Clarifying Concepts in Democracy Assistance:
“Engineering” v. “Regulating”

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During our October 26 conference session at the Clingendael Institute, Peter Burnell reminded us that political parties in new democracies were not like parties in established democracies. Consequently, our advice for dealing with electoral and party politics should consider where a country stands in the process of political development.

Although Burnell’s observation seemed obvious, we had not actually considered it in our conference discussions. Without specifying a nation’s developmental status, we talked about electoral engineering and regulating political parties as if “engineering” and “regulating” were alternative terms for governmental action to promote democratic politics. But were they?

Stimulated by Burnell’s comment, I argued aloud that “engineering” and “regulating” were fundamentally different processes that fit different stages of political development. Accordingly, we needed to be clear about what the terms entailed and when they applied. I promised to write “an essay” on the subject, and this is what resulted. It is not a polished paper. I am circulating it in draft form to all conference participants at the “Expert” and “Author” meetings for comments.

In the sections that follow, I offer evidence for four assertions:

1. Writings on democratic assistance tend to speak in terms of “engineering” when discussing elections and “regulations” when discussing political parties.
2. The terms “engineering” and “regulating” in normal usage do indeed describe fundamentally different processes.
3. Engineering is a proactive process: it requires well-developed theoretical knowledge to design a future state of affairs and to achieve the desired result.
4. Regulating is a reactive process: it attempts to achieve a desired result after examining empirical observations.
5. Incorporating these concepts and associated terms into the language of democracy assistance can sharpen the analysis of attempts to shape party systems.

Electoral Engineering and Party Regulations in Democracy Assistance
Activities that promote democracy rely heavily on the concepts of “electoral engineering” and “regulating political parties.” Carothers says, “If there is one area of democracy assistance that has gained broad visibility, it is elections assistance,” which he separates into “electoral aid” and “political party assistance.”

Reviewing ten years of democracy assistance for International IDEA, Ellis says:

These frameworks have many component parts, including constitutions, political laws (for example those regarding the structure of legislatures or the regulation of political parties), electoral laws and electoral system design. The essential interconnection of all of these is only now beginning to be understood.

The language of democracy assistance often uses the terms “engineer,” “engineering,” or “design” with reference to elections, and the terms “regulate,” “regulating,” or “regulations” with reference to political parties. Studies that focus on elections tend to speak in the language of engineering or design and tend not to mention regulating or regulations. In contrast, studies on political parties often exaggerate the reverse situation: they virtually ignore engineering in preference for the language of government regulations as embodied in party law.

These tendencies were present in the papers by Ben Reilly and Per Nordlund, two organizers of our conference. Consider these counts of words used in their papers.

Reilly’s paper, “Political Parties and Political Engineering in Divided Societies,” was mostly about how elections shape parties, mentioning elections 24 times in 21 pages of text. It referred to “engineering” 15 times but to “regulation” only 3 times.

Nordlund’s paper, “External Regulation and Internal Functioning of Political Parties: An Introductory Overview,” was more about party organizations, mentioning “elections” only 10 times in 25 pages. It used regulatory terms 79 times and engineering terms only 3 times.

These terminological tendencies are not peculiar to these two papers; they permeate the literature. To illustrate my contention, I have done a quick and non-scientific survey of recent studies in democracy assistance that focus on elections and on political parties. Consider these

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3 This paper will refer to search counts, usually but not always done electronically. When it reports counts for engineering terms, they will be based on “engineer” as the root, which also includes “engineers” and “engineering.” Counts for regulatory terms will be based on “regulat” as the root, which includes “regulate,” “regulation(s),” and “regulating.”
illustrative examples, first for political parties and then for elections. This section concludes
with more general observations on institutional engineering.

**Political parties:** These studies overwhelmingly employ the language of regulation rather than
that of engineering.

USAID’s *Democracy and Governance: A Conceptual Framework* has 6 references to regulation
and none to engineering.⁶

USAID’s *Political Party Development Assistance* has 6 references to regulation and none to
engineering.⁷

Seidle, “Regulation of Political Parties: Rationale and Modalities,” fails to mention engineering.⁸

Johns, “Desirability of Regulating Political Parties,” fails to mention engineering.

