EMPTY COFFINS: BRIDGING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN
OPPOSITIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY AND OPPOSITION PARTIES

A Dissertation
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in Government

By

Caitlin M. Brown, B.A.

Washington, DC
April 10, 2017
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Caitlin M. Brown, B.A.

Advisor: Marc M. Howard, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

When they hold similar policy preferences, civil society groups that are critical of the incumbent government in democratic states and out-of-power opposition parties would seem to be natural allies. But individuals who are dissatisfied enough with the incumbent government to found and lead civil society groups opposing its actions do not always also invest their time and energy in supporting likeminded opposition parties. When will the leaders of such oppositional civil society groups direct their organizations to become active participants in electoral politics?

Using in-depth case studies of two different types of oppositional civil society groups in post-apartheid South Africa—social movements and NGOs—this dissertation finds significant initial support for a theory that oppositional civil society groups wait until opposition parties are states-in-waiting to become directly involved in electoral politics. When oppositional civil society perceives opposition parties to be pursuing control of the state in order to significantly alter its form and functions, they will actively support their preferred political parties in their electoral efforts; when opposition parties present themselves as simply alternative governments, eager to take control of the state but not to change its institutions, governing rules, or relationship with society, oppositional civil society will choose to remain largely disengaged from partisan and electoral politics. I argue that this theory is most applicable in three types of regimes: dominant-party democracies, consolidating democracies, and states ruled by former liberation movements.

Although the literature on civil society’s contributions to democratic governance is voluminous, the relationship between civil society and two of democracy’s core institutions—political parties and elections—is understudied. I will argue that civil society leaders can actually feel quite threatened by elections and contemptuous of political parties. My research question requires me to pry open the black box of civil society more generally, exposing several of its inherent, but unspoken, preferences. Not all of these preferences fit with conventional conceptions of “democracy,” thus allowing the findings of my dissertation to have broader implications for the wider discipline.
This dissertation would not be possible without the advice and encouragement of several individuals, including Marc M. Howard, Charles King, Scott Taylor, Devin Finn, Manuel Mera, Meir Walters, Kristin K. Brown, and John M. Brown. My South African interlocutors also deserve more thanks than I can ever possibly give them.

Caitlin M. Brown
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<td>Abahlali baseMjondolo</td>
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<td>ANC</td>
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<td>APF</td>
<td>Anti-Privatisation Forum</td>
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<td>CCS</td>
<td>Centre for Civil Society</td>
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<td>CHOSA</td>
<td>Children of South Africa</td>
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<td>Democratic Alliance</td>
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<td>ECARP</td>
<td>East Cape Agricultural Research Project</td>
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<td>GEAR</td>
<td>Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy</td>
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<td>IEC</td>
<td>Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa</td>
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<td>ILRIG</td>
<td>International Labour Research and Information Group</td>
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<td>R2K</td>
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<td>SDCEA</td>
<td>South Durban Community Environmental Alliance</td>
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<td>SECC</td>
<td>Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee</td>
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<td>UPM</td>
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INTRODUCTION: EMPTY COFFINS

In 2005, in a march that presaged the launch of the Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) social movement in South Africa, some three thousand residents of Durban’s shack settlements converged on the office of their local councilor, Yakoob Baig. They brought with them a memorandum of ten demands, composed after a series of community meetings, which exhorted the local government to address the need for housing, jobs, sanitation, and an end to police brutality. They also brought a coffin. If Baig did not resign, they proclaimed, they would declare their ward without a councillor. No matter his choice, it was to be his “political death” (Gibson 2011: 148).

And yet the resurrection of Baig was almost instantaneous. Although he did little to address the demands of the AbM protestors, the voters of Ward 25 returned Baig to office in the municipal elections that took place less than a year later. Baig’s party, the African National Congress (ANC), which AbM has continued to unflinchingly denounce through marches, protests, and publications, remains in control of the municipal, provincial, and national government (Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa). In retrospect, AbM’s empty coffin looks like an empty threat.

AbM is not the only member of post-apartheid South Africa’s oppositional civil society that has been carrying around empty coffins that are yet to be filled with the politicians and the political party that are directly responsible for unpopular policies. While social movements, non-governmental organizations and citizen protests have had some success in forcing the post-apartheid South African government to change its course on specific issues, as of yet, they have not been able to change the fact that the post-apartheid South African government, especially at the national level, is an ANC government. In fact, the electoral dominance of the ANC reached
its apex precisely during the zenith of oppositional civil society organizing (in the late 1990s and
the first decade of the 2000s), and most analysts peg the most recent erosion of the ANC’s
support at the municipal level to factors other than oppositional civil society (Anna 2016;
Branson 2016; Friedman 2016; McMurry et al. 2016). For its part, in 2016 AbM once again
“took a firm stand that we will retain our autonomy and not enter in any electoral agreement with
any political party” (Abahlali baseMjondolo 2016).

After a brief lull following the inauguration of multiracial democracy and the election of
Nelson Mandela as president, extra-political-party organized citizen criticism and opposition to
the ANC—what I call oppositional civil society—quickly revived in South Africa. Social
movements like AbM were joined by a veritable alphabet soup of others, including the Anti-
Privatisation Forum (APF), the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC), the Landless
People’s Movement (LPM), the Unemployed People’s Movement (UPM), and the Anti-Eviction
Campaign (AEC). Organizations that can be considered more conventional NGOs, like the South
Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA), the Eastern Cape Agricultural Research
Project (ECARP) and the Public Service Accountability Monitor (PSAM), also rose to the
occasion, giving voice to citizen dissatisfaction with the government’s policy. Finally, citizen
protest against the government, even without an officially named campaign or sponsoring
organization—often referred to as “service delivery protests” (Friedman 2009)—became a
regular occurrence. Between 2009 and 2013, the police recorded more than 3,000 protests (Saba
and van der Merwe 2013), earning the country the designation of the “protest capital of the
world” in the international media (Bianco 2013). This is a notable turn of events, considering
that the transition to democracy often leads to the demobilization and depoliticization of civil
society, as was the case in the former communist countries of Eastern Europe (Howard 2003;
Robertson 2004). Civil society’s willingness to challenge the ANC is even more remarkable given the party’s status as a liberation movement, which often serves to insulate post-liberation governments from major societal criticism (Booysen 2011; Southall 2013).

But this robust civil society criticism of the ANC has not translated into rebuke or wholesale abandonment from voters. Indeed, the ANC has seen its share of electoral support remain comfortably large from 1994 to the present day, surpassing 60% of the vote in all national-level elections since the fall of apartheid. Even in the most recent 2016 local elections, in which the ANC lost control of a few prominent municipalities, the ANC captured 56% of all votes, which was more than twice the vote share of its nearest competitor (Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa). This cements its status as a dominant party, one that “outdistances all [other parties]” (Sartori 1976: 193). Opposition parties proliferate in post-apartheid South Africa, but their electoral and governmental impact is dwarfed by that of the ANC, and none can be considered a government-in-waiting at the national level. The largest of these opposition parties is the Democratic Alliance (DA), which garnered approximately 22% of votes cast in the last national elections in 2014 (Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa).¹ The DA has unseated the ANC in Western Cape Province and a handful of significant municipalities, but an alternative government to the ANC at the national level would require both a significant exodus of ANC voters to other parties as well as an unlikely alliance among several ideologically dissimilar opposition parties. The empty coffin paraded down the streets of Durban is fitting not only because it symbolizes the relationship between oppositional civil society and electoral politics, but also because it makes clear that the ANC is far from dead yet.

¹ Twenty-seven additional parties received votes in the national elections, and eleven of these parties also garnered seats in the national legislature.
Unlike the dominant party to South Africa’s north, Zimbabwe’s ZANU-PF, the ANC has not been stealing or manipulating elections. Rather, South Africans who are dissatisfied with the ANC’s rule have been reluctant to “throw the rascals out” and transfer their support to opposition parties. This is especially true of those who participate in oppositional civil society. According to Booysen (2011), the “ballot” for the ANC is frequently combined with the “brick” against it, as “voters protest between elections rather than choose an opposition vote come election time” (131). Indeed, a 2007 study found that the ANC succeeded in extending its support in the 2006 municipal elections precisely in those wards that were most marked by protest action against the local ANC government (Booysen 2007). At the national level, in 2009 voters waited until after they had returned the ANC—by its highest margin ever—to power through elections to launch a wave of protests against ANC policy (Booysen 2011). As Booysen (2011) notes, it seems that South Africans, even those who are angry enough to protest against the ANC, “regularly look for reasons to continue supporting the ANC – in general, but also particularly through elections” (106). The original research in this dissertation will further elaborate on this phenomenon by closely considering the words and actions of oppositional civil society groups and their leadership towards electoral politics. The official position of most oppositional civil society groups, from more radical social movements operating out of shack settlements to staid nongovernmental organizations staffed by middle-class professionals, is that citizens should largely disregard the ballot box when seeking to hold the ANC accountable for its failings.

Thus the practice of democracy in South Africa seems contradictory and schizophrenic, as the population condemns the ruling party on the streets while supporting it at the polls, and as oppositional civil society declares itself the enemy the ruling party but rebuffs any sort of alliance with opposition parties. What factors explain why civil society opposition to and
criticism of a democratic government would not always entail withdrawal of electoral support for that government? What prevents those who use the brick against a ruling party from also using the ballot against it? When does oppositional civil society demand “bodies” for its coffins?

**States-in-Waiting vs. Governments-in-Waiting**

Using post-apartheid South Africa as a case study, this dissertation builds a theory that for oppositional civil society to turn its back on the ruling part(ies) and actively support opposition parties, it is simply not enough that the policy preferences of oppositional civil society and opposition parties coincide. Instead, oppositional civil society actors within democracies will only switch their allegiance to opposition parties that share their views when the former also sees the latter as *states-in-waiting*. As opposed to out-of-power political parties that are *governments-in-waiting*, parties that are states-in-waiting do not simply seek to fill positions of power within the extant state and uphold the political, economic and social status quo; instead, they promise to overturn or reform state structures and the broader economic, social and political systems of a society. In other words, oppositional civil society will withhold its support from opposition parties until it sees them as representing a new and different state than the current one, and when that version of the state is one with which oppositional civil society agrees. I will examine the two ends of spectrum of oppositional civil society in post-apartheid South Africa—the adversarial, extra-legal side associated with the new social movements, and the critical, yet law-abiding side associated with NGOs—and show that absent states-in-waiting opposition parties, both either prefer, or are ambivalent about, the continued dominance of the ruling party.

Political parties that position themselves as states-in-waiting will be able to draw support from oppositional civil society because they overcome a *natural alienation between civil society*
and electoral politics that exists within democracies. Because the world has witnessed several instances (including in South Africa) in which civil society helped to usher in democratic transitions, invariably culminating in elections, it seems logical to assume that civil society action continues to translate into electoral outcomes once democracy becomes established. This dissertation will argue, on the other hand, that the baseline state of affairs within democratic polities is for civil society to separate itself from electoral politics and political parties. Instead, the same exceptional circumstances that drew civil society into alliances with political parties and aspirant politicians during the lead-up to the democratic transition will again need to prevail for civil society to wade into electoral politics post-transition: the nature of the state and its associated political and economic systems must be at stake. Like oppositional civil society pre-transition, whose actual target of opposition is not the government of the undemocratic state but the undemocratic state itself, oppositional civil society post-transition focuses primarily on the democratic state’s model of political and economic relations, believing that they are more important than the specific parties and individuals that occupy positions of power within the state. In order to garner the support of oppositional civil society, opposition parties must convince it that they represent not just a new government, but also a new state. Opposition parties are able to build bridges with civil society when they subordinate their central goal as political parties—to gain control of positions within the state—to the goal of getting the structures of the state “right.”

**Core Pillars of the Theory**

The theory developed in this dissertation relies on several core arguments that I will briefly preview. The first is that political civil society is inherently statist in its orientation, and
that this orientation inclines it to remain aloof from electoral politics until they directly involve
the status of the state.

By political civil society, I use Larry Diamond’s (1999: 221) definition of civil society, which is “the realm of organized social life that is open, voluntary, self-generating, at least partially-self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules,” with the added criterion that the focus of the organized social life must be explicitly political issues. Robert Putnam’s archetypical bowling leagues are not part of political civil society. At the same time, political civil society is different from what Diamond distinguishes as simply political society, which he conceptualizes as encompassing “all those organized actors…whose primary goal is to win control of the state or at least some position for themselves within it” (1999: 221). Political parties, then, are part of political society, and not political civil society. In the interest of avoiding a tiresome repetition of adjectives, and because this dissertation is only concerned with political variant of civil society, henceforth the term civil society will be used and understood as referring to political civil society.

In addition to setting aside all those manifestations of civil society that are not explicitly political—the recreation leagues, self-help societies, neighborhood groups, etc.—my theory also focuses on oppositional civil society. Within the realm of politically oriented civil society, there are groups whose advocacy and activism centers on criticism of the government and opposition to its policies. I refer to these groups as oppositional civil society, and this dissertation focuses on them because they presumably should be the natural allies of opposition parties. Oppositional civil society does not represent the totality of civil society in the world at large or even within South Africa, but they are significant enough to merit their own study.
What civil society and political society share is a common point of reference for their actions, organizing, and rhetoric: the state. Civil society makes demands on only one entity, and that is the state. When it targets political parties or politicians, it is only in the context of those political parties or politicians being part of the state. The criticism that civil society in South Africa directs against the ANC, for example, is grounded in its recognition that the ANC holds state power, and therefore is the only political party currently in position to effect policy. Thus, the orientation of civil society—whether it opposes or supports state actions—is fundamentally statist.

This runs counter to a great deal of literature that frames civil society as either a place of refuge and disengagement from the state (Azarya 1998, 1994; Bayart 1986; Lewis 1992)—often made in regards to regimes that may be considered autocratic or predatory—or, in the case of economically developed, democratic regimes, as an alternative to the social welfare state (Powell 2013). This dissertation argues instead that even civil society that is oppositional—that is, one that actively protests and challenges state policy—can actually be one of the greatest supporters of the state as an institution and key organizing force in society. This dissertation will argue that civil society opposition to the state and its representatives signals a significant investment in the state and its power; if civil society did not believe that the state could deliver on its demands, then it would not bother to make demands on it at all. Instead, by engaging with the state but disassociating itself from electoral politics, civil society demonstrates its faith in the state as an institution that exists above and beyond any particular parties or politicians that occupy it.

This interest and investment in the state as an institution means that civil society can largely ignore political parties and electoral politics as long as political parties do not set their sights on more than settling into the already-furnished government offices. But when state-in-
waiting parties start to advance on the capital with serious redecoration plans, civil society becomes activated. It is only when opposition parties present the potential of reforming the state once at the helm of the government that oppositional civil society must decide whether or not to support opposition parties. At this point, that state that civil society has evolved to interact with, which processes its demands and regulates its activity, stands to change, and civil society cannot afford to be apathetic.

The second core argument underlying this theory contends that civil society is fundamentally committed to participatory democracy, which further alienates it from electoral politics. Participatory democracy, also sometimes referred to as “thick democracy” (Barber 1984), looks to expand citizen involvement in governance beyond elections, which are the key institutions of representative, “thin democracy.” It demands active citizenship and requires that both elected representatives engage with constituents between elections and that constituents hold their representatives accountable between elections. In representative democracy, elections are essentially citizens’ one chance to “get things right”: to reward or punish representatives for past behavior and to communicate their preferences for the future. Citizens’ duty is “to fill the office” (Lippman 1956) and “understand that, once they elected an individual, political action is his business not theirs” (Schumpeter 1942). In participatory democracy, on the other hand, neither citizens nor representatives lose the chance to “get things right” once ballots are cast.

Civil society action is participatory democracy in practice; marches, protests, strikes, and letter-writing campaigns are all forms of citizen engagement with the government that transcend the narrow confines of elections. Moreover, I will argue, civil society can perceive its methods of participatory democracy as locked in a zero-sum competition with those of representative democracy, which leads to actively avoid and eschew electoral politics. If civil society groups
were to encourage citizens to focus on elections and rewarding or punishing representatives at the polls, then they would undermine their conviction that citizen-representative engagement is an ongoing process, which is the very basis of civil society organizing.

What we often witness as a result of this belief in the primacy of between-election citizen-constituent engagement is an unstated preference for incumbent parties and politicians and wariness of investing in out-of-power parties and politicians. The incumbents are the individuals with whom citizens have already had the opportunity to build a working relationship. These are the parties and individuals that, by virtue of their current positions within the state, currently have the resources and power to deliver on the demands of the people. On the other hand, until an opposition party or candidate has earned a seat in government, its primary avenue for engaging with citizens revolves around the institutions of representative democracy: elections. Again, it is only when opposition parties offer themselves as alternative states-in-waiting that the interest of those who are invested in the participatory model of democracy piques. At that point, the relationship between the state and society—and the fortunes of participatory democracy—becomes a potential electoral issue, and one that civil society cannot ignore.

An outside observer can be easily baffled—and frustrated—by South African civil society actors’ repeated pronouncements that they are “waiting”: waiting for a political party of the poor and working class to emerge, waiting for a political party committed to participatory democracy to arise, waiting for the ruling party to self-implode. Why do these very committed, savvy, and politically interested actors not just form their own state-in-waiting political parties? While very formidable practical obstacles stand in their way, including funding and challenges of mass organizing, this dissertation will assert that the choice to oppose state policy through civil
society and not opposition parties is not simply a choice made out of material necessity. Instead, the final core argument underlying this dissertation’s theory is that civil society organizing offers its leaders a set of benefits that they would not be able to enjoy if they were to instead embrace electoral politics.

The first of these benefits is that it allows true believers to actually practice the participatory democracy that they preach. Additionally, I will suggest that civil society presents individuals with an opportunity to engage in what I call “politics without compromise.” Politics without compromise clings tightly to ideological purism. It is unwilling to admit disagreements and differences of opinion about core beliefs, and is dismissive of alliances between groups with overlapping goals but incomplete harmony of political ideology and methods of organizing. Civil society can support such unbending politics, as civil society groups can be small, narrowly focused, and do not necessarily require significant resources to exist. This “politics without compromise” approach of civil society stands in stark contrast to the type of politics in which political parties must engage in order to be viable. No political party can be ideologically pure; it must make compromises among individuals with differing opinions in order to build its movement and be sustainable on a large scale. But civil society is a place where political actors who would not otherwise survive in the realm of party politics can have their say. While many civil society groups will not stand differences of opinion internally, civil society, writ large, admits all types.

The appeal of civil society organizing is not just reserved for ideological purists; it also applies to those who want to practice what I call “politics without constituents.” That is, civil society organizations can relatively easily claim to represent certain groups, such as “the poor” or “the working class,” without having to actually prove this connection. Unlike political parties
and politicians, who have built-in mechanisms for delineating and measuring their constituencies—such as elections and electoral districts—civil society groups do not have institutionalized incentives for defining their base of support or populations that they claim to represent. They do not have the clear, readymade ways of proving that they have the consent and support of those they claim to represent that political parties do.

While I am not arguing that all, or even most, civil society groups are just hollow shells, the ability to practice “politics without constituents” and “leadership without followers” is beneficial to would-be politicians who either cannot, or believe that they cannot, win elected office. By not exposing themselves to the competition and failure inherent in electoral and representative politics, these civil society actors can continue to lay claim to leadership within a community and influence on the state. Passively waiting for the ideal opposition party to arise—rather than proactively working to create this ideal opposition party—may ensure their survival as someone with greater prominence and political weight than the average citizen. Again, the choices of civil society leaders are to a large degree rational, based on the rewards and constraints present in the given political milieu. If that milieu were to change—as would be a possibility if a state-in-waiting party were a serious electoral contender—then civil society leaders would likely need to alter their behavior to account for this new reality.

**Methods: Interviews, Participant Observation, and Primary and Secondary Source Research**

The methods employed in this dissertation are unambiguously—and unabashedly—qualitative. While it might be possible to devise crude numerical scales to measure the dependent variable, the support for political parties, and the key independent variable, the degree to which opposition parties are states- or governments-in-waiting, what are of most importance and
interest are the mechanisms linking the dependent and independent variables. As theorized, these mechanisms comprise ideas, perceptions, and preferences, all of which tend to elude quantitative measurement. Rather than trying to translate these ideational and psychological factors into numbers, I focused instead on the translation of ideational and psychological factors into motivations and behaviors, as only that would allow me to assess the merit of my theory.

Quite simply, I was interested in determining whether there was a coherent and emergent paradigm shared by civil society leaders who behaved similarly with regards to political parties, and if so, whether this paradigm made sense of their actions or was merely coincidental to them. I focused on four types of qualitative data for evidence of this paradigm: interviews, participant observation, primary source research, and secondary source research. The goal for all types of data was to understand the meaning behind what leaders and their organizations said and wrote as a way of accessing their mindsets.

The interviews I conducted and the participant observation I engaged in were the most fruitful for my research. I spent roughly three months in South Africa during the winter (summer in the Northern Hemisphere) of 2013, staying in four cities: Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, and Grahamstown. I chose these four locations based on my knowledge of where there was considerable oppositional civil society activism.

In order to identify and connect with civil society groups and their leaders, I generally followed a snowball methodology. Prior to arriving in Johannesburg, I set up meetings with several academic researchers in the city who either studied or participated in oppositional civil society organizations. Oftentimes, these scholars did both, as I found that in South Africa there was a good deal of overlap between the worlds of academia and activism. These initial contacts then introduced me to further civil society leaders to interview and organizations to visit within
Johannesburg and the three other locations on my itinerary. While I did do a good deal of cold-contacting of individuals and organizations that I had independently determined were important for my research, I also relied on my interviewees to help me get a foot in the door and identify individuals and organizations that were important but not easily visible to outside observers.

A complete list of the individuals I interviewed can be found on page 241. The typical interview ran around two hours. Although I entered into each with a list of issues that I wanted to address, I followed an unstructured, open-ended approach to my questioning, allowing my interviewees considerable leeway to choose the direction of our conversation. Conducting interviews in this manner was partially meant to put my interviewees at ease so that they would speak frankly, but it was also meant to protect the integrity of my theorized causal mechanisms. Ideas mattered for my theory, and I did not want to risk planting ideas in my interviewees’ heads by directing our conservations too rigidly. The best way for me to confirm whether civil society leaders felt threatened by elections, for example, was not to ask them outright if this was the case, but to listen to how they described elections unbiased by my own suggestions. I received permission to record the audio of the majority of my interviews, which then yielded hundreds of pages of transcripts of our conversations. When interviews began to strain the batteries on my recording device by lasting several hours or when they transitioned from seated to on the move, as we walked through noisy townships or rumbled down dirt roads, I took notes with an old-fashioned notebook and pencil.

I almost exclusively took handwritten notes when I conducted participant observation of subject organizations and shadowed subject individuals. Several of my interviewees were eager for me to see them and their organizations in action, inviting me to sit in on their meetings and accompany them in protests and marches. While it was almost impossible for me to remain
invisible while observing, I made a point not to interfere with the activities of those I was watching. Seeing how my interviewees behaved in normal settings and listening to them talk to one another augmented their interview answers and allowed me to better interpret the meaning of their words and actions.

I often left meetings with interviewees with more than a full notebook or audio recording device; frequently my bag was also overloaded with stacks of official literature that my contacts gave to me. These documents—newsletters, fliers, copies of petitions, published and unpublished op-ed articles, movement manifestos, etc.—joined wherever material civil society organizations made available online to comprise the primary-source data I gathered for the dissertation. I also took advantage of the extensive collection of scholarly and journalistic literature profiling civil society organizations and the leaders, a good deal of which was only available in South African libraries. These secondary sources were primarily descriptive accounts of their subjects, which provided helpful background context and an additional way to verify that what I had seen and heard in my interviews echoed what others had observed. The latter was especially valuable for my project, as my interviews and participant observations are, by their very nature, not conducive to exact replication by other researchers.

