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Chapter 13

The Research–Policy Nexus and U.S. Democracy Assistance

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This chapter examines the impact of scholarly research on U.S. democracy assistance programs. It focuses specifically on the ways in which scholarship has informed and shaped the democracy assistance programs administered by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the principal U.S. government (USG) instrument responsible for delivering American democracy assistance worldwide. In examining this impact of the research–policy nexus on U.S. democracy assistance, the chapter draws on empirical materials related to the formulation and delivery of USAID democracy assistance in Africa.

It should be stressed that the chapter does not provide either a comprehensive account of U.S. democracy assistance policy or an in-depth examination of USAID democracy assistance programs in Africa. The principal objective of the chapter is a conceptual one, namely, to clarify the structure of the research–policy nexus and its impact on the conceptualization, formulation, and implementation of U.S. democracy assistance. To illustrate this relationship, the chapter draws selectively on USAID democracy programs in Africa.

The central argument of the chapter is that scholarly research has had an important, but indirect and irregular, impact on the shape and content of USAID democracy assistance programs. Scholarly research has impacted democracy assistance programs principally as a diagnostic tool, contributing substantively to the development of conceptual frameworks for designing democracy aid programs and strategies and identifying targets of opportunity to implement them effectively. It has had limited impact on prescribing the substantive content of democracy aid programs and even lesser impact on designing the projects and the technical assistance for implementing them.

This uneven impact obscures the important contribution of scholarship to democracy assistance. It also highlights an important weakness in the concep-
ualization of the research–policy nexus that seriously hampers theoretically systematic analysis and empirically relevant understanding of that contribution. This weakness involves the erroneous view of a reflexive and uniform link between research and policy that motivates the often simplistic criticisms of many, if not all, scholars about policymakers’ failure to use research as a basis for policy. However, both studies and experience show that several factors mediate the impact of research on policy, two of which are especially crucial for the present discussion.

The first concerns the type of knowledge produced by scholarship and the extent to which this knowledge has policy relevance. The second concerns the intrinsic incoherence of the research–policy nexus that derives from (1) the wider political-institutional context that structures the formulation and execution of American foreign policy and (2) the different organizational cultures in which academics and practitioners work and the different institutional incentives that motivate their professional interests. The first factor is obviously the more important because it concerns the production of knowledge that makes up the substantive content of policy. The second factor shapes how this knowledge enters the policy arena and is used in policy formulation.

Together, these two factors constitute a useful analytical framework for theoretically systematic analysis and empirically accurate understanding of the complex and varied ways in which research impacts the formulation of democracy assistance programs. In particular, they offer a realistic conceptualization of the research–policy nexus that emphasizes its intrinsic incoherence rooted in the diversity of purpose and the incrementalism of decision making that typify both academic research and policy making, the much-vaunted claims of cumulative theory-building and disciplined production of knowledge in academe notwithstanding. Such a realistic conceptualization is important because it encourages an appropriate recognition of the opportunities that exist for research to impact policy as well as the constraints on them. Such a recognition, in turn, is absolutely crucial for an appreciation of the fact that scholars and practitioners occupy fundamentally different organizational cultures and are motivated by correspondingly different professional interests and institutional incentives and that these differences cannot and should not be eliminated. But they can and should be bridged to the mutual benefit of both communities.1

The raw materials for constructing this bridge are to be found in the substantive knowledge that academic research routinely produces because scholars are by training best equipped to do so. However, scholars studying democracy and democratization have not exploited this comparative advantage in part because they are often unaware of the policy relevance of their work, but principally because they lack an adequate understanding of policy-relevant knowledge. What, then, is policy-relevant knowledge? How has it informed USAID democracy assistance programs?

Before answering these questions, the chapter focuses on the second factor, namely, the incoherence of the research–policy nexus and how it mediates the
impact of research on policy. A prior understanding of this factor is important because it defines the wider context that structures (facilitates and constrains) the production of policy-relevant knowledge and the way that this knowledge enters the policy process and is incorporated in the substantive content of democracy assistance programs. The chapter then explains the three key features that constitute policy-relevant knowledge and illustrates how research has impacted the development and application of the strategic assessments framework, a key diagnostic tool utilized by USAID to design its democracy assistance programs. The conclusion summarizes the central arguments and situates them in the theoretical literature on the complex and ambiguous relationship of social science research to policy making and the inchoate utilization of information in decision making. Figure 13.1 portrays how the key factors discussed in the chapter interact to constitute the complex process by which research impacts democracy assistance policy.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE RESEARCH–POLICY NEXUS

The production of policy-relevant knowledge is no guarantee that it will enter the policy process, much less impact decision making and substantive policy outcomes. How policy-relevant knowledge enters the policy process and impacts democracy assistance depends a great deal on the intrinsic features of the research–policy nexus. These features reflect the combined effects of (1) the characteristic fragmentation of the wider political-institutional context that shapes the U.S. foreign policy process and (2) the different organizational cultures and institutional incentives that shape the work, professional interests, and expectations of scholars and practitioners. Together, these two factors produce a fractured nexus between research and policy that, in turn, vitiates the uniform impact of research on policy.