Scott Bennett, “Australia’s Political Parties: More Regulation?” mentions regulation 56 times
against 0 for engineering.⁹

Cullen “Regulating Political Parties In Hong Kong,” mentions regulation 30 times and does not
mention engineering at all¹⁰

Austin and Tjernstroöm, *Funding of Political Parties and Election Campaigns* mentions
engineering once against more than 125 references to regulation.¹¹

Janda, “Adopting Party Law,” uses regulation 69 times and engineering only 4 times.¹²

**Elections:** Studies that discuss democratic development through elections tend to employ the
language of engineering but do mention regulation.

Sartori’s seminal article, “Political Development and Political Engineering,” points out that
political engineering once meant constitutional engineering. His article, however,
discussed engineering of party systems through elections. Except for two isolated
references to “regulates” and “regulating,” Sartori employs engineering terminology
throughout.¹³

Reilly’s *Democracy in Divided Societies: Electoral Engineering for Conflict Management* is
couched in the language of engineering and has no reference to regulatory terms in the

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⁸ F. Leslie Seidle, “Regulation of Political Parties: Rationale and Modalities,” paper prepared for the National
⁹ Scott Bennett, “Australia's Political Parties: More Regulation?” Research Paper No. 21 2001–02 (Canberra,
Australia: Information and Research Services, Department of the Parliamentary Library, 2002).
¹⁰ Richard Cullen, “Regulating Political Parties In Hong Kong,” Paper prepared for the Panel on Constitutional
Affairs Legislative Council of the Hksar Meeting on the Role and Development of Political Parties, February, 2005
¹¹ Reginald Austin and Maja Tjernstroöm (eds.), *Funding of Political Parties and Election Campaigns* (Stockholm,
¹² Kenneth Janda, “Adopting Party Law,” in *Political Parties and Democracy in Theoretical and Practical
index. (This book was not available in electronic form for searching. Regulatory terms may be mentioned in the text, but not indexed.)

Norris’ _Electoral Engineering: Voting Rules and Political Behavior_ also employs engineering language, lacks “regulations” as an index entry, but does mention “regulating” or “regulations” 28 times in almost 350 pages of text.

Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis. _Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook_, uses “engineering” only 4 times in about 200 pages of text but mentions “design” (its synonym) 135 times. Regulatory terms of various forms (i.e., regulate, regulating, regulation, and regulations) appear only 9 times.

**Institutional engineering:** As Sartori said in 1968, “The traditional instrument of political engineering is, or at least was for a long time, constitution-making.” Separate today from the literature on democracy assistance, stands another body of writings on political engineering, often described as “institutional” engineering or design. These broader writings often rely heavily on engineering terminology. Although containing “parties” in its title, Müller’s article, “Parties and the Institutional Framework,” fits this broader literature. It uses engineering 27 times (usually as “institutional engineering”) and regulatory terms only 7 times.

Tommasoli’s review of ten years of “democracy building” strikes a cautionary note about the efficacy of institutional engineering/design:

> Building state institutions does not consist of just translating institutions into a new context because they will work in different ways depending on the local political, social and institutional environment. Nor can the solution be reduced to institutional engineering or technical design, because public institutions are constructed through a political process and their effectiveness cannot be guaranteed by the expert technocratic knowledge invested in their design.

It is time to look closely at the definitions of “engineering” and “regulating,” terms that we imported into political science from science and law.

**Engineering in the Physical and Social Sciences**

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17 Sartori, p. 272.