With thousands of pages of written material and hundreds of hours of first-hand interaction with the subjects of my dissertation, I feel fairly confident that I was able to access a relatively accurate snapshot of the oppositional civil society in South Africa, particularly as it existed in the winter of 2013. The question remains, however, whether this painstaking research is an appropriate basis for its own social-scientific study, which I will now address.
Methods: The Case for the Single-Case Study

The theory that oppositional civil society will remain aloof to opposition parties so long as they are governments-in-waiting and not states-in-waiting derives from a close, careful examination of a single case. For some within the social science discipline, there exists an almost reflexive tendency to dismiss or under estimate theories that arise from analysis of single cases or counterfactual analysis. The impulse to treat the results of single-case analysis with caution is not unfounded, as such a method does make it difficult to establish conclusive causality between dependent and independent variables. My theory contends that it is the identity of opposition parties that determines whether oppositional civil society is actively involved in electoral politics, but without a perfect control with which to compare contemporary South Africa, I cannot be entirely sure that other factors are not driving the outcomes that are currently observed. But that does not mean that my single-case analysis cannot rule out rival theories or rigorously test the plausibility of my theory. Small-N case-study research may not be the cleanest application of the scientific method, but it can be well suited for the inherent messiness of some social phenomena.

In fact, I argue that single-case and small-N research does more to consider and interrogate alternative hypotheses than does the typical large-N study. As the number of cases in a study climbs, the task of addressing alternative hypotheses can be increasingly assigned to the laws of mathematical probability. This means that alternative theories may only get a cursory review by the researcher, who may entertain alternative theories in each of his or her cases under study only to the extent of coding the cases for the necessary variables. For example, to

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2 I would argue that any single-case analysis that addresses causality invariably involves counterfactual analysis, as the implicit comparison is between the actual, empirical case and what that case would look like if the observed outcome had been different or if the key independent variable had been absent.

3 Any review of these arguments must begin with King, Keohane and Verba (1994).

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investigate the alternative hypothesis that oppositional civil society chooses to support opposition parties based on their calculation of the parties’ likelihood of winning elections, a large-N study may look at the public opinion polls of the opposition parties prior to the election. If no statistically significant relationship between public opinion polling and civil society support for opposition parties is found, the study can then discard the alternative hypothesis. This absolves the researcher from having to look for any further evidence of this alternative hypothesis in any of the cases in his or her universe.

In this dissertation, I had to take seriously all of the alternative explanations that relied on what some may consider South Africa’s “exceptional” or “unique”⁴ nature. These included, most importantly, the claim that oppositional civil society’s reluctance to engage with opposition parties derived from the fact that like the constituencies it claimed to represent, it was a diehard supporter of the ANC. Voting and party affiliation in post-apartheid South Africa so closely hewed to racial and ethnic cleavages, the argument goes, that civil society groups would never ask their black constituencies to cross the racial line and vote for the party of the white and coloured minorities (the DA). An additional argument suggested the ANC’s status as the party of liberation meant that even the harshest critics of the party recognized its inherent right to rule the country. Without a large dataset that allowed me to control for these alternative explanations, I had to look for evidence that they might be driving the lack of affinity between oppositional civil society and opposition parties. That meant that I asked all of my interlocutors in oppositional civil society whether the real and/or perceived racial and ethnic identity of the DA and other opposition parties affected their stance towards the them and paid close attention when civil society leaders repeatedly told me that they saw no meaningful difference between the ANC and

⁴ I will argue later that despite the ways in which does stand out amongst its neighbors in the region and world, South Africa is hardly a one-of-a-kind, incomparable country.
the DA, despite the their racial disparities. It meant that I was keen to note that even the oppositional NGOs led and staffed by the DA’s core constituency—the white and coloured middle classes—refused to augment their criticism of the ANC government with support for the DA. It forced me to ask my interlocutors to explain what it would take for their organizations to support the electoral efforts of the newly-formed Economic Freedom Fighters party, given its claims to represent the very same constituency of poor and marginalized black South Africans that most of oppositional civil society groups also claimed to represent. Likewise, given that I knew that I had to address head-on the issue of whether oppositional civil society’s refusal to support opposition parties was due to their respect for the ANC as the party of liberation, I paid special attention to the frequency with which my interviewees confessed that they were done with venerating the ANC, treating it as if it were above reproach—and replacement—because of what it had done in the past. If I were studying multiple country cases as part of my research, I would not necessarily have had the means or incentive to hear all of these pieces of evidence disconfirming rival hypotheses. I could have possibly let abstract, birds-eye-level data suggest to me that alternative explanations were not true, rather than have those actually and intimately engaged in the processes I was studying tell me that they were incorrect.

In single-case and small-N studies, on the other hand, the researcher not only has the time, but also the imperative, to carefully consider alternative theories. They simply do not have enough data to confidently conclude that the laws of random chance can explain correlations between variables that support rival hypotheses. In other words, researchers have to look for evidence of alternatives theories at the same time that they look for evidence of their proposed theory; they never have the methodological or mathematical permission to don blinders that allow them to focus solely on their preferred theory.
Similarly, the rigor that I applied in testing the validity of my theory likely would not have been possible had I been juggling a large-N dataset. As several have argued, small-N studies allow researchers to move beyond the question of whether certain dependent and independent variables are connected to the more crucial questions of how and why they are connected. The best single-case and small-N studies invariably become a search for mechanisms, as researchers discover what it is that truly drives relationships between variables. In my in-depth research of the single South African case, I discovered mechanisms linking my dependent and independent variables that are not easily observable or intuitive, but which matter a great deal. For example, I learned that civil society movements that harshly criticize the sitting government might nonetheless prefer the electoral status quo. I learned that concerns about the realization of citizenship rights and participatory democracy might turn civil society actors away from conventional political parties. I discovered that civil society actors might not want governmental accountability to be tied to elections, because doing so lessens the perceived need for civil society groups. These mechanisms all give meaning and credence to my theory. In a sense, they do just as much as a large-N study to test its robustness, as they help establish just how many elements combine to make civil society’s involvement in electoral politics an unsavory option, and one that requires a high-stakes situation in which the ruling party faces states-in-waiting opposition parties.

An additional concern about small-N research is that its results may not be generalizable beyond the cases used in the study. With enough cases in the dataset, the effects of outlier and idiosyncratic cases are minimized, allowing researchers to estimate the average effects of causal factors on outcomes and to produce generalizable laws that can be applied broadly across cases.

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5 George and Bennett 2005 would be a fine place to start.
It is more difficult to reach generalizable conclusions from research done on single cases, however, unless such cases may be considered crucial cases, such as a least-likely or most-likely cases (George and Bennett 2005). But while generalizability is undoubtedly valuable, it is not the only reason that social science research may have value. As worthwhile as it is to discern the general, and generalizable, tendencies of certain social phenomena, it is also important to understand their non-modal behavior. Generalizable propositions tell us what it is typical to expect and observe, but they do not necessarily describe the full range of empirical possibilities. Even if civil society groups in post-apartheid South Africa were behaving in a way completely at odds with all other comparable civil society groups, it would be worthwhile to understand them because it gives us a deeper understanding of the variety and possibilities of those entities we call civil society groups.

In fact, if we have reservations about our ability to generalize from our investigations of single cases, this may cause us to rethink and refine our definitions and categorizations so that they are ultimately more useful. Indeed, conceptual stretching is more likely to go unchecked if we focus on generalizability, as the drive to find attributes that apply to the largest array of cases can lead to losses in the precision of our concepts, so that we are “cover[ing] more…only by saying less, and by saying less in a far less precise manner” (Sartori 1970). Just because generalizable research allows us to say something about more cases does not mean it allows us to say more about each of those cases. The relationship between civil society and opposition parties in contemporary South Africa and the dynamics underlying it may not apply in all, or even most, times and places. If generalizability is the chief goal, then that means we would need to either ignore the case of post-apartheid South Africa or strip it of so many of its particulars that the
conclusions we draw from studying the case are so banal as to be unhelpful to driving research forward.

Rather than design research from the outset so that it produces insights readymade for wider applicability, I argue instead that it can be equally valid for researchers to wait until after they have developed and tested a theory using a single or small number of cases to address the issue of generalizability. Intimate knowledge of a small number of cases and the causal mechanisms at work in them can help researchers to better identify when their theories are being stretched to the point of meaninglessness or unrecognizability as they are applied to a larger set of cases. Such familiarity likewise enables researchers to better sort out the contingent from the essential components of their theories, ultimately leading to theoretical propositions that are more generalizable. In the penultimate chapter of this dissertation, my chief purpose will be to take a theory aimed at explaining the contemporary South African case and tease out its implications for other cases, as well as for the study of civil society and democracy. I will argue that while my theory is best suited to explain the behavior of civil society groups in new democracies, dominant-party democracies, and post-liberation democracies, this dissertation raises new and important insights that can enrich the overall study of civil society, democracy, and political parties.

**Methods: Why South Africa?**

South Africa is an excellent setting for single-case theory building because it is both a country like no other and a country like many others. The regional economic and political powerhouse, South Africa is also home to one of the subcontinent’s most democratic governments (since the end of apartheid in 1994), and it has come to symbolize the democratic potential of sub-Saharan Africa. Its barely 20-year-old constitution is widely heralded as one of
the most liberal and progressive in the world, and its relative success in forging a multiracial democracy on the smoldering ashes of apartheid serves as an inspiration to many post-conflict societies around the globe. And yet for all of the ways that South Africa stands out, it still follows the norm of the African political party system, with a single dominant party having ruled for several years and an array of smaller opposition parties with no present chance of gaining a majority of seats or votes at the national level. The ANC has ruled South Africa since the demise of apartheid and currently holds slightly less than two-thirds of the seats in the parliament. While many of sub-Saharan Africa’s one-party dominant states lie closer to authoritarianism than democracy, South Africa has managed to fully transition to a democracy while retaining single-party dominance. Understanding how this could happen can shed light on the prospects for democracy on the rest of the subcontinent as well as better prepare us for understanding the dynamics of the African democracies that may emerge.

South Africa can also speak to democratic consolidation beyond the African subcontinent. The country’s struggle with realizing political pluralism seems all the more puzzling given how it possesses many of the elements thought to be felicitous to democratic deepening. Particularly important is its thriving civil society, which is something that many in the democracy-promotion field wish they could recreate in other countries (Ottaway and Carothers 2000). While civil society often loses its vibrancy once democracy is achieved, in South Africa it remains strong and especially vocal in its criticism and opposition to the ANC-controlled government. Still, opposition parties remain weak, and any threats to the national dominance of the ANC seem most likely to arise from elite-level splits within the ANC itself, not from challenges from energized opposition parties. Thus, studying South Africa can provide us with a more nuanced understanding of civil society’s contributions to democratic consolidation
in new democracies and insight on the best policies to pursue in these countries. If a strong oppositional civil society is helping to maintain the ANC’s electoral dominance, then those seeking to promote political pluralism in new democracies may need to rethink their approach to fostering civil society.

South Africa is also a good country to use for this single-case study because, as previously discussed, many observers think they have already “solved” the puzzle of why oppositional civil society in the country enthusiastically denounces the ruling party in the streets but not at the polls. This makes contemporary South Africa a more difficult case for use in theory building, as it requires that any new theory to be strong and compelling enough to challenge the alternative explanations that have already been proffered and accepted by many. If I had chosen a case in which there were few, or weak, standing hypotheses explaining the relationship between oppositional civil society and political parties, then my theory may have attracted undue credence simply because it had so little serious competition. By choosing South Africa, I have given myself considerable hurdles to cross, which should make my theory stronger and more convincing if it does cross them.

The 2016 Municipal Elections

In fact, recent events have introduced what may appear at first glance to be a significant hurdle for this dissertation’s theory, but what is actually an argument for its importance. In August of 2016, South Africans went to the polls for municipal elections and delivered a significant blow to the ANC’s dominance. The party’s vote share fell to 54% (Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa), the lowest level since 1994, and it lost control of three key metropolitan municipalities: Nelson Mandela Bay, the City of Tshwane (which includes Pretoria, the country’s administrative capital), and the City of Johannesburg. The results are
widely considered to be a “watershed” in the country’s post-apartheid history and a sign of the coming decline of the ANC as South Africa’s dominant party (Branson 2016).

As much as these results seem to buck electoral trends in South Africa, they do not actually undermine this dissertation’s theory. The theory never claims that dominant parties like the ANC are invincible or that voters will never defect to government-in-waiting opposition parties like the DA, which has benefitted the most from the eroding support for the ANC. Rather, the theory suggests that oppositional civil society will withhold its support for opposition parties until such parties are states-in-waiting. As such, if government-in-waiting opposition parties gain support from voters, then my theory would argue that voters were driven from the ruling party by factors other than the stance of oppositional civil society.

Although 2016 municipal election is still being analyzed,\(^6\) the consensus opinion is that oppositional civil society played a very minor role in the remarkable rebuke of the ANC. Instead, scholars and analysts point to factors including the perception of widespread corruption within the ANC (especially considering President Jacob Zuma), a faltering economy and growing economic inequality, the political maturation of the “born-free” generation (those born after the end of apartheid), the efforts of the DA to shed its exclusive racial identity, and splits within the ANC itself as pushing the electorate towards opposition parties (Anna 2016; Branson 2016; Friedman 2016; McMurry et al. 2016). While some mention has been made of protest action concerning educational issues and service delivery, such events have been interpreted as signs of popular discontent with the current government rather than organizational attempts to rally support for opposition parties. Indeed, the Fees Must Fall student protests that have been roiling university campuses since 2015—arguably the most prominent social movement in South Africa

\(^6\) At the time of writing, it has only been six months since the election.
in the past year or two—are focused almost exclusively on engaging with university officials and the national government, as they are the authorities with the power to effect the issues that are of concern with the protesters, and as such, have paid little attention to the most recent municipal elections (Tracey 2016). Meanwhile, the oppositional civil society groups profiled in this dissertation, including AbM, the Unemployed People’s Movement, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, the East Cape Agricultural Research Project, and Public Service Accountability Monitor were all conspicuously—and characteristically—silent with regard to the most recent elections. Only AbM released a public statement on the matter, reaffirming their commitment to “not enter in any electoral agreement with any political party” (Abahlali baseMjondolo 2016).

The golden age of civil society opposition to the ANC appears to have passed at precisely the time that government-in-waiting opposition political parties are gaining in prominence and support. Thus, the results of the 2016 municipal elections do not impugn this dissertation’s theory but rather emphasize one of its critical insights: that oppositional civil society may end up being a mere footnote even in “watershed” electoral contests could profoundly alter the political status quo, provided that these elections do not threaten to alter the state itself.

The results of the 2016 municipal elections do cast doubt on the alternative theories that posit that oppositional civil society’s wariness of reaching out to opposition parties stems from its deference to it constituents, who are stalwart supporters of the ANC. If increasing numbers of black South Africans, particularly those living in urban areas (Friedman 2016), are now willing to oppose the ANC in the streets and at the polls—to add the ballot to the brick against the ruling party (Booysen 2011)—why is oppositional civil society not following their lead? As grassroots organizations, presumably they had their finger on the pulse of popular political sentiments, and thus could not have been surprised by the number of their constituents who were willing to
switch their vote from the ANC to an opposition party. Yet the fact that they likely foresaw these
trends and still did little to engage with elections and political parties suggests that oppositional
civil society’s alienation from electoral politics has different and deeper roots than a simple
desire to please their supporters. This dissertation is an exercise in uncovering these hidden roots,
in building a theory that can explain why civil society opposition to the ruling government would reject alliances with potential political partners even as their core constituencies are moving into the embrace of oppositional parties. My theory will consider how and why civil society’s coffins can remain empty despite the intentions of their voting constituencies to fill them.

Dissertation Outline

This dissertation will proceed in the following manner. Chapter One will review the extant literature on civil society with an eye toward finding insights regarding the relationship between civil society and political society actors. Although there is considerable scholarship on civil society’s role in supporting the political opposition to non-democratic regimes, its relationship with ruling and opposition parties within democratic regimes has received little explicit attention. Once democracy has been achieved, scholarly focus tends to shift too quickly to civil society’s support of the more general concepts of “good governance” and “institutional performance” (Putnam 1993; Tusalem 2007). If there is interest in the partisanship of civil society, it primarily concerns whether civil society is a partisan of democracy itself, not of specific political actors within a democratic system. What the literature says about civil society’s stance towards political parties and electoral politics largely has to be inferred.

Chapter Two will thus develop, somewhat de novo, the theory of when oppositional civil society will actively support political parties and become involved in electoral contests. It will argue that civil society waits until electoral contests involve opposition parties that are states-in-
waiting, grounding it in propositions about civil society’s natural alienation from electoral politics, statist orientation, and affinity for participatory democracy.

Chapter Three then moves to the case of post-apartheid South Africa, with the goal of performing an initial test of the validity of the theory and finding refinements necessary to build a stronger theory for wider applicability. The focus of this chapter will be on post-apartheid’s social movements and how they lend credence to the dissertation’s theorizing about oppositional civil society’s approach to ruling and opposition parties. Several scholars (Diani and Bison 2004; Snow, Soule and Kriesi 2004; Tarrow 1994) have offered their own conceptualizations of social movements, but most are variations of Tilly’s (1984) definition of a social movements as: “a sustained series of interactions between power holders and persons successfully claiming to speak on behalf of a constituency lacking formal representation, in the course of which those persons make publicly visible demands for changes in the distribution or exercise of power, and back those demands with public demonstrations of support” (306). Social movements are marked by their less professional, more informal, and more ephemeral nature than non-governmental organizations, which are often considered the paradigmatic institution of civil society. Chapter Three will draw primarily on original interview research with leaders and members of South Africa’s most prominent social movements, including the Anti-Privatization Forum, the Unemployed People’s Movements, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, and Abahlali baseMjondolo. It will show that these movements purposely eschew involvement with elections, campaigns and political parties because of their belief that only a refashioned state will be capable of addressing the needs of the majority of South Africans. These groups are the most outspoken in their criticism of the ANC and are prone to illegal protest actions, but the
underlying purpose is to “get the ANC back on track” and to continue the “interrupted” political-economic revolution.

Chapter Four will focus on another dimension of post-apartheid oppositional civil society, demonstrating that it too has reasons to be wary of a change in the identity of the ruling party absent an overhaul of the South African state. Here the object of analysis will be non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance, the Public Accountability Monitor, the International Labor Research and the East Cape Agricultural Research Project. Unlike South Africa’s social movements, these NGOs possess a greater degree of institutionalization, often have a professional staff, and are officially registered with the government. In addition, several of them have partnered with the South African government in policy development or implementation. Still, these groups are vocal in their criticism of the government and the ANC and do not hesitate from organizing in order to oppose government action with which they do not agree. Yet these NGOs do hesitate from supporting opposition parties given their significant prior investment in the ANC and the state that it runs. They are unwilling to engage in action that may undermine the current state, cognizant that they could not exist without the state. Thus, many indicated that the only thing that would pull them into the world of electoral and representational politics would be an attack on the state, such as that presented by an opposition party that is a state-in-waiting.

Chapter Five will then tackle the issue of the generalizability of the theory. It will outline three different categories of political systems that should be worthy targets for the theory: dominant-party democracies, consolidating democracies, and post-liberation societies ruled by former liberation movements. The cases of Botswana, Thailand, Namibia and Zimbabwe will be briefly reviewed to suggest wider applicability of my theory beyond South Africa.
Chapter Six will conclude the dissertation by summarizing the theory and its implications for issues related to state-society relations, democracy, and opposition politics. It will draw attention to a number of theoretical propositions that deserve further scrutiny, especially as they deviate from much of the received wisdom about civil society’s affinity for, and salutary effect on, democratic governance. Just as the protesters staging the mock funeral were actually only just getting started with their movement, I hope my dissertation opens more avenues in the study of civil society, democracy and political parties than it closes.
CHAPTER I. UNANSWERED (AND UNASKED) QUESTIONS: TOWARDS A THEORY OF CIVIL SOCIETY – POLITICAL PARTY INTERACTION

It is not difficult to find answers to the question of why disgruntled South Africans who participate in civil society groups that oppose ANC policy have thus far remained aloof from the country’s opposition political parties. The proposed reasons for this missed pairing are legion, and they are the same as those proffered for the South African electorate as a whole. Foremost among these explanations is the lingering racial divide and animosity that still besets the country. This, it is commonly argued, has prevented the chief opposition party, the Democratic Alliance, from garnering support among the black majority, as the party is widely seen—deservedly or not—as the party of the white and coloured minorities. Others suggest that black South Africans feel they owe a debt to the ANC as the party of liberation, and that has prevented them from abandoning the party at the polls so long as the memories of the horrors of apartheid remain fresh in their minds. Like those who argue that young South Africans are wary of upsetting their “grannies”—longtime and stalwart supporters of the ANC—they suggest that the ANC will eventually lose its widespread support as the “born-frees” (those born after the end of apartheid) begin to dominate the electorate. Still others point to the importance of patronage politics, noting that impoverished South Africans are worried about losing their social grants and access to state-provided welfare services if they vote against the ANC. Additional explanations range from off-putting personalities within opposition parties to the population’s tendency to blame local ANC politicians and not the larger political party.

The irony about this abundance and variety of jointly plausible explanations, however, is that it renders the whole situation seemingly inscrutable. Nothing can be explained when everything can do the explaining. The situation in post-apartheid South Africa seems to be both
over-determined and overly unique, neither a puzzle nor a generalizable case: in essence, a dead-end for social scientists.

But the fact that we can entertain so many explanations and are unable to discriminate among them should not suggest the disutility of the South African case but rather point to the under-development and inadequacy of our theory regarding the relationship between civil society and democratic electoral politics. As it is, the question of why organized opposition to the ANC at the level of civil society does not translate into support for opposition parties is too often reduced to the question of why unhappy South Africans still vote for the ANC, as if the presence of a robust oppositional civil society were just an indicator of dissatisfaction with the ruling party rather than its own phenomenon. Indeed, the most commonly offered explanations for oppositional civil society’s alienation from opposition parties in South Africa gloss over the very identity of these groups as civil society groups. We tend to treat protestors’ reasons for rejecting opposition parties as somehow exogenous from their choice to engage in organized protest, when they may be endogenous to their very predilection for civil society-level opposition. All of this speaks to the narrowness of our theorizing when it comes to conceptualizing civil society within democratic contexts and our tendency to cast civil society as the agent of something else, rather than granting it independent agency. Particularistic understandings of the oppositional civil society’s approach to political parties abound in part because we have unnecessarily constrained our focus when theorizing about civil society.

For the past thirty years, what has chiefly animated political science scholarship of civil society has been the partisanship of civil society with regard to democracy itself. The concept of civil society was resurrected within the discipline beginning in the 1980s primarily as an independent variable that could help explain when and why what we call “democracy” works.
The focus has been on whether civil society is “good” for democracy writ large, frequently operationalized through macro-level statistics like Freedom House scores or voter turnout. Key questions within the literature are those such as: Do democratic institutions function more efficiently when the surrounding civil society is robust? Is democracy more likely to survive when a country’s citizens are enthusiastic joiners of voluntary organizations? Do members of bowling leagues and bird-watching clubs participate more in democratic processes—writing letters to the editor, voting, etc.—than those atomized individuals who pass their free time alone in front of a blinking screen? Although there exist important cautionary voices (Berman 1997; Powell 2013), the general consensus within the literature is that there is a natural affinity between civil society and democracy, and that civil society is important in establishing and sustaining a democratic system. In turn, policymakers and activists on both the political right and left have seized upon civil society as a solution to the ills and failings of democratic politics.

