New perspectives on international party assistance

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ABSTRACT
With its micro-level perspective, this article addresses a gap in the literature on democracy support. The study focuses on the analysis of eight national international party assistance (IPA) providers and their penchant for tame, regime-compatible support, based on data gathered in more than fifty qualitative interviews with practitioners, experts, policymakers and government analysts over a 4-year period (2015–2018). Structured around the four factors that distinguish national IPA providers – objectives, organizational model, financial scale and modes of intervention – as well as provider age, the analysis centres on the role played by survival-seeking behaviour when providers opt for tame assistance, with a view to identify variation between the vulnerable and less vulnerable NGOs. The study finds that, while survival-seeking behaviour often plays a role, it is frequently not the main factor driving tame assistance, even amongst those providers whose survival is most at stake. Rather, drivers of tame assistance vary from case to case, habitually involving one or more of the following factors: institutional set-up, branding and growth. Thus, if the sector is to move away from tame assistance, we need to look beyond macro-level factors and also focus on ameliorating institutional constraints and the factors that shape agency at the micro-level.

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Introduction
International party assistance (IPA) is one of the most overtly political forms of democracy support as it directly targets a country’s political system. Consequently, IPA is frequently classified as an example of regime-incompatible assistance at a time when the industry is growing progressively more tame in its approach, i.e. focusing on technical assistance and “activities associated with measurable outcomes that refrain from directly confronting dictators”. In a ground-breaking study from 2018, Bush demonstrates how this convergence around tame assistance is largely a consequence of an increasingly crowded and competitive environment. This has resulted in the NGOs, who carry out democracy support on behalf of the donors, struggling...
to survive, leading these to express a preference for tame assistance with a view to secure funding from donors and gain/maintain access in recipient states.

This article takes its starting point in Bush’s findings, working from the well-documented premise that democracy assistance across the board, i.e. even in regime-incompatible sectors such as IPA, presently converges around tame assistance. Bush’s study focused on demonstrating how the struggle for survival of the NGOs that make up the democracy establishment, i.e. the organizations that design and implement democracy assistance programmes, is the driver of tame assistance. Given the scope of the study, variation amongst the different types of actors was not explored, and this is, accordingly, where the present article seeks to make its contribution. The article queries whether tame assistance is predominantly driven by a desire by NGOs to survive given that not all NGOs are equal and, therefore, not equally vulnerable. In other words, do non-vulnerable NGOs also pursue tame assistance? And, if so, what factors drive this approach? Is tame assistance a result of agency relating to survival or does structure in the form of institutional constraints matter too? By exploring the relationship between different types of NGOs, their vulnerability and their penchant for regime-compatible assistance as set out in the six hypotheses below, this article contributes to a more detailed and nuanced understanding of what really drives tame assistance.

The article is thus an exploration of whether and how different types of NGOs vary in their propensity for regime-compatible assistance as well as an analysis of the factors underpinning their behaviour, thereby providing us with an insight into when tame assistance is problematic, situations where it can be the best way forward, and the scope for agency versus structure of the various NGOs when considering different approaches to IPA and democracy assistance more broadly. Based on the theoretical framework and findings of Bush discussed above, which stresses the prioritization of survival and tame approaches, I expect those NGOs that are more vulnerable in terms of their survival to be risk-averse and strongly inclined to opt for tame approaches. However, because there is a sector-wide move towards tame assistance coupled with the fact that democracy support is an industry and the NGOs that operate within it are businesses, I also expect the less vulnerable NGOs to display a preference for tame assistance, not as a survival strategy, but with growth in mind.

Finally, at this point, it is important to underline that the objective is not to generate knowledge that will assist in a move away from tame assistance. In other words, the article does not position itself on the side of those who argue that tame assistance is problematic as far as it habitually assists in perpetuating authoritarianism. Yet, it also does not join the camp of those scholars who qua its more palatable nature deem tame assistance more effective than regime-incompatible assistance. Rather, based on the data gathered, the article argues that whether tame assistance is positive or negative depends on what drives it in a specific case. Once we establish what these drivers are, we have the tools to make democracy assistance more effective.

The article begins with an outline of the theoretical foundations, focusing in particular on the introduction of micro-perspectives and organizational theory into the study of democracy support, prior to moving onto case selection, empirical expectations and methodological considerations, before the introduction of the data and analysis commences. The data analysis clusters around four themes: structure and branding; fraternal support and expansionism; complex relationships; and unexpected findings relating to staffing.
**Research design: from state-based theories to an NGO-centred micro-perspective**

Within academia, research on democracy assistance has predominantly been approached from a state-centric perspective, with scholars focusing either on how the preferences of donor states\(^8\) or the characteristics of target states\(^9\) have affected efficacy (Bush 2018). State-based approaches in the form of studies focusing on foreign influence are thus dominating the field, leading to a situation where scholars have neglected micro-perspectives. A recent study by Bush (2018), has highlighted the importance of including non-state actors too, more specifically taking into account the preferences of the NGOs that design and implement projects on behalf of the donors in the target states, i.e. the so-called democracy establishment.\(^10\) While the state-based, macro-level approaches are primarily rooted in international relations, the analysis of the role played by the NGOs has led to the incorporation of theories of international organizations into the body of academic work on democracy support, thereby opening up a new avenue for research.

