

Civil Society and Political Parties Revisited



UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

KEY FINDINGS

- New V-Dem evidence underscores the important role of civil society and political parties for consolidating democracy.
- Strong political parties seem to contribute to economic growth.
- On world average, civil society has become increasingly robust during the last decades.

Introduction

Democracy is more than holding elections. Therefore, scholars and practitioners are increasingly paying attention to other important elements of democracy such as political parties and civil society. New V-Dem data allows comparing and analyzing civil society and political parties across the world better than ever before. For the first time in history, reliable and detailed data on manifold aspects of civil society and political parties are available for virtually all countries from 1900 to 20121. This policy brief highlights the first findings of V-Dem scholars analyzing this data.

The Development of Civil Society in the World

There is an urgent need for reliable and comprehensive information about

the status and development of civil society. Existing datasets do not provide such information on a global scale and do not cover long time periods. In the V-Dem data set, ten indicators covering different aspects of civil society are available. In Working Paper 13, Michael Bernard and his colleagues aggregate three key indicators to a Core Civil Society Index (CCSI). This index captures the robustness of civil society by measuring the level of citizen activism and the organizational environment for Civil Society Organizations – namely state repression and entry/exit control (see Figure 1).

The authors convincingly demonstrate the validity of the index with several micro- and macro level face validity tests and through examining its correlation with related indicators from other sources. On world-average, the robustness of civil society has improved drastically after the end of the cold war (Figure 2). During earlier decades, world averages of

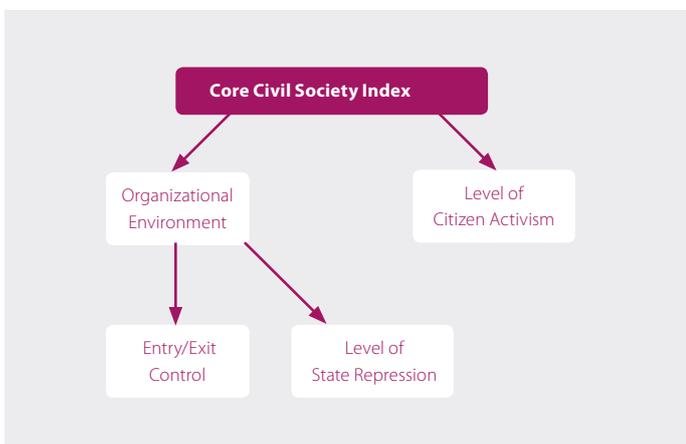


Figure 1. Conceptual Mapping of the Core Civil Society Index (CCSI) (Source WP 13: 9).

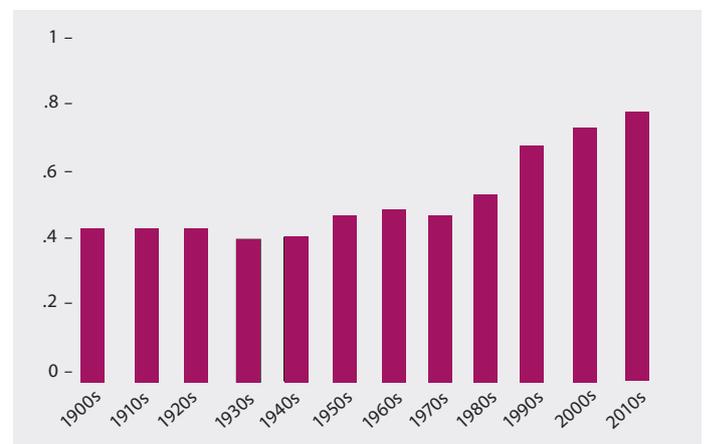


Figure 2. World Average of Core Civil Society Index by Decade (WP 13: 13).

¹For 60 countries data is also available for 2012-2014. Further updates are planned for 2015.

civil society development are relatively constant. However, there is considerable regional variation.

For example, throughout the 20th century the civil society development is at medium levels in Central and Latin America whereas for Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia Civil Society robustness stagnates at very low levels until the 1980s (WP 13: 15). In a nutshell, the CCSI provides scholars and practitioners with a reliable measure of the robustness of civil society with world-wide coverage. Its potential uses are manifold. V-Dem Working Paper 13 presents one example by showing that civil society in post-communist countries is on average not less robust than in other world regions (WP 13: 21f).

Civil Society and Political Parties: Crucial for Democratic Consolidation

During the 20th century, almost one third of all democratic regimes broke down at some point (WP 4: 21f). Hence, it is important to understand better what makes democracies resilient against breakdown.

According to the authors of Working Paper 4, strong party systems and robust civil society “offer important safeguards against anti-system activity” (WP 4: 6). Strong and institutionalized political parties and highly developed civil society organizations have capacities to sanction the use of undemocratic methods. This threat may deter politicians from using such means. Bernhard et al. test these notions with V-Dem data on virtually all countries in the world from 1900 to 2001, using sophisticated statistical methods.

Particular attention is paid to the institutionalization of party systems in terms of national-level and local anchorage, political platforms and legislative coherence (WP 4: 13). The paper presents strong evidence that strong political parties and robust civil society are likely to pro-long the life-span of democracies.

Strong Political Parties Drive Economic Growth

Political stability is needed for economic development. Strong political parties tend to facilitate such stable conditions, as they provide institutional frameworks for policy makers to coordinate and respond to the needs of larger constituencies.