Yet this widespread acceptance of a link between civil society and democracy has not proved exactly liberating to scholars, emboldening them to ask novel questions and test the boundaries of this relationship. Instead, the conviction that civil society and democracy go together, both theoretically and empirically, seems to have engendered banality, as political scientists continue to tread the same well-worn ground. It has also brushed aside inquiry into the black box of civil society itself. The extant scholarship provides limited direction on how to understand the thoughts, behavior, and motivations of individuals who choose to engage with their democratically elected governments through civil society action and organization. Likewise, it offers scant guidance on what these choices mean for anything other than the macro concept of democracy, such as for the specific components of democratic systems, including elections, political parties, and individual politicians. Indeed, it is difficult to build theories to
explain the stance of oppositional civil society towards opposition parties within democracies when our theorizing remains stuck on the question of civil society’s support for capital-D democracy. In probing the voting choices of civil society participants, the literature directs us to treat these individuals as generic voters, rather than as individuals who are both civil society participants and voters. We need to expand the focus away from civil society doing something for democracy towards civil society as its own way of doing democracy.

This chapter will engage critically with the voluminous yet incomplete literature on the linkages between civil society and democracy. While this scholarship does have an unnecessarily limited scope, there is something to be evinced from its silences and ellipses, and I will draw on these in order to construct my own theory, delineated in the next chapter, about the relationship between oppositional civil society and opposition political parties. I will begin this chapter with the literature on civil society’s role in the transition towards democracy, pointing out the unspoken assumptions about the types of political parties that attract civil society support during moments of transitions, and how they might inform our understanding of the interaction of civil society groups and political parties once democracy has been established. Then I will look at the scholarship linking civil society to democratic governance, highlighting several important underlying themes: the natural alienation of civil society from political society, the statist bias of civil society, and its alignment with the participatory model of democracy. This will set the stage for the next chapter’s formal description of my theory about oppositional civil society’s support for opposition parties.

**Civil Society and Political Society**

Before wading too deeply into the literature, it is crucial to first define the key terms under discussion. Despite the way it is sometimes blithely bandied about by policymakers, “civil
“society” is not an uncontested term, free of the weight of historical and cultural baggage and scholarly debate. Surveying the myriad definitions that exist for the term, Eboe Hutchful (1995) notes that they tend to include any or all of the following criteria: “location (between the state and the citizen), functions (serving and defending the interests of private memberships), and institutions and politics (opposition to and collaboration with the state).” In this dissertation, I will follow the example of those who seek a degree of precision in their definition of civil society while leaving aside normative evaluations. Civil society is not simply everything that lies between the state and the family or household. Following Linz and Stepan’s (1996) discussion of the five “arenas” of democratization, we can distinguish three that exist between the state and the family: civil society, political society, and economic society. Civil society consists of organized, voluntary groups and associations of ordinary citizens that are formally established and legally protected yet autonomous from the state (Howard 2003; Diamond 1999).

Civil society differs from political society and economic society in several respects. According to Diamond (1999), political society “encompasses all those organized actors (in a democracy, primarily political parties and campaign organizations) whose primary goal is to win control of the state or at least some position for themselves in it” (221). Howard’s (2003) succinct rendering of economic society is that it includes “the myriad of business organizations pursuing economic profit in a capitalist system” (34). What differentiates political and economic society from civil society, then, are their motivations and reason for existence. Although civil society organizations often do seek political influence and need financial support to survive, their chief goal is neither state power nor economic profit (Howard 2003: 35). As Cohen and Arato (1992) note, the fact that civil society actors are not directly involved with state power and economic production—nor strive to be—has the effect of rendering their political role
This diffuse and inefficient political role further points to the second key distinction between civil society and political and economic society. While the latter two are the realm of elites, the former involves ordinary citizens.

This dissertation focuses on civil society and political society, and specifically on two subcategories of them. What I will call oppositional civil society refers to voluntary groups and associations of ordinary citizens that are organized around opposition to specific state policies, actions, or political positions. Their goal is to change state actions—through the implementation of new policy or the abandonment of offensive policies—but they do not seek state power as a means to their ends. Oppositional civil society groups want the state or government to change its actions, but do not believe that members of their groups need to become part of the state or government in order to implement these changes. The closest counterparts within political society to oppositional civil society are opposition parties, defined as those political parties that are not part of the ruling coalition within a specific sitting government or branch of a specific sitting government. A key distinction between oppositional civil society groups and opposition parties is that the latter’s criticism of the incumbent government is paired with an argument that they should replace the incumbents in their positions within the state.

Civil Society and Transitions to Democracy

Civil society is by no means a new topic within the political science canon, but it jumped to the forefront of democracy studies beginning in the 1980s as contemporary events suggested a key role for civil society in the transitions from non-democratic to democratic rule. Its popularity then began to ebb post-9/11, as attention turned to more pressing subjects. In the years prior to the 1980s, scholars had primarily focused their attention on the role of political elites in the authoritarian regime and their democratic opponents in negotiating a transition. For its slim
spine, O’Donnell and Schmitter’s (1986) widely read “green book” on transitions from authoritarian rule commanded outsize attention, and it mapped a course in which civil society is “resurrected” only after elite-led liberalization. But as the third wave of democratization (Huntington 1991) crested over the globe, scholars and laypersons alike noted that civil society’s role in the transition to democracy was often more proactive, even in those cases considered foundational for the elite-driven model (Diamond 1999: 234).

This was particularly evident in the transitions in Eastern Europe and Latin America, where by necessity civil society led the pro-democracy movements, given that expressly political organizations were either forbidden or very weak in many of these states (Linz and Stepan 1996). The neopatrimonial structure of Africa’s authoritarian regimes also ensured that the subcontinent’s transitions to more liberalized, multiparty systems were initiated by protest and popular mobilization and not by elite conflict or schisms within the ruling regime, as the institutional structure of such regimes tends to insulate elites from popular criticism and lead them to resist political liberalization for as long as possible (Bratton and van de Walle 1994). A long list of disparate countries including South Korea, Taiwan, Chile, Czechoslovakia, Nigeria and Benin join Poland—perhaps the paradigmatic example of a country driven towards democracy in large part due to the leadership of civil society—as those whose democratization cannot be properly understood without reference to civil society action (Alagappa 2004: ix). Civil society certainly played a crucial role in the dismantling of apartheid and move to multiracial democracy in South Africa; the ANC itself began as a social movement, and when it was banned as a political party, its allies in civil society, particularly the United Democratic Front, took up the mantle in leading the fight. While some have forcefully argued that the third-wave-inspired “transitions” literature blinded political scientists and policymakers to empirical
reality and overestimated the importance of civil society (Carothers 2002), it did open scholars’
eyes to the importance of civil society in the process of democratization.

While not immediately evident, the place of prominence that many scholars gave to civil
society in the transitions literature speaks to the question at hand here—oppositional civil
society’s support for opposition parties within democracies—in several ways. First, it suggests
that civil society is most likely to become directly involved in electoral and party politics under
very specific, and special, circumstances. Transitional moments are those when the very nature
of the state is at stake. Elections at this critical juncture represent not just an opportunity to
determine who will fill positions within the government, but also the rules of the game that will
structure the behavior of the government. That civil society can, and often does, play a key role
under these circumstances raises the issue of whether we can expect it to take such a strong
stance and such direct action when the political stakes are not nearly as high.

Diamond (1999), for example, doubts that Pinochet would have been defeated in the
1988 plebiscite that ended his dictatorship were it not for the “heroic organization” (236) of the
Crusade for Citizen Participation, and argues that it was only the mobilization of civil society in
protesting the stolen presidential election in the Philippines in 1986 that eventually forced
Marcos from power (235). But if these extraordinary achievements in ousting non-democratic
rulers were possible because of civil society mobilization and organization, it is worthwhile to
consider whether civil society mobilization and organization actually depended on the possibility
of removing dictators from office. That is, perhaps it was the 1988 plebiscite itself, which
directly put to the people the question of the continuation of the Pinochet dictatorship, which
motivated and mobilized civil society in Chile. The literature on civil society’s role in political
transitions towards democratic rule takes for granted the fact that these are moments when
fundamental change in the nature of the state and the political regime is possible, but it is not clear whether civil society makes the same omission when deciding when and how to participate in politics. My theory concerning oppositional civil society’s stance towards opposition parties will argue that the surrounding political circumstances matter, and that when the nature of the state is at stake, as it is during transitional moments, civil society is more likely to regard this as an invitation—or even an obligation—to become involved.

A second key insight to be gleaned from the transitions literature concerns the identity of those political actors that civil society supports during moments of change. Not surprisingly, scholarship focuses on civil society’s support for democratic political society. While this reflects the bias within the field to see civil society first and foremost as a partisan of democracy, it also follows from the reality that during these moments there essentially are just two significant camps within political society: the democratic camp and the non-democratic camp. Transitional moments are thus not only extraordinary because of their high stakes, but also because there tend to be clear and significant dividing lines between opposing factions in political society. In this sense, the decision to support pro-democracy regime opponents seems easy and almost preordained on the part of civil society. But if scholarship suggests that it is easy for civil society to support pro-democracy political actors during moments of transition, then it may not be easy for civil society to choose political actors with which to side, when, during the course of normal politics in consolidated democracies, all political actors are equally pro-democratic. Again, the literature paints civil society as decisive and predictable in its actions when the political situation has already been decided to be a contest between democracy and non-democratic rule. My theory will argue that civil society’s default support for pro-democratic political forces leads to much indecision and inaction when all major political actors, meaning both the ruling and opposition
parties, are pro-democratic. In other words, when competing political parties share an underlying commitment to the democratic state, then civil society may not want, or feel it needs, to choose between them.

On the other hand, some of the literature on transitions stresses that there may not actually be much of a pro-democratic, oppositional political society for civil society to support. A third insight from the transition literature that I will draw from in my theory is the recognition that civil society is just as capable and accustomed to substituting for oppositional political groups as it is to supporting and subordinating itself to those groups. In certain cases of democratization, civil society leads the movement to oust dictatorial rulers precisely because it comprises the bulk of the opposition within a country. Bratton and van de Walle (1994), for instance, warn against stretching O’Donnell and Schmitter’s (1986) elite-driven model of transition across different types of autocratic regimes, arguing that the neopatrimonial regimes found in Africa simply did not have the oppositional actors within political society to force a political opening within the regime and craft a pacted transition. Instead, such forms of autocratic rule tend to foster loyalty among those who have access to the state and opposition only from those who have been denied access to political society. Linz and Stepan (1996) further agree that the type of non-democratic regime matters greatly in patterning the process of transition and the types of tasks the nascent democratic regime will face. In their typology of non-democratic regimes, they consider the degree and type of pluralism permitted under a regime, noting that certain regime types, particularly totalitarianism and sultanism, quash the development of political pluralism, forcing opposition to grow outside the political sphere. The fact that many democratic transitions were initiated and carried through by civil society in the absence of a strong, institutionalized oppositional political society raises the issue of whether civil society
needs to engage with like-minded actors in political society in order to effectively oppose the incumbent government. My theory argues that oppositional civil society frequently assumes that it can successfully challenge the incumbent government without allying with opposition parties.

In fact, I draw on the transition literature’s observations about the potential for political parties to co-opt and demobilize civil society to further bolster my contention that post-transition, civil society is wary of joining forces with parties unless absolutely necessary. While some transitions to democracy involved civil society working independently of non-existent or weak political forces, in others, civil society operated as a puppet for opposition parties, to be taken offstage when they were no longer needed. For example, Linz and Stepan (1996) note that in the cases of Chile and Spain, “some of the movements called civil society had, to a great extent, been created and directed by previously illegal political parties. When these political parties were able to participate legally in politics, they shifted their efforts away from mobilization of civil society and, in some cases, consciously demobilized society” (9). If political parties have a history of co-opting and demobilizing civil society, then it should follow that the latter does not have an innately charitable view of the former or desire to aid them, which is one of the underlying assumptions of my theory. Thus, the literature on civil society’s role in transitions towards democracy, which are relatively uncommon and special political circumstances, has partially informed my theory’s assertion that special circumstances will also have to obtain for oppositional civil society groups to actively support opposition parties.

**Alienation of Civil Society from Political Society**

Scholarly attention to the role of civil society in democratic transitions pales in comparison to the volumes of theory and research dedicated to the issue of civil society’s contribution to democratic governance. It is here that we find the most developed and
sophisticated theories regarding what civil society can—and cannot—do to make democracy “work.” Rather than attempting even the most cursory review of the entire literature, I will focus instead on those strands that speak, often only implicitly, to the relationship between civil society and political society, particularly political parties.

One underlying theme that can help address the issue of when oppositional civil society will support opposition parties is the apparent alienation of civil society from political society. While it is important to take heed of Edwards and Foley’s (1996) contention that the separation between civil society and political society is largely a scholarly fiction, not actually seen in practice, it is worth considering why civil society groups and political parties are frequently studied in isolation. This dissertation does not presume that scholars should overlook political society when studying civil society, or vice versa, but it does take seriously the possibility that civil society actors themselves can, and do, overlook and/or undervalue political society.

In fact, I argue that while civil society organizations and political parties share a broadly complementary goal—namely governmental accountability—they differ enough in their conceptualization of what it looks like and how it is to be achieved that the two groups would be hard-pressed to view themselves as natural allies. This is particularly true on the part of civil society, which I contend is likely to see political parties as taking the “easy way out” when it comes to keeping the government accountable to the people.

For example, scholarship suggests that civil society’s understanding of governmental accountability is invested in the expression of the full range of citizen interests, no matter how minor, and thus is not satisfied with a government that merely reflects the majority or popular

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7 Apologies, as always, to Putnam et al. 1993.
8 In particular, they take Putnam and his coauthors (1993) to task for what they see as glossing over the role of political parties in democratic functioning and writing as if civil society were able to affect democratic governance completely unmediated.
will. In Diamond’s (1999) view, civil society is the realm where even the smallest interest group can find its niche and make its voice heard. It is often the refuge of traditionally marginalized groups and those who cannot find representation in the centripetal, catchall system of political parties. A government that is accountable to civil society, then, is a state that listens to all organized interests, even those not strong enough to win elections or positions within the state. In a sense, true accountability requires officeholders to renounce their partisanship, even if that played a significant role in their ascension into the government. Civil society may undervalue political parties because they are chiefly concerned with accountability to the electorate, while it aspires to achieve government accountability to the whole populace.

Moreover, civil society’s conceptualization of government accountability demands much more of officeholders and constituents alike. The agents of political society concern themselves with who occupies positions of power within the state. Getting the right people or party in office, and throwing the wrong people or party out of it, are key to ensuring that the state acts in ways that accord with the interests of the people. Accountability, then, is a function of representation. Elections are the chief form of communication between would-be representatives and their constituents. As Benjamin Barber (1984) argues, accountability in such representative democracies is really “reciprocal control” (240).

Civil society, on the other hand, operates on the principle that elections are not the only—nor even the primary—way in which citizens hold their representatives accountable. Civil society action assumes that those who occupy positions of power within the state, no matter their partisan affiliation, are responsible for and responsive to the interests of their fellow citizens. It assumes that communication between representatives and their constituents extends beyond election season. What is most important in this conception is not finding and electing the best
individuals to serve in the government, but the interaction between all citizens—those in positions of political power and those outside of the government—in finding solutions to shared problems. It most closely approximates what Barber (1984) characterizes as “strong democracy,” in which the civic bond “is neither vertical nor lateral but circular and dialectical” (242).

Given the distinct understandings of state accountability between political society and civil society, I argue that civil society has ample reason to separate itself from political parties. In fact, an alliance between civil society groups and political parties stands to undermine its conceptualization of government accountability. The voices of those minority interests not numerous enough to matter electorally might be lost were civil society to concede to the principle of accountability through representation. The vertical relationship between voter and elected representative might supersede the circular and dialectical relationship between the two should civil society organizations devote too much time to helping political parties obtain positions within the state. Just as there is a degree of self-subordination involved when individuals “speak out” by supporting the candidacy of others, civil society groups may have to sacrifice some of their animating principles in order to work with political parties.

Indeed, as Doug McAdam and Sidney Tarrow (2010), two of the foremost scholars of social movements, have noted, there is an “inherent tension between the logic of movement activism and the logic of electoral politics” (537), and this tension may alienate civil society from political society. Allowing the logic of movement activism, with its unbending commitment to single issues and confrontational and unconventional tactics, to dominate in an alliance between political parties and social movements could result in political parties losing necessary electoral majorities. On the other hand, dominance by the logic of electoral politics, with its drive to establish large-scale coalitions of disparate interests and commitment to play by the rules,
could undermine social movements’ raison d’être and independent existence (Trejo 2014). It may be that democracy cannot survive without both a robust civil society and a strong political society, but that does not mean that civil society and political society view each other as natural allies.

Wariness of party politics may actually be a hallmark of contemporary civil society. In the oft-romanticized, Tocquevillian version of the early United States, Kirp (1999: 26) argues that emerging political parties could be considered a type of civil society association. But once they became the modern incarnation of political parties, marked by patronage and focused on winning elections, they isolated themselves from civil society and set in stark relief the nonpartisan “specialness” of civil society within democratic politics. As Walzer (2003) notes, both the political right and left have agreed on the separateness and nonpartisanship of civil society for some time now, such that “antipolitical tendencies…commonly accompany the celebration of civil society” (317). On the right, civil society is anti-political because it believes that agents of the state need not get involved in community issues, while on the left, it is anti-political because it seeks to circumvent the elitist, hierarchical model of representative and party politics.

According to Powell (2013), a postmodern ethos, defined by its anti-bureaucratic and anti-clientelist values, has seeped into social movements and citizen uprisings all over the globe (157). “Politics as usual” was as much a target of the recent Occupy protests as was Wall Street, as activists have come to recognize that the current practice of democracy—in which politicians are bought and paid for by lobby groups and oligarchs—is inextricable from the practice of neoliberal capitalism (Della Porta 2012: 66). Those involved in the new social movements and oppositional civil society groups perceive themselves as having been excluded from the political
society, but they do not desire inclusion in the political society as much as the delegitimizing of
political society as the paramount realm of politics.

The Africanist literature has also long been skeptical about civil society’s willingness to
engage with formal political institutions. Given the subcontinent’s history of colonial rule and
repressive post-colonial regimes, many scholars argue that civil society in sub-Saharan Africa
evolved to become an alternative to politics and the state. Azarya (1998, 1994) has focused on
African civil society as a realm of “disengagement” from political life, a place to which the
people retreat in order to escape the reach of the state. Likewise, Bayart (1986) insists that
African civil society must be defined by its confrontational relationships to the state and politics,
and Lewis (1992) describes the “regeneration of association life” in Africa as a “defensive”
response to state policy. From these perspectives, civil society draws its strength from resisting
incorporation or engagement with political society. Those who retreat to civil society do not see
political parties as a way for them to amplify their interests, but as a way for their interests to be
swallowed by corrupt political machines.

Ekeh (1975) suggests that the divide between civil society and political society is one of
predator and prey, but argues that it is actually civil society that is in the dominant position. Civil
society, he contends, prevents the political sphere from preying on the people by encouraging the
people to instead prey on the political sphere. His concepts of the “primordial public” and the
“civic public” correspond to civil society and political society, respectively. Presaging Migdal’s
(1988) work on states and societies vying against one another for social control, he argues that
voluntary associations, as part of the primordial public, do not complement, but rather subtract
from the civic public in Africa. They encourage members to prioritize primordial groups and
their interests over civic concerns or the needs of the wider community, allowing for the literal
and figurative impoverishment of the civic public. In a sense, then, civil society and political society groups are separated from one another because of competition for members and their conflicting goals.

The self-imposed alienation of civil society from political society is not confined to Africa, however. Around the globe, there is a considerable history of civil society in autocratic regimes separating itself from political parties as a means of survival. As noted by Linz and Stepan (1996) and Bratton and van de Walle (1994), in some autocratic regimes, opposition parties were either banned or so weakened that civil society groups opposing the incumbent government needed to actively distance themselves from political parties as a way to survive regime scrutiny, essentially forcing them to act alone. The divide has continued into the democratic era. In recently transitioned countries, civil society groups are often required to maintain what Carothers (1999: 221) calls the “illusion of non-partisanship” in order to receive financial aid from outside groups. The U.S. democracy promotion industry abroad is especially prone to a “mythic conception of nonpartisanship” regarding civil society groups, stemming from “the notion that there is a clear line between nonpartisan advocacy and partisan politics” (Carothers 1999: 221). In many cases, the advocacy NGOs are indeed somehow involved in partisan politics, but the expectation that they separate themselves from political society drives these relationships between civil society groups and political parties underground, and makes civil society eager to sever their support for political parties when they launch any campaigns that will put their activities in the spotlight. In his seminal article “The End of the Transitions Paradigm,” Carothers (2002) implores democracy promotion efforts to completely change their course and stop encouraging civil society groups to stay away from partisan politics. This
implies that the divide between civil society and political society is real, and according to this seasoned observer of democratic transition and consolidation, has significant consequences.

**Aloof but Still Influential?**

Yet even many scholars who contend that civil society seeks to set itself apart from political parties still concede that the products of civil society cannot but help to seep into the political sphere. This is the essence of much of the literature on civil society’s role in the production of that key fertilizer of democracy: social capital. A term borrowed from the sociologist James S. Coleman (Edwards and Foley 1998) and popularized in the political science literature by Robert Putnam, social capital is conceived of as the “features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” (Putnam et al. 1993: 167). The core argument offered by numerous scholars is that civil society organizations inculcate democratic habits and norms in participants and build trust among the wider community (social capital), which then redounds to the political sphere, allowing democratic institutions to operate more efficiently and responsibly. As the key intervening variable between civil society participation and democratic governance, social capital’s ability to transcend the boundaries of individual bird-watching clubs and bowling leagues to affect the proceedings of town halls underlies a long tradition of scholarship, from Tocqueville’s (1835) study of the United States’ young democracy to Tusalem’s (2007) finding that the density of civil society organizations within post-transition countries was positively correlated with better institutional performance. The most trenchant critiques of this literature do not push back against the idea that social capital produced in civil society affects politics, but against the theory that social capital always has salutary effects on democratic functioning.  

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My theory, on the other hand, departs from the prevailing themes in the literature by questioning how easy it is for the products of civil society participation to cross into the political sphere and advocating for greater specification of exactly which institutions of democracy feel the effects of civil society’s reserves of social capital. On the first point, I echo Edwards and Foley (1998), who note that Coleman, the sociologist who pioneered the term “social capital,” conceived of it as the “norms and values available as resources to those individuals who share access to [a] particular social context” (129). That is, social capital develops within a certain social context and subsequently operates within that same social context. Yet many scholars expect the trust built among members of a specific civil society group to somehow translate into trust among individuals operating in other spheres, as if trusting specific individuals makes a person trusting of anyone. The theory to be developed in this dissertation is skeptical of the assumption that social capital is so easily generalizable and applicable outside of the context in which it was produced. Even if oppositional civil society groups and opposition political parties share a similar assessment of the policies of the ruling party, the trust and norms of reciprocity developed within specific organizations may remain exclusive to members of those particular organizations. There needs to be a compelling reason for civil society participants, especially their leaders, to look beyond the confines of their organizations for allies they can trust and feel comfortable working with.