The Political-Institutional Context

The advancement of democracy across the world has been a leitmotif of American foreign policy for the past century, reaching its greatest triumph in the post–World War II democratic reconstruction of Germany and Japan. In Africa, however, the American record of support for democracy reflects a “sorry history.” Rhetorical support of democracy in Africa was rarely translated into practice, as the United States made pragmatic accommodations with the continent’s authoritarian rulers as part of its global struggle with the Soviet Union. Around 1989–1990, the end of the Cold War and the global spread of democracy’s Third Wave reverberated through Africa, precipitating widespread popular protest that quickly replaced authoritarian regimes with hurriedly constituted democratic government in some African countries and preemptive political liberalization by authoritarian rulers in others. These historical transformations led to a dramatic change in U.S. foreign policy toward a greater concern with de-
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Figure 13.1
mocracy, accountability, and human rights and launched systematic and, for a while, well-funded U.S. democracy assistance programs.\textsuperscript{10}

However, while the U.S. foreign policy goals in Africa have shifted in emphasis, the basic process by which they are established and the strategies devised to achieve them have not—neither has Africa’s traditional marginal position in U.S. foreign policy priorities. As a result, in the absence of any major crisis on the continent that might seriously affect U.S. strategic interests, the basic process of U.S. foreign policy toward Africa continues to reflect the influence of bureaucratic routines and the competing organizational interests and missions of respective bureaucracies, ranging from the principal diplomatic and national security agencies, such as the Department of State (DOS), the Department of Defense (DOD), and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), to the social and economic development agencies such as USAID.\textsuperscript{11} The result is the well-known fragmentation that typifies the U.S. foreign policy process.\textsuperscript{12}

This has paradoxical consequences for the impact of research on democracy assistance. On the one hand, it gives scholars access to midlevel career policymakers in USAID who, free from the partisan influences that constrain decisions by the president or the secretary of state, tend to be more receptive than political appointees to the ideas and insights produced by academic research. Moreover, because these policymakers are also responsible for formulating the democracy programs and designing the technical assistance for implementing them, scholars are potentially able to have a substantial and meaningful impact on democracy assistance at this level. Indeed, some of the most productive effects of research on democracy assistance programs have occurred at this level. For example, when democracy assistance became a foreign policy priority for the United States at the end of the Cold War, USAID as the principal U.S. government (USG) agency responsible for promoting international development was charged with formulating and implementing the democracy assistance programs. But the agency, which had traditionally focused on social and economic development and had carefully, even if somewhat disingenuously, defined its programs as “apolitical,” did not possess the requisite in-house expertise in democracy. As a result, it relied heavily on outside academic experts to develop a sound intellectual foundation for conceptualizing and designing its democracy assistance programs. The agency’s Africa Bureau, in fact, took the lead in recruiting academics either through direct personal service contracts or indirectly through large-scale, multiyear contracts to consulting firms, such as the Associates in Rural Development (ARD), to conduct research and provide technical assistance. These activities contributed substantially to the development of conceptual frameworks and analytical tools for assessing the needs of individual African countries for democratic assistance on the basis of which country-specific democracy aid programs could be designed and implemented.

On the other hand, USAID is not a policy-making agency and therefore does not set policy priorities. That responsibility rests with the State Department. As an arm of the State Department, USAID’s principal task is the implementation
of development policies through the provision of technical assistance. While it exercises considerable autonomy in how it performs this task, it has to operate within the policy (and hence the political) as well as the bureaucratic constraints associated with its location in the overall organizational framework of the U.S. foreign policy establishment. USAID democracy assistance programs thus have to compete with USAID development programs as well as with strategically more important U.S. foreign policy priorities for attention and especially scarce resources. Additionally, USAID’s position in policy debates derived from its comparative advantage in technical assistance and could be overridden by larger strategic considerations. For instance, USAID opposed direct financial assistance and commodity support (faxes, computers, etc.) for political parties in the 1994 transitional elections in Mozambique and the 1996 elections in Bosnia-Herzegovina. This opposition was based, among other things, on technical grounds; for example, the political parties did not possess the requisite accounting mechanisms required by U.S. law. But the Department of State, citing larger U.S. strategic interests in both countries, as well as congressional pressure in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, overrode USAID opposition.13

A particularly crucial aspect of bureaucratic politics that mitigates the direct impact of research on policy concerns the relationship between USAID Missions and U.S. Embassies overseas. This relationship derives from the considerable autonomy delegated to them by Washington and varies according to the personnel involved.14 In 1992–1994, for example, the vigorous and vocal pro-democracy stance of U.S. Ambassador Smith Hempstone in Kenya gave the first USAID Regional Economic Development Services Organization (REDSO) advisor, a prominent academic African specialist, considerable leeway in his work over the objection of his superior, the USAID mission director.15 Hempstone’s successor, however, adopted a less vigorous pro-democracy position and severely curtailed the work of the second REDSO officer. In Ethiopia, the embassy’s less than enthusiastic support for democracy limited the impact of an otherwise activist USAID democracy portfolio there.