Central to Bush’s theoretical approach are preferences. Of donor states, of the NGOs that make up the democracy establishment, and of the target states, with particular emphasis placed on the former. Bush argues that while the NGOs are motivated by both ideational and pragmatic concerns, as competition has increased following the exponential growth in actors within the democracy establishment since the late 1990s, survival-seeking behaviour has come to dominate. Within democracy support, survival is habitually equated with two factors: securing donor funding as well as gaining and maintaining target state access.\(^11\) The more funds an NGO wins, and the more states to which an NGO has access, the better the chances of that particular NGO’s survival and – ultimately – growth, as it establishes a successful reputation and global brand. Over the years, the key to securing donor funding has become the pursuit of tame strategies emphasizing measurable programmes, routinely focusing on technical assistance as this type of support is associated with quantifiable outcomes, which can be used to justify the spending of taxpayers’ money to the general public.\(^12\) Consequently, NGOs seek to please donors by pursuing measurable programmes, whilst simultaneously seeking to please the incumbent regime in target states in order to gain and maintain access, again in the form of tame programmes as these are regime compatible, i.e. not directly confrontational.

While we know that the NGOs converge around tame approaches, we know very little about how they vary in terms of why they opt for regime-compatible assistance and what causes variation. In other words, do different types of NGOs vary in their predilection for tame assistance? And do vulnerable and less vulnerable NGOs differ in their motives for pursuing regime-compatible approaches? To explore these research questions, with the objective of gaining deep insights into the views and experiences of those working in democracy support, I set up a qualitative research design centring around six hypotheses as detailed in the subsequent sections.

**Case selection: the national IPA providers**

The purpose of the research design is to dig deep and obtain a granular perspective as opposed to detecting broader patterns and generalizing statistically. The article seeks to investigate the interplay of various factors, some obvious, others unexpected, via the
personal experiences of those working in the sector, both in the field and at head offices in the donor states, as practitioners, experts, analysts and government officials. With this in mind, I narrow the focus of my investigation to a relatively small and clearly defined sub-category of democracy support, namely IPA, defined here as activities supporting political parties, promoting peaceful interaction between parties, and strengthening the democratic political and legal environment for parties. IPA is one of the less popular forms of democracy support, with estimates indicating that parties receive less than 0.1% of official development assistance, and it accordingly fits well within the scope of the study. Furthermore, IPA is particularly interesting because of its overtly political character and regime-incompatible nature, which allows us to explore what drives tame assistance in a non-tame field of democracy support and in an area that is notoriously difficult to quantify and measure.

The design and implementation of programmes under the rubric of IPA is carried out by various national providers as well as large international organizations such as e.g. the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF), and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). This article focuses on the national IPA providers, most of which receive in excess of 90% of their resources from public funding even though they are non-governmental, thereby blurring the line between being independent and instruments of the state. Consequently, some prefer to categorize these providers as transnational actors, quasi-non-governmental actors (QUANGOs) or, in the UK, as non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs), which are a sub-category of QUANGOs.

During the early years, IPA was largely a prerogative of the German party Stiftungen, most notably the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) established in 1925 and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) of 1955, the former affiliated with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the latter with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). In the US, the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) were formed in 1983 as a core foreign policy instrument, and together with the German Stiftungen these two US party foundations dominated what was a relatively small field of IPA providers until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, in the aftermath of which most European countries began to set up organizations of their own, leading to an exponential growth in investment into IPA. The national providers, of which there are more than 30 in Europe alone, vary not only with regard to their age, but also in terms of their objectives (strengthening a single party/multiple parties), their organizational model (party-affiliated/inter-party incl. conglomerates), the financial scale of their interventions, and their mode(s) of intervention (mainly political party focused/broader focus beyond political parties). With a view to cover these five factors and their impact upon the approach of IPA providers whilst keeping in mind the objective of affording depth to the study, I select eight providers as cases for investigation as detailed in Table 1: the FES and KAS, representing the German Stiftungen, which is where IPA originated; the IRI and the NDI, which play a leading role within the field of IPA and democracy support more broadly; the well-established but relative newcomer, the UK’s Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD); the Danish Institute for Parties and Democracy (DIPD), which models itself on the WFD; as well as the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD), which is seen as an innovator in the field of IPA, along with DemoFinland, which is in turn models itself on the NIMD.
Empirical expectations

Next, I devise a set of hypotheses relating to vulnerability. These are anchored in Bush’s research on tame democracy assistance/NGOs and Svåsand’s seminal work on IPA, more specifically the four dimensions mentioned above that distinguish the various national providers from each other: objectives, organizational model, financial scale of interventions and mode(s), as well as the additional factor of age.20

Objectives. IPA providers used to fall into two categories: those that work on the basis of a multiparty approach and those that operate with a “sister party” or fraternal approach, assisting parties that belong to the same family, i.e. share the same ideology. Over the years, the multiparty approach has grown increasingly popular and very few national providers pursue an exclusively fraternal approach today, largely as a consequence of the fact that IPA has expanded to cover regions of the world where the cleavage pattern differs to that in Europe.21 Although the majority of providers adopt the multiparty model, there are some – such as e.g. the DIPD and the WFD – that follow a two-pronged approach with their budgets divided into multiparty activities and support for sister parties. The main objective behind such a strategy is to establish and nurture strong, sustained relationships and thus increase the likelihood of access, an element highlighted by Bush as a key priority for IPA providers.22 Furthermore, what characterizes fraternal support is its emphasis on assisting ideologically proximate parties in winning elections, making it somewhat easier to measure and evidence.23 Consequently, I hypothesize that IPA providers that have a proportion of their budget earmarked for fraternal party support are less likely to opt for tame assistance on this element of their provision (H1).