One the second point, there actually is not much within the Putnam and Tocqueville schools that suggests that political parties are the democratic institutions that would benefit from civil society’s largess. Putnam and his coauthors (1993), for example, argue that in the regions of Italy rich in social capital, both citizens and their elected officials are less staunchly partisan, being “unafraid of creative compromise” with their political opponents (Putnam 1993: 105). In a
sense, the culture of openness and compromise in civic regions undermines the importance of political parties in mediating between conflicting interests. Furthermore, citizens in a civic community “expect their government to follow high standards” (Putnam 1993: 111), which raises the question of how willing a trusting populace will be of using the blunt object of elections to sanction poorly-behaving officeholders. It may be that the social capital bred within civil society actually functions to insulate political society from outside pressures that may inspire significant internal reordering. The social capital produced in civil society may inspire more citizen engagement in democratic governance, but not necessarily more citizen engagement with political parties. The theory in this dissertation takes these unspoken observations about civil society’s ability to influence democratic functioning without necessarily reinforcing electoral politics and political parties and makes them explicit. It will start with the assumption that civil society’s influence in politics is not diffuse but targeted, and that except in certain circumstances, its influence is targeted away from political parties and elections.

**Statist Bias**

The alienation of civil society from political society suggests that civil society groups may not believe it is necessary or wise for them to actively work with and support political parties. But a principled disdain for party politics does not mean that civil society rejects all of the major institutions of democratic polities. On the contrary, there is significant reason to believe that civil society may be so neglectful of political parties because they are so invested in and focused on the *state* instead. The theory being developed in this dissertation will argue that this statist bias can help explain the cautionary stance of oppositional civil society groups towards opposition parties and the specific moments when they transgress these tendencies.
Social scientists have long grappled with the relationship between the state and civil society, but the consensus has moved away from zero-sum calculations in which one only becomes greater as the other diminishes. Such was the diagnosis of Gellner (1994), who once characterized civil society as “the social residue left when the state is subtracted,” as if civil society only existed in those crevices of society not already occupied by the state (212). This view of state-civil society relations resonated with scholars studying autocratic settings, who often saw civil society as a place of refuge from a predatory state (Ayoade 1988; Azarya 1988; 1994; Lewis 1992). But it is important to note that even these characterizations of the relationships between the state and civil society are not necessarily zero-sum, as they imply that the more repressive the state becomes, the more citizens retreat to, and invest in, life in civil society. The smaller the gap the state leaves unfilled, the more that gap will be filled by what Lewis (1992) calls in the African setting, the “defensive regeneration of associational life” (148). In a sense, the power and pull of civil society is not the inverse of the power and pull of the state, but its direct reflection. In a similar vein, the neoliberal call for the shrinking of the state and the displacement of many of its functions onto civil society (Powell 2013) emanates from a belief that the state has become too large; a more robust civil society is envisioned as the necessary counterweight for a state that is doing too much. The view of civil society as the state’s opponent or alternative requires that the former match the latter.

Scholars who reject the “civil society against the state” argument go even further in their contention that the state and civil society tend to mutually reinforce one another. Some even suggest that the one cannot exist without the other (see Howard 2003; Walzer 1990). This is especially the case in democratic contexts. Walzer (1990) sums up this sentiment with pith: “Only a democratic state can create a democratic civil society: only a democratic civil society
can sustain a democratic state” (1990: 319). While this does seem to introduce the chicken-and-
the-egg problem of which—civil society or the state—came first, it highlights the fact that the
two need one another to survive. Civil society’s contribution to the sustenance of the democratic
state and governance has been covered earlier, but there are also many ways in which civil
society owes a great debt to the state.

At the very least, civil society within democracies requires a state strong enough to
maintain the right of its citizens to free speech and association (Diamond 1999). But additional
historical and contemporary research from the United States (Skocpol 1999), France (Levy
1999), Germany (Padgett 2000), and Britain (Hall 1999) suggests that the state has and can do
much more for civil society, often being directly responsible for the establishment and support of
voluntary organizations. That is, the state has not only provided the fertile ground for civil
society to grow; it has also actively cultivated it. And if civil society makes democracy work,
then the democratic state also puts civil society to work. Not only does a state that is officially
committed to democratic norms and principles provide the pretext for watchdog and advocacy
civil society organizations, but such a state can also directly partner with civil society groups to
develop, implement, and monitor policy. There is always significant concern about the co-
optation of civil society by the state, especially immediately after democratic transitions, but it is
necessary to consider whether such co-optation is a betrayal of civil society’s autonomy or if it
betrays civil society’s inherent investment in the democratic state.

In fact, some scholars (Chazan 1992) even insist that organizations should not be
considered part of civil society unless they legitimize state authority. Chazan’s requirements are
directed towards non-Western societies, but they derive from the way Western civil society has
historically legitimized state authority by seeking to convince the state to adopt its principles and
purposes. Powell (2013) argues that one of Western civil society’s greatest triumphs was the creation of the welfare state, which he calls the “socialisation of the state” and a “fusion between state and society.” In the modern era, civil society was able to force its agenda onto the state and replace private charity with state-provided welfare services. The socialization of the state by civil society no doubt “imperilled [civil society’s] own autonomy” (Powell 2013: 117) but it also represented civil society advancing one of its key goals, which was the creation of a virtuous society writ large—not one confined to a smaller segment of citizens active in the issues of social justice. The welfare state represented civil society’s investment in the state as executor of its interests and vision. The “socialisation of the state” was not so much an instance of civil society compromising its principles, but of civil society fulfilling them by working with and through the state.

Despite the state’s repeated failures and tendency, especially in recent years, to become increasingly beholden to the market, civil society still demonstrates considerable faith in the democratic state to effect its vision. Opposition at the level of civil society is often not against the state, but against the direction in which the state has moved. As Thompson and Tapscott (2010) point out regarding civil society in the global South, even when people receive poor treatment from the state, “most still turn to the state for services and resources,” meaning it is “not always the political order which they wish to change, as much as their position in that order” (20). What English-speakers often call movements of the poor or marginalized, which can include demands for housing, legal status, etc., are frequently known as sans or “without” movements by French speakers (Powell 2013: 158). “Without” highlights the fact that there are groups who are lacking what is due to them as members of a polity. “Without” movements come with the recognition that there are others who are “with,” that “with” is possible, and that there
are entities that determine who is “with” and who is “without.” The key entity that has this ability to confer a “with” or “without” status, of course, is the state. The sans movements within civil society betray a conviction that the state can change the position of those who are without.

Ultimately, civil society’s bias towards the state reveals its propensity to engage with those who hold the power in a given polity. The romantic David-and-Goliath narratives of civil society fighting for the powerless against the powerful tend to obscure just how much civil society relies on the powerful for its purposes and success. Civil society shrewdly focuses on the state because its power is greater, more enduring, and more legitimate than that of other institutions within democratic society.

While the existing literature makes a strong case for the statist bias of civil society, it has not fully followed through on this insight to consider how this bias affects civil society’s relationships with other key institutions of democracy. My dissertation does just that by contemplating how civil society’s focus on the state influences its stance towards political parties. It will argue that in normal circumstances, when political parties all represent various governments-in-waiting vying to take hold of the same state, civil society should be relatively apathetic as to which of the political parties it prefers. When the elections will do little to change the basic architecture of, operating principles of, and resources available to the state, civil society has little incentive to take interest in them or their major players. In fact, to behave as if the state can only meet the demands of society if certain parties and politicians take office would be to acknowledge state weakness and concede that accountability is a feature of certain political parties rather than the democratic state itself. If civil society were to engage with political parties instead of the state, it would be undermining the authority of the one democratic institution that it can reflexively count on to support and legitimate its own existence.
Preference for Participatory Democracy

Extant scholarship suggests that civil society is not biased just toward the state, but that it also has a distinct preference for participatory forms of democracy. This inclination towards participatory democracy also undergirds this dissertation’s theory about the behavior of civil society toward political parties. Far from being a monolithic concept, democracy can be parsed into many different types or categories based on how it operates and the values it maximizes. Within the literature, there is a distinction between the ideal types of “representative”—also known as “thin” or “elite”—and “participatory,” sometimes called “strong” or “thick” democracy (Barber 1984). Representative democracy derives from Schumpeter’s (1942) classic definition of democracy as an “institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide via a competitive struggle for the people’s vote” (273). In representative democracy, citizen participation in decision-making is constrained to choosing among candidates who will then make and implement policy. In order to operate the most efficiently, there must be an accepted division of labor between those who vote and those who are elected to office.

Participatory democracy, on the other hand, refuses to acknowledge such distinctions in the duties of the electors and the elected. According to Cohen and Arato (1992), “the participatory model of democracy maintains that what makes for good leaders also makes for good citizens—active participation in ruling and being ruled (i.e., in the exercise of power) and also in public will and public opinion formation” (7). Between elections, citizens are not expected disengage from politics, nor are politicians expected to refrain from consultation with their constituents. In the ideal-type of participatory democracy, citizen participation in governance is continuous, never abating. Even those citizens who voted for a losing candidate
have the right and duty to engage with their elected representative, and even those elected representatives who won as members of a specific party have the right and duty to defer to their constituents—and their often-changing needs—over the dictates of their party.

It is not difficult to see how the concept of civil society is more closely aligned with the concept of participatory democracy than it is with the representative model. If citizen action were restricted to choosing among candidates for elected office, then political parties may be the only institutions needed to mediate between the state and society. But the very existence of politically oriented civil society groups points to the fact that participation can entail a much wider range of activities than simply casting a ballot. They are predicated on the principle that citizens can and should engage with the political process above and beyond elections. Political civil society thus would seem, of necessity, to subscribe to a vision of democracy that transcends representative models to embrace thicker, more participatory ideals.

Indeed, much of civil society’s preference for participatory democracy seemed predicated on self-interest; strong democracy favors civil society, so civil society favors strong democracy. Shankland (2010), studying Brazil, and Buccus and Hicks (2011), studying South Africa, have both noted how state initiatives to expand participatory policymaking have benefited civil society organizations by providing them with state-sanctioned avenues to act as representatives of local communities. Insisting that such projects are no more than “representation dressed up as participation,” they argue that they chiefly provide opportunities for elites within civil society rather than expanding participation in democratic governance more broadly (Shankland 2010; Buccus and Hicks 2011). Civil society’s embrace of participatory democracy, in their view, may not owe to its commitment to true principles of strong democracy, but to its understanding that as
the public face of “the grassroots”—whether deserved or not—it stands to gain the more “the grassroots” is empowered.

At the same time, there has also been a backlash within some segments of civil society against such state-initiated programs that only give a veneer of participatory democracy. Some civil society groups have explicitly rejected the advent of “invited spaces” (Piper and Nadvi 212) for consultation and participation in the policymaking process, decrying them as fronts for state co-optation of disgruntled communities (Booysen 2011) and as opportunities to further privilege the participation of the middle-class and already organized over the poor and unorganized (Pithouse 2013). For these elements of civil society, participatory democracy is so preferred over representative democracy that half measures that nod in the direction of the latter are not viewed as welcomed signs of progress but as betrayals of their cause.

Whether civil society’s championing of participatory democracy is sincere or strategic, it should affect how it interacts with political parties and elections. However, the vast majority of the literature on civil society and participatory democracy gets caught in a type of definitional trap, excluding the topics of elections and political parties because of the sheer fact that they are the epitomic institutions of representative democracy. My theory will step into the void by offering insights about how organizations that are committed to one form of democracy will behave in relation to institutions that are invested in a rival form of democracy. The strong condemnation of insufficiently participatory “invited spaces” by some civil society groups, as noted above, points in the direction that my theory will travel. As I will detail in the subsequent chapter, my theory posits that civil society groups invested in participatory democracy will view electoral politics as threatening and opposition parties as potential challengers to their power and position within the polity.
Conclusion

Despite the resurgence of civil society in the scholarly and policymaking literature in the recent past, the concept is too often treated as the handmaiden of other, supposedly more important, issues. Interest in what civil society does frequently reduces to what civil society does for democracy, or what it does for governance, or for social capital. This dissertation is concerned with what civil society does, but in the sense of how it behaves, not simply what it produces. Furthermore, it contends that we have gotten ahead of ourselves, inserting civil society into a variety of political and social scientific equations before we even fully understand what it really is: its underlying logic, its biases, and its capabilities. By exploring the issue of when oppositional civil society involves itself in electoral contests, I hope to begin the process of opening up the black box of civil society and to invigorate theorizing in which civil society is the subject of inquiry.

In surveying the voluminous literature involving civil society—chiefly divided between the topics of democratization and governance—I found only oblique hints and fragments of hypotheses that could be used to construct a theory about how civil society approaches electoral contests in democratic contexts. I would argue that this is because political scientists\textsuperscript{10} are not used to thinking about civil society as a subject in its own right, much less one that exists outside of the issues of democratization and governance. In my approach to the questions of when and how civil society tackles elections, I begin with the recognition that it matters that civil society groups are civil society groups. Civil society is more than just an arena of democracy, a place beyond the family, state and market where citizens gather. It is also an arena with its own internal logic, values, and praxis. The choice to participate in civil society—and sometimes this

\textsuperscript{10} Sociologists and anthropologists have certainly produced much scholarship in which civil society is the subject of study, but because of the different orientations of these disciplines, I argue that they cannot wholly substitute for political science analysis, particularly when studying civil society’s relationship to distinctly political institutions.
is less of a choice than a necessity, when individuals believe that there is no other way to address their problems—comes with attendant beliefs regarding the role of the democratic state, the value of participatory democracy in contrast to representative democracy, the importance of elections, and the role of political parties. These beliefs strongly condition the behavior of civil society, and so they must be clearly and carefully theorized if we are to understand the actions of civil society.
CHAPTER II. THE THEORY: WAITING FOR STATES-IN-WAITING POLITICAL PARTIES

The relentless focus on whether civil society is “good” for democracy pushes scholars to undervalue the case of post-apartheid South Africa, where disgruntled citizens have organized in the streets against the ruling party yet also lined up in support of it at polling places. The country only fits into this paradigm as a counter-example, a case that suggests that civil society opposition cannot wholly prevent a democratically-elected dominant party from veering towards increased corruption and unaccountability, as has been the case with the ANC. Post-apartheid South Africa then becomes a cautionary tale to mitigate our expectations of the benefits of civil society to democracy. What the post-apartheid South Africa does not become, however, is a case for building a theory of civil society’s ideological and practical approach to democratic governance. This chapter will attempt to do just that, using the motivations, actions and beliefs of oppositional civil society participants to construct a theory about when and why oppositional civil society will actively wade into electoral politics and which types of parties they will support. This theory addresses much narrower issues than whether and when civil society can be beneficial for democracy, but the answers it proposes can actually go a long way in unpacking and elucidating the relationship between civil society and democratic governance.

Starting Assumptions about Civil Society

The question of when civil society groups, organized around their dissatisfaction with the behavior of political incumbents, will support opposition forces at the polls is qualitatively different from the question of when individual voters, unhappy with the performance of the incumbent government, will vote for opposition parties and candidates. The disgruntled citizen who spends his evenings with his family around the kitchen table lamenting the failings of the government to provide basic services is not the same as the individual who becomes active in the
local branch of an organization pressing the government for better service delivery. They may end up checking the same boxes on the ballot come election time, but they cannot, and should not, be lumped together and analyzed as one. The very quality of being an active and committed member of civil society matters, and this dissertation will argue that this voluntary identity provides the bulk of the answers to questions regarding civil society’s orientations towards political parties and action in electoral contests in democratic settings. Civil society comes to the scene burdened by a unique set of biases and values, and we can expect these to condition its actions in the electoral arena.

What I mean is that the actions of oppositional civil society in any specific electoral scenario chiefly issue from a set of general propositions that govern civil society’s involvement in electoral politics. These are not steadfast, unbreakable rules, but they do directly refer to what I claim are important traits of civil society, meaning that they should be relatively robust if my understanding of civil society is correct. If my theory is valid, then it should not only help to answer the question of when and why oppositional civil society groups actively support opposition parties, but it should also provide greater insights into what civil society—that seductive and slippery concept—actually is.

I propose four general propositions about civil society in democratic polities: 1) elections can be threatening to politically oriented civil society groups; 2) civil society has an unspoken preference for one-party dominant democracy; 3) civil society is the refuge of those looking to practice politics without compromise and/or a politics without constituents; and 4) the nature of the state must be at stake for civil society to become actively involved in electoral contests. In what follows, I will summarize my reasoning for each of these four propositions and enumerate what their observable implications should be.
Before I expand upon my theory, I offer some important specifications about its principal actors. When referring to civil society, I am specifically interested in those groups that are concerned with political issues. More importantly, I am concerned with the beliefs and behavior of those who hold leadership positions within politically oriented civil society groups; henceforth, when I refer to civil society, I am referring to their leaders. It would be naïve to assume that everyone who participates in civil society in some way has the same starting biases and preferences. The leaders of civil society groups, however, are those most thoroughly committed to and invested in being part of civil society, and thus we can assume that if there is a distinct civil-society mindset or paradigm, they are the ones most likely to possess it. Leaders are also those who formulate and direct the actions of their organizations, so it is likewise valid to refer to the ideas and actions of civil society as those of its leaders, as I will do so in this project. 

_Elections for political office can be threatening to politically oriented civil society groups._

While it can be posited that elections are the bread and butter of democratic politics, they are not the centerpieces of civil society’s involvement in the democratic process. On the contrary, civil society represents participation in democratic governance beyond, and between, elections. It stands as the embodiment of the participatory model of democracy, in which the chief duty of citizens is not to choose their political representatives, but to actively engage with the government in an on-going process of reciprocal consultation and participation. Elections are one-shot games producing winners, losers and policy mandates, but civil society is premised on the belief that the outcome of elections should not silence constituencies nor deafen representatives. Citizens should always be free to speak and politicians should always be obliged to listen. Elections send the message that citizens’ actions primarily matter when they directly determine who gets a job in the government. Civil society operates according to the principle that
citizens’ actions determine not just who comprises the government, but what the government does. What it means for civil society to be politically oriented, then, is that these groups are interested not in state government but in state governance. No matter who is currently in the government, they believe that the state will respond to the needs and demands of the people.

Elections are also the purview of political parties, from which civil society groups view themselves as separate, and in many ways, superior. From the standpoint of civil society, political parties are crude amalgamations of disparate interests stitched together to propel certain individuals to power within the state. Civil society groups see themselves as the organic outgrowth of citizen solidarity, which seeks to use the state as a vehicle for addressing common problems. The trust and norms of reciprocity that may be cultivated through participation in civil society groups do not transfer from these groups to political parties, meaning that active participants in civil society will likely be weak partisans. Instead, those who participate in civil society will turn away from political parties and their artificial relationships of convenience and patronage towards the more “authentic” bonds between individuals seeking common solutions to common problems.

That is not to say that electoral politics are unimportant to civil society; on the contrary, civil society may treat them as unimportant only because they present an existential threat. Elections threaten to distract attention away from participatory forms of governance, many of which are funneled through or facilitated by civil society groups. They threaten to privilege political society over civil society. Voting for a different party or candidate in an election if one is dissatisfied with the actions of the incumbent seems unnecessary if one can engage with the incumbent between elections through civil society action and participatory structures. In fact, between-election engagement with the incumbent may be cheapened and undermined by a lateral
move to vote for an opposing candidate. Supporting an opposition candidate or party not only can mean that an individual has lost confidence in the incumbent candidate or party, but also may mean that he or she has lost confidence that his or her actions beyond voting have any real merit or meaning. That is, an individual decides to eject the officeholder because he or she does not believe the officeholder can be held accountable through any other avenues. Elections can thus be threatening to civil society participants because they can potentially suggest that participatory forms of democracy are inferior to the representative model.

In addition to undermining the case for participatory models of democracy, elections do not champion the power and position of the democratic state in the way that civil society would prefer. Electoral politics threatens to displace accountability from the state, which owes a responsibility it to all its citizens, to political parties, which are obliged to be accountable only to their supporters. It is thus in civil society’s best interest to minimize the importance of electoral politics by refusing to get involved in it. This privileges the enduring institution of the democratic state over the ephemeral players who take positions within it, as well as the relationship between state and society over the relationship between voter and representative. Its belief in the authority and power of the state should compel civil society to act as if political parties are of little consequence. While most scholars would agree that free and fair elections and a robust civil society are both essential components of a democratic state, I propose that civil society has reason to be wary of the power of its “partner in democracy” because of the conflicting logics of citizen participation and state accountability. Civil society and elections are at odds regarding the type of democratic polity they champion.

Whether politically oriented civil society is actually as steadfastly non-partisan and as dedicated to participatory democracy as suggested above, it often claims to be, and in the course
of normal democratic politics, it seeks to distinguish itself by these traits. The result is that civil society groups tend to behave indifferently, or ignorantly, in the face of electoral contests. This means that they will generally not endorse candidates or political parties in specific elections, nor will the leadership of these groups encourage their rank-and-file members to vote in a specific way. Even when civil society groups are vehemently opposed to the actions of political incumbents, they will not actively reach out and support opposition figures. If they were to do so, it would be seen as invalidating their work to engage with incumbents and a tacit acknowledgement that their strategies of holding the state accountable to society are inferior to elections. I thus propose that the default action of oppositional civil society groups is to remain aloof from oppositional political parties, no matter their degree of dissatisfaction with the incumbents or the overlap in policy preferences with the opposition parties.

**Civil society has an unspoken preference for one-party dominant democracy.**

Even more counterintuitive than my claim that civil society is uneasy about political elections is my contention that civil society also harbors an innate dislike of political pluralism within the state. Civil society may be a place where all manner of citizen interests can organize and agitate, but in general, I argue that civil society prefers that the state responds with a single, unified voice. The ideal state for civil society is one that is democratic, but dominated by a single political party or coalition, preferably one that is durable. The democratic principle of regular alternation-in-power (Przeworski et al. 2000) is not highly desired by civil society. Rather, civil society has an unspoken preference for systems in which one party “outdistances all others” (Sartori 1976: 193). Pempel (1990) has identified four key dimensions that make political parties dominant within a democratic system. First, the party must dominate the electorate, winning a larger number of seats than its opponents. Second, it must hold a dominant bargaining position,
allowing it to continually stay in government as a result of its ability to effectively bargain with smaller parties to form governments. Third, the predominant party must be “dominant chronologically” placing it at the core of government for an extended period of time (3). Finally, such a party is characterized by its ability to dominate governmentally, “carr[ying] out what many would call a historical project, a series of interrelated and mutually supportive public policies that give particular shape to the national political agenda” (4). In short, dominant parties are those whose extended reign makes them effectively synonymous with the government and the state.

There are several reasons why civil society would prefer a one-party dominant state. States that are not riven by partisan divisions tend to be stronger, more decisive, and capable of following through on their promises and initiatives. This makes them a better target for civil society demands. Even those civil society groups that have an oppositional relationship with the state prefer that their adversary be strong and unified, as their demands ultimately require state action. It makes little sense for civil society groups to demand accountability from the state if its government is too internally divided to take effective action. Moreover, the symbiotic relationship between civil society and the state seems to call for a strong state if civil society also hopes to be strong. As previously discussed, civil society needs the state’s protection and legitimization to thrive, and this is more likely if the state is dominated by one party with a clear—and positive—stance toward civil society.

Civil society operates according to the principle that all citizens, by virtue of their citizenship and participation in the life of the polity, have the right to hold the state accountable and to press the state for the fulfillment of their needs and wants. Political parties, on the other hand, often operate as if they are most responsible to their partisan supporters. In one-party
dominant states, there is a great degree of overlap between the general citizenry and the ruling party’s political supporters, which should make the one-party dominant state more receptive to any demands coming from the grassroots. Civil society groups benefit when it is difficult to distinguish their constituencies from those of the ruling party. When they represent the same people that the state represents, they are harder to ignore. More so, single-party dominant states often make claims, based on their electoral popularity, that they have the support of the grassroots. In those situations when the grassroots, aided by civil society, then rises up to question or oppose the state’s actions, the state will often quickly move to appease them as a way to avoid embarrassment and quash questions about the true extent of its popular support. Again, civil society groups can benefit from these face-saving moves.