Finally, in Ghana in 1992, Ambassador Kenneth Brown’s quiet but firm support for democratic transition in that country over the objection of the USAID mission there is especially instructive in how bureaucratic politics conditions the impact of academic research on the substantive content of democracy assistance programs. After the problematic transitional elections in Ghana in 1991, the USAID Africa Bureau in Washington, armed with a new mandate to provide democracy assistance, sent a team of five academics to conduct a standard strategic assessment exercise aimed at developing a general assessment of the prospects for democratic consolidation in the country and identifying targets of opportunity for disbursing financial assistance in support of that process. The team was charged with recommending a range of options for allocating the funds. However, at its first meeting with embassy and USAID personnel, the team was informed that the decision had already been made to spend $10 million to improve Ghana’s election administration system, which was held responsible
for the problems that marred the otherwise successful transitional election the year before. In response to this unanticipated situation and unwilling to insert itself in bureaucratic politics, the team reorganized its work plan and proceeded to complete its original task of conducting the assessment but tailored its final recommendation to accommodate the fait accompli presented to it by the embassy. In the end, the program turned out to be a spectacular success, a rare and unheralded outcome for USAID democracy assistance, but that was due in no small measure to the embassy’s strong support for it against the objection of the USAID country mission.

The fragmentation of the internal organizational structure of USAID for formulating and delivering democracy assistance programs also mitigates the direct impact of research on policy. While this fragmentation reflects the typical division of labor in any bureaucracy, it contributes to the incoherence in the formulation and execution of democracy assistance programs. Two aspects of this fragmentation are especially important for the present discussion. The first concerns the division between the Center for Democracy and Governance (henceforth, DG Center) and the regional bureaus. Established in 1994 as the organizational manifestation of the elevation of democracy assistance as a major U.S. foreign policy priority, the DG Center’s principal purpose is to provide technical and intellectual leadership in the field of democracy development, but it also helps short-staffed field missions design and implement democracy strategies and directly manages some democracy assistance programs from Washington. The regional bureaus are responsible for the provision of technical assistance and the delivery of the full range of development portfolios (of which democracy assistance is one) tailored to the needs of the specific regions for which they are responsible. While coordination between the DG Center and the regional bureaus over democracy assistance does occur, albeit not routinely, the inevitable duplication of efforts and their respective organizational interests, reinforced by issues of turf protection and budget imperatives, tend to diminish the coherence of democracy assistance programs.

The second aspect of the fragmented internal organizational structure concerns the division of the DG Center’s democracy assistance programs into four areas that it considers to be the building blocks of democracy: rule of law, elections and political process, civil society, and governance. The DG Center recognizes that the four areas are not mutually exclusive and supports programs that cross-cut them, but its basic staff and money allocations reflect their mutual separation. Moreover, an implicit and unwarranted assumption of synergy and homeostatic equilibrium in the relationship among these four areas informs the center’s work. Recognition of and serious attention to the inherent tension between them, analyzed in extensive research and validated by historical evidence, are not reflected in either the analytical or the technical work of the center.

Finally, even as they define an incoherent process that mitigates the uniform impact of research on policy, the characteristic fragmentation of the U.S. foreign policy structure and the associated organizational politics and competing foreign
policy priorities do create multiple opportunities for researchers to influence democracy assistance programs. However, this very multiplicity of opportunities is both a source and a symptom of the frayed nexus between research and policy. On the one hand, the varied opportunities expand the number of entry points for researchers to access practitioners involved in democracy assistance programs. On the other, they overwhelm academics unfamiliar with the intricacies of bureaucratic structures and procedures with a mind-boggling array of seemingly disjointed access points defined by mystifying acronyms. The result is that only a limited number of scholars who have developed skills combining substantive professional and area expertise, intellectual entrepreneurialism, and mastery of the bureaucratic maze are able to impact USAID democracy assistance programs. This, in turn, produces a highly personalized and idiosyncratic pattern of linkages between individual academics and practitioners that is cultivated and sustained over time. There is, in other words, no institutionalized mechanism for research to impact policy.

The Different Worlds of Research and Policy

Scholars and practitioners occupy different organizational cultures that influence their work, provide different institutional incentives, and shape their different mind-sets. These differences, which are generally viewed as inherently irreconcilable, are best exemplified by the stereotypical perceptions that scholars and practitioners have of each other.

For practitioners, scholars (1) impute far too much rationality to the policy process; (2) produce arcane knowledge replete with esoteric jargon understood only by them and their colleagues; (3) are misguided in their attempt to examine the otherwise inchoate policy process on a scientific basis; (4) produce quantitative studies about trivial issues, but when such studies do produce important policy-relevant results, these are lost in abstract theorizing and not presented in ways that are useful for policymakers; and (5) are not as objective and free from ideological biases as they claim. For scholars, practitioners: (1) are caught up in the incrementalism of bureaucratic routines and are unable and unwilling to take a look at the larger picture; (2) are atheretical and ahistorical and tend to treat each issue as unique, with no theoretical reference point for analyzing and interpreting it; (3) incorrectly claim that intuitive judgment and experience are sounder bases for policy decisions because they do have their unacknowledged theoretical perspectives that they use implicitly; and (4) are swayed far too much by shifting political considerations.