Organizational model. The main feature distinguishing national providers today is whether they are party-affiliated institutions (PAIs) or inter-party institutions (IPIs), the latter including conglomerates. As the name suggests, PAIs are widely seen as affiliated to a political party, such as e.g. the FES, the KAS, the NDI and the IRI, regardless of the reality that the latter two claim to be formally independent, non-partisan

| Organization | FES | KAS | IRI | NDI | WFD | NIMD | Demo | DIPD |
|---------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|------|------|
| Country       | (DE)| (DE)| (US)| (US)| (UK)| (NL)| (SF)| (DK) |
| Formation     | 1925| 1955| 1983| 1983| 1992| 2000| 2005| 2010 |
| Party-affiliated institutions (PAI) | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Inter-party inst. (IPI) | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Conglomerate | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Size in parliament of affiliated party reflected in funding | 50% | 40% |
| Strengthening a single party (budget share) | 100% | 100% |
| Strengthening multiple parties (budget share) | 100% | 100% |
| Mainly political party focus (direct support) | 50% | 100% |
| Broader focus (beyond political parties) (indirect support) | 50% | 60% |

Sources: Burnell, Democracy Assistance; Dodsworth and Cheeseman, “The Potential”; Erdmann, Hesitant Bedfellows; Erdmann, Lessons; Hällhag and Sjöberg, Political Parties; Poultainen and Seppälänen, Evaluation 3; Svåsand, International Party Assistance; van Wersch and de Zeeuw, Mapping; Wild, Foresti, and Domingo, International Assistance. Please also refer to the websites of the IPA providers: www.demofinland.org; www.dipd.dk; www.fes.de; www.iri.org; www.kas.de; www.ndi.org; www.nimd.org; www.wfd.org.
institutions. The IPIs are institutions that represent the interests of a number of parties, but there is variation in terms of their organizational set-up, with the DIPD and the WFD having much stronger political representation on their executive boards than DemoFinland and the NIMD, which are both conglomerates and have assigned politicians a much more advisory role.\textsuperscript{24} Bush argues that the level of homogeneity matters in terms of whether an NGO is likely to display a preference for tame assistance, with multilateral programmes being tamer than their bilateral counterparts due to delegation dynamics.\textsuperscript{25} I therefore hypothesize that IPA providers, which are more homogeneous in their structure, are less likely to opt for tame assistance than those that are more heterogeneous in their structure (H2).

Financial scale of interventions. IPA provider budgets vary significantly in scale. The larger NGOs, i.e. the FES, the IRI, the KAS and the NDI have funds in excess of 20 million euros at their disposal for IPA activities, whereas the smaller NGOs have annual budgets closer to an average of 8 million euros.\textsuperscript{26} Arguably, the providers with the smaller budgets are the ones whose survival is most at threat, and I thus hypothesize that IPA providers that are small in terms of budget size are likely to opt for tame assistance with a view to survive, while those that are larger are expected to choose tame assistance with growth in mind (H3). Furthermore, because the larger NGOs are more robust financially, I also hypothesize that IPA providers with small budgets are more likely to prefer regime-compatible approaches compared to their more sizeable counterparts (H4).

Mode(s) of intervention. Different providers have different foci. Some focus mainly on assistance to parties, i.e. direct support, whilst others include support for civil society and the political system writ large, thereby providing indirect assistance to political parties too.\textsuperscript{27} Because a narrow focus puts providers at risk in times of volatility, e.g. in situations where party politics is suspended or significant individual parties (i.e. potential partners) disappear from the scene, I hypothesize that IPA providers that are limited in terms of their focus are more likely to opt for tame assistance (H5).

Age. In addition to the four dimensions discussed above, I expect the age of the provider to play a role in its propensity for tame assistance, operating from the assumption that young providers are more vulnerable as they are still to make a name for themselves. Hence, I hypothesize that IPA providers that are newly established are more likely to opt for tame assistance (H6). I define newly established as those IPA providers that were set up in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall, rather than in terms of the NGOs’ age, due to the reality that these NGOs appeared in what can almost be described as a wave.

Methodological considerations

The article rests primarily on qualitative interviews using purposive sampling based on the twin principles of symbolic representation and diversity. I interviewed academics and experts in the field of democracy support (mainly IPA), regional experts, policymakers and government analysts in the UK (Department for International Development; Foreign and Commonwealth Office), and with IPA practitioners in the West and in the field with a view to gather as in-depth data as possible. Over the course of a 4-year period (2015–2018), 51 interviews were conducted despite the general reluctance of practitioners to engage with researchers due to fear of criticism and the sensitive nature of their work. For this reason, all interviews were in confidence
unless the interviewee explicitly requested otherwise. The interviews, which lasted approximately 1 hour and took the form of open-ended questions in a semi-structured format, were conducted face-to-face in Birmingham, Brussels, Copenhagen, the Hague, Nottingham and New York or via Skype and WhatsApp with participants located in continental Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and the United States.

IPA practitioners working for the eight providers at the centre of the analysis were interviewed in addition to representatives from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, IDEA, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, the Overseas Development Institute, the OSCE, UNDEF and the UNDP. As illustrated in Table 2, the pool of interviewees included practitioners at the junior level, middle managers and representatives in senior roles, with the majority of participants belonging to the middle category. The group of participants also included a mix of interviewees who had worked their way up within their organization and those who had worked for a series of different NGOs within the democracy establishment or in politics more broadly. A few interviews were audio recorded, but in most cases the interviewer took notes. Finally, it is worth noting that interviewees were fielded questions about other organizations too in order to maximize data and retain confidentiality in this relatively small pool of participants. Interviewees working for the various providers were generally very complementary about their counterparts, and when assessing an IPA provider as having a penchant for tame assistance, participants did not imply a negative connotation. This attitude was particularly pronounced amongst participants working for the European providers, which frequently partner up on projects despite also being competitors.