Civil society also benefits if there is minimal alternation-in-power in the government of the state, as it allows civil society to build working relationships with those in power that will endure for some time. In general, civil society prefers incumbents to challengers because it prefers that its participation has maximal influence on the governance of the state, and governance is currently the charge of incumbents.

From this proposition about civil society’s preference for one-party dominant states, we can expect several observable implications. First, the more a single party dominates the democratic state, the less likely civil society groups are to become involved in electoral contests. The electoral status quo works in their favor in these situations, and so civil society groups will not want to waste their resources or energy intervening, especially when the outcome of the elections appears certain.

At the same time, the more one party dominates state power, the more civil society will shun opposition parties, even those whose policy preferences closely align with their own.
Opposition parties here are worse than a mere distraction; their embrace of certain policies also championed by civil society threatens to ghettoize these policies, casting them as ideas of the minority fringe. Oppositional civil society wants to convince the ruling party that its demands are those of its supporters, and so it needs to distance itself from opposition parties.

Likewise, until an opposition party or candidate has earned a seat in government, its primary avenue for engaging with citizens revolves around the institutions of representative democracy: elections. Thus, civil society’s preference for participatory democracy biases it against out-of-power opposition parties.

Civil society is a refuge for those looking to practice a politics without compromise and/or a politics without constituents.

There are many reasons why individuals choose to engage in civil society organizing and activism. One reason that has direct bearing on how the leaders of civil society groups approach political parties and electoral politics involves the style of politics that civil society can support (but political society cannot): what I call politics without compromise and politics without constituents.

Politics without compromise clings tightly to ideological purism. It is unwilling to admit disagreements and differences of opinion about core beliefs, and is dismissive of alliances between groups with overlapping goals but incomplete harmony of political ideology and methods of organizing. Civil society can support such unbending politics, as civil society groups can be small, narrowly focused, and do not require significant resources to exist. Political parties, on the other hand, generally cannot engage in politics without compromise and expect to remain electorally viable. No political party can be ideologically pure; it must make compromises
among individuals with differing opinions in order to build its movement and be sustainable on a large scale.

Likewise, a second type of politics that can thrive in civil society—politics without constituents—is unthinkable in the realm of political parties and elections. Civil society leaders and the groups they chair do not necessarily need to represent a clear, unique constituency in order to exist. Many different groups can simultaneously claim to represent the same group, such as “the poor” or “the working class,” without any of them having to actually prove this connection. Unlike political parties and politicians, who have built-in mechanisms for delineating and measuring their constituencies—such as elections and electoral districts—civil society groups do not have institutionalized incentives for defining their base of support or populations that they claim to represent. Groups that are claimed by civil society organizations as their constituents do not have readymade procedures for verifying this relationship or giving their consent to be represented.

I am not arguing that all civil society groups are hollow shells with no real basis of grassroots support or filled entirely with ideological purists, but the fact that civil society does permit a politics without compromise and a politics without constituents is important because it can drive a wedge between it and political parties. Civil society leaders practicing such models of politics should be particularly wary of aligning with political parties. In the one case, they would likely have to compromise some of their ideological commitments in order for a partnership to work. In the other case, partnering with political parties could expose the fact that civil society leaders actually have few followers. This would jeopardize their standing not only with potential party allies, but could also diminish their position in the eyes of the state and outside funders that once saw them as authentic representatives of certain communities.
Thus, the freedom that civil society affords its leaders to practice politics without compromise and politics without constituents simultaneously restricts their behavior towards political parties. We can expect that the more a civil society group is dominated by ideological purists and/or the more tenuous its claims to constituent representation, the more it will isolate itself from political parties.

*The nature of the state must be at stake in order for civil society to become actively involved in electoral contests.*

Civil society is able to remove itself from electoral politics because under normal circumstances, electoral politics revolves around issues that are not of significant consequence to the existence and functioning of civil society. Most electoral contests are between incumbent parties and politicians and challenger parties and candidates that are *governments-in-waiting*. A government-in-waiting party seeks to gain positions within the state as it currently is; it does not seek to overturn the structures of the state or the rules of the game that govern politics but instead seeks to take over these structures and become the players of the established game. In the normal parlance of political science, opposition or out-of-power parties are known as governments-in-waiting, biding their time until they have opportunity to administer the state.

Opposition parties are not frequently referred to as *states-in-waiting* for the simple fact that they most often do not represent a potential new state. Opposition parties that are states-in-waiting do exist, however, but they are often called revolutionary parties or forces, due to the fact that they seek to overhaul and replace state structures with their own and implement new rules that will govern political, economic, and social relations within society. Like beneficiaries that immediately sell what they have been bequeathed, states-in-waiting opposition forces are not looking to inherit what is already there, but to use their access to resources to assemble their own
new estates. When opposition parties are states-in-waiting, then, the moment is one of either successful or thwarted transition or revolution.

Most electoral contests in democracies do not hold revolutionary potential—no matter the inflated rhetoric and dire prognostications of the opposing sides—but when they do, civil society is compelled to get involved. As previously discussed, civil society has a statist orientation; the state authors civil society’s existence, shapes its agenda, engages with its demands, and absorbs its influence. When the existence and identity of the state is at stake, so is the nature and identity of civil society. When a government-in-waiting challenges an incumbent at the polls, civil society can afford to remain indifferent about the outcome. No matter who wins, civil society can expect the same rules to govern its interactions with the state. In general, it can expect the state to honor its previous commitments, as these commitments were made on behalf of the state, not on behalf of some government or political party. The principle that the people can hold the government accountable to the needs and demands of citizens does not change unless the state changes.

But when the very nature of the state is in jeopardy, civil society takes a great risk if it stands on the sidelines. The reason why we see civil society groups playing active roles during transitional moments is because the standing of civil society is implicated in the transition. When the dust has settled, civil society cannot assume that things will return to the status-quo-ante, unless the forces representing the status-quo-ante prevail. Likewise, if civil society groups prefer a different type of state, they know that it cannot be achieved save for the victory of the opposition state-in-waiting party. In these non-normal situations, civil society is compelled to take sides and actively show its support.
One of the dangers of civil society playing an active role in electoral contests is that it threatens to overshadow non-electoral forms of citizen participation and question their efficacy compared to casting ballots. A vote for one side in a contest between contrasting visions of the state, however, often translates into a vote for a state that regards civil society as an important and useful partner in governance. When electoral contests invoke the nature of the state, then civil society groups understand that their support for certain political parties is an essential part of supporting themselves and their ability to operate. They do not worry about getting lost in the shuffle of the electoral campaign or becoming second fiddle to political parties, because they know that if their preferred party does not win they are at risk of being permanently lost in the shuffle of the political life of their state. The fanfare surrounding civil society’s participation in democratic transitions is somewhat misplaced, as its involvement is not surprising given civil society’s general interest in the installment of a democratic state. Electoral contests between states-in-waiting are extraordinary circumstances that compel civil society actors to behave in ways that are outside of their normal repertoire, but that involvement should not be unexpected. 

Thus, we can expect that under the special circumstances in which the incumbent part(ies) face a formidable electoral challenge from state-in-waiting opposition part(ies), civil society groups will wade into representative politics and actively support one or more of the involved parties. Their active support can take many forms, including: urging members to vote for or against specific parties, campaigning for specific parties, and fundraising. In these situations, it will be clear that civil society groups have a well-defined preference for the outcome of the elections, and their activities will at least partly revolve around ensuring that their preference is realized. Which parties and candidates civil society decides to support will depend on the type of state advanced by the parties and how it fits with the values of civil society groups.
For example, civil society groups that campaign against the state’s neoliberal economic policies will likely support opposition parties that promise a move to a more socialist state. On the other hand, these same oppositional civil society groups will likely rally around the incumbent party if opposition parties advance causes that are antagonistic to civil society’s goals, such as those that want to move the state in a more authoritarian or theocratic direction. That means that we cannot expect oppositional civil society groups to automatically support opposition parties when the stakes of electoral contests include the nature of the state; we can only expect that they pick sides in the electoral contests. To be an oppositional civil society group within a democracy is not necessarily to be opposed to the state per se; it can simply mean opposition to state policy. In fact, it is during these moments when the nature of the state is being electorally contested that the true target of oppositional civil society’s dissatisfaction is thrown into relief.

**Putting it all Together: Oppositional Civil Society and Opposition Parties**

The question on the minds of many in post-apartheid South Africa is when oppositional civil society groups, so vocal and vociferous in their criticism of the ANC, will throw their weight behind opposition parties, if ever. I propose to look beyond the particularistic, ad-hoc answers to this specific question and instead approach the South African situation as an example of the broader issue concerning the relationship between oppositional civil society and opposition parties. Using the four propositions outlined above, I arrive at the following theory, which I propose will not only help to explain the puzzle of oppositional civil society behavior in contemporary South Africa, but also provide a framework for understanding oppositional civil society-opposition party relations in similar settings. My theory proposes that under normal democratic circumstances, oppositional civil society groups will either ignore electoral contests or try to undermine them, remaining aloof from even those political parties who share their
criticism of the incumbents. Only when electoral contests put the nature of the state up for vote will oppositional civil society groups actively support political part(ies), and even then, their support for opposition part(ies) will be conditioned on whether they prefer opposition part(ies)’ vision of the state over that of the ruling part(ies). What this means precisely is that when electoral contests in democracies are between ruling part(ies) and government-in-waiting opposition parties, oppositional civil society groups will not actively support any of the parties involved in the elections. On the other hand, when electoral contests in democracies are between ruling part(ies) and state-in-waiting opposition parties, oppositional civil society groups will actively support those part(ies) whose agenda for the state they find most preferable. It is important to note that in the scenario of political contests between rival state-in-waiting parties, it is possible for oppositional civil society to side with the political incumbents it had hitherto criticized and opposed; when the nature of the state is at stake, traditional antagonists may became untraditional allies.

Although my theory is phrased to refer to oppositional civil society groups—voluntary groups and associations of ordinary citizens that are organized around opposition to specific state policies, actions, or political positions but which do not seek state power for themselves—my four general propositions about civil society suggest that the same hypotheses can be advanced with regard to non-oppositional yet politically oriented civil society groups. Under normal circumstances, they too should remain aloof from elections, only becoming directly involved when the nature of the state is at stake. Then, of course, because these groups are not opposed to current state action, we should expect them to almost always support the ruling (status quo state) part(ies) over the opposition state-in-waiting parties. I choose to focus on oppositional civil society groups because they have already demonstrated a willingness to organize around their
dissatisfaction, thereby making their non-actions in the electoral realm less expected and thus in need of explanation.

If my theory is correct, then we should expect oppositional civil society groups to directly involve themselves in elections very infrequently, and to support opposition parties only in a subset of those cases. The literature duly notes that potential moments of transition, when the state stands on the cusp of fundamental change in political, economic, and social relations, present rare moments for civil society to step into the forefront of politics. My theory ties together civil society action during times of transition and times of normal democratic circumstances to present a coherent understanding of civil society’s relationship to electoral contests.

**Conclusion**

My theory begins with four general, governing propositions about civil society in democratic states. First, I contend that elections, the sine qua non of democratic politics, can actually be quite threatening to ideas that undergird the very existence and importance of politically oriented civil society groups. As the cornerstone of the representative model of democracy, elections are moments when the participatory modes of democratic engagement championed and practiced by civil society take a back seat and state accountability becomes linked to partisanship rather than citizenship. Civil society, I argue, has a vested interest in ensuring that elections do not occupy a place of prominence within the democratic system. My second general proposition posits that civil society has an unspoken preference for a situation in which the democratic state is dominated by a single party or coalition. This owes to civil society’s statist bias and strategic desire for a strong, unified and decisive state with which it can engage. My third general proposition argues that civil society is the refuge of individuals seeking
to practice a politics that does not force them to compromise their ideological commitments or policy positions as well as those who style themselves as leaders but are unable or unwilling to amass followers. Such individuals would likely not rise to positions of prominence within political parties. The fourth general proposition holds that the nature of the state must be at stake in order for civil society to become actively involved in electoral contests. This proposition recognizes the inextricable linkage between the state and civil society, such that when the state is on the verge of possible fundamental changes in its political, economic, and/or social structures and relations, civil society also faces profound changes in how it operates. In these electoral scenarios, civil society’s support for certain political parties is actually its support for a specific vision of the state.

Applying these propositions to the issue of oppositional civil society’s support for opposition parties, I arrive at the theory that under normal democratic circumstances, oppositional civil society groups will either ignore or undermine the importance of electoral contests. Under non-normal circumstances, when political incumbents face serious challenges from state-in-waiting opposition parties, oppositional civil society groups will actively support political parties in elections, but even then, their support for opposition part(ies) will depend on whether they prefer the opposition part(ies)’ vision of the state over that of the ruling part(ies).

The puzzling situation of post-apartheid South Africa, where disgruntled citizens are organizing against the ruling ANC party on the streets at the same time they are supporting them at the polls, prompted my inquiry into the nature of the relationship between oppositional civil society and opposition parties. My theory would argue that the reason that oppositional civil society groups in South Africa have not thrown their support behind opposition parties is because none of these parties has, thus far, presented themselves as anything more than governments-in-
waiting, longing to take the reins of power in the South African state but not to change the fundamental rules by which it operates and interacts with society. Overall, oppositional civil society’s approach to elections in South Africa has been one of indifference and benign neglect, as they refuse to overstate or acknowledge the importance of elections or to even offer advice or guidance in how citizens should vote. This owes to the ANC’s domination of state power, which benefits oppositional civil society and makes it wary of potentially upsetting the status quo by getting involved in elections. A few oppositional civil society groups have called for boycotts of elections and spoiling of ballots. Some might argue that the behavior of South African civil society is not puzzling once one understands the South African context, but with my theory, I want to suggest that it is not puzzling once one understands a general set of principles about civil society itself.

The next set of chapters will attempt to bring validity—and life—to my theorizing by examining the empirical evidence for it in the South African case. While a single case cannot properly test a theory, it can show its strengths and weaknesses and point us in the right direction as the discipline moves forward in analyzing the relationship between elections and protest, civil society and political society, and participatory democracy and representative democracy.
CHAPTER III. OPPOSITIONAL SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA: PATIENT, PASSIVE REVOLUTIONARIES

It was only after they had each charged their cell phones that they mentioned the video. We had been sitting in the bare-earth front yard of one of the Zakheleni Settlement’s many nurseries—really just the tin-roofed home of an older woman who had agreed to look after neighborhood children while their families were out pursuing work—for a few hours, and the sun was just beginning its slow descent over the western horizon. As the young men of the Unemployed People’s Movement (UPM) in Zakheleni (located in the township of Umlazi, outside of Durban) talked animatedly and I scribbled down notes, I had been aware of a boy of about twelve toiling quietly behind us. First he emerged from the shack with a massive coil of extension cord, a sight that immediately attracted the attention of similarly aged boys in nearby yards. Almost wordlessly, they gathered together, forming a circle around the cord and hoisting it up above their heads. They disappeared together through the front gate, but some ten minutes later, only the first boy returned, walking backward as he carefully unwound the extension cord. With some gentle tugging, he managed to stretch the black cord a few feet into the small, doorless room that served as the woman’s kitchen. Without interrupting the conversation, he then gathered the cell phones from each of the young men I was interviewing and plugged them into the socket at the end of the extension cord, their briefly illuminated screens bringing a momentary shock of light to the otherwise dark kitchen.

I was not going to ask, but one my interviewees answered the question anyway. They were indeed “stealing” electricity, illegally tapping into a power supply several dozen meters away—a power supply that was only supposed to serve paying customers. They could not afford paying for electricity—few in Zakheleni could—and the government was failing in its duty to subsidize necessary service. Once the cell phones were charged and the hot plate turned on long
enough to warm some food for the woman and her charges, they would unplug from the power supply, freeing up the non-free resource for others to use—also mostly illegally. They didn’t mention how frequently they pilfered power, but the efficiency and sense of routinization of the whole process suggested that it was far from an exceptional occurrence. This was not them demonstrating their plight to a sympathetic outsider; this was them living their lives as usual.

But when the phones were ready and the stew was hot, they remembered that there was something special they could show their guest. And so the electricity was borrowed for a bit longer, as they powered up their one laptop and we all gathered around the screen. What we watched was one of the UPM’s most recent triumphs: mock corruption trials of President Zuma, the ward councilor for Zakheleni, and the police commissioner that the group had held a few months earlier. The video showed a packed venue and a well-rehearsed piece of theatre lasting over an hour. “This shows what the people of Zakheleni would do if they could, and what the politicians would say if they were being truthful,” one of the young men told me excitedly, as we watched the forceful “prosecutor” grilling “President Zuma” on the stand. After a barrage of accusations and charges from the prosecutor—during which you could hear the audience’s vocal agreement—the actor playing Zuma stared forward blankly and said simply, “As president, I am controlled by my political party and by the World Bank and the IMF.” An added computer graphic then flashed on the screen, proclaiming, in Zulu: “One People, One Nation, No Party Politics.” My hosts turned to me, beaming proudly.

The fact that it was dusk became immediately apparent once the laptop was turned off and the kitchen, despite its own windows and wide-open door, was plunged into darkness. As I thanked my hosts and said goodbye, the young boy scurried behind us, coiling the extension cord as he followed its path back to the power source. Watching him, wishing there had been more
time—and electricity—for me to copy the digital recording onto my thumb drive, I understood
the pang of longing my hosts must have felt every time they had to gather up the cord and
“return” the electricity to its rightful owners.

Did this longing for something that had just been there, until it suddenly was taken away,
unplugged, also strike the audience for UPM’s mock trials, as they watched the president, the
councilor, and the police commissioner get the punishment they believed they deserved—until
suddenly the performance was over, and they were jolted back into the reality that what had just
happened was no more “real” than a dream? Or was the feeling that UPM was trying to conjure
through its exercise simply one of catharsis, releasing pent-up anger and frustration within South
Africa’s downtrodden? If so, was that enough?

The UPM, which also has branches in other South African cities and their associated
townships, is one of the many social movements that have arisen within civil society in recent
years to criticize and oppose a host of social, economic, and political conditions in the post-
apartheid, ANC-dominant era. While their choice of tactics—including protests, marches, mock
trials, even destruction of property—can be justifiably called “emotionally charged,” I will argue
that their behavior is as coolly logical as a neatly coiled expanse of extension cord. Of the four
propositions that my theory offers about civil society and electoral politics, three are particularly
evident in the worldview of many leaders of contemporary South African social movements and
condition their behavior and that of their movements: that elections can be threatening to civil
society, that civil society prefers a one-party dominant state, and that civil society will only
become directly involved in elections when the nature of the state is at stake. There are also signs
of the type of ideological purism that underlies what I call “politics without compromise;”
although evidence of that theorized phenomenon, in addition to a “politics without constituents”
was less robust than evidence of the other three propositions.\textsuperscript{11} The three propositions that do hold in the case of South Africa’s social movements are a large part of the reason why an organization like the UPM choose to pretend to punish political incumbents and the ruling party in the courtroom rather than actually punishing them in the voting booths. The UPM’s mock trials of politicians are not emotional outbursts of communities resigned to helplessness; they fit a framework for improving their situations based on a guiding logic of “one people, one nation, no party politics.” They are representative of the value commitments inherent in opposition to state policy through civil society, and a sign that absent a viable state-in-waiting opposition party, South African civil society is likely to passively promote the electoral status quo.

Drawing primarily from original interview research, this chapter will attempt to make sense of what seems, at first blush, to be a non-rational approach to electoral politics on the part of South Africa’s oppositional social movements. By letting the leaders of social movements speak for themselves, I was able to evince considerable support for three of my four theoretical propositions about the ideas and value commitments that animate civil society, as well as see how they shape oppositional civil society’s behavior towards opposition political parties. Although South Africa’s oppositional social movements have not yet had the opportunity to support state-in-waiting parties, their words and actions suggest that were one to arise, they would feel compelled to do so, finally breaking their record of alienation from electoral politics.

\textbf{What are Social Movements?}

Underlying its more specific propositions about when and why oppositional civil society will support opposition political parties, this dissertation rests on the claim that we cannot understand the choices of voters at the polls if we do not also consider their prior and concurrent

\textsuperscript{11} As I will demonstrate in the following chapter, there is considerable evidence of a “politics without constituents” among NGOs in contemporary South Africa.
choices to communicate with the government on the streets. That is, it argues that civil society participation matters a great deal in shaping the direction of electoral politics, and that the two cannot be neatly separated, even at the level of the individual actor.

However, “civil society” and “civil society participation” are not monolithic concepts, and treating them as if they were undermines the validity of any theorizing that follows. Thus, I have chosen to divide oppositional civil society into two broad ideal-types—social movements and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—and separately analyze how well my theory applies to them. In so doing, I will demonstrate that despite the significant differences between social-movement oppositional civil society and NGO oppositional civil society, both lend credence to my theory about the relationship between civil society and electoral politics. There is significant variety in the groups that comprise civil society, the strategies they employ, the activities that they undertake, the leadership that oversees them, the rank-and-file members that join them, and the communities they claim to represent. But, as I will show, because they are all of civil society, they are governed by a set of principles that makes their behavior towards elections both predictable and similar in its outcome.

This chapter will examine the first side of oppositional South African civil society, which is composed of a distinct type of voluntary organization: the social movement. Although the layperson or policymaker often thinks of civil society as primarily composed of NGOs, scholars have taken special interest in South Africa’s many social movements, producing a prodigious array of studies of individual movements. While these have great descriptive value, they are often divorced from any grander, more generalizable theorizing. My purpose in this

12 As Richard Pithouse, a consummate scholar, observer and participant of South African civil society, told me: “When people talk of civil society, what they often mean is NGOs.”
13 Ballard et al. 2006 would be a good place to start for a survey of this literature.
chapter is not to replicate these comprehensive portraits of post-apartheid social movements,¹⁴ but to use their insights, alongside my own original research, to connect them to larger theories about the workings of civil society within democratic settings.

Like the concept of civil society, “social movement” has no single succinct, universally accepted definition. Sidney Tarrow (1998), one of the foremost scholars of social mobilization, offers that social movements are “collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities” (4). Charles Tilly (1985), Tarrow’s frequent collaborator and another influential expert in the subject, has narrowed the definition further, suggesting that social movements are analogous not to political parties or unions, but to political campaigns. The collective mobilization that “we call a social movement actually consists in a series of demands or challenges to power-holders in the name of a social category that lacks an established political position,” he writes (736). What emerges from these two definitions is the idea that social movements arise outside of the formal, institutionalized channels of state-society engagement, and largely consist of the hitherto unorganized and unrecognized making demands on those in positions of authority.

Almost all scholars agree that social movements are separate from other forms of collective action by their more non-institutionalized, informal, and transitory nature, although some, like Howard (2003), argue that these very features can push them beyond the bounds of civil society analysis. I agree that what some have called “popcorn” protests (Bond 2013) in South Africa—unorganized, leaderless protests with no central demands that seem to arise as quickly as they fizzle out—should not be included among the category of social movements, but

¹⁴ Readers might notice that the social movement leaders I interviewed and the groups that I profile in this chapter all fall to the left end of the political spectrum. I found it difficult to find oppositional social movements with more conservative political views, and the voluminous literature on post-apartheid social movements suggests that they are very rare. I am confident that my sample is representative of the current social movement landscape of the country.
caution that we do not use the unrecognized status or lack of an established political position of those who participate in such collective action to dismiss their activities as too “informal” or too “unorganized” to warrant inclusion in civil society analysis. The social movements that I include in this chapter tend to represent those who are politically, economically, and socially disempowered in post-apartheid South Africa, such as the poor, the unemployed, and the homeless. However, all of these movements have names and individuals who voluntarily claim to be members. They may not all have defined leadership structures, official membership criteria and lists, or even an address, phone number, or dedicated headquarters, but they all have identifiable leaders, they all make specific claims on power-holders, and they all are sustained beyond a single, one-shot activity. Moreover, they all proclaim themselves to be social movements, demonstrating a shared conception that social movements are a unique class of organizations within civil society.