What is striking about these mutual criticisms is that they are mirror images and totally misdirected. That is, practitioners criticize scholars for doing precisely what scholars are professionally trained to do and therefore ought to be doing. Similarly, scholars criticize practitioners for doing precisely what practitioners are professionally trained to do and therefore ought to be doing. The result is that scholars and practitioners fail to recognize the specific ways in
which their otherwise distinctive skills and substantive work are compatible and can foster mutually beneficial exchanges.

THE MEANING OF POLICY-RELEVANT KNOWLEDGE

Clarifying the meaning of policy-relevant knowledge requires a prior understanding of the general relationship between knowledge and action. Knowledge is not a substitute for action but is the raw material that both shapes the actions of policymakers and informs the substantive content of those actions. The dominant criterion of appropriate actions (good policy), in other words, is not the much-vaunted objective analytical rationality espoused by academic researchers but the political rationality of practitioners that necessarily encompasses a broader range of political interests and idiosyncratic concerns that animate the decision-making process and eventually become embedded in the substantive content of policy. Policy informed by knowledge but motivated by interests necessarily involves judgments by policymakers about trade-offs between (1) a search for high-quality decisions, (2) the need for acceptability, consensus and support, and (3) the prudent management of time and other policy-making resources.23

Research, in other words, produces knowledge that has an important but indirect impact on policy. For research to have this impact on policy, however, it must produce policy-relevant knowledge that has three key components: (1) a conceptual model of the range of strategies likely to solve a policy problem; (2) context-specific knowledge about the conditions that are likely to contribute to the success or failure of the strategies; and (3) actor-specific models as opposed to the generalized rational-choice models.

Conceptual Model

Policy-relevant knowledge provides a general conceptual model that serves policy first as a diagnostic tool by clarifying for policymakers the “nature of the problem they face, the trend they may be observing, and the incipient warning signs they may be sensing.”24 Second, the conceptual model serves as a prescriptive tool by contributing to the conceptualization of strategies for dealing effectively with the problem at hand and specifying the theoretical rationale for using the strategy, that is, how and why the strategy is likely to be successful. It is important to recognize that the model itself is not a strategy but the conceptual and theoretical foundation for policymakers to design their preferred strategy.

Two literatures in extant political science scholarship are especially suitable in providing such a conceptual model for democracy assistance programs. The first is the literature on the crucial distinction and the inherent structured tension between populism and liberalism that underpin and animate all modern democracies. A useful contribution that research can make in this respect would be to
clarify the practical implications of the two views of democracy for the design of new democratic institutions and the potential strategies that could be devised to accommodate their conflicting imperatives in emerging democracies. Acknowledgment, much less an understanding, of the two definitions of democracy and the inherent tension between them does not exist in USAID. Indeed, over the past few years, USAID democracy programming has shifted substantially toward strengthening civil society in emerging democracies. This shift is heavily informed by an implicit populism that is not even recognized within the agency and is curiously at odds with the agency's efforts in other areas of democracy programming, for example, the support designed in the governance component to strengthen policy-making capacities of new and fragile democratic governments.

A telling example of this paradox occurred during the Second USAID Legislative Strengthening Conference that the DG Center organized in June 2000. The central theme of the conference was that representation was the most important function of democratic legislatures, and the conference presentations were mostly aimed at analyzing and devising ways to strengthen the representation function of legislatures in emerging democracies. That modern democratic legislatures located as they are at the interface of state and society perform governance functions as well, such as lawmaker, investigative, and oversight functions, that inherent tensions exist among these functions and between them and representation, that the effectiveness and legitimacy of democratic legislatures derive from their ability to negotiate the inherent tensions between these essential functions, that all modern democracies have designed and sustained institutional mechanisms to negotiate these tensions with varying degrees of success, and that these tensions relate to the larger contradictory imperatives of representation and governance—all these issues were largely ignored in the conference presentation. More egregiously, the misguided emphasis on representation as the most important function of democratic legislatures is now institutionalized in USAID's Handbook on Legislative Strengthening, prepared by the DG Center. This handbook includes detailed recommendations on strategies for improving the representation of legislatures in emerging democracies without consideration of how this might impact the other functions that democratic legislatures perform as well as the USAID programs aimed at improving them.