**IPA and tame democracy support: the practitioners’ view**

The subsequent sections discuss the findings of the interview data in some detail. By way of introduction, and as illustrated in Table 3, it is worth noting that the data confirms five of the six hypotheses, namely that fraternal support is less tame than multiparty support (H1) and that the IPA providers with the largest budgets (H4), those with a broader focus (H5) and the older IPA providers (H6) are less likely to opt for

|        | Number | Percentage |
|--------|--------|------------|
| Female | 16     | 35         |
| Male   | 30     | 65         |
| Junior level | 8 | 17       |
| Middle level | 28 | 61      |
| Senior level | 11 | 24       |
| Europe-based | 29 | 63       |
| Field based | 12 | 26       |
| US-based | 6     | 13         |
| Academic/expert | 9 | 20         |
| IPA practitioner | 33 | 72         |
| Policymaker/government analyst | 4 | 9          |
| Varied career | 34 | 74         |
| Employed by their organization 10 + years | 12 | 26         |

Note: The following were interviewed twice: female, junior level academic based in Europe; female middle level IPA practitioner based in Europe; male middle level IPA practitioner based in Europe; male senior level IPA practitioner based in Europe; male middle level policymaker based in Europe.
tame assistance. Furthermore, the data supports the hypothesis that NGOs with a more homogeneous structure have less of a propensity for tame assistance (H2). Finally, the data relating to the motives (survival/growth) of smaller versus larger providers in terms of budget size is ambiguous, revealing support for H3 with regard to the providers with larger budgets, but not for the NGOs with more modest funds at their disposal. Finally, the data also presents interesting observations relating to the interplay of the factors that drive tame assistance, whilst simultaneously revealing unexpected findings in terms of how structure affects the options and approach of individual NGOs.

**Beyond agency and survival: structure and branding**

The FES, the IRI, the KAS and the NDI, i.e. the four largest IPA providers in terms of budget size, as well as the four oldest and the ones with the broadest focus, are the least likely to embark on tame assistance, interviewees across the board agreed. Furthermore, the interviewees concurred that of the four younger, smaller and more narrowly focused IPA providers, the eldest, the one with the largest budget and a broadening outlook, i.e. the WFD, has less of a propensity for tame assistance compared to DemoFinland, the DIPD and the NIMD. Consequently, one could easily be tempted to conclude that there is a causal relationship between budget size, age and focus on the one hand, and tame assistance on the other, but the interview data also reveals that this would be a mistake. The dynamics of tame assistance and its various drivers are not that simple. The survival-seeking behaviour of NGOs is not the sole – and often not even the main – factor driving IPA.

The smaller IPA providers and their conduct illustrates this point particularly well, as do the experiences of the early, formative years of some of the major providers, most notably the FES and the KAS. In terms of the smaller providers, interviewees – in this case practitioners, analysts and academics – overwhelmingly assessed DemoFinland...
and the NIMD as the tamest providers out of the eight NGOs at the core of the research. This was justified by the interviewees based on their structure and pursued strategy, which in turn affect their scope for manoeuvre. Both DemoFinland and the NIMD have a very strong focus on parties, although both also emphasize the emancipation of women, youths and minorities, which are popular themes in IPA. Because of the narrow focus on engagement with parties and politicians, DemoFinland and the NIMD predominantly operate in capital cities, and their target audience and those exposed directly to their activities by chance thus belong to a limited segment of the population. While not tremendously inclusive, this approach allows the two NGOs to concentrate their efforts on the political elite, which potentially has the power to instigate regime change. The question is, then, why do DemoFinland and the NIMD pursue tame assistance when they qua their focus are well-positioned to adopt a regime-incompatible approach?

The answer has less to do with survival than branding according to the data. Interviewees from the NIMD stressed that, in their opinion, survival-seeking behaviour was not driving the NGO’s behaviour as they did not view the NIMD’s existence as at stake, thus countering H3. Interviewees professed that with the organization’s needs in mind, they perceived the state funding received from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs to be “generous” to such an extent that it allows the NIMD to concentrate on programme design and implementation, rather than chasing funds and pleasing donors and potential partner states with a view to expand.

Rather, the main driver of tame assistance by the NIMD, interviewees proclaimed, is the organization’s ethos, an assessment they stretched to include DemoFinland. Both the NIMD and DemoFinland have adopted a strongly consensus-based approach, which sets them apart from the other providers, but which aligns clearly with the Dutch political tradition of consociationalism and the principles of power-sharing and coalition government, and in some respects, the NIMD thus represents the Dutch brand. In practice, this consensus-based approach to IPA shapes the way in which the two NGOs carry out their work, not only in terms of ideology, but also on the ground. Stressing collaboration, dialogue and inclusivity as well as the principles of recipient ownership and empowerment, DemoFinland and the NIMD operate with local implementing partners, which are organizations made up and governed by the parties in the recipient country, including the ruling party. It is this set-up, which the interviewees highlighted as the main factor driving tame assistance, partly due to the consensus element and besides the centrality afforded to process, with DemoFinland and the NIMD stipulating that in order for a party to qualify for funding, it must become a member of the implementing partner organization.

The active participation, dialogue and collaboration between the various parties is consequently part of the success criteria, resulting in a situation where outputs and outcomes are conflated at times. This, according to experts and interviewees from other providers, has ensued in a preference for tame assistance, although an interviewee from the NIMD described it in a rather more positive light as a conscious long-term strategy in the form of “a back door to democracy” akin to the European Union’s idea of democracy by osmosis. Furthermore, interviewees pointed to the principle of neutrality and related inclusion of the ruling party as problematic given the authoritarian nature of the regimes in the partner states and the frequently asymmetrical power of the ruling party, which is consequently in a position to dominate the process and ultimately steer IPA in the direction of regime-compatible assistance.
those instances where there is no predominant party, interviewees deemed sizeable and/or fragmented multiparty systems to pose a problem as consensus becomes difficult to achieve, leading to the adoption of programmes that are tame and inoffensive to the majority.