Indeed, social movements seem to be distinguished not only by how they organize—informally, with loose leadership structures—and who they organize—marginalized classes within a society—but also by their aims and political ideology. This is especially true for the activists and spokespeople of social movements, although it is also echoed in the academic literature. Wilson (1973) defines social movements as organized attempts “to bring about or resist large-scale change in the social order” (8). Bond (2004), who is both a scholar and active supporter of South African social movements, sees them as “both protest-oriented and utopian, in the sense of attempting to construct the community of a future society in the decay of the old.” (Ballard 2005: 91). Likewise, according to Thompson and Tapscott (2010: 16), quoting Mushakoji (1993: xiii-xiv), the prevailing view of social movements in the global South is that their goals are not to assume state power but to “creat[e] free space from where a democratic
society can emerge” and to “prepar[e] a future desirable society.” What is common about these understandings is that they see social movements as orienting themselves towards large-scale social change and advocating for an idealized society, often one that is more authentically “democratic” in the sense that there is no longer an elite stratum that enjoys undue and outsize power and influence.

Those to whom I spoke that were directly involved in social movements in South Africa reinforced the idea that their movements stood out within civil society because of their ideological commitments. Several interviewees highlighted the fact that unlike NGOs, middle-class interests did not dominate social movements, and they did not practice “middle-class” politics. “The problem with NGOs,” one interviewee told me frankly, “is that they are too busy making reports for their funders. They bring in funders and show them around the community like it were a zoo, and ‘here are the baboons’” (Buthelezi 2013). Rather than being beholden to the demands of those who already hold disproportionate power and resources, social movements, according to my interviewees, answer directly to those they claim to help, in spite, or because of, their position of marginalization within the institutionalized economic and political spheres. Social movements do not view the poor and marginalized as problems to be contained, studied, and solved—baboons in cages—but as solutions to be mobilized and heard.

Whether social movements are for and by the people, what is important here is that social movements seem to almost invariably make these claims about themselves. As a result, they undeniably position themselves within the ideological landscape of participatory democracy. If social movements recoil from the idea of providing “deliverables,” such as reports, tours of the community, and workshops for their donors in exchange for the latter’s continued beneficence, then they should also balk at the model of democracy in which citizens deliver votes to a
politician in exchange for the latter attending to their needs. As we will see shortly, this publicly made commitment to participatory politics affects how social movements in South Africa approach elections.

South African social movements also define themselves by their preference for, and anticipation of, large-scale social change. It is striking how often their leaders talk of the “coming revolution,” the “rising up of the working class,” and the “revolt of the poor.” Many envision their movements as carrying on with the revolutionary change that started with the dismantling of apartheid but has since stalled once the ANC transitioned from liberation movement to ruling regime (Ballard 2005). What is significant about social movements defining themselves as the remaining revolutionary forces within democratic society is how it alienates them from the democratic system as it currently operates. Those who are preparing for future revolutionary change have little time for or interest in small-scale alterations that consolidate and entrench the current system. In order to see themselves as harbingers of what is to come, social movements cannot also be participants in what already is. As self-described revolutionary forces, social movements have become remarkably patient in their wait for the rise of state-in-waiting political parties.

In what follows, I will demonstrate that the sincerity of social movements’ self-conception as revolutionary forces and participatory democrats can lead to actions that invite questions about the sincerity of their opposition to ANC rule. Furthermore, these changed-oriented and utopian movements often unwittingly reinforce the political status quo. Table I provides a brief summary of the social movements profiled in this chapter.

15 Individuals who invoked such terms in their interviews, without me bringing them up first, include: Blake, Buthelezi, James, Kota, McKinley, Mngeni, Ngwane, Pillay, Satgar, Tabensky, and Xhali.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Year Founded</th>
<th>Funding</th>
<th>Interviewees (Position within movement)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM) Sweet Home Farm Branch</td>
<td>Grassroots Governance; Land; Housing; Opposition to Neoliberalism</td>
<td>Cape Town (Sweet Home Farm) *AbM is based in Durban and has 20+ additional settlements located around the country affiliated with it.</td>
<td>2013 *AbM was first founded in Durban in 2005.</td>
<td>Membership dues; occasional small donations from individuals (domestic and foreign)</td>
<td>Siya James (Leader)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF)</td>
<td>Opposition to GEAR; Opposition to Neoliberalism; Opposition to the ANC</td>
<td>Johannesburg</td>
<td>2000 *Ended circa 2011.</td>
<td>Primarily foreign, including: War on Want (UK); Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (Germany); Unitarian Church (US)</td>
<td>Dale McKinley (Cofounder); Claire Ceruti (Leader); Trevor Ngwane (Cofounder)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC)</td>
<td>Opposition to GEAR; Opposition to Neoliberalism; Access to basic services</td>
<td>Johannesburg (Soweto)</td>
<td>Circa 2000</td>
<td>Limited foreign and domestic donations</td>
<td>Trevor Ngwane (Founder)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed People's Movement (UPM) Grahamstown Branch</td>
<td>Access to basic services; Opposition to GEAR; Opposition to Neoliberalism</td>
<td>Grahamstown</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Limited domestic and foreign donations</td>
<td>Ayanda Kota (Leader); Makhays Mzongwana (Member)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed People's Movement (UPM) Durban Branch</td>
<td>Living Wage; Land Nationalization; “True” Democracy; Opposition to GEAR</td>
<td>Durban (Umlazi)</td>
<td>Circa 2006</td>
<td>Limited domestic and foreign donations</td>
<td>Bheki Buthelezi (Leader)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Left Front (DLF)</td>
<td>Umbrella organization of left-leaning social movements; Critique of “elite, electoralist” politics; Opposition to Neoliberalism</td>
<td>Johannesburg</td>
<td>2011 *Largely inactive as of 2017.</td>
<td>Very limited, primarily from member organizations</td>
<td>Vishwas Satgar (Leader)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The Threat of Elections

AbM in Sweet Home Farms: “We Don’t Want Polling Places Here”

National elections were only half of a year away when I was in South Africa in the summer of 2013, but if they were on the minds of the oppositional social movements’ leaders I spoke to, they were not on their lips. While they dutifully answered my election-related questions when I posed them, I frequently got the sense that I was exasperating or disappointing my interlocutors just by broaching the subject. “Oh,” one interviewee sighed when I asked him about the Democratic Alliance political party, “so you are not here just to talk about us, you want to talk about parties and elections as well?” When I explained that I was interested in the nexus of political and civil societies, electoral and street politics, he was blunt: “We have nothing to do with them” (James 2013). Richard Southall’s (2013) comment weeks earlier that I would find a “total disconnect” between South Africa’s new social movements and opposition parties now seemed eerily prophetic.

Social movements’ reticence about electoral politics reflects an underlying belief that elections threaten social movements’ very existence and ethos. According to Przeworski (1991), democracy necessarily entails a degree of uncertainty, and that uncertainty is centered on the event of elections, whose outcome cannot be foreknown. But if elections entail uncertain outcomes for those who stand to gain or lose seats in the government, they also introduce uncertainty in the outcomes of groups and individuals that do not subscribe to the electoral model of democratic politics. Elections conjure questions about the place, purpose, and importance of participatory democracy and its proponents, and in so doing, put them on trial. The insistence that social movements have “nothing to do” with electoral politics, I discovered, is just a mask for a fervent desire that electoral politics had nothing to do with social movements. The
truth is that elections implicate social movements in a variety of ways that the latter’s leaders find potentially threatening.

Social movements’ leaders’ chief worry about elections is that they will invalidate the need for participatory democracy—and social movements themselves—by suggesting that representative democracy, can, and does, function entirely satisfactorily. In many ways, social movements, with their focus on engendering responsive, accountable government and serving the interests of those who are already underprivileged in the current economic and social conditions, are premised on the limitations and failures of representative democracy. Elections, however, provide those who benefit from the representative model of democracy with the perfect opportunity to present a “show” of their model’s successes.

In Sweet Home Farm, an informal settlement in the Cape Town metropolitan area, a small branch of the Durban-based AbM movement opened in response to the community being, in the words of one of its leaders, “forgotten by the government” (James 2013). As the rain pounded on the tin roof overhead, Mr. James motioned out the window to the muddy, unlit streets. Other communities in the area had paved roads, street signs, and electricity, he explained to me, but the Sweet Home Farm AbM had to organize protests, march through the city center, and draft memorandums to present to the municipal government just to get their problems recognized. Even then, their councilor was never seen in Sweet Home Farm, and the mayor’s office kept making last-minute postponements to a meeting with AbM. “The government doesn’t have to meet all our demands, but we want them to listen to us, to hear what we have to say,” James (2013) told me when I asked what his movement would like to see as a result of it advocacy.
Elections were especially difficult for James and his branch of AbM because they were the one time when political society seemed to do exactly what the social movement would like it to do. “[Politicians] know our community only when they want our votes,” he lamented (2013). Election time was when their councilor and other representatives of the municipal government finally came to Sweet Home Farm, giving speeches and making a show of assessing the needs of constituents. Of course, James insisted, these activities were all for positive publicity—and votes. In between elections, AbM’s protests were frequently met by rubber bullets from the police. But as elections neared, government officials reached out to James to hold meetings. Promises were made to address residents’ demands. James and the others in AbM’s leadership knew that these were empty promises, but it was very frustrating to James and AbM that any recognition from political society that they received, however disingenuous, did not seem connected to their efforts.

Instead, it was directly tied to elections. The representative model of democracy, which allows politicians to effectively ignore their constituencies for most of their tenure, suddenly seems to be the solution to the problem of government unresponsiveness during the short, intense bursts of time it forces politicians to pay attention to the demands of their constituents. When elections roll around, suddenly the flawed representative model of democracy seems self-remedying, and AbM’s efforts to draw attention to the needs of Sweet Home Farm seem superfluous, ineffective, and in the case of actions that lead to violence and unrest, potentially negative. No matter what AbM in Sweet Home Farm does, it can be certain that politicians will suddenly feign interest in the settlement around election time. More damningly for James, AbM in Sweet Homes Farm can be sure that politicians will feign interest in the settlement at election time even if his social movement did not even exist.
It is little wonder, then, that AbM seeks to undermine elections, both in Sweet Home Farm and other communities. Like the larger AbM social movement, James told me that his branch was encouraging participants to boycott elections. Or, “if they are going [to vote], it is better to spoil their ballot papers. Just write: ‘no land, no house, no vote.’” He further noted that the AbM in his community was seriously considering meeting with the IEC (Independent Election Commission, the agency charged with overseeing South Africa’s elections) and telling them “we don’t want to see a polling station in this community” (James 2013).

It is somewhat breathtaking to hear that a movement of and for the marginalized promotes a policy that would both symbolically and literally disenfranchise its constituency. But because the leadership of AbM does not view elections as a way to effect the change they would like to see in their communities, it makes sense to completely disinvest in them. The only way for elections to lose their false veneer as the “solution” or at least as part of the “solution” to South Africa’s current problems is for people to stop treating them as such. Participation in elections implies an acceptance of their value and their ability to do make democracy work. But according to James (2013), and others within South Africa’s oppositional social movements, the only thing that elections accomplish is to force politicians to make false promises in exchange for votes. To drive a polling station from a community is not to disenfranchise that community, but to expose the lie that the community had ever been enfranchised under the current democratic system.

The leadership of AbM knows that the electoral model of democracy is ascendant in post-apartheid South Africa. They know that every election that comes and goes without major problems further cements the electoral mode of democracy and sets the precedent that elections

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16 This is the slogan of the nationwide AbM movement.
are the primary way that South African democracy functions. They know that their ideal of participatory democracy appears more utopian and unnecessary the longer elections proceed without incident, with South Africans casting their ballots and accepting the results. While the scholarly consensus holds that elections are hardly sufficient for robust democracy, the hostile stance of many social movements in South Africa towards elections suggests that civil society itself may not be confident that the “fallacy of electoralism” (Schmitter and Karl 1991) is self-evident beyond academia. James’ desire that polling stations be barred from the Sweet Homes Farm community speaks of a worry among those invested in the participatory model of democracy that the electoral model of democracy will prove to be too seductive and too easy, for citizens and power-holders alike to accept as the way of putting democracy into practice in South Africa.

**APF: Self–Destruction in the Face of Elections**

Elections are threatening to social movements not only because they can undermine them ideologically, but also because they can hurt them organizationally. The question of how social movements are to approach elections is one that many within their leadership want to ignore but few can actually dismiss. The result is that a good deal of time, thought and resources are diverted to dealing with an institution that most social movements see as besides the point. The further the movement gets entangled in such peripheral concerns, the more likely it is to face schisms, collapse, or transformation.

The case of the Anti-Privatization Forum (APF) is instructive and indicative of how social movements can self-destruct in the face of elections. Began in 1999 principally as a reaction to the “practical exigencies of GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution Programme),” the APF first consisted of thirty to forty activists who sought to challenge the
government’s neoliberal economic program, especially it as it concerned the privatization of public utilities like electricity and water, which effectively made access to these services too expensive for many poor South Africans (McKinley 2013). Before long, the APF knit together a wide range of community organizations, other social movements, and disenchanted activists from the political left, “seamlessly tackling a mixture of bread-and-butter issues and ideological issues” (Ceruti 42013).

By 2011, however, the APF had basically ceased to exist. According to activists who took part in the movement and those who studied it, APF’s dissolution was not particularly tied to its record of success—although there were plenty of disappointments over the years—but rooted in the fact that it could not come to a clear formal consensus regarding how it would approach South Africa’s institutions of representative democracy. Debate raged within the intellectual leadership of the movement about whom they should support in elections, whether they should even take a stand on elections, and whether the APF should field its own candidates. Although the APF generally recommended that its participants not vote for any “bourgeois party” (principally meaning the ANC and DA), there were ongoing discussions about which approach to elections was the best (Ceruti 2013). In the end, the APF largely left the decision up to individuals and groups within the movement, fearing that making a decision prescribing what everyone should do would tend to “break people up” (Ceruti 2013). But the debate itself did result in breaking people up as it revealed strategic and ideological divides among allies. According to Fogel (2013), “a lot of people left” the APF due to the debate over elections; some because they thought it was wasting time and resources over a issue not related to the movement’s core purpose, and others because they did not agree with the opinions expressed by their erstwhile colleagues in the debates.
In other cases, the commitment to allowing members to act independently encouraged them simply to become independent from the APF. Elections and interactions with political parties were not a chance for the social movement to close ranks and solidify its stances and policies; they became an opportunity for groups and leaders within the movement to distinguish themselves from one another despite their shared commitment to a future in which elections and political parties would play a very minor role within democratic politics. When internal debate in the APF got “nasty” and turned “unproductive” regarding the APF-allied trade unions’ ties to political parties, for example, Trevor Ngwane simply resigned from the APF (2013). An activist with a long and impressive history, Mr. Ngwane had helped to form the APF as one of the de-facto leaders of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC). But he was able to simply walk away from a movement he helped to nurture and lead for five years and pursue an independent agenda with the SECC partially because the APF was not equipped to handle the sort of decisiveness that was needed in confronting the institutions of representative democracy.

As Mr. Ngwane lamented to me: “What is an election? It’s not a big deal. It’s not something to scratch your head [about]. Either we run or we don’t. That’s all. Damned if you do, damned if you don’t. And now they are taking a year to decide on a single issue. I’m not saying that it’s that simple; we should discuss for a day or two and move on. But they are not” (2013). What is apparent from Mr. Ngwane’s complaint about the APF and other social movements is that the ways that a participatory, grassroots-oriented organization approach important questions—through extended debate, dialogue, and an insistence on consensus—does not work well when the questions originate within the grammar of the electoral, representative mode of politics. Mr. Ngwane left the APF not because he did not agree with its basic principles or goals, but because he saw that its principles and goals were actually preventing positive progress within
the current context. And Mr. Ngwane was not the only one who saw the negatives of the APF when it confronted elections and political parties; it was his “group” of SECC activists and followers who “decided [he] should resign from the APF” (Ngwane 2013). Thus, elections can be threatening to social movements because they are capable of exposing the “lie” of the superiority of the social-movement brand of democratic politics, not just to leaders of these movements, but also to their rank-and-file supporters and outside observers.

What is also significant about the demise of the APF is its demonstration of how social-movement engagement with the institutions of representative democracy can undermine social movements’ commitment to leaderless, grassroots organizing. Leaders and individuals who could serve as individual representatives of certain viewpoints were never more needed or encouraged than when the movement approached such thorny questions as participation in elections and engagement with political parties and party-connected labor unions. It was then that Mr. Ngwane’s group asked him to step up and voice their disapproval with the tenor of internal dialogue in the APF and resign from the group. It was in such situations that groups began to gather around certain individuals and urge them to break off and lead separate organizations, or to possibly run for election themselves. Participants in social movements craved leaders to help them decide upon questions of whether to vote in elections and for whom to vote. Mr. Ngwane had to leave the APF in order to be the type of leader that his supporters wanted him to be, which sent an important and potentially devastating message about the supposed value of social movements.

**Exposing the Gulf Between Social Movement Leaders and Participants**

Although most of the leaders within South Africa’s post-apartheid social movements spoke positively of Mr. Ngwane, the majority of those I spoke to emphasized the importance of
rebutting their supporters’ calls and pressure to actively participate in electoral politics. When I asked my interlocutors across a wide range of social movements if they would ever consider running for office themselves, even as independent candidates, unaffiliated with any political party, the response was overwhelmingly negative. Such an action, they explained, was clearly against their vision of an ideal type of politics. But it was clear that such a question was one that they were used to fielding, even from those whom were ostensibly part of their movement and whom shared in their political goals. Elections can threaten the cohesiveness of social movements by exposing the ideological gulf between leaders and lay participants.

Ayanda Kota, the gregarious and charismatic leader of the Unemployed People’s Movement (UPM) in Grahamstown, was adamant—like the great majority of social movement leaders—about never running for office, but he was also insistent on the need to couple his refusal with an ongoing effort to build his supporters’ consciousness of the inherent failures of the capitalist, electoral mode of democratic politics. The message that the leaders of the social-movement communicate to their followers cannot be one of “just don’t vote only” (Kota 2013). Instead, Kota suggested: “We can work tirelessly for a big revolt, we can show people, direct our people to what is happening around the world in terms of revolt. So we are taking people away from elections, exposing that it is a fraudulent system that is based on a capitalist notion. Therefore we are directing you to Tunisia, to Egypt, to Greece, to Brazil. It becomes not a slogan, but an education, a constant education. Not only during elections, but constant education before, during, and after elections.” (Kota 2013). Kota’s point about replacing the focus on elections with a focus on revolt clearly suggests that there might be a mismatch between the viewpoints and goals of leaders of social movements and their current and potential followers, and his insistence on a “constant” education of the latter by the former suggests that such a
mismatch may not be easily surmountable. The very need of social movements to “educate” their followers about the proper interpretation of electoral politics raises the question of the actual strength of the movements. It also raises the issue of whether these movements are actual popular movements, or causes in search of grassroots support.

Kota was not the only social movement leader who spoke of the need to properly educate the masses. But educating the masses of their “role” within social movements carried implicit risks, especially when contrasted with the “role” of the masses in political parties. Some social movement activists I interviewed told me of how the specter of elections forced them to have blunt and sometimes difficult discussions with their supporters as part of this process of education. The risk of these difficult discussions was that they would drive supporters away from social movements.

When the national or local conversation turned to elections, social movement leaders often had to remind their followers that despite all appearances, they were not in fact “leaders.” Vishwas Satgar, a prominent figure in the Democratic Left Front, explained to me that leadership within his movement looked very different from the type of leadership that people had come to expect within democratic political systems. “For us, it means that rather than saying: hey, here, we have the answer, it is to build the capacities of working-class and poor people,” he said, echoing the sentiment that social movements are meant to educate and support the masses to take their own action (Satgar 2013). Despite the fact that most of the unofficial “leaders” of social movements have superior educational backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and activist experience than those their movements sought to help, they ultimately claimed their subordination to the latter.
But this principled stand sometimes proved dissatisfactory to working-class and poor people, especially when they were confronted with the examples of “leaders” and “followers” from political society. During election time, according to Ngwane, “[politicians] are promising: I will buy you a car. I will build your house,” but leaders of social movements are forced to respond by telling the truth, which is: “No, I can’t build your house. You must join the struggle for the nationalization of the brick industry, which means you must join a local organization, which means you must pay attention to local politics” (Ngwane 2013). Of course, the response of the social movement leaders is not what most people want to hear, as “people want to do the least” (Ngwane 2013). If elections in South Africa brought out the best in politicians, encouraging them to actually pay attention to and engage with their constituencies, then they also have the potential to bring out the “worst” in social movement leaders, in the sense that it forced them to admit to uncomfortable and unpopular truths for their followers. Social movement leaders who refuse to participate in elections, instead telling their supporters that it is their burden to build the movement towards some unspecified future revolution or revolt, can appear patronizing and uncommitted in the eyes of their supporters. Even when the poor and marginalized recognize that the promises of politicians are empty, they can at least seem more rooted in reality than exhortation by social movements that the poor and marginalized must, and will, rise up in solidarity and help themselves. When elections loom, the social movements’ promises that someday the poor will have a major voice in the governance of their country might seem more far-fetched than politicians’ promises that they will deliver paved roads or free electricity to communities that vote them into office.

At the same time, social movement participants who are seduced by the false promises of politicians and elections may appear more than just “uneducated” to social movement leaders;
they may also appear beyond help or hope. None of the social movement leaders I spoke to held
the view that the masses that they were fighting for were unworthy of their efforts—otherwise,
they would not be putting so much time or dedication into their causes—but it is possible that
some of the attrition of social movement leaders owes to a recognition of the sometimes very
significant differences in political ideas and commitments of social movement leaders and
followers: a recognition that electoral politics can very easily bring about. Siya James’ plan for
preventing polling stations from being installed in Sweet Home Farms is potentially telling; if he
were indeed confident that his community was committed to boycotting the elections, would he
still insist on measures that prevent it from making the active choice to boycott? James’ ideal
solution to undermining the importance of elections contained more than a kernel of doubt in the
sincerity of his followers, despite his repeated claims that were completely supportive of AbM.

The concern that the seductive nature of electoral politics might siphon off support for
social movements is not confined solely to the rank-and-file participants of such groups, of
course. There is also a fairly widespread fear among the social movement community that its
leaders may abandon their causes for the spoils that come from competing for and winning
elected office. Several of the social movement activists that I spoke to relayed stories of being
approached by party operatives, mostly from the ANC, and offered promises of perks if they
would run for office under the party name. These activists were able to resist the pressure, but
that is not always the case. According to Jared Sacks, one of the leaders of CHOSA\textsuperscript{17} in the
Western Cape, what will often happen with fledging social movements is that “the community
group will rise up along non-party lines, and then their leadership will get co-opted by the ANC
or the DA, and that’s how the movements are often destroyed” (2013). Either the leadership will

\textsuperscript{17} Mr. Sacks considers his organization to be an NGO, not a social movement, but has significant experience as an
observer and participant in social movements.
abandon the causes of the community in order to toe the party line, or, by virtue of the leadership pledging allegiance to one political party over the others, the group will fracture among party divisions. Thus, even when social movements refuse to participate in elections, elections can still create opportunities for political parties to infiltrate and co-opt social movements. Elections arm political parties with a series of valuable resources—access to jobs, power, and prestige—that they can offer to their leadership. Social movements do not have the same store of resources at hand that they can use to pay or reward their leaders, and this disparity can only become more apparent during election season.