The second literature is the burgeoning scholarship inspired by the new institutionalism. This literature remains highly varied in quantity and quality, but many of its central insights about institutional design variations that distinguish democracies and their relative capacities for governance and peaceful conflict management are now beginning to coalesce around a limited number of core themes. For example, an impressive theoretical and empirical literature has emerged on the consequences of presidential and parliamentary regimes and different electoral systems designs for accommodating the inherent tensions between broad-based representation and creating stable governing majorities.
these themes have not been synthesized and converted into policy-relevant knowledge. Doing so would provide some semblance of theoretical grounding to the otherwise ad hoc development of USAID democracy aid programs in such areas as elections and political process and legislative strengthening. For instance, USAID’s democracy assistance programs in elections and political process almost invariably aim to improve individualized, candidate-based (as opposed to party-based) campaigning and postelection representation. This goal, however, is best realized in countries that have adopted plurality electoral systems with single-member districts, an institutional design that encourages such political strategies. Yet, some USAID past and current programs have been implemented in countries that have adopted party-list, multimember proportional representation electoral systems, an institutional design that is profoundly at odds with the candidate-based strategy of election campaign and political representation.28

Context-Specific Knowledge

Policy-relevant knowledge provides generic knowledge of strategy based on past experience to develop improved understanding of the conditions on which the effectiveness of that strategy depends. The emphasis here is on context-specific knowledge and conditional generalization. Context-specific knowledge requires a “thick description” approach in which area specialists excel.29 Conditional generalization requires specifying the contextual conditions under which a strategy is likely to be successful or not, an approach that most area specialists reject. Yet combining the approaches is absolutely essential for producing policy-relevant knowledge. Bureaucrats working especially at the level of project design and implementation usually do not have detailed local knowledge and will find the expertise of area specialists particularly helpful. However, they are also interested in knowledge about the conditions under which a particular strategy is likely to work. This combination of generic knowledge and conditional generalization is productively generated through “lessons learned” exercises that USAID occasionally undertakes but has not integrated as an essential component of its decision-making process because of time and personnel limitations. In the few instances that such exercises have been completed and reports produced, it is not clear that the lessons have been seriously considered and incorporated in subsequent programming.

The last few years have witnessed an increasing number of comparative studies dealing broadly with the process of democratic transitions as well as more narrowly with how specific democratic institutions are selected and perform across regions and countries in Africa. These works typically aim to discover context-rich explanations that specify the empirical limits of extant theoretical propositions30 as well as the empirical conditions that shape the choice, performance, and outcomes of new democratic institutions, such as electoral systems, in expected and unexpected ways. For instance, while it is widely
recognized that proportional representation is ideally suited for securing equitable political representation in multiethnic societies, more contextually sensitive analysis shows that plurality systems with single-member districts can also secure equitable representation in multiethnic societies if ethnopolitical groups are regionally concentrated and vote as a cohesive bloc. The policy implication of this body of research suggests that USAID democracy assistance aimed at improving candidate-based election campaigns and postelection representation is more likely to succeed in the latter group of countries than the former.

Actor-Specific Knowledge

Policy-relevant knowledge provides actor-specific behavioral models. Standard, rational-choice models portray political leaders as disembodied actors free from strategic and contextual constraints. Actor-specific behavioral models provide detailed knowledge of how individuals or groups in specific cultural contexts are likely to respond to uncertain and rapidly changing political situations that typify democratic transitions. Particularly useful here is the emphasis of the political economy approach on the role of power and interest groups and the centrality of individual leaders in shaping political outcomes in the absence of strong institutions in transitional democracies. This approach is useful in identifying potential constraints and opportunities for targeting democracy assistance. This approach, in fact, has been successfully integrated with the earlier institutional approach in USAID to create a more effective strategic assessment framework, an important diagnostic tool for developing an overall assessment of the prospects for democratic consolidation in individual countries and identifying targets of opportunity for channeling scarce democracy assistance funds.

In sum, within the constraints of the frayed research–policy nexus that mitigates the consistent impact of research on policy, as discussed in the previous section, research can have an important impact on policy. To have this impact, however, researchers must develop a broader understanding of the relationship between knowledge and action and a more rigorous conceptualization of what constitutes policy-relevant knowledge. The latter requirements are especially critical because the conversion of information produced by research into usable knowledge by policymakers is an absolutely essential condition for improving the impact of research and policy. In other words, the production of policy-relevant knowledge is a way to smooth the frayed nexus between research and policy and bridge the gap between the academic and policy communities.

RESEARCH AND STRATEGIC ASSESSMENTS

As mentioned above, one of the more critical functions of policy-relevant knowledge in democracy assistance is to serve as a diagnostic tool that can provide policymakers with an overall assessment of the situation in a particular
country that can also identify targets of opportunity for devising democracy assistance programs tailored to the specific needs and situation of that country. For USAID, strategic assessments are an important diagnostic tool for prioritizing its democracy assistance portfolio. From the inception of democracy assistance programs in the late 1980s, USAID has relied on academic experts to assist in developing an analytical framework for strategic assessments that is sufficiently broad-based to encompass the key political, structural, and historical factors that are likely to affect the process of democratic transitions and the prospects for democratic consolidation. Application of this framework in specific countries could then be used to design country-appropriate assistance programs.