One standard dictionary defines “engineering” as “The application of scientific and mathematical principles to practical ends such as the design, manufacture, and operation of efficient and economical structures, machines, processes, and systems.”\(^2\) This ordinary language definition corresponds to one proposed by the U.S. Engineers’ Council for Professional Development, which defined engineering as

> the profession in which a knowledge of the mathematical and physical sciences gained by study, experience, and practice is applied with judgment to develop ways to utilize economically the materials and forces of nature for the progressive well-being of mankind. It is a profession in which study in mathematics and science is blended with experience and judgment for the production of useful things.\(^2\)

Separate fields in engineering (e.g., electrical, chemical, mechanical, biomedical) define their study in somewhat different ways. The definition of “structural” engineering has some parallels to political engineering. The British journal, *Structural Engineer*, defines structural engineering as “the science and art of designing and making, with economy and elegance, buildings, bridges, frameworks, and other similar structures so that they can safely resist the forces to which they may be subjected.”\(^3\) The most relevant definition from accepted fields in engineering faculties, however, comes from “industrial” engineering: “Industrial engineering is concerned with the design, improvement, and installation of integrated systems of people, materials, information, equipment, and energy.”\(^4\)

What can we learn from this brief review of definitions? In his book, *To Engineer Is Human*, Petroski stresses the relationship between “engineering” and “design”: “The idea of design—of making something that has not existed before—is central to engineering, and I take design and engineering to be virtually synonymous for the purposes of my development.”\(^5\)

If we understand that design—making something that has not existed before—is central to engineering in the physical sciences, then we have some insight to the term’s usage today in political or institutional engineering.\(^6\) Schmitter says:

> The attempt to democratize or, more often, to re-democratize over fifty countries in the past twenty-five years has promoted a new interest in ‘political Engineering,’ i.e. in purposive efforts to design political institutions in such a way as to ensure the subsequent persistence – if not the flourishing – of democracy.\(^7\)

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\(^3\) Available at <http://www.answers.com/topic/mechanical-engineering>


\(^5\) This definition is quoted at <http://www.ise.tntech.edu/IIEDef.htm>.

\(^6\) Petroski, p. vii.

\(^7\) “Social” engineering, in contrast to political engineering, has acquired a peculiar meaning in today’s Internet. Searching for “social engineering” using “Google” generates over two million hits, headed by definitions that describe “a collection of techniques used to manipulate people into performing actions or divulging confidential information.” See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_engineering_(computer_security)>

This focus on “purposive design,” in Schmitter’s words, in electoral studies often is translated into the language of “choice.” Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis use this language in *Electoral System Design*:

> The choice of electoral system is one of the most important institutional decisions for any democracy. In almost all cases the choice of a particular electoral system has a profound effect on the future political life of the country concerned, and electoral systems, once chosen, often remain fairly constant as political interests solidify around and respond to the incentives presented by them.  

They point out, however, that “while conscious design has become far more prevalent recently, traditionally it has been rare for electoral systems to be consciously and deliberately selected. Often the choice was essentially accidental, the result of an unusual combination of circumstances, of a passing trend, or of a quirk of history, with the impact of colonialism and the effects of influential neighbours often being especially strong.”

Later, Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis acknowledge that electoral systems, whether consciously designed or accidentally implemented, often are altered. Moreover, the process through which the system was designed or altered “has a great effect on the type of the system which results, its appropriateness for the political situation, and the degree of legitimacy and popular support it will ultimately enjoy.”

The paragraph above contains an extremely important point that begins to separate political engineering in general and electoral engineering in particular from engineering in the physical sciences. To the extent that Petroski is correct in saying, “The idea of design—of making something that has not existed before—is central to engineering,” political and electoral engineering are different enterprises from regulation. Political and electoral engineering sometimes modify institutions that are already in place.

Accordingly, Reilly stresses “the importance of engineering political rules so as to improve the operation of political processes and institutions [emphasis added]:

> For the political engineer, institutions change outcomes, and changing formal political institutions can result in changes in political behaviour and political practice. This message has been echoed by a number of recent studies, reflecting an emerging scholarly orthodoxy concerning the importance of political engineering and institutional design.”

In the same vein, Norris allows that electoral engineering involves “changing the formal electoral rules” which “has the capacity to generate major consequences by altering the strategic behavior of politicians, parties, and citizens.” Later, she says, “It follows that policy reforms that alter the formal rules—or electoral engineering—should have the capacity to generate important...”