**Fraternal support and expansionism**

The DIPD and the WFD, the other two smaller providers, have adopted a somewhat less tame approach according to the data collected. This is in line with what was expected in H1, i.e. given their element of fraternal support, which sets them apart from most other providers. Interviewees – both those currently engaging in fraternal support and those who have done so in the past, in this case representatives of the FES and the KAS – confirmed how this approach to IPA has the potential to be less tame than multiparty assistance, because it frequently centres on winning, i.e. supporting a party that performs well at the polls, even if to the detriment of democratization. However, the same interviewees also recounted how, in their opinion, fraternal support is only effective when there is a clear ideological connection and a strong, established relationship, resulting in IPA that is anything but neutral. Several interviewees attributed the overtly political fraternal support during the early years of international support by the FES and the KAS as one of the cornerstones of their success even to this day, despite the German *Stiftungen* abandoning fraternal support many years ago. By providing sustained and highly political support, the FES and KAS along with the (non-fraternal) IRI and the NDI established a name for themselves as caring about the politics of the country in question, the parties they backed as well as the individuals they supported, some of whom became influential years down the line. Interviewees did not see the same potential for the DIPD and the WFD, however, as a consequence of the fact that these two NGOs are IPIs and therefore have a less homogeneous structure and related weaker ideological branding, thus partially confirming H2.

The DIPD and the WFD have furthermore struggled to deliver effective fraternal support at times. Interviewees recounted how this was largely as a consequence of the fact that the success and strength of fraternal support relies heavily on the commitment and engagement by the representative to the IPA provider of the sister party in the donor country as well as that of the local sister party. Because the DIPD and the WFD are IPIs, interviewees argued that fraternal support is “once removed” compared to in the case of the FES and the KAS, thereby weakening the commitment of the party representative and ultimately resulting in comparatively tamer fraternal support, yet still habitually less tame than multiparty assistance. Another factor, which has become highly apparent in recent years, is the availability of sister parties, which has negatively impeded upon the work of the DIPD and the WFD. One interviewee described how in Egypt after the Arab Uprisings it was difficult to find sister parties that were willing to engage on a sustained basis. Another interviewee mentioned opportunities to deliver potentially regime changing support to the *Ennahda* in Tunisia proved impossible because of the party’s Islamist nature; there simply was no sister party for the *Ennahda* to partner with in the donor country despite the *Ennahda* being keen to benefit from IPA.

These snapshots of difficulties encountered in some ways also illustrate how the DIPD and the WFD have become victims of their own success by representing their
country’s brand and following foreign policy patterns, in this case in the form of a more aggressive – or forward – strategy. Facilitated by tame, technical assistance and its formulaic nature – or what Carothers has termed the “cookie cutter approach” – these two NGOs have rapidly expanded geographically, including into areas where potential sister parties are rare and/or where key parties do not correspond ideologically to potential sister parties in the donor country. Interviewees proclaimed that the main driver behind this expansionist strategy is the desire to grow as a business. In the case of the WFD, with a view to establish the organization as a world leader and, with regard to the DIPD, as a key player with a sizeable market share, and their experiences thus do not lend support to H3.

**Complex relationships: structure, agency and the interplay of factors in tame assistance**

Although agency governs the DIPD’s and the WFD’s expansionist strategy to some extent in that there is an active policy choice that lies beneath, structural factors also contribute to this penchant for tame assistance. In H4, I put forward the hypothesis that NGOs with smaller budgets have a higher propensity for tame assistance. While the interview data lends support to this as interviewees across the board agreed that the four providers with the largest budgets are less tame in their approach, they also concurred that budget size is not the main explanatory factor.

As one interviewee, who is not a practitioner, proclaimed, the budgets of most providers are adequate. The majority are not threatened on their survival but are rather finding it difficult to increase their market share. In his opinion, the main issue is not the volume of funds available, but rather how the providers spend their time and money. He put forward the argument that many have grown complacent and opt for tame assistance in the form of technical support, which is not only regime-compatible and measureable but also familiar and thus effortless. Whilst this interviewee strongly alluded to agency as a main factor driving tame assistance, the various practitioners interviewed did not share this view. Although they agreed with the assessment that budget size is not paramount, they were of the opinion that it is still important, particularly in conjunction with other structural factors, most notably organizational set-up (H2), provider focus (H5) and to some extent also provider age (H6).