This effort to incorporate the insights of academic research into the development of a strategic assessment framework involved reconciling two competing theoretical approaches to explaining political behavior generally and democratic transitions in particular. One approach was the institutional analysis and development (IAD) approach, and the other was the political economy (PE) approach. The IAD approach emphasized the importance of institutions as sets of rules and institutional incentives in structuring political behavior and shaping political outcomes. The principal policy lesson of the approach was to “get the institutions right.” The PE approach stressed the importance of power, group interests, and the role of individual leaders, especially in the context of weak institutions typically found in developing countries, in shaping political processes and determining political outcomes. The principal policy lesson of the PE approach was to stress the importance of groups and interests that supported political liberalization. In USAID, the Africa Bureau favored the IAD approach, while the Near East Bureau and, to a lesser extent, the Latin American Bureau favored the PE approach.

The Africa Bureau took the lead in developing a strategic assessment framework grounded in the IAD approach. The approach informed the development of the framework in two ways: (1) through the establishment of a small group of political scientists who were specialists in the IAD approach to develop a strategic assessment framework and (2) field-testing the framework in five countries (Ghana, Mali, Niger, Tanzania, and Madagascar). The substantive components of the IAD framework were anchored by the concept of “democratic disciplines” that emphasized a multidimensional set of institutional rules to constrain (discipline) the arbitrary exercise of public power by the state. These rules included (1) a written constitution; (2) rule of law; (3) elections; (4) legislative deliberation; (5) civil society; and (6) decentralization.

This framework was envisaged as the common basis for conducting the country assessments in the five countries, with team members for each assessment responsible for at least one and occasionally two democratic disciplines. But the framework was never uniformly utilized because some of the academic country specialists (mostly political scientists) recruited to conduct the country assessments were either unfamiliar with the framework or strong adherents of the PE approach and thus did not agree with its central assumptions and logic. This
was not a major obstacle, however, because the academics were selected for their country expertise, not their expertise in the IAD framework. However, the team leader responsible for writing the final report was an IAD specialist and synthesized the various components of the team's report within the framework. In the end, all five reports included a uniform structure and provided the basis for a synthetic analysis at the end of the project.38

The impact of the IAD framework and the country assessments that it spawned on the content and design of democracy assistance programs, however, was rather limited in USAID generally and even within the Africa Bureau. One reason was that the complexity of the framework and the expense involved in designing programs consistent with its findings often proved to be prohibitive. This was especially true at the level of the country missions, which were responsible for incorporating new democracy assistance programs in their portfolios. The IAD approach never acquired wide acceptance within USAID; the Near East Bureau, in particular, remained implacably opposed to it, perhaps reflecting the continued strong influence of the PE approach in Middle Eastern scholarship. The project under which the IAD framework was developed and tested came to an end in 1994, coinciding with the transfer and subsequent retirement of the senior officer in the Africa Bureau, who was committed to the approach and had supported and spearheaded the development and field-testing of the framework based on it. The end of the project also coincided with the internal reorganization of USAID that led to the creation of the DG Center in the new Global Bureau as the main repository of intellectual and technical leadership in democracy assistance and the attendant decline in the ability of regional bureaus to devise their own approaches to democracy assistance. The new personnel in the DG Center had little commitment to the IAD approach; as a result, it failed to acquire its erstwhile prominence in shaping USAID thinking about democracy assistance.

Even so, the IAD framework introduced important insights about the centrality of institutions and institutional incentives into the organizational process governing the conceptualization of democracy assistance programs and into the next iteration of the strategic assessment framework. Since it was established in 1994 to provide intellectual and technical leadership to USAID democracy assistance program, the DG Center began an incremental process of developing conceptual frameworks for technical assistance for specific programs (e.g., media support and political party support) in each of its four broad programmatic areas, rule of law, elections and political process, civil society, and governance. As part of this overall attempt to institutionalize its intellectual and technical leadership, the center used both field experience and analytical studies conducted by academics to develop over a period of five years a new strategic assessment framework.39 This framework consists of four sequential but related steps by which each country is analyzed, its democratic transition and prospects for democratic consolidation assessed, and targets of opportunity for democratic assistance identified.
Substantively, the framework combines elements of both the IAD and PE approaches. These elements define the analytically sequential topics for conducting the assessment: the political system, the key actors and their interests, the institutions, and distilling the framework and the institutions. The first step in the assessment process involves identifying the prevailing strengths and weaknesses of the country along five key elements of a democratic political system: (1) consensus over the basic rules of the game, (2) the extent of rule of law as a functional process beyond the formal trappings of courts and judges, (3) the degree of political competition permitted, (4) the extent of inclusion of diverse groups, and (5) good governance, defined as the capacity of both public and private social institutions to govern effectively. These five elements define the basic structural foundation of a democratic system.

The second step is to assess their operational effectiveness by examining the key actors and their interests who constitute the players in the political game. The emphasis here is on identifying the central players, their interests, the resources (both domestic and international) that are available to them for deployment in the political game, the alliances that they are likely to form, and the strategies that they are likely to adopt to pursue their goals. The key to this step is the identification of the quantity and quality of political support or opposition for democratization in the country.

The third step is to identify the institutions, the sets of rules that structure the political game and the strategic interactions of the players. Here, the emphasis is first on the basic legal environment comprising the constitutional sphere, the substantive law sphere of statutes and regulations, and the judicial sphere for the peaceful adjudication of disputes. A second emphasis is on the competitive arena, both electoral and nonelectoral. The third emphasis is on the arena of governance, including the legislature, the executive, and the administrative, and the local government spheres. The fourth area of emphasis is on civil society, broadly defined as the institutional arena, encompassing all associational life beyond the state.

