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News from Vanderbilt

[Vanderbilt professor to study relationship between foreign aid and democracy](#) 1-14-2005  



Mitch Seligson

NASHVILLE, Tenn. – A Vanderbilt University political scientist will work with colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Virginia to measure the impact of U.S. foreign assistance on democracy-building efforts in more than 100 countries around the globe. "If we can pinpoint where the United States has been most successful, then we can target more carefully our foreign assistance to places such as Iraq, Afghanistan and other troubled nations," said Centennial Professor of Political Science Mitch Seligson, who is also a Fellow of the Center for the Americas at Vanderbilt.

Vanderbilt is the lead institution for a grant of \$296,590 from the Association Liaison Office for University Cooperation in Development, a consortium that includes the American Association of Universities and the American Council on Higher Education. The grant was made in cooperation with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

Seligson said that while the United States has maintained an active program of foreign assistance since the Marshal Plan in the post-World War II period, during the past decade there has been a growing emphasis on promoting democracy through foreign assistance.

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Democracy assistance involves support at various levels. "At the most basic level, when countries are just beginning their transitions into democracy, assistance can focus on promoting free and fair elections," Seligson said. "Many countries that ended decades of authoritarian rule, such as those in the former Soviet Union, needed to hold competitive elections for the first time. So the United States has helped interested nations in everything from setting up voter registration systems to printing ballots."

Other areas of democracy assistance that the professors will study include the effectiveness of legislatures, the strength of the judiciary, the rule of law and whether or not there is a free press in countries that are included in the study.

"These are aspects of democratization that go beyond selecting the personnel of government via elections that express the popular will, but yet have very much to do with the degree to which a government should be considered more democratic or less democratic," he said.

The professors will use, among other sources, data provided by the USAID, a major arm of foreign assistance in the United States. Their research, which will cover the years between 1980 and 2002, will be available in approximately 10 months to other researchers through an online database. The research also will be presented at several workshops in Washington, D.C.

Seligson acknowledged that they must be careful to avoid what social scientists call "selection bias" in their analysis. "The most difficult aspect of the study will be determining if democratic changes that occur in a foreign country can be attributed to U.S. foreign assistance." He noted that the list of countries that receive American aid continually changes, with the U.S. government often adding countries that are doing poorly and dropping others that no longer need help. "This means that unless one does a very careful statistical analysis, the results could erroneously show that where the United States invests the most in democracy promotion, the results are the worst. In fact, the countries that have done the best could have 'graduated' and no longer need U.S. assistance, leaving our nation investing in the most difficult cases."

Media contact: Ann Marie Deer Owens, (615) 322-NEWS
Annmarie.owens@vanderbilt.edu

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