The practitioners interviewed maintained that the NGOs with larger budgets are more robust. Consequently, these have been able to better absorb the sharp increase in paperwork over the past two decades in line with the rise of the so-called “impact agenda” and its focus on technical assistance within the aid industry. In short, their larger budgets equate to a larger workforce, which in turn means staff hours can be re-allocated and staff dedicated to writing reports and grant applications. This reshuffling strategy is not a viable option for the providers with smaller budgets, which therefore opt for tame assistance, not only because this is what donors have been rewarding, but also since it is easier; regime-incompatible assistance is costly. The practitioners interviewed accordingly agreed with the expert above, who criticized providers for taking the easiest route, but disagreed with the motivation for doing so: it is not that providers opt for tame assistance because they are lazy; rather they do so because tame assistance is more affordable, they argued. This is a very interesting view, because interviewees also highlighted the changed bureaucratic environment as affecting not only the smaller providers but also those with sizeable
budgets, albeit to a lesser extent. Interviewees from the IRI and the NDI described a situation where they too had to sit down and consider whether they could afford to set aside time to write funding applications, and how doing so resulted in resource diversion away from programme implementation, particularly as reporting volume and requirements have simultaneously intensified. The larger budget size (H4) coupled with the longer track-record (H6) and broader outlook (H5) of the FES, the IRI, the KAS and the NDI have afforded these NGOs the benefits associated with economies of scale. This, in turn, has assisted them in mixing tame assistance with regime-incompatible support on a much more frequent basis than the smaller, younger providers, which also share a more exclusive party focus. In short, interviewees argued that for the most part, the former were less vulnerable and more resilient. This was not only because they could afford to take a financial hit, but also as a consequence of the reality that they were viewed as less likely to find themselves in such a situation. Furthermore, they were seen as better able to diversify and reconfigure should direct party assistance in a given country become tricky or unfeasible for one reason or another. Interviewees also described how these NGOs have been able to gain access by piggy-backing on other aid efforts, absorb shocks in terms of budgetary and local partner volatility, as well as form strong, long-lasting relationships. The interviewees pointed in particular to the experiences of the NDI and the IRI, which have local offices in most of the states in which they work, and frequently also outside of the capital city, which is rare as this is where IPA activities are traditionally centred due to the location of parliament. Several interviewees detailed how a broad focus enabled the NDI and the IRI to reach a wider audience (beyond the urban elite) at a minimal cost as their organization already had local offices and networks for IPA practitioners to tap into, which, in turn, facilitated more frequent interaction between local party representatives and the IPA provider, albeit within different contexts such as e.g. electoral assistance, media training and support to combat corruption, thereby strengthening the relationship between the actors.

**Unexpected findings: a vicious circle of staffing issues and tame assistance**

In contrast, the providers with smaller budgets have found it financially unviable to open local offices in most target states (the DIPD and the WFD) or have made the conscious decision at the time of their formation to operate without these (DemoFinland and the NIMD). This reality has made the smaller providers vulnerable in the sense that to acquire contextual knowledge and target state access, they are reliant on either those providers who do have local offices or local partners whose background and/or information are difficult to verify and control. Interviewees expressed how this leads to situations where providers are “being taken for a ride” by local partners or where they find it difficult to recruit the right people, partly because the pool of candidates is small. One interviewee explained how hiring staff to work locally for the duration of a programme was tremendously difficult, as the organization had to rely on local contacts that were relatively new. Often they would end up hiring a friend or family member of said contact, knowing that the person would be able to move in political circles. In other words, the candidate would understand the norms and values that underpin this upper echelon of society, while expected to be independent and
objective, although the latter at times proved to be somewhat of an issue as the provider had little knowledge of the person’s credentials and political sympathies.\textsuperscript{56}

Furthermore, local staff working for the smaller providers with \textit{ad hoc} country presence also described a deeply unsatisfactory situation compared to the experiences of those working for the larger providers with permanent – and more – offices. Several interviewees stated that they had the impression they were viewed as of secondary importance and their opinions and ideas not heard and respected on par with those of staff located in the West, thereby negatively impacting not only on morale but also on the quality of assistance as providers are not tapping into local knowledge as well as they could do.\textsuperscript{57} The feeling of not being important or a full member of the team was augmented by high staff turn-over, regardless of whether in the field or at headquarters, due to subsequent lack of familiarity and a preference for short-term projects with a focus on results and tame assistance, whilst neglecting the working environment.\textsuperscript{58}

High staff turn-over was an issue brought up by several interviewees based at headquarters too, particularly those working for the IPIs, who argued that many people use a job for an IPA provider as a springboard due to poor pay and the lack of career opportunities.\textsuperscript{59} Interviewees explained how poor staff retention has an impact upon reporting given the short timeframe surrounding most evaluation reports and the volume of such, coupled with the complexity of the requirements. They emphasized the importance of having staff at headquarters who were familiar with writing reports in addition to good knowledge of the workings of their own organization. Institutional memory, they expressed, significantly reduces the time spent on writing reports to the standard expected by the donors, which is key to successfully applying for funding again. With a view to deliver efficiently and effectively, some providers with staff retention issues accordingly made the conscious decision to opt for tame assistance, because it is less time consuming, easier and ultimately less risky.\textsuperscript{60}

\textbf{Conclusion}

This article has put forward the argument that NGOs within the democracy establishment, even within non-tame areas such as IPA, have come to converge around regime-compatible support. Nevertheless, there is variation amongst the various NGOs in terms of their penchant for tame assistance and what drives this approach. Utilizing a case study of eight national providers, the research shows that vulnerable NGOs whose survival is more at stake have different motives for pursuing regime-compatible assistance to those NGOs who are comparatively less vulnerable.