These three steps constitute the analytical components of the assessment strategy. In an important and useful departure from the previous strategic assessment framework, this framework adds a fourth pragmatic step for distilling the framework to make it usable for designing programs. The key to this step is close attention to the political, bureaucratic, and financial constraints on USAID's and other donors' support for democracy assistance as well as practical constraints on the ability of recipient countries to utilize that assistance effectively.

In sum, the purpose of the strategic assessment is "to lay out the problems and possible solutions, to explain and order them, to recommend a strategy and subordinate tactics, and to suggest results and impacts." Because this framework has been utilized in only two countries, Morocco and Peru, its utility in helping to design specific assistance programs remains to be tested. What is clear, however, is that the substantive components of the framework reflect the combined insights of the IAD and the PE approaches. This combination, in
CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter has argued that academic research has had an important, but inconsistent, impact on U.S. democracy assistance programs administered by USAID. Academic research has had a visible impact as a diagnostic tool, informing the development of strategic assessment frameworks that are used by USAID to develop an overall assessment of the status of democratic transition and the prospect for democratic consolidation in a country. This assessment is ideally conducted to assist the agency in identifying targets of opportunity and designing country-appropriate democracy assistance programs. The two main theoretical approaches—the IAD and the PE approaches—in extant political science scholarship informed the substantive content of the framework. However, the standard operating procedures, competing organizational interests, and incrementalism that typically animate bureaucratic processes mediated their impact. The conflicting commitment of the Africa Bureau to the IAD approach and of the Near East Bureau to the PE approach, for instance, vitiated the full acceptance of the initial framework based on the former approach. Personnel turnover and internal reorganization contributed to the diminished impact of the IAD approach but also led to the integration of some of its insights with the PE approach to shape the development and inform the content of the current strategic assessment framework in USAID.

The uneven impact of academic research on democracy assistance policy can be attributed to the disjointed character of the research-policy nexus associated with the complexity and incoherence of the overall structure and process of U.S. foreign policy and with the different organizational cultures in which academics and practitioners work. Within the constraint of the disjointed research-policy nexus, however, research can have a significant impact on policy to the extent that both researchers and academics recognize that the differences in their respective professional worlds cannot be eliminated but can be bridged to their mutual benefit. The key to building and sustaining this bridge is the ability of researchers to convert their research products into policy-relevant knowledge that offers practitioners (1) a general conceptual model of strategies that can assist policymakers to devise appropriate policies, (2) context-sensitive analysis and conditional explanations of the prospects for success and failure of alternative policies, and (3) actor-specific models that identify the key players in the political game who are the likely supporters and opponents of democratization.

The analysis presented in this chapter contains an important, perhaps even a painful lesson for academics who insist that the dominant criterion for determining the relevance of research for policy should be its pristine analytical rationality instead of the more messy political rationality that animates policy decisions. In the real world of policy, however, such an insistence sounds un-
realistic at best and naive at worst. Moreover, to paraphrase Alexander George's writing on the impact of research on foreign policy, scientific theory and knowledge are not essential for sensible implementation of democracy assistance programs.43 Two implications follow. The first, according to George, is that just as ordinary people cope with life's routine chores without the benefit of sophisticated scientific knowledge, policymakers can, do, and must rely on the best available knowledge and experience to make reasonably intelligent judgments about complex issues that they routinely confront. Even the most scientifically sound research cannot substitute for such judgment. The second implication is that no inevitable isomorphic relationship exists between scientific knowledge and policy-relevant knowledge. Sound science may be necessary for the production of policy-relevant knowledge, but it is certainly not sufficient. The transformation of scientifically sound knowledge into policy-relevant knowledge is the key to the productive impact of research on policy, but that transformation itself is independent of the scientific enterprise and requires a close understanding of policy-relevant knowledge.

The need for a close understanding of policy-relevant knowledge revealed by the analysis presented in the chapter also points up an important theoretical implication of that analysis. The indirect and uneven impact of democratization research on democracy assistance policy reflects the more general pattern of complex and ambiguous relationship of social science research to policy making44 as well as the more general pattern of inchoate information utilization in decision making.44 Policymakers routinely have to balance conflicting imperatives under conditions of incomplete information, time constraints, and resource scarcity to arrive at feasible (as opposed to desirable or optimum) policy options with uncertain outcomes. Decision makers, moreover, are bombarded with a bewildering variety of information from a corresponding variety of sources, including information from academic research. They employ a series of implicit filters defined by bureaucratic structures and procedures to process the information. They discard the information that fails to pass the filters, and they retain the information that passes through the filters as residues that augment their stock of knowledge on which they draw when action becomes necessary.45

The analysis presented in this chapter suggests that these processes that animate all policy making and the realistic conception of the link between knowledge production and knowledge utilization that they engender help to clarify U.S. democracy assistance policy making as well. To the extent that scholars are inclined to use their comparative advantage in knowledge production and influence U.S. democracy assistance policy, a realistic appreciation of the inherent complexity and incoherence of U.S. foreign policy is essential if they are to speak truth to power. Speaking truth to power requires both an understanding that policies are essentially experiments with uncertain outcomes and a self-conscious attempt to incorporate this understanding into systematic policy analysis.46 But it also requires a close understanding of those factors that mediate
the relationship between knowledge production and knowledge utilization and constrain the direct and uniform impact of research on policy.

