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**Policy Brief**

# Programmatic Political Parties: Conditions for their emergence

**This policy brief is based on research commissioned by International IDEA on programmatic parties and presents a wide range of factors that provide a more conducive environment for their emergence. These findings can be used by both assistance providers and political parties to guide them in efforts to increase and strengthen programmatic parties.**

Political parties that are centred on clear sets of policies or programmes, rather than patron-client relationships or charismatic leaders for example, are more likely to listen to and reflect citizens’ voices. Such so-called programmatic parties are accordingly of central importance in a representative democracy. Gaining a better understanding of both the opportunities and obstacles to programmatic parties in a given context can help assistance providers to better judge how likely their support, as well as what type of support, will contribute to an increase and strengthening of such parties. The same contextual understanding can also guide parties in taking measures themselves.

**What is a Programmatic Political Party?**

A party needs to have the following elements to be considered programmatic:

* A collection of policy positions that constitute a well-structured and stable political programme by which the party is publicly known.
* Internal coherence and agreement on a range of policy positions, which constitutes a single ‘party voice’.
* A commitment to delivering on campaign promises when in a position of power.
* A party programme that is the most defining element in how it attracts and engages its members.

In reality of course political parties do not fall into neat divisions of being programmatic or not and the spectrum is broad. All parties exhibit a certain degree of populism and focus on leadership. Notwithstanding this caveat, however, there are clearly cases where a political party is predominately programmatic.

**Why Programmatic Political Parties?**

By exhibiting the above qualities, parties that are primarily programmatic are more likely to represent the voices of citizens than non-programmatic types of political parties. And when political parties tie themselves to a clear set of policy positions and commit to implementing them if elected, they make themselves accountable to the people to deliver on their promises. Voters can then reward or punish parties – chiefly through the ballot box – based on their performance. Because they better represent citizens and are more accountable, predominately programmatic parties are more likely to deliver on development and poverty reduction than other types of parties who seek to control state resources more for their own personal use. Among other things, the increased accountability of programmatic parties helps legitimize the democratic system, and the focus on policy debate and governance is conducive to economic development and transparency. Programmatic parties are also more likely to be inclusive of all people in society, instead of certain sections only. However, in many cases, parties do not base themselves primarily on programmes and instead seek to secure the support of voters chiefly by other means, such as through material exchanges, patronage of jobs, ethnic identity or a charismatic leader, to name but several. In such contexts, women and men are not effectively heard or represented and both the people and democracy suffer as a result.

Programmatic parties are also good for the parties themselves. For one thing, they are cheaper to operate than parties based mainly on a patron-client model and which survive through material exchanges. A party orientated around policies can allocate a greater proportion of its funds towards winning votes instead of buying them. Consequently, the programmatic party model can help politicians in a low-cost way to sustain the party’s appeal beyond that of its current leader; allow for greater internal coherence and more focused campaigning; build a homogenous nationwide party; link ambitious politicians to a known party label; encourage greater commitment and participation by members and facilitate fundraising, to name but several benefits.

As the topic of programmatic parties influences both the nature and workings of a party, it should be of great interest to political party assistance providers to better understand what circumstances facilitate their emergence and endurance.

**Conditions that facilitate programmatic parties: What the research says**

The following presents a number of conditions that are conducive to programmatic parties as well as possible explanations for these links. Based on the aforementioned research commissioned by International IDEA, these conditions provide a favourable, enabling environment for programmatic parties and give insight into the likelihood of their emergence, but do not guarantee their presence or suggest a direct cause and effect relationship.

***Economic Development***

As countries become more affluent, there is an increasing chance that their parties and politics will become more programmatic. People in more affluent countries derive less relative benefit from the small gifts and simple social services that more patron-client-based parties can afford to offer. The higher levels of education that often accompany economic development also make voters more likely to appreciate that sophisticated economies require skilled jobs that are not given through patronage and policies that can deliver collective goods.

***The structure of society***

Urban societies tend to be more receptive to programmatic parties than rural ones. The high-density of urban areas, greater access to information and frequent presence of civil society organizations and trade unions makes it easier for parties to spread their programmes, whereas this can often be a challenge in the rural context.

***Ethnic identity***

Programmatic politics can be hampered in contexts where there are deep ethnic divisions accompanied by substantial differences in average incomes. In such cases, voters may link their own success with that of their ethnic group. In addition, for those political parties that are mainly programmatic in their outlook but rely on an ethnic base for support, there is a struggle to reconcile the two which greatly reduces the likelihood that the programmatic nature will be consolidated and institutionalized. To satisfy both the ethnic and programmatic bases simultaneously within the context of a fragile economy is a challenging task.

In Zambia, the Patriotic Front, led by Michael Sata, came to power in 2011 heavily supported by his Bemba speaking rural ethnic group, while at the same time promising to deliver policies for urban voters.

