), when this was true of only forty-four countries.

² These four case studies, one for each country, were published by experts on each country affiliated with the European Democracy Hub, a joint initiative of Carnegie Europe and the European Partnership for Democracy.

³ The state building/good governance category in table 2 is based on OECD data categories used by the Development Assistance Committee. This includes funds for public sector policy and administrative management, public finance management, decentralization and support to subnational governments, anticorruption organizations and institutions, domestic revenue mobilization, public procurement, legal and judicial development, and macroeconomic policy. Meanwhile, the democracy support category includes funds for democratic participation and civil society; elections; legislatures and political parties; media and free flow of information; human rights; women's equality organizations and institutions; ending violence against women and girls; and the facilitation of orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility.

⁴ Figure 1 includes funding allocated by the OECD's Development Assistance Committee for the following uses: democratic participation and civil society; elections; legislatures and political parties; media and the free flow of information; human rights; women's equality organizations and institutions; ending violence against women and girls; and the facilitation of orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility.

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