This incentivizes politicians to prioritize economic development and improvement of public services. Thus – according to the authors of WP 10, strong political parties contribute to economic growth (see Figure 3).

Based on V-Dem data, the strength of political parties is measured in terms of permanent national and local organization, centralized candidate selection, legislative cohesion, locality of MPs, and programmatic linkages. Statistical analysis based on V-Dem data for more than 150 countries for 1900-2012 provides strong support for the notion that political party strength matters for economic growth. A 1-point increase on the Party Strength index is predicted to increase GDP per capita growth in the following year by between 1 and 2 percentage points. These findings hold in the light of different specification tests (WP 10: 25).

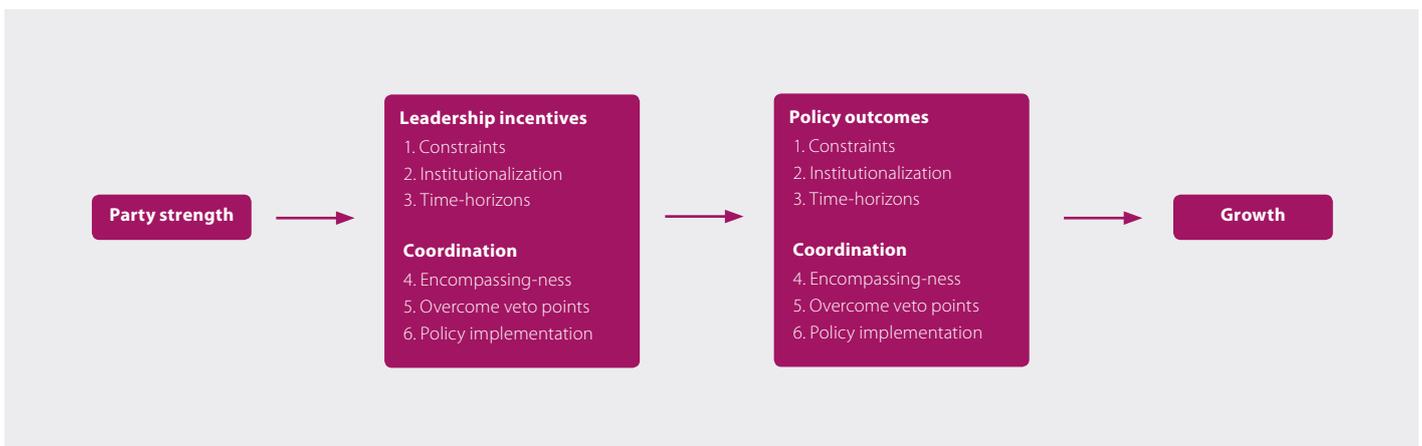


Figure 3. The Relationship between Party Strength and Economic Growth. (Source: WP10: 9).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The V-Dem Core Civil Society Index provides a new empirical basis for monitoring the development of civil society across the world.
- Considering the new evidence for the important role of political parties and civil society for democratic consolidation, democracy assistance providers might want to intensify their engagement with these groups.
- Increased attention should be paid to the institutionalization of political parties particularly in the crucial first period after democratic transition.

REFERENCES

- Bernhard, Michael, Fernando Bizzarro, Michael Coppedge, John Gerring, Allen Hicken, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Staffan I. Lindberg and Svend-Erik Skaaning. "Party Strength and Economic Growth". Varieties of Democracy Institute, Working Paper (WP) 10, September 2015. https://v-dem.net/media/filer_public/d3/67/d3673c5a-e206-42cf-94e1-ef0a26b63141/v-dem_working_paper_2015_10.pdf
- Bernhard, Michael, Allen Hicken, Christopher Reenock and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2015. "Institutional Subsystems and the Survival of Democracy: Do Political and Civil Society Matter?". Varieties of Democracy Institute, Working Paper (WP) 4, April 2015. https://v-dem.net/media/filer_public/62/8e/628e4e08-ffb4-45ee-84c5-a25032d1b0dc/v-dem_working_paper_2015_4.pdf
- Bernhard, Michael, Eitan Tzelgov, Dong-Joon Jung, Michael Coppedge and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2015. "The Varieties of Democracy Core Civil Society Index". Varieties of Democracy Institute, Working Paper (WP) 13, October 2015. https://v-dem.net/media/filer_public/b4/66/b4667c50-1a31-4092-9e44-425f76fae191/v-dem_working_paper_2015_13.pdf

ABOUT V-DEM INSTITUTE

V-Dem is a new approach to conceptualizing and measuring democracy. The project's multidimensional, nuanced and disaggregated approach acknowledges the complexity of the concept of democracy. With four Principal Investigators, two Project Coordinators, fifteen Project Managers, more than thirty Regional Managers, almost 200 Country Coordinators, several Assistant Researchers, and approximately 2,600 Country Experts, the V-Dem project is one of the largest-ever social science data collection projects with a database of over 15 million data points.



Department of Political Science
University of Gothenburg
Sprängkullsgatan 19, PO 711
SE 405 30 Gothenburg Sweden
contact@v-dem.net
+46 (0) 31 786 30 43
www.v-dem.net
www.facebook.com/vdem institute
www.twitter.com/vdem institute