Yet, whereas Bush (2018) demonstrated that survival plays a central role in driving tame assistance, the research here illustrates how survival is not the only factor nor is it always the most important one. Tame assistance, at least in the case of IPA, is also driven by institutional constraints as well as a desire by several NGOs to grow as a business. In other words, even amongst the smaller, more vulnerable providers, factors beyond survival drive the penchant for tame assistance. Most notably, institutional set-up has dictated the approach to IPA in the case of DemoFinland and the NIMD; branding has played a considerable role too for the DIPD, the NIMD and the WFD; and growth has been paramount in the case of the DIPD and the WFD, who have pursued an expansionist strategy.
While the larger IPA providers (the FES, the IRI, the KAS and the NDI) are facing different pressures in the increasingly competitive environment post-1989, these are by no means immune, and with cost and growth in mind, they too, have opted for tame assistance, which is both cheaper and easier to implement and evaluate. That said, the research shows that it is easier for these more established NGOs with a strong brand and sizeable budgets to weather the storms, particularly if they have a broader focus, which allows for flexibility and affords career advancement, thereby facilitating institutional memory. What is interesting to note, however, is that the interviewee testimonies pointed to the much more sustained and politically assertive approach of these four NGOs as perhaps the main factor in them arriving at their current lead position within the industry, but also in their being less inclined to opt for tame assistance. Their continuous and partial approach nurtured strong local relationships, which resulted in the local partners professionalizing and thus, over time, the need for more advanced, less technical support, i.e. a strategy that is miles apart from today’s propensity for tame assistance and multiparty support. With this in mind, it appears as if the DIPD and the WFD – with their insistence on a two-pronged approach to IPA in the form of both fraternal and multiparty support – might be on the right track, even if their strategy is uncharacteristic within the sector. The WFD, which interviewees deemed to be on the cusp of joining the ranks of the foremost providers, seems to have a particularly well-crafted strategy, as the organization has slowly broadened its focus and is making a name for itself as a leader in the area of parliamentary strengthening, albeit ultimately still with parties at the core of its agenda.

Finally, with democratization in mind, it is important to underline that the research presented demonstrates that, when pursued by choice at the micro-level, tame assistance is often the result of issues related to budgets, time constraints and staffing. IPA providers and the practitioners working for these do not think of tame assistance as superior. On the contrary. Every single interviewee pointed to deep contextual knowledge and a sustained local presence and related strong local contacts as paramount for successful IPA. However, the pressures of the industry on the providers, which are effectively businesses and not charities, often lead to the pursuit of tame assistance because brand strengthening and growth take precedence. If the sector is to become more effective and/or move away from tame assistance, which as argued above does not necessarily equate to “bad” IPA, then we need to look beyond macro-level factors and also focus on ameliorating institutional constraints and the factors that shape agency at the micro-level.

Notes

1. Burnell and Gerrits, “Promoting Party Politics”; Bush, The Taming; and Carothers, Confronting.

2. Bush, The Taming. 5. In other words, within the context of IPA, whether a programme is classified as tame depends not only on the programme activities but also on which actors it targets. For example, a programme that has as its objective to strengthen parties at election time can be seen as reinforcing the status quo in its support for existing regime parties (and thus categorized as tame) but would be viewed as non-tame and regime confrontational in its support for opposition parties in so far as these could potentially challenge the status quo.

3. The book adopted a mixed-methods approach based on data from 12,000 programmes, a survey of 1000 practitioners and 150 qualitative interviews conducted in Jordan and Tunisia. Bush, The Taming.
4. Bush, The Taming; Bridoux and Kurki, Democracy Promotion; Carothers, Confronting; and Carothers, Aiding Democracy Abroad.
5. Bridoux and Kurki, Democracy Promotion; Burnell and Gerrits, Promoting Party Politics; Bush, Taming; Carothers, Confronting; and Svåsand, International Party Assistance.
6. Bolleyer and Storm, “Problems”; Bush, The Taming; Carothers, Aiding Democracy Abroad; Hagmann and Reyntjens, Aid and Authoritarianism; Klaas, The Despot’s Accomplice; and Magen et al., Promoting Democracy.
7. Lührmann et al., The Effectiveness.
8. See, among others, Bridoux et al., Rethinking Democracy Support; Börzel, Tanja. “The Noble West”; Huber, Democracy Promotion; Ikenberry, “America’s”; Isaac, “Explaining.”
9. Carapico, Political Aid; Carothers and Ottaway, Uncharted Journey; Dutta et al., “The Amplification”; Finkel et al., “The Effects”; Lührmann et al., The Effectiveness.
10. Emphasis on the inclusion of micro perspectives has been propelled by the “Doing Development Differently” agenda within the aid community more broadly. See Honig and Gurlajani, “Making Good.”
11. Bush, The Taming; Bridoux and Kurki, Democracy Promotion; Carothers, Confronting; and Carothers, Aiding Democracy Abroad.
12. Bush, The Taming; Catón, Effective Party Assistance; and Mitchell, The Democracy Promotion.
13. Burnell and Gerrits, Promoting Party Politics.
14. Burnell and Gerrits, Promoting Party Politics; Bush, The Taming; Carothers, Confronting; Catón, Effective Party Assistance; European Partnership for Democracy, Programming for Democracy; Lekvall, Development First; Shaiko, USAID; and Svåsand, International Party Assistance.
15. Burnell, Democracy Assistance; and Svåsand, International Party Assistance.
16. Bush, The Taming; Kaiser and Starie, Transnational European Union; Mitchell, The Democracy Promotion; and Risse-Kappen, Bringing Transnational Relations. The term NDPB is often used to characterize the WFD, whilst the term QUANGO has been applied to the NDI and the IRI as well as the NIMD. Given the way in which DemoFinland and the DIPD mirror these organizations, the term QUANGO should apply to these two too by extension. Please note that despite these caveats, the term NGO will be used throughout this article.
17. In Table 1, this distinction between new and old IPA providers is indicated by a dotted line.
18. van Wersch and de Zeeuw, Mapping.
19. Svåsand, International Party Assistance. Please note that Svåsand identifies six dimensions, the additional two being the timing of intervention and the geographic focus for IPA. However, today most national IPA providers emphasize longevity of programmes and, in terms of geographic reach, there is a tendency to spread efforts across the globe with a view to increase market share.
20. Bush, The Taming; and Svåsand, International Party Assistance.
21. Svåsand, International Party Assistance.
22. Bush, The Taming. See also Mair, “Germany’s Stiftungen.”
23. Erdman, “Hesitant Bedfellows”; Mair, “Germany’s Stiftungen.”
24. See https://dipd.dk/om-dipd/bestyrelse, www.wfd.org/about/, https://demofinland.org/meista/hallitus/ and https://nimd.org/organization/. See also Burnell, Democracy Assistance; Hällhag and Sjöberg, Political Parties; Svåsand, International Party Assistance; and van Wersch and de Zeeuw, Mapping.
25. Bush, The Taming.
26. Catón, Effective Party Assistance; Hällhag and Sjöberg, Political Parties; Poutiainen and Seppälänen, Evaluation 3; and Svåsand, International Party Assistance. See www.nimd.org and www.wfd.org.
27. Burnell and Gerrits, Promoting Party Politics; Carothers, Confronting; Svåsand, International Party Assistance; and van Wersch and de Zeeuw, Mapping.
28. www.demoﬁnland.org and www.nimd.org. See also, Härmälä and Juhola, “A Decade”; and Zuijderduijn et al., “Mid-Term Review.”
29. The WFD covers 33 countries, the DIPD 21, the NIMD 20 and DemoFinland 7. See www.dipd.dk; www.fes.de; www.iri.org; www.kas.de; www.ndi.org; www.nimd.org; www.wfd.org.
30. Interviews with two Europe-based, middle-level practitioners, 2018.
31. Interestingly, DemoFinland was at some point urged to expand into Latin America by the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but the organization decided against it. See Hällhag and Sjöberg, Political Parties.

