



**Remarks by NDI President Kenneth Wollack at Panel on
“Empowering People: Strengthening Democratic Institutions and Civil Society”
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Mr. President, Mr. Secretary General, members of the SI family. It gives me great pleasure to address this distinguished body. The National Democratic Institute is proud to have worked with so many of the parties in this room in pursuit of democratic values, practices, and institutions worldwide.

In our new standing as an associate organization, we look forward to expanding and deepening our relationships. I thank you for your support. NDI has greatly valued our longstanding friendship with President Guterres and Secretary General Ayala, and the SI is fortunate to benefit from their extraordinary leadership.

For this panel on “Empowering People: Strengthening Democratic Institutions and Civil Society”, I would like to briefly address a topic that is often overlooked but essential to everything for which the International stands—that is political parties.

As SI and its member parties work to expand and deepen democratic governance at the global and country level, and as an organization dedicated to equality and social justice, we must begin to look at reform issues closer to home—that is, how *we* perform and serve *our* societies as political parties.

It is simply impossible to modernize and strengthen multilateral institutions, deepen international relations, close the divide between rich and poor, enhance the prospects for worldwide sustainable development, and transform governance at all levels without reform in the way we operate as political parties, which must aggregate the interests of our citizens. If we are unable to fulfill our unique role and reform and modernize the way we operate as organizations, we will be ill equipped to address these larger issues.

We must begin this process by putting our own houses in order. It is a time for introspection—a time for change. That process has already begun by many parties, some of which are in this room.

The fate of parties is not just a matter for social democrats; it concerns every practitioner of democracy—every liberal, every christian democrat. It is what we share in common. It affects every society—whether a traditional, emerging or new democracy. It impacts on developed and developing countries alike.

Globally, citizens have grown increasingly frustrated with their political parties and leaders. Polls, focus groups and voting behavior indicate that society largely views political parties as ineffective and out of touch with their needs. Some established political parties have experienced a dwindling membership that is aging. Young people are hesitating to join or become associated with political parties. At the same time, support has risen for independent candidates, special interest parties, and anti-party movements.

In many places, political parties are either too weak, too personalistic, too constrained by oppressive governments, or too out of touch to earn the respect and support of the public. Centralized decision making, the lack of well-institutionalized rules and procedures, and the decline of ideology or unifying principles have eroded public support and discouraged participation in political party activities. An unwillingness to undertake greater citizen outreach and consultation has diminished the public's support.

To be fair to ourselves, however, this crisis of confidence may more accurately reflect a growing lack of trust in institutions more broadly. According to political analysts who have conducted extensive public opinion surveys globally, it is not only parties that are in trouble. It is the institutions of democracy that face difficulties because of an underlying culture of mistrust. These surveys' confidence indexes of democratic institutions in Europe, Latin America and Africa show that religious bodies enjoy the greatest level of trust, followed by presidents. Armed forces rank third; courts of justice came in fourth; parliaments rank fifth with political parties in sixth place. Parties rank at the bottom of these institutions because they have often acted without transparency. Citizens do not know how parties make decisions; and having open rules, being accessible and accountable is the foundation upon which political trust is built.

We also know that parties are needed and cannot be replaced by civil society or by any other organized structure to give voice and representation. No other institution can impede government by fiat, government by mob, government by strongman.

Parties mediate. They create common ground. By definition, their vision goes beyond the town limits. Political parties aggregate interests. They create grounds for compromise. They create order out of chaos. And thus they help societies unite and remain united.

But the parties themselves are not solely to blame for their weaknesses. Problems have often been exacerbated by the international community itself—by some donor aid agencies, by international financial institutions.

In recent years, civil society in new and emerging democracies has become the favored child of international assistance. It has been described as the wellspring of democracy. The international community has buttressed civic organizations, aided them, and abetted their rise. This has been a good and necessary endeavor; NDI participated in it and continues to do so.

Yet the focus on civil society moved beyond fashion. For some, it became an obsession, a mantra. There was a distinct danger in this. Increasingly, resources were being channeled to programs that develop civil society to the exclusion of political parties and political institutions such as parliaments. I know that many felt that was more virtuous to be a member of a civic

organization than a party. That parties had to wait until there is a certain level of societal development. That parties will emerge naturally.

But this is wrong on its face and dangerous besides.

The international community often, unintentionally, helped to create the demand side of the political equation while often ignoring or marginalizing those institutions—political parties and parliaments—that must respond to these very demands.

A number of political parties have begun to address weaknesses and the growing lack of credibility in a variety of ways. These include placing greater emphasis on issues of ethics in public office, modernizing party structures to allow for greater participation, and greater openness and transparency in the operation of government and political systems generally.

Democratization within parties must be a priority in efforts to restore public confidence. And greater citizen participation, accountability of leadership, transparency and institutional safeguards are now more important than ever for that democratization process to succeed.

There must be transparency and participation in the selection of party leaders and candidates for public office, including the use of party primaries; greater public funding for parties; limits on private contributions to parties; public disclosure of contributions; and enhanced outreach efforts to women, to youth, and to previously disenfranchised communities such as the indigenous of Latin America and the Roma in Eastern and Central Europe. And women's participation does not mean token representation on the lower end of party lists or the formation of "women's wings", it means real leadership roles.

The ingredients of party reform are not a mystery—the challenge is political will. There has to be a call to action. Each of us, all of us, must rededicate our efforts. This International, dedicating itself to peace, democracy, and a new multilateralism, is an appropriate place to help spearhead these efforts.