**Elections and Civil Society: Complementary to Democracy, But Not to Each Other?**

Many theorists conceptualize a robust civil society as a necessary complement to electoral politics in fashioning a strong democratic system. But given the many ways that elections and electoral politics can threaten the unity, strength and very existence of social movements, we must not conclude that civil society and electoral politics are necessarily complementary to one another. It may be that electoral politics and civil society need to be paired for democracy to work, but that this pairing may be one of parallel functioning rather than intersection. Claims that civil society does or can operate wholly independently from political society and the state have long been criticized as unrealistic, and I agree with this critique. Rather, the “parallel functioning” of civil society and political society (the latter of which encompasses electoral politics) that I posit is an unreachable ideal. But it is an ideal that the social movements in my study continually strive for, as they view most intersection between political society and their movements as weakening their cause. To say that civil society and political society operate independently of one another is false, but that does not mean that civil society does not want to, and does not try to act as if it could operate independently. Nor does it
mean that there are not real consequences of this aspiration. It means that social movements may work to prevent voting from taking place in their communities; they may refuse to support or field even unaffiliated, independent candidates; or they may alienate their supporters by refusing to take a stand on electoral issues.

Preference for a One-Party State

If social movements want to distinguish themselves from political society and its representative model of electoral politics, it may help if they do not have to share their opposition to the state and its government with other entities. In other words, social movements may prefer to confront a one-party state (either de jure or de facto) or at least one in which opposition political parties are relatively weak and inconsequential. This affords their opposition a degree of purity and totality; without potential allies within political society, social movements can cast themselves not only as opponents of a specific government and set of policies, but also as the only legitimate alternatives to that government.

This preference for a one-party state is not something that social movement activists will readily and openly admit to, and this is largely due to the fact that they reject party politics altogether. But when their objections to party politics are parsed, it becomes apparent that what social movements may really object to is organized pluralism within political society and the state. Pluralism within political society may actually make it more difficult for social movements to confront and challenge the state.

Partisan Competition Invites Co-optation

In particular, pluralism in political society can potentially subsume contention between the state and society under the false guise of partisan bickering. The Western Cape Province in South Africa is an example of how increased pluralism and competition in political society can
stymie the efforts and frustrate the leaders of oppositional civil society. The Democratic Alliance party (DA) has long been stronger in the Western Cape than the rest of the country, and in 2009 it managed to oust the ANC and become the leading party in the provincial government. Rather than cheering the fact that their province contained two highly competitive political parties capable of effecting periodic alternations in power within the government, oppositional social movements in the Western Cape held a much more pessimistic view of the political pluralism in their midst. In their experience, it meant that their opposition to the state as citizens would too easily be recast as opposition to a political party in government as partisans of competing political party.

In some cases, this is the result of direct cooptation by political parties of social movements and civil society organizing. Reflecting on a pattern he had noticed as a participant and observer of civil society in the province, Jared Sacks (2013) reported that what began as non-partisan grassroots movements seeking to make the state more accountable often became, through cooptation of the movements’ leaders, fronts for opposition parties to attack incumbents. The fierce competition between the ANC and the DA made non-partisan grassroots organizing prone to infiltration by the political parties, as the latter seized any opportunity they have to bolster their electoral support. The opposition party in particular would be foolish to watch from the sidelines as communities organize against their elected representatives and the policies they pursue. Thus, the leaders of community groups with grievances against the government were often courted by opposition parties and induced to become agents not just of their communities, but also, or even primarily, of opposition parties (Sacks 2013). Pluralism and competition in political society drove political parties to seek to remake contentious politics between communities and their governments into partisan issues.
On the other hand, many community and social movement leaders steadfastly resist the efforts made by political parties to co-opt their struggles against the government. But given the political context in which they operate, it is difficult for them to shrug off associations with political parties. According to both Fogel (2013) and Sacks (2013), it is all too easy for the media to portray civil society groups as agents of political parties and for elected representatives to dismiss these groups as disappointed partisans of the losing political party. Given the reality that some groups are indeed co-opted by political parties and that officeholders most routinely face organized opposition that is partisan, these are not unfounded or illogical assumptions to make. In the case of non-aligned civil society groups and social movements, however, they can be not only false, but also harmful to the former.

**Constituents vs. Electors**

By rejecting party identification and support, social movements seek to take advantage of the sharp distinction between the obligations elected officials have to their *constituents* versus the obligations they have to their *electors*. All those individuals that an officeholder is charged to represent are his or her constituents. An officeholder’s constituency encompasses those who voted for rival, losing candidates, as well as those who did not or could not vote. Electors, conversely, are those who do vote in political contests involving the officeholder. While officeholders have the duty to listen to and consider the preferences of their constituents, they have the choice to listen to and consider the preferences of their electors. This is because the relationship between officeholders and electors is transactional, while the relationship between officeholders and constituents is ontological.

That is, electors have standing with officeholders because they play a direct role in the placing and maintaining the officeholder in his or her position within the government. They
matter to officeholders because of what they do: vote for or against incumbents. As such, officeholders can choose whether they will listen to and pursue the preferences of specific electors based on their calculations of whether such action will garner the votes of these electors and whether those votes are necessary for the officeholder to win the election. While officeholders do need to pay attention to the preferences of electors in order to gain and retain their position, it is not a duty of their office, nor is there an expectation that they will equally consider the demands of all electors, even initially. In particular, officeholders can largely ignore the unique demands of electors who voted for other candidates, as the support of these electors was not necessary for their election victories, and it can be inferred that these preferences—not shared with those who did vote for the officeholders—were what drove them into the arms of rival candidates. The relationship between officeholders and electors, then, is one based on choice for both parties.

While there is latitude for officeholders and constituents to make choices in their interactions with one another, choice is not the foundation of their relationship. Officeholders are not to define nor distinguish among constituents based on whether or how they voted, or whether or how they will vote. Constituents are to have equal standing with officeholders by virtue of who they are: constituents. No matter for whom they cast their ballots, or for whom they will cast their ballots (if they even voted or will vote), they can expect officeholders to be responsive to their preferences because they are the people that officeholders have the duty to represent as part of their governmental position. The relationship between representatives and constituents is ontological. To be a representative one must have constituents to whom he or she is responsible; to be a constituent, one must have a representative who is responsible for him or her. Neither party can ignore the other and still claim to be either a constituent or a representative. One is
either a constituent of a representative, or not a constituent; one is either a representative of constituents, or not a representative.

In practice, of course, the distinction between officeholder-elector dyad and the representative-constituent dyad often blurs. Of interest for this discussion is the fact that representatives often do not make a good-faith effort to consider that preferences of all of their constituents, but instead focus narrowly on those who are electors and who either did vote for them in the past or may vote for them in the future. This devolution of the representative-constituent relationship into the officeholder-elector relationship can be the result of framing that overlays partisanship onto political issues.

Quite simply, when contention between a representative and some of his or her constituents is framed as a disagreement between members of opposing political parties, the two sides can expect the contention to transpire as if it were between an officeholder and electors. Party labels not only identify individuals based on their policy preferences; they also identify individuals based on their allegiances and obligations towards others. A representative who strongly identifies with a particular political party (or who others strongly identify with a particular political party) can be expected to function first and foremost as an officeholder for that party. That means he or she will be expected to pursue the preferences of the party over the interests of individuals within his or her assigned constituency. A constituent who strongly identifies with a political party (or who others strongly identify with a particular political party) can be expected to function first and foremost as an elector of that party rather than as a constituent of whoever holds office in his or her area. The mutual duty of the representative and the constituent to recognize and make a good-faith effort to work with one another seems more like a choice when one or both are primarily cast as agents of political parties.
And so many in the social movement community see the infiltration—whether real or suggested—of party politics into representative-constituent contention as disadvantageous to their cause. Officeholders do not have the same obligation to engage with community demands that are seen as originating with rival political parties than those that emerge from the grassroots. They do not have the same obligation to represent the preferences of communities that have allied themselves with direct rivals for their office than those of communities whose leaders are politically unaligned. Political pluralism and robust competition between political parties may be good for democracy in general, but when it is seen as bleeding into civil society, it may provide cover for the government to be less responsive and responsible to the needs of society.

In the Western Cape, both those social movements that have been co-opted by political parties and those that are inaccurately portrayed as having a partisan leaning struggle to make an impact (Fogel 2013; Sacks 2013; D’Sa 2013). They are often dismissed out-of-hand by officeholders as belonging to opposing political parties. Since these social movements and community organizations are assumed to belong to opposition parties, incumbents can decide that they need only pay minimal attention to their demands, as they assume that if these demands had been strong and widespread enough, they would have propelled the opposition party candidate to power. The demands of these social movements, then, are seen as belonging to groups within the electorate that the incumbent does not need to maintain in office.

Likewise, the mainstream media often portrays the concerns of community groups and social movements as part of the normal game of politics wherein the out-of-power party does its best to agitate and discredit the ruling party (Fogel 2013; Sacks 2013). Again, this frames the issues brought forth by social movements as attacks on officeholders from disgruntled partisans on the opposing side rather than efforts of constituents to engage with their representatives.
Under this frame, the very real issues that underlie the frequent service delivery protests that convulse through poor communities—the lacking provision of services necessary for baseline human welfare—can be seen as secondary to the desire to discredit the officeholder. Anyone involved in the protests, however, would surely affirm that access to clean water, for example, is more important to them than ousting an officeholder or incumbent political party (Sacks 2013). These protests are not about scoring points against an enemy, but about bringing the state and society in closer communication and consultation.

**Constructive Criticism and the Dominant-Party State**

In essence, party competition and political pluralism threaten to soil the “pure” motivations of social movements for improved state-society relations. Many in South Africa’s social movements would ideally like to see the end of political parties in their country, but if there need to be political parties, then they would prefer that one party dominates the state. Some even believe that a one-party dominant state with limited competition from opposition parties is the best scenario for social movements to have an effect on the state. When opposition parties are very weak, it is difficult to frame contention between communities and their representatives as the work of opposition parties. Thus, they cannot automatically dismiss criticism from their constituencies as partisan. At the same time, officeholders have to acknowledge that their position does owe to the communities’ electoral support. This primes them, they argument goes (Sacks 2013), to view oppositional social movements as offering constructive criticism. That is, when social movements cannot be easily separated out from the larger community that voted for officeholders, it is easier to frame their protest as a way of pointing out flaws or shortcomings so that they officeholders and their parties can strengthen their grip on power. A dominant-party state is secure enough in its position to not view all critics as enemies, but not self-satisfied.
enough to ignore its critics wholesale.\textsuperscript{18} It follows that officeholders in states with weak opposition parties may be more likely to engage with the demands of their critics.

While it may not have been entirely intentional, the social movements I encountered in South Africa found ways to communicate to officeholders that they did not need to worry about the threat of opposition parties. According to Sacks, when social movements rose up in defiance and protest, the focus was rarely on the power and potential of aggrieved communities to take something (namely support) away from officeholders. Instead, the message most often centered on the power and potential of the officeholder to affirm the inherent “dignity” of the protesters (Sacks 2013). In these lopsided relationships, social movements could not—and would not—harm incumbents, but incumbents could help social movements. This act of asking for recognition from officeholders serves to reify their authority and undermines the sense that they face meaningful political competition. Indeed, social movements are asking the “people in government [to] hear them out when making policy and making decisions” (Sacks 2013), which neatly elides the fact that it is also possible for individuals to be heard when selecting people to serve in government. Waiting until politicians are in office to seek their recognition, and acting like this recognition is the prerogative of the officeholder, suggests political competition is not a major concern for the politician. Indeed, the “dignity” of the governed could be read as inhering in them precisely because they share the same political party as their representative. In one-party and dominant-party states, much of the “dignity” of the governed can originate in their membership in the party, and most of their input happens after the government is in office.

It is important to note that while appeals to the recognition of the dignity of communities and their desire to be heard by those already in government seem to telegraph a preference for limited political pluralism and party competition, they also fit with social movements’
commitment to participatory democracy. Likewise, while the choice of social movements to act and speak as if they are operating in contexts with little political pluralism may be a strategic move to advance the goals of the movements, these choices can also reflect a principled stand. An appeal to recognize the inherent dignity of the governed may be meant to point out that the governed consists of fellow party members, or it may be meant to point out that the governed are all constituents who merit representation regardless of how or whether they voted. Grassroots groups asking to be heard in post-election decision-making may reflect a conscious effort to downplay the strength or impact of partisan competition in governance, but it also may reflect an unrelated desire for closer collaboration between communities and government. Thus, social movements’ preferences for one-party states and limited political pluralism may be strategic or unintended, or more likely, some combination of the two. But what is important is that no matter the motives of social movements and their leaders, they all lead to the same outcome.

If social movements in contemporary South Africa are going to deepen democracy, it is unlikely that they will do so by enhancing political pluralism or strengthening opposition parties vis-à-vis the ruling party. Oppositional social movements are more likely to agitate—directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously—for one-party or non-partisan states than for states with multiple and robust oppositional parties. Their strategic calculus changes, however, when oppositional parties represent social movements’ ideal vision of the state.

**States-in-Waiting Parties**

By and large, oppositional social movements in post-apartheid South Africa take pains to disassociate themselves from opposition parties, even those that share their critique of the ruling party and seem amenable to their demands. But that does not mean that these movements have given up on political parties altogether; instead, they seem to be waiting for a new type of
opposition party to rise: the state-in-waiting opposition party. They are waiting for a party that represents not just a new slate of faces and policies to be fit into the slots of the existing state, but a party whose people and policies are so radically incongruous that they break the mold, forcing a new state to form around them. Oppositional social movements in the country indicate a willingness to support likeminded opposition parties so long as their opposition is truly towards the state, not just the government.

The critiques leveled at opposition parties by members and leaders of social movements that I interviewed all point to the fact that the social movements are not satisfied with the very nature of political parties in the country. They suggest that the true problem with opposition parties is that they do not represent a wholly alternative vision of politics and state-society relations.

The most broadly cited charge against the existing opposition parties that I encountered from civil society leaders was that they were narrowly “electoralist” (Satgar 2013) and only focused on winning elections. Given how social movements feel threatened by elections, it was not surprising that they should assail parties on this count. But the critique that opposition parties were only, or too, focused on elections carried an implication that some in social movements believe political parties could behave differently—that they could play an important role beyond elections. An opposition party that is too focused on winning elections thinks that its biggest challenge and greatest achievement will be gaining positions within the state, while the type of opposition party preferred by social movements recognizes that it has the potential to remake the state while it was in office.
While many political experts thought that DA party’s aspiration to build a winning multi-racial electoral coalition was far-fetched when I was doing my research in 2013,\(^{19}\) the leaders and spokespeople of many of the social movements I interviewed thought it was shortsighted. As the DA’s goals failed to include refashioning the South African state, they were seen as overly cautious. Vishwas Satgar, a leading figure in the Democratic Left Front movement, echoed the sentiments of many in the social movement community when he argued that none of the opposition parties deserved their support or respect because none were challenging the “political institutional framework” of South Africa (2013). His rebuke of the opposition parties was that they would only “open up the democratic space” that was needed for them to slip into state positions instead of opening up the space for a new type of democratic politics within the state. Parties like the DA opposed the ANC not because they did not like the state that the ruling party had forged, but because they liked it so much that they wanted to control it. Opposition parties, he argued, were inadequate because envy, not revolutionary zeal, motivated them. They were just governments-in-waiting, longing for their chance to take the head of the table.

**Waiting for States-in-Waiting**

Social movements’ condemnation of government-in-waiting opposition parties is complemented by expressions of support for state-in-waiting opposition parties, but it is important to note that this support is both speculative and passive. That is, social movements intimate that they would support state-in-waiting political parties if they arise, but do little in the present to proactively encourage the development of such parties or political movements.

At present, the representatives of social movements I spoke to acknowledge that there are not any political parties or movements seeking to capture the state in order to remake it. At best,

\(^{19}\) With the stronger showing of the DA in 2016 municipal elections, some experts are now beginning to soften their assessment that this is nigh impossible, although most still believe it is overly ambitious.
they can only affirm that they would support such parties if they existed and point to the relationship between social movements and the ANC during the struggle to dismantle the apartheid state, at which point the ANC was a state-in-waiting political party. Social movements and civil society groups did play a key role in helping to bring down apartheid and installing the ANC at the helm of the new, fully inclusive democratic state. Social movements could hardly remain aloof from politics when there was a political organization, the ANC, promising to fundamentally alter the relationship between the state and majority of its population, especially since the goals of the ANC and many of these civil society groups aligned. Among the leaders of South Africa’s post-apartheid social movements who are of a certain age, very few can report not having supported the ANC’s efforts to initially capture the state, or not having been a past member of the ANC, or one of its affiliated organizations.

Additionally, some social movements see their opposition to and criticism of the ANC state as part of still-ongoing process of installing a new, post-apartheid South African state. Surveying the landscape of civil society groups currently clashing with the state, Marais (2011) noted that “almost all of them were pursuing goals that had formed major planks in the national liberation struggle and most claimed to be upholding the ideals of the Freedom Charter and principles and commitments outlined in the Reconstruction and Development Programme,” all of which are seen as key documents of the ANC (450). In pushing the ANC-dominated state to follow through on its commitments, one gets the sense the social movements are not only willing to support state-in-waiting political parties in their drive to capture the state, but also to hold them accountable for actually building that new state once in power. Given this history of engagement with the ANC, it is hard to doubt that social movements have the capacity and willingness to support a likeminded state-in-waiting political party should one arise.
However, social movements’ commitments to supporting a leftist state-in-waiting party and confidence that one such party would emerge did not translate into proactive efforts to cultivate it. Rather, I was told time and again that South Africa would need to wait until the poor and marginalized were ready to rise up and take power for themselves. The role of social movements was to play a part in “conscientiz[ing]” (Buthelezi 2013) and building the "confidence of the masses” (Ngwane 2013), but not to play the part of the “vanguard” or pretend to have “the answers” (Satgar 2013).

This stance clearly fits with the social movements’ commitment to participatory and grassroots politics. It is also to be expected given the groups’ distaste for political parties and electoral politics. But it does point to just how much of a rarity it will be for oppositional social movements to support oppositional political parties and just how particular the conditions must be for them to do so. What would drive the eventual formation of state-in-waiting political parties would be “a crisis of democracy” (McKinley and Veriava 2005: 3) wherein the system would not function properly, or a “state of emergency” (Kota 2013) in which the state started to ruthlessly and aggressively suppress the people as it had done during the apartheid-era struggles. This, according to my interlocutors, would then be followed by widespread “revolts” (Buthelezi 2013) and devastating “strikes” (Ngwane 2013). In other words, the rise of state-in-waiting political parties and movements would necessitate a widespread disillusionment with the status quo, a shared belief that problems could not be remedied through the current state and model of politics, and a feeling of political efficacy rather than apathy and resignation. My interlocutors in South Africa were sure that this special confluence of events was brewing in the near future for the country, but this does not negate the fact that these specific conditions are relatively rare.
Politics will need to be not-as-usual, and democracy may need to be faltering, for social movements to coalesce behind opposition political parties.

**Conditions that Favor States-in-Waiting—and Social Movements**

My interviewees’ predictions about the conditions that would lead to a rise in revolutionary political movements seeking to capture the state in order to fundamentally alter it call to mind what many social scientists have indicated as important drivers for the rise of social movements themselves. McAdam’s (1982) political process model for analyzing the trajectory of social movements focuses on the importance of the organizational readiness of excluded groups, shifts in political opportunities that favor protesters, and the growth of an insurgent consciousness. Likewise, Piven and Cloward (1977) write of the necessary transformation in both consciousness and behavior on the part of the poor as a precondition of their protest. The system needs to lose its legitimacy in the eyes of the poor (echoing McKinley and Veriava’s (2005: 3) point about “crisis of democracy”), people need to begin to assert rights and demanding change (recalling Buthelezi’s (2013) talk of coming “revolts”), and they need to acquire a newfound sense of political efficacy (see Ngwane’s (2013) predictions of widespread strikes) in order for them to mount an effective protest. The degree of overlap in what leaders of social movements identify as precipitating factors in the rise of political movements that they would actively support and what scholars describe as the preconditions for the rise of social movements themselves suggests that the chances for social movements to ally with likeminded state-in-waiting parties are probably quite slim. Much of the time, the conditions that my interviewees identified as potentially propelling the rise of revolutionary political movements seeking to capture the state will likely result in the emergence of social movements demanding fundamental change within the state, but not a position at the head of the state. What leaders of
social movements claim to be waiting for may not be so much new state-in-waiting parties, but larger, more powerful social movements. Social movements’ support for oppositional state-in-waiting parties is likely more hypothetical than their leaders either recognize or are willing to admit.

**Undermining the Need for Opposition Parties**

By focusing on conditions that could favor social movements just as much or more than they favor state-in-waiting parties, leaders of social movements betray the possibility that social movements may actually prevent, purposively or not, the development of new state-in-waiting parties. The Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC), for example, continually exposes the failures of South Africa’s political system by doing what the government cannot. When residents of the area have their electricity disconnected because of their inability to pay, they have learned that it is best to ignore their local councillors and instead go immediately to the SECC for effective remedy. By effectively resolving problems relating to the provision of public goods, the SECC allows communities to bypass political institutions and the whole political process in having their needs met (Skuse 2011). The SECC certainly sends the message to its participants that there is a crisis of democracy, but it also sends the message that this crisis can be best addressed through civil society. It suggests that support for social movements like the SECC is needed more than the support of opposition parties. Individuals who participate in social movements like the SECC might be eager supporters of the right state-in-waiting political party should it arise, but they may also be learning that such a state-in-waiting party does not need to arise for them to see positive improvements in their daily lives.

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20 This most often means the SECC will send a “re-connector” to illegally restore their electricity.
Likewise, the example of social movements in post-apartheid South Africa also shows how they can function to prevent irreparable damage in the relationship between the state and society, which is precisely what is needed to spur the development of such revolutionary political parties. Thompson and Nleya (2010: 240) have noted a trend in developing countries whereby grassroots organizing is the strongest and most sustained regarding issues for which the state has already made concrete promises and invited community participation and deliberation. In post-apartheid South Africa, this is evident in the plethora of social movements and grassroots protests that focus on service delivery. These movements charge that the state has been negligent in its promises and duties to the populace, but they do not argue that the state is wrong to have already singled out service delivery as a core part of purpose. They contend that the state-sponsored forms of participation and deliberation are weak and need to be expanded, but they do not assert that the state was wrong to reach out to communities for their input. In other words, these movements are not questioning the basic premise of what the state has said that it is trying to do. They are not suggesting that fundamentally new ideas are needed about the role of the state in society, nor are they refusing to acknowledge that some elements of political society have already recognized the validity of participatory forms of democratic governance. Focusing on those areas where the state is moving in the right direction—however slowly and unsatisfactorily—is a smart move for engaging with the state and winning specific battles, but it does not inspire the type of full-scale disillusionment with the status quo and a feeling that democracy is in crisis that precipitates the emergence of a political party that promises to overturn and remake the state.

In Grahamstown, I watched as Ayanda Kota, the widely respected head of the city’s branch of the Unemployed People’s Movement, led his organization from behind, working to
educate and build the confidence of his followers. Those under Kota knew their rights, knew the state’s obligations to their communities, and knew that grassroots organizing was the best way to engagement their government and resolve their conflicts with it. Repeated clashes with the local government around such issues as water shortages were simply that: repertoires at which UPM and its members had become experienced and skilled. Victories and defeats both produced the feeling that the UPM was to not be abandoned; the lesson was always that the commitment to the social movement needed to be redoubled. The idea that a revolutionary political party promising to overthrow the state could emerge or gain support in Grahamstown seemed far-fetched. The town had already found its preferred way to engage with the state and shape it to its demands. The classic trope of civil society “making democracy work” by nurturing empowered, engaged citizens was at play in Grahamstown, and as a result, revolutionary opposition parties and political movements were not.