32. Interviews with two Europe-based, middle-level practitioners and three senior-level practitioners, 2017, 2018.

33. For more on branding, aid and foreign policy, see Stokke, International Development Assistance.

34. The two NGOs also team up with local embassies and form international partnerships to carry out their work. See www.demofinland.org and www.nimd.org as well as Härmälä and Juhola, “A Decade”; and Zuijderduijn et al., “Mid-Term Review.”

35. In this sense, the degree of homogeneity (H2) in terms of decision-making relating to programmes not only depends on the composition of the NGO’s board but also on the cleavage structure in the recipient country, which shapes the local implementing partner. Furthermore, distance intensifies the problem with homogeneity (Bush, The Taming).

36. Youngs, Ten Years. Interview with Europe-based, middle-level practitioner, 2018.

37. This assessment is supported by recent findings by Godfrey and Youngs, Strengthening.

38. Interviews with five Europe-based senior and middle-level practitioners, 2017, 2018.

39. Interviews with three Europe-based, senior-level practitioners, 2017, 2018; interviews with two Europe-based, middle-level practitioners, 2017, 2018; interview with US-based academic and policy analyst, 2018; interviews with two US-based, senior-level practitioners, 2018.

40. There are also additional benefits to the sister party approach. Several interviewees stated that, in their opinion, the reality that the DIPD and the WFD both have a fraternal element makes it easier for them to reach consensus on the multiparty element as the individual parties can still push their own agenda, thus mitigating the IPI set-up somewhat.

41. Interview with Europe-based, senior-level practitioner, 2017.

42. Interviews with two Europe-based, middle-level practitioners, 2018; interview with Europe-based, junior-level practitioner, 2018; interview with Europe-based academic, 2018.

43. Interview with Europe-based, senior-level practitioner, 2017.

44. Interview with Europe-based, middle-level practitioner, 2018.

45. Interviews with three Europe-based, senior-level practitioners, 2017, 2018; interview with Europe-based, middle-level practitioner, 2017; interview with US-based academic and policy analyst, 2018; interview with, Europe-based academic, 2018.

46. Carothers, Aiding Democracy Abroad, 168. See also, Alkon, “The Cookie Cutter.”

47. According to interviewees, the DIPD is to some extent motivated by survival, although they also described the organization’s budget as “adequate” whilst simultaneously asserting that the DIPD’s future existence is not at stake. Interviews with three Europe-based, middle- and senior-level practitioners, 2015, 2017, 2018.

48. Interview with US-based academic and policy analyst, 2018.

49. This is supported by the academic literature. See, Bush, The Taming; Carothers, Confronting; and Svåsand, International Party Assistance.

50. Interviews with two US-based, senior-level practitioners, 2018.

51. Every individual interviewed for this article, regardless of their background, concurred that successful IPA rests on strong and sustained relationships with local partners.

52. Interviews with two US-based and two Europe-based, senior-level practitioners, 2018; interview with US-based academic and policy analyst, 2018.

53. Interviews with Europe-based, senior-level practitioner, 2017, 2018.

54. Interviews with Europe-based, senior-level practitioner, 2018.

55. The perpetuation of inequality and bias is beyond the remits of this article. For a classic introduction to the topic, see Lipton, Urban Bias.

56. Interviews with Europe-based, senior-level practitioner, 2017, 2018; interviews with two Europe-based, middle-level practitioners, 2017, 2018.

57. Please note that this sentiment was less common amongst the field staff who had been in post for a couple of years, and those who were in frequent face-to-face (in person) contact with their colleagues at headquarters.

58. Interviews with three middle-level, Africa-based practitioners, 2018; interviews with two middle-level, Asia-based practitioners, 2018; interviews with two middle-level and one
senior-level practitioners based in Latin America; interviews with three middle-level, post-Communist Europe-based practitioners, 2018.

59. Interviews with two US-based and one Europe-based, senior-level practitioners, 2017, 2018; interviews with two Europe-based, middle-level practitioners, 2017, 2018.

60. Interviews with two Europe-based, senior-level practitioners, 2017, 2018.

61. This was also highlighted in a recent NIMD evaluation report, where the authors pointed out that a lot rides on the quality of the relationship between the NGO and its partners. See Zuidevdelduijn et al., “Mid-Term Review.”

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