Finally, policy relevance need not be a criterion, either exclusively or in combination with other criteria, for evaluating knowledge produced by scholars. A combination of professional training, intellectual interest, and institutional incentives motivates most scholars to produce works that have no intrinsic policy relevance and that they would prefer to be judged exclusively on analytical and professional merits. At the same time, however, Stokes has brilliantly pointed out (1) that the distinction between basic and applied research that has underpinned scientific enterprise for the past fifty years in the United States has had deleterious effects on both and (2) that some of the major scientific discoveries of the past century originated in attempts to devise policy solutions to social problems. Thus, while this chapter has focused on the impact of research on policy, it is also important to recognize that policies and the problems that they are designed to resolve can and do become sources for the production and accumulation of scientific knowledge. In comparative democratization scholarship, this impact of policy on research is evident in the recent attempt to develop an analytical framework for the systematic analysis and understanding of the role of electoral governance in the process of democratization. This attempt draws on the experience of practitioners over the past two decades in international election observation and international assistance provided principally, but not exclusively, by USAID to establish effective and credible systems of electoral governance in emerging democracies.

NOTES

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10. Carothers, Aiding Democracy Abroad.

11. Presidential involvement in African policy has been largely limited to crisis situations that might affect strategic U.S. interests (e.g., Angola and Mozambique in the 1970s) or that might lead to severe regional instability and potential American commitment and involvement (e.g., the current crisis in the Great Lakes region). Extended political crises, such as the antiapartheid struggle in South Africa, have also contributed to increased involvement of Congress and the public. Schraeder, United States Foreign Policy, 11–50, offers an excellent account of these variations in patterns and processes of U.S. foreign policy toward Africa.


13. In a telling indication of the inverse correlation between U.S. strategic priorities and USAID influence, USAID was successful in opposing embassy request for direct support to political parties in the 2000 elections in Haiti.

14. According to protocol, the ambassador, as the president’s representative, is the overall chief of country posts with authority over all U.S. foreign policy personnel.

15. The REDSO adviser provides technical assistance in response to requests by USAID country missions. Most country missions did not initially have resident democracy specialists to handle the addition of democracy assistance programs to their portfolios. REDSO officers were appointed in part to fill the gap. In 1992, two REDSO officers were appointed, one based in Nairobi for servicing missions in East and Southern Africa and the second based in Abidjan for servicing missions in West Africa. The first two REDSO officers in Nairobi and the first REDSO officer in Abidjan were prominent American political scientists and African specialists.


17. The four regional bureaus include Africa, Asia and the Near East, Europe and Eurasia (covering the former communist countries), and Latin America and the Caribbean.

18. Compounding the fragmentation, the Office of Transition Initiatives, established in 1994 as a rapid response unit to assist in the reconstruction of countries coming out of violent internal wars, also provides democracy assistance programs.


21. These stylized and somewhat simplified perceptions are drawn liberally from George, *Bridging the Gap*, 3–18.

22. This section draws heavily on George’s excellent, pragmatic yet analytically rigorous explication of policy-relevant knowledge.


28. In fairness to USAID, such programs are designed and implemented by two USAID partners, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), associated with the Democratic Party and the International Republican Institute (IRI), associated with the Republican Party. The programs clearly reflect the bias of the two main American political parties. Yet, while NDI and IRI enjoy considerable autonomy in designing their projects, USAID retains the final authority over them and can require better theoretical grounding for the projects.


30. Bratton and van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa*.


36. The precise reasons for this correspondence between bureaucratic and theoretical compartmentalization are not entirely clear but probably had to do with the respective academic training of the individuals who headed the democracy assistance programs in the Africa and the Near East Bureaus. In the Africa Bureau, that individual’s previous portfolio had been the decentralization and financial management portfolio, in which the IAD framework heavily informed the analytical and technical work.


39. USAID, Conducting DG Assessment.

40. Ibid., 55.

41. A team of political scientists with country expertise and comparative analytical skills participated in the development of the framework.

42. George’s full statement reads: “It should be recognized that scientific theory and knowledge are not essential for sensible conduct of foreign policy.” George, Bridging the Gap, 139.


45. Weiss and Bucuvalas, Social Science Research and Decision-Making, 249.

46. Wildavsky, Speaking Truth to Power.

47. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that many political science departments do not treat “applied” research reported, for example, in consulting reports as legitimate “scholarly” works in tenure and promotion decisions. A number of professional colleagues
inform the author that they do not even list works resulting from applied research in their résumés, especially when compiling their tenure and promotion files.