***Major change in the political and economic environment***

Periods of rapid change or crisis may present opportunities for more programme-based parties to increase their relevance and become the main competitors in the political arena. In such times, voters tend to be more willing to put their faith in parties (often new or previously marginalized) of a more programmatic nature and may question previously held assumptions when change appears more attainable. Leaders, for their part, face pressure to reform and opposition politicians need to provide alternatives. This factor is strongest in middle and upper-level income countries.

Bulgarian party politics became more programmatic partly as a consequence of budgetary constraints following the global economic downturn of 2008, while in the Ukraine the party system became more programmatic after the Orange Revolution of 2004.

***Competitiveness of democratic elections***

Politicians want to win elections and generally only strive to make their parties more programme-based when it will further this goal. Programmatic politics becomes more appealing the closer an electoral contest becomes and the higher the stakes, but only if there are sufficient voters to respond to such programmatic messages and who believe that voting for a more programmatic party might make a real difference. Research suggests the link is only strong in affluent countries, although it is unclear whether it is competitiveness that creates greater programmatic efforts or vice versa.

***Political parties’ relationship with civil society***

Vibrant and independent social movements and interest groups may pressure political parties to become more programmatic. Voters who are not primarily associated with a political party but rather with a civil society organization (CSO) may be harder to co-opt in a patron-client relationship. This is because such voters fall outside of the party networks that oversee client behaviour. CSOs may also be potential competitors to political parties if the latter fail to incorporate CSOs’ agendas. Additionally, parties with close links to issue-based movements and groups, such as trade unions or women’s movements, tend to exhibit clearer programmatic characteristics. Again, there is only evidence for this in more affluent countries and only among those CSOs that are programmatic in nature; rather than identity driven for example.

***Party & legislative organization***

Party organizational arrangements, such as candidate nomination procedures, legislative caucus arrangements or financial practices do not seem by themselves to cause parties to become predominately programmatic. In conjunction with other conditions, however, such as increased affluence or a moment of economic transition, these factors do support and complement the emergence of more programme-based parties.

***Leadership***

All of the above are favourable but not determining conditions for the emergence of programmatic parties. To take advantage of them, such parties need leaders capable of identifying and seizing opportunities of timing or environmental circumstances and who have the ability to design, maintain and deliver on political programmes.

In Brazil, the skill and determination of leaders such as Fernando Henrique Cardoso of the Brazilian Social Democracy Party and Lula of The Workers’ Party in the 1990s and 2000s played a vital role in the move towards more programme-based politics.

**Conclusion**

There is no simple formula that will bring about programmatic parties. Instead, research illustrates how their emergence is facilitated – but by no means guaranteed - by a range of background conditions that provide for a more conducive environment. In particular, the research highlights the role of economic development in shaping a favourable environment for programmatic parties and how the strength of other factors generally increases in proportion to a country’s level of economic development.

In South Korea a high level of economic development combined with the fallout from a financial crisis, credible elections, receptive voters, electoral reform and internal party organization all contributed to parties becoming more programmatic in the 2000s.

Broad environmental factors are beyond the influence of assistance providers. These factors can, however, assist as an analytical tool to provide better understanding about what facilitates programmatic parties and can guide party assistance providers in their work, e.g. who to work with and when.

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The research on programmatic parties on which this brief is based was commissioned by International IDEA and carried out by teams led by Dr. Herbert Kitschelt of Duke University and Dr. Nic Cheeseman of University of Oxford, as well as a desk review by Juan Pablo Luna of the Institute for Political Science (PUC) in Chilie For further details and the full research and case studies: (publication forthcoming).

**Recommendations**

**Stemming from this research, a number of lessons can be drawn for those aiming to strengthen the programmatic nature of parties:**

**For political party assistance providers**

* Be mindful of favourable environments for programmatic parties and focus on them especially. For example, as programmatic parties are more likely to flourish in middle-income countries, support to parties in such contexts may be of particular benefit.
* Facilitate and strengthen dialogue between political parties that are primarily programmatic and civil society groups that are programmatic in nature.
* Support new parties and opposition parties that show programmatic tendencies, particularly in parliaments and election campaigns.
* Develop and utilize more systematically political economy analysis tools that look beyond the present time and events (e.g. anticipate crises and viable reforms; identify losers and winners; monitor public opinion).
* Intensify efforts to support parties with a programmatic outlook in times of crisis or transition and not be deterred by the instability and uncertainty of such periods.
* Link up with organisations that focus on socio-economic development to better monitor and impact upon the conditions for programmatic parties.
* In tight electoral contests, assist in efforts for parties to communicate their policies, including differences between parties’ policy stances. Policy platforms offer an opportunity for parties to distinguish themselves in the eyes of voters.

**For political parties**

* Establish links with relevant issue-based civil society organizations, such as social movements or interest groups.
* Groom and field leaders that focus on policies.
* Look for favourable opportunities to become more programmatic, especially in times of economic crisis and under competitive elections.
* Engage party members in policy debates in order to deal with shifts in programmatic contexts when they emerge.

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Be mindful of favourable environments for programmatic parties and focus on them especially. For example, as programmatic parties are more likely to flourish in middle-income countries, support to parties in such contexts may be of particular benefit.

* Select and support programme-based leaders.
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