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28 Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis, p. 1. Emphasis deleted.
29 *Ibid*.
31 Reilly, *Democracy in Divided Societies*, p. 5.
consequences for political representation and for voting behavior.\textsuperscript{33}

At this stage in our assessment of engineering v. regulating, we can confirm two points concerning the use of “engineering” in politics.

1. Consistent with the term’s usage in the physical sciences, electoral and political engineering aim primarily at the creative design of new institutions.

2. In politics, however, engineering is used more broadly to encompass alterations in those institutions, sometimes presented as “reforms.”

Following from the second point is a third, which discloses how engineering merges into regulating.

3. These institutional changes, regardless of their fit with established engineering principles, are often prompted by observational feedback on how well the system is operating.

The comparable concept in engineering is “feedback control,” technically defined as “the use of difference signals, determined by comparing the actual values of system variables to their desired values, as a means of controlling a system.”\textsuperscript{34} The regulatory process usually depends on feedback.

**Regulating in Law, Economics, and Political Science**

In the English language, the concept of “regulating” is reflected in three terms: “regulating,” “regulate,” and “regulation.” Explicating the concept necessarily involves referring to all three terms. One standard dictionary gives three related meanings for “regulate”:

\begin{quote}
(1) To control or direct according to rule, principle, or law. (2) To adjust to a particular specification or requirement: regulate temperature. (3) To adjust (a mechanism) for accurate and proper functioning.\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

All three meaning of this ordinary language definition emerge in legal and economic usage. In his comparative study of the politics of regulation, Francis says, “Regulation occurs when the state constraints private activity in order to promote the public interest.” [meaning #1] “Regulation is frequently associated with what is called ‘market failure’—a situation in which the market fails to produce goods and services at appropriate prices;” [meaning #2] and “Regulation is often sought to provide stability or equilibrium in an area of endeavor that has experienced unsettling changes.” [meaning #3]\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{35} The American Heritage Dictionary.
All three meanings also are present in the French language as applied to economics. Delorme writes:

To regulate also means to cause to function accurately or to cause to conform to some standard. In general terms, regulation in the theory of systems denotes the role of feed-back mechanisms in relation to the stability of some set of interactions. In French, réglementation is related to the first meaning while régulation pertains to systems theory. However, regulation also means stabilization in French, in the sense of government action aimed at reducing fluctuations of macroeconomic activity by means of budgetary or monetary contracyclical interventions.

In their standard text on regulatory law, Shapiro and Tomain incorporate at least two of these meanings to justify government regulation:

In the economic model, regulation is justified on the ground of ‘market failure’ or the absence of one or more of the factors necessary for an efficient market. A market will operate inefficiently if there is inadequate information about goods or services, insufficient competition, externalities or spillover costs, or public goods.

To cite only one example from the democracy assistance literature, Avnon’s early study of party laws found that evidence of “market failure” in most “democratic polities that have chosen to legislate party laws had previously experienced a collapse of their democratic systems.

In the process of reforming their democratic structures, the legislatures in these polities enacted parties laws that would ensure that political parties perform functions commensurate with the goals and practices of modern democracies.

What seems clear about the concept in law, economics, and politics is that regulation comes after the fact, after human behavior has been observed. This contrasts with the idealized state of engineering, which “makes something that has not existed before.” In a nutshell, then, engineering is anticipatory or proactive in normal usage whereas regulating is responsive or reactive.

**Analytical Benefits of Distinguishing “Engineering” from “Regulating”**

Unfortunately, writings on democracy assistance seldom observe the distinction between engineering as a proactive approach designed to achieve some desired state of affairs in anticipation of empirical results and regulating as a reactive response to empirical observations. Failing to make this distinction robs writers of an important analytical lever. Certainly, my failure to make the distinction affected my interpretation of the comprehensive party law enacted by Germany in 1967 and the nearly as comprehensive party law enacted in 1992 by Jordan.

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Both Germany and Jordan had enacted lengthy laws that prescribed in considerable detail how parties were to organize and operate. In “Adopting Party Law,” I noted that the German law was “highly prescriptive” and said:

Given the vigor of contemporary German party politics, Germany’s meticulous state regulation of party organization and activity has obviously not hampered the development of strong, democratic parties.

One can argue that the Jordan Party Law (Box 13)—and the Party Laws of Yemen, Cambodia, and Indonesia, not illustrated here—are not much more detailed than the German Party Law or similar laws in other advanced democracies, however, differ greatly according to when they were created and who created them. The German Party Law was passed only after [18] years of experience with party politics, and it was created with the participation of vigorous political parties. Although the German law regulated party practices, it effectively recognized established practices of competitive parties. In this regard, its passage fits the promotion model more than the prescription model. Because strong, independent parties did not design party laws in Jordan, Yemen, Cambodia, and Indonesia, authoritarian ruling forces had more latitude to prescribe how parties would be created and organized.  

In the German case, the 1967 party law was enacted after political parties had contested five elections (1949, 1953, 1957, 1961, and 1965). Because the German law was based on a substantial background of party politics, it clearly qualifies as an example of regulating parties informed by feedback.

In the Jordanian case, the 1992 party law was enacted when political parties did not exist and had not existed for 35 years—since King Hussein banned them in 1957. After the 1991 Gulf War, however, King Hussein found it advantageous to liberalize his regime by recognizing certain elements of organized opposition. As one scholar wrote:

The 1992 Political Parties Law can be seen as an institutional survival strategy because it allowed organized pluralism back into political society. At the same time, the regime’s draft law sought to regulate and narrow the range of groups that could claim to be political parties.

Another scholar similarly concluded, “The Political Parties Law, promulgated in 1992, enabled the organized opposition to legalise its structures, but also contained specific conditions which allowed the regime to control them.” The Jordanian law was not based on any experience at all with party politics. It did not seek to regulate political parties as much as to engineer a party system that satisfied the Hussein regime.

In fact, the 1992 law seemed to fulfill its design objectives. With the law in place, Jordanian elections were held in 1993, the first multi-party elections since 1956. Although more than twenty parties registered under the stringent requirements of the prescriptive law, nearly all

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40. Janda, “Adopting Party Law,” p. 18. My original text erred in calculating Germany’s years of experience with party politics as 35, which I obtained by subtracting 1949 from 1994 (the year the law was revised) instead of 1967 (the year it was first formulated).
failed to obtain broad support. In fact, only 18 percent of the 534 candidates were explicitly affiliated with a political party, and party members won only 33 of the 80 seats—16 of which were won by the Islamic Action Front, the party of the Muslim Brotherhood. The IAF boycotted the 1997 election, which resulted in nearly two-thirds of the seats going to tribal candidates or centrist independents. The IAF did contest the 2003 election but won only 16 percent of the seats, compared with 90 percent for independents and “allies of King Abdullah.”

My analysis of the prescriptive German party law of 1967 and the similarly prescriptive Jordanian party law of 1992 would have been sharpened by classifying the German law as an example of party regulation and the Jordanian law as one of party engineering.

**Conclusion**

Burnell observed that we should be mindful of where a country stands in the process of political development when we discuss democracy assistance. That led me to reflect on the terms that we use in talking about democracy assistance. I argue that the language of electoral engineering suggests a very different process from the language of regulating parties. I think that this language difference contributes to the “conceptual confusion” that concerns Biezen:

> In this article, it is argued that one factor that accounts for the weaknesses of theory building on political parties is the conceptual confusion of the perspectives on party formation with those of party adaptation, development and change. What ultimately lies beneath the controversy over diversity or convergence is a lack of understanding of the type of context that matters at a party’s initial formation, how internal party dynamics and the external environment account for subsequent party development, and how period-effects impact on the genetic structures of parties. Extrication of the body of theory on political parties into distinct analytical frameworks of party formation and party change is imperative for any assessment of which institutions matter and how.

The language of engineering is ideally suited to party formation. The language of regulating is better suited to party change. We may be able to improve analysis by paying more attention to our concepts and terms.

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43 Ibid, p. 133.
44 Lucas, p. 58.
46 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_Jordan#Political_parties_and_elections>