**The ANC as the Incubator of the State-in-Waiting**

Indeed, social movements that engage with the government primarily on its key policies and commitments may foster the idea that no new opposition parties are needed because the ruling party already contains the state-in-waiting party that the country needs. For some within oppositional civil society, the ANC, or at least the leftist elements within it, still is the state-in-waiting party that the country needs. There is no need for an alternative, state-in-waiting opposition party to arise in the country because the revolutionary core of the ruling party still has not triumphed, and as such, the party already contains its own state-in-waiting.

Those with this viewpoint point to such documents as the Freedom Charter and the Reconstructions and Development Programme as a sign of the ruling party’s still-untapped revolutionary potential (Marais 2011). Many subscribe to the belief that the country’s liberation
will proceed in two stages, the first of which will encompass political liberation in the form of
democracy, and the second of which will comprise economic liberation in the form of socialism
(Alexander 2002). The ANC has ushered in the first stage of the liberation by bringing down the
apartheid state; now, it needs to be prodded to follow through with the second stage of liberation.

Although Trevor Ngwane of the SEC reported that he was not “convinced of the two-
stage revolution,” he did argue that he and many of his peers helming post-apartheid social
movements foresaw the ANC’s betrayal of its more leftist principles once it was in control of the
state. The post-apartheid era, as he saw it, would be about reigniting the party’s revolutionary
elements (Ngwane 2013). For him, the decision to support the ANC during the liberation
struggle was a clearheaded calculation that the party was the only political force that could defeat
the apartheid state and subsequently incubate a socialist state until it was pushed by society to
bring that socialist state into fruition. Like many within social movements claimed, he knew that
he would not be satisfied with the ANC-helmed post-apartheid state, but that was tempered with
an expectation that the ANC would, with sufficient time and prodding, eventually fashion a truly
new state. He took a long-range view of the ruling party and political and economic development
in South Africa, believing that the ANC, founded as a state-in-waiting, could not easily shrug off
this core of its identity by simply winning power within the state.

There certainly are signs that the communities in South Africa where oppositional social
movements are the most active and civil society protest is fiercest also believe in the possibility
of the ANC’s redemption. In reviewing the results of a survey conducted around the 2009
elections, Booysen noted a strong correlation between civil society protest of the ANC and
electoral support of the party, as “the same communities protested and voted in the election, and
the same communities protested and voted for the ANC” (2011: 106). Opposition to the ANC in
the streets and support for it in the polling stations have long been noted by Booysen (2011) as complementary strategies of engagement, a way of letting the ruling party know that communities both want it to change its policies and believe that it can do so. A separate study of the SECC found that many branch members, despite their anger at the policies of the ANC, continued to vote for the party in both local and national elections (Skuse 2011: 66). Opposition parties have struggled to gain a foothold in these communities, and this is likely at least partially a result of the fact that those who are active in civil society believe that the oppositional state-in-waiting party that is most likely to triumph and implement the demands of communities already existed within the ANC itself.

It is possible that this underlying belief that the ANC still retains its revolutionary heart owes in part to the party’s distinct history as a liberation movement. Much ink has been spilled debating the effects of liberation movements that have transitioned into governments, many highlighting the potential for a slide into authoritarianism. As a country’s “saviors,” such parties and political movements often develop a sort of messiah-complex that brooks little criticism and opposition once installed at the helm of the state. With weak opposition parties laboring under suspicions that they are little more than representatives of the pre-revolutionary state dressed up in different clothes, some observers look to civil society as the perhaps the only credible critic that can speak truth to power, shattering the myth that the liberation-party-turned-government is still the last hope of the people (Melber 2002).

But the belief held by some within social movements that the ANC still incubates a state-in-waiting political party speaks to how the savior narrative of the former liberation movement can even influence those who are its most vocal critics. The ANC often invokes its identity as the

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party of liberation in order to excuse its lapses in democratic and accountable governance; that same identity may allow social movements to excuse themselves from the search for new state-in-waiting parties outside of the ANC. For just as its history as a liberation movement drives the ANC to discredit opposition parties, it may also discourage its critics from thinking that they need opposition parties for revolutionary change. It is much easier to believe that a revolutionary state-in-waiting exists within a ruling party when that party was once the party of national liberation and still styles itself as the party of liberation. The impetus to excuse the behavior of the ANC because it once was, and always will be, the party of liberation extends beyond political society and its avowed supporters to even those who have abandoned political society for civil society.

**Conclusion: Social Movements May Make Democracy Work, But How?**

Many on the left side of post-apartheid South Africa’s political spectrum see social movements as one of the remaining beacons of hope in a country that has so far failed to realize its full potential as one of the world’s greatest and most politically, economically, and socially progressive democracies. If the country is to get back on track after two decades of increasing corruption, decreasing governmental accountability, and deterioration or stagnation in socioeconomic markers, then social movements will be the forces that shift the tide. They will be the ones to ensure that South Africa’s ongoing “crisis of democracy” does not devolve into a wholesale implosion of democracy.

As easy as some have found it to dismiss social movements and their admirers as starry-eyed utopians, it is important to note that social movements’ ambitions to save the country do not address all, or even what some would say are the most fundamental, ways that South Africa’s democracy is imperiled. Leftist social movements’ vision of an ideal South African democracy is
one of direct citizen participation in governance. It is one in which consultation between those who govern and those who are governed replaces elections and political parties. It is not one in which citizens sort themselves into rival political factions that take turns gaining access to the state and thus the opportunity to enact their predetermined priorities. It is not one of ritualized, institutionalized competition among officeholders acting as delegates. It is not one in which the ANC loses its electoral dominance at the national level and peacefully transfers power within the state to opposition parties. That is, it is not a vision of South Africa that would meet outside observers’ shorthand markers of democratic consolidation. As much as social movements style themselves as the potential saviors of democracy, they are not seeking to save some of the most important hallmark institutions of democracy: elections and political parties.

In fact, as this chapter has shown, social movements’ preferences for democratic governance clash with many of the accepted axioms of how democracies should, and do, work. Although most scholars would argue that the importance of elections is often overinflated, few would dismiss them as non-essential components of functioning democracies. Yet in the case of post-apartheid South Africa, we have seen how social movements can feel quite threatened by electoral politics. Elections that are marked by non-participation, apathy and voter disillusionment actually raise the profile of social movements. Those that fail time and again to hold officeholders accountable and communicate societal preferences to state actors make social movements appear more important. Social movements have reason to cheer when elections degrade into hollow rituals.

Likewise, social movements have reason to support the creation of single-party or one-party-dominant states. It prevents state-society relations from becoming party battles and community needs and government obligations from becoming repackaged as partisan policies to
be negotiated and put to vote. This preference for single-party rule also runs counter to prevailing arguments that democracy works best when power in the state is shared among two or more political parties.

Finally, this chapter has used the examples of post-apartheid social movements in South Africa to demonstrate that social movements only express potential support for likeminded political parties that they see as states-in-waiting. The robust competition between political parties that scholars generally agree is beneficial for democratic consolidation is competition between parties that are governments-in-waiting. Such parties accept the basic legitimacy of the state and its institutions and consent to upholding the rules of the game in the prevailing model of politics. They seek positions within the state in order to administer it, not to change it.

State-in-waiting political parties, on the other hand, do not profess this same commitment to upholding the status quo; they seek to fundamentally alter the institutions of the state and patterns of politics and governance once they are in power. They offer the promise of revolutionary change that social movements committed to participatory democracy crave, but they do not offer the stability that experts believe is key to democratic consolidation. While state-in-waiting political parties are not necessarily parties that would end democracy or push a country in a non-democratic direction, they do promise to introduce a period of uncertainty about the fate of a country and to undermine what progress has already been made establishing patterns of democratic governance in a country. By refusing to support political parties that are not likeminded state-in-waiting parties, social movements may be indirectly supporting a situation in which its populace sees democracy as continually in “crisis,” having lost legitimacy, and one in which the country is understood as continually on the verge of widespread revolts and uprisings.
This is certainly the impression that I got from interviewing dozens of leaders and representatives of social movements in South Africa.

Social movements thus advance an ideal of democracy that not all would argue is ideal. If they make democracy “work,” then it must be acknowledged that they may make democracy work in a very specific way that does not necessarily accord with how many experts and laypeople alike argue that democracy does and/or should work. In particular, social movements cannot be counted on to directly or indirectly support robust competition among political parties. Those that criticize that ruling party and oppose its policies cannot be expected to embrace opposition political parties or nurture an environment in which opposition parties can thrive. The mock trials of government officials in Umlazi, the illegal electricity reconnections in Soweto, and the protest marches in streets of Grahamstown should not be read as social movements gnawing at the ties of loyalty between the ANC and black South Africans, setting them free to find home in new political parties. Rather, they should be read as signs that social movements are hoping to steer South Africans toward a new vision of politics, one in which the electoral status quo remains largely undisturbed precisely because it has lost its relevance.
CHAPTER IV. NGOS: INVESTING IN THE STATUS QUO

Everybody wants to claim that their organization is a social movement. They realize that to be a non-governmental organization (NGO) is now considered passé. And so they try to appropriate the term that currently holds the most cachet among activists and academics alike. But they cannot hide behind their hasty attempt at rebranding. They cannot shrug off the symbolic baggage that comes from being part of the white, middle-class establishment simply by claiming to be something else. It is clear to even the most complaisant judge that NGOs are nothing like true social movements.

Those were the complaints that I frequently encountered as I became a traveler in the leftist, oppositional civil society of post-apartheid South Africa. Not surprisingly, they came most strongly from those who considered themselves to be representatives of actual social movements. More dispassionate observers, however, still tended to agree about the ubiquity and impreciseness with which the term “social movement” was bandied about, and how it obscured the very real differences among the types of civil society opposition to the policies of the South African state. While I will argue that there is significant overlap in how NGOs and social movements position themselves vis-à-vis political society and their practical effects on representative democracy, I do concede that the typical NGO would be hard-pressed to convincingly “pass” as the typical social movement.

Non-governmental organizations and social movements are indeed two different beasts that can hardly be lumped together as some sort of generic civil society organization. They deserve separate analysis not only because they can, at best, merely pretend to be the other, but also because they are two separate pathways that lead in the same direction. They demonstrate
both the richness and diversity of civil society and its self-limiting potential to upset the political status quo.

The base material conditions of NGOs and social movements certainly do much to distinguish the two. In order to get in touch with leaders of social movements, I relied on contacts to provide me with their direct mobile phone numbers. In cold-calling them, I was as likely to catch them at home or “in the field” as I was to interrupt them while at their “office,” conducting “official business.” Indeed, some of the social movements did not have dedicated offices or headquarters to host our meetings; I met many leaders not at locations with official addresses but at physical landmarks—a bus stop, the entrance to the township across from the factory billboard—and was then welcomed into their homes or taken to public meeting spots. There, I met with additional individuals who were both participants and members of the movement as well as neighbors, friends, and family. Very few had official job titles or formal sets of duties. No one was paid. Although several individuals saw their work with the social movement as their vocation, dedicating more than half of their waking hours to the group, no one thought of their work as a livelihood. I often left with a lighter bag, having been asked to donate cheap office supplies—notebooks, pens, etc.—to the group. On a few occasions, I let my interviewees share my taxi on my ride back to town or drove them myself to their next appointment, as securing their own transportation was difficult.

In contrast, I most often initiated contact with leaders and representatives of NGOs through emails to their organizations or phone calls to their secretaries. People I already knew often provided me with this initial contact information, but had they not, I could have easily have found it on the organizations’ websites. I was asked to provide my credentials and a letter of introduction from my university before individuals would agree to talk to me. Meetings were
arranged days, and sometimes weeks, in advance. I was able to provide my taxi drivers with street addresses to my destinations, and when we arrived, the buildings greeted us with clear signage indicating the name of the organization. Employed guards sometimes augmented the barbed-wire-topped fences and security gates that were standard issue for South African businesses. The hospitality I encountered once inside the NGO offices was no warmer or more generous than I received when meeting with social movements, but it was more perfunctory and ritualized. When I was offered a cup of hot tea or coffee at NGOs, I knew it was part of their general entertaining supply for guests; when my interviewees at a social movement passed me the greasy paper bag of fat cakes, I knew that they were sharing something with me that they had purchased primarily for themselves. The individuals I met at the NGOs were unequivocally passionate about their work, but they also would not have balked at being characterized as employees of the organization, nor would they have been uncomfortable with the idea of deriving a livelihood from their activism. The majority had job titles and routine sets of tasks. They were coworkers and colleagues, but not often also neighbors, friends and family. When they bade me goodbye, my bag was heavier with business cards, pamphlets, newsletters, and other organizational literature. I was never asked to share a taxi, but I was often offered their services in securing me a safe ride home.

My informants were correct, then, that I could not have mistaken the typical NGO for the typical social movement. Being a native from one of the wealthiest countries in the world, the material differences between the two were perhaps more noticeable than they might otherwise be. South African NGOs fit more comfortably into the bureaucratized, professionalized world I was used to inhabiting; the social movements were a constant reminder that I was far from home. What took some time to strike me, then, was how these oppositional NGOs, conforming as they
did to the Western, idealized vision of civil society, did not readily support the Western ideal of the properly functioning democracy. It was not surprising that oppositional social movements that oriented themselves to some future revolt of the poor had dispensed with a model in which competing government-in-waiting parties took their turn at the helm of the state. It was surprising, however, that most oppositional NGOs had made the same decision despite their own doubts about the revolutionary potential of the marginalized classes and their commitment to so-called middle-class values.

Someone I met while touring the townships with the UPM in Grahamstown remarked that I must have felt more at home at the offices of the NGO PSAM in the city. While this may have been true in a physical sense, the NGO hardly seemed a refuge for the kind of robust multi-party representative democracy that has come to dominate our shared understanding in the West of what democratic progress should look like. NGOs may be much more familiar than social movements, but their vision of state-society relations and their effects on political society can be just as unsettling to those steeped in the Western paradigm of how civil society makes democracy work.

In this chapter, I will use the case of post-apartheid South Africa to highlight several “unfamiliar” proclivities of NGOs: their rejection of multiparty politics, their preference for a strong, united, single-party state, and their commitment to a politics of consensus over compromise. While these facets of NGOs are unfamiliar in that they are not often emphasized in discussions of the relationship between civil society and democracy, I will argue that they are not unknowable or unpredictable. Rather, they are built into the underlying premises of civil society. In many ways, to be a political NGO is to realize these ideas. Upon observation, we cannot hide from the fact that NGOs can undermine opposition through political society any more than
NGOs can hide from the fact that they are not social movements. This chapter will also provide support for my four theoretical propositions about civil society: that it prefers one-party dominant democracy, is a place where leaders can practice a politics without constituents, regards elections as potential threats to its mission, and that it will wait for the nature of the state to be at stake before becoming involved in electoral politics.

NGOs are frequently defined by what they are not. They are not government entities nor do they seek public office for their members; they do not chase financial profit; and they are not ad hoc or non-institutionalized entities (Martens 2002). After surveying the extensive literature concerning NGOs, Martens describes them as “formal (professionalized) independent societal organizations whose primary aim is to promote common goals at the national or international level” (2002; 282). The popularity of the study of NGOs among scholars of civil society, particularly in the global South, has waned in recent years, but they still remain the prototypical civil society organization behind longstanding theories relating civil society to democratic governance and consolidation. I will argue, however, that these theories often sidestep the very mechanics by which ideal-type democracy as a system of government is supposed to function, thus leaving unexplored the issue of NGOs’ posture towards and effects on these mechanics. Our theories of civil society organizations’ salutary effects on democratic governance often read as if NGOs are the chief—or most legitimate—mediating organizations between the state and society. Political parties are often left out of the discussion.

In the following sections, I will show how political scientists are actually following the lead of NGOs in leaving political parties out of the discussion. The way NGOs approach political opposition through electoral processes and institutions of representative democracy in my South African case study ranges from dismissive to hostile. I will not go as far to argue that NGOs are
“bad” for democratic consolidation. That would simply reproduce the mistake of leaving unspoken and unexamined the underlying assumptions of what “democracy” actually is. Instead, I will argue that if “democracy” is taken to mean robust competition among multiple political parties for a turn at the reins of the state, then NGOs, given their own operating principles, are going to do very little to reinforce this type of democracy. NGOs can deepen democracy, but that may not be because they function to bind individuals to its traditional institutional pillars, like political parties, or to engage them in the hallmark processes, like electoral competition. Rather, it may be because NGO can serve to broaden the scope of what democracy can look like in practice. Table II provides a summary of the organizations profiled in this chapter.

**Rejection of Party Politics**

It was not surprising when a top operative in the Democratic Alliance Party told me that civil society organizations that were critical of the ANC frequently refused to collaborate with the DA or would only do so secretly (Redelinghuys 2013). What was unexpected was his prediction that work of NGOs that opposed ANC policies would do nothing, even indirectly, to pique interest in opposition parties. The success and expansion of oppositional civil society, he thought, would simply leave increased numbers of lapsed ANC members and non-voters in its wake. The rejection of the ANC through civil society organizations, he intimated, was also the rejection of multiparty politics. The more I spoke to representatives and participants in NGOs, the more I reached the same conclusion that opposition to state policy through civil society organizations very frequently accompanies a disenchantment—if there ever actually was an original enchantment—with democratic politics as practiced through political parties.

It is noteworthy that many of the leaders of South Africa’s oppositional NGOs once were active members of the ANC. If they thought that change could be achieved through political
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Year Founded</th>
<th>Funding</th>
<th>Interviewees (Position within NGO)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Centre for Civil Society (CCS)</td>
<td>Social Justice; Ecological Justice; Community Organizing</td>
<td>Durban *Part of the University of KwaZulu-Natal</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>University funding</td>
<td>Patrick Bond (Director)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Cape Agricultural Research Project (ECARP)</td>
<td>Farmworkers' Rights; Opposition to Neoliberalism</td>
<td>Grahamstown</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Foreign (governmental and private foundations)</td>
<td>Lali Naidoo (Director); Sonto Shelle (Staff Member)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG)</td>
<td>Participatory Governance; Housing; Living Wage; Opposition to Neoliberalism; Opposition to GEAR; Alternatives to Globalization</td>
<td>Cape Town</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Primarily private foreign foundations, including: Fund for Co-operation and Development (Belgium), Steelworkers' Humanity Fund (Canada), Canadian Catholic Organisation for Development and Peace, Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst e.V. (Germany), Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (Germany), Canadian Autoworkers, Freres Des Homme of Luxembourg, Africa Groups of Sweden</td>
<td>Michael Blake (Staff Member); Mzimasi Mngeni (Staff Member); Mthetho Xhali (Staff Member)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Service Accountability Monitor (PSAM)</td>
<td>Anti-Corruption; Government Accountability</td>
<td>Grahamstown *Part of Rhodes University</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Foreign (governmental and private foundations)</td>
<td>Jay Kruuse (Director)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right2Know National Office</td>
<td>Government Transparency; Media Freedom; Freedom of Expression</td>
<td>Cape Town</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Foreign and domestic private foundations, including: Bread for the World (Germany), Claude Leon Foundation (South Africa), Norwegian People's Aid, Open Society Foundation of South Africa, Privacy International (U.K.)</td>
<td>Mark Weinberg (National Coordinator)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA)</td>
<td>Environmental Justice; Community Empowerment; Opposition to Neoliberalism</td>
<td>Durban</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Primarily foreign private foundations</td>
<td>Desmond D'Sa (Leader)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
parties, then they were already well positioned to pursue it through that avenue; the fact that they voluntarily resigned from political society rather than trying to use it to their advantage suggests that they believed that they could not use it to their advantage. Indeed, the options for opposing the ANC through political society are not solely confined to starting or joining other political parties. As an alliance of several different political factions, there is ample room underneath the ANC umbrella for internal opposition, and several vocal critics of prevailing policies have chosen to remain within the party in order to change it from the inside. Those who have moved from the ANC to NGOs have clearly decided that both internal and external political society opposition to the ANC is insufficient. Their previous experience only provided them clarity as to the limitations of political parties. As Desmond D’Sa of the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA) put it: “Having come from the ANC, I am against party politics as I cannot see any of them [political parties] representing the needs of the community” (2013). Civil society organizations, then, are the resort of many who do not believe that political parties can make democracy work.

The Inferiority of Political Parties

It is tempting to characterize the choice of civil society leaders to abandon political parties not as categorical disillusionment with political parties, but as disillusionment with political parties as they exist in a given context. Indeed, some at least partially attribute the rise of oppositional civil society in post-apartheid South Africa to the country’s slate of opposition parties,\(^\text{22}\) seeming to imply that if there were a different set of opposition parties, particularly

\(^{22}\) See, for example, Ballard 2005: “With the oppositions parties representing economic principles that are broadly in line with the government’s approach, more critical voiced turned to civil society and social movements in particular,” (83) and “In a context where the formal political system has failed to produce a significant political party to the left of the ANC to more directly champion the cause of the poor, social movements restore a degree of political balance in favour of the poor.” (94)
ones that sat more to the left in their political views or were more electorally effective, there
would not be such a need for such civil society organizing as we currently see it. Again, such an
argument leaves unaddressed the question of why those who are dissatisfied with the current
array of opposition parties do not attempt to reform them or form their own opposition parties
rather than resort to civil society opposition. But it also ignores the fact that the civil society
organizations do not frame themselves as correctives to specific political parties, but to political
parties as a whole. What makes the DA an unsavory partner for NGOs and other civil society
organizations that are critical of the ANC state is not that it symbolizes white rule, but that it
symbolizes electoral democracy itself.

Unlike many academics who worry about the fate of South Africa’s democracy because
of the imbalance in power between the ruling and opposition parties, those I spoke to within its
civil society worried that democracy was imperiled precisely because too much importance was
pinned to the outcome of electoral contests for state power. Elections were the wrong barometer
to use to measure the health of South Africa’s fledgling democracy, or the degree of to which its
government was accountable to its populace. If one wanted to really evaluate South African
democracy, it was better to focus on civil society groups like NGOs.

The underlying theme of my interview with D’Sa of the SDCEA was that NGOs like his
were superior to political parties in multiple ways. He assured me that neither he, nor the
communities that his organization worked with, would benefit if he were to join a party and
aspire to elected office. He could achieve far more for his constituents as an agent of an NGO
than he could as part of a political party.

D’Sa’s belief in the superiority of NGOs encompassed both practical concerns and
philosophical commitments. First and foremost, he insisted that they were better representatives
of their constituents than political parties ever could. The irony of D’Sa’s argument was twofold; not only was he claiming that unelected leaders were better advocates than those directly chosen by communities, but he was also claiming that NGOs were better representatives than political parties precisely because they were not subject to regular electoral checkups by their constituents.

As an NGO, the SDCEA could “cross anyone,” (D’Sa 2013) regardless of their political identification or whether they were a representative of the government or a private entity. The SDCEA did not have to worry about appeasing any sort of higher organization, like a national party structure. It did not have to worry whether its actions would be sanctioned across the large variety of interests that make up the typical political party. It did not have to consider how its actions affected its popularity; instead, it could focus almost exclusively on how its actions affected its specific policy goal.

The SDCEA could also remain nimble, changing its tactics and goals as it—and its small constituency—saw fit, rather than having to remain within a script that had been carefully calibrated to appeal to a wider audience. Unburdened by the goal to gain power within the state, D’Sa and the SDCEA did not have to compromise the needs of his constituency in order to attract others in order to build a winning electoral coalition. NGOs and other civil society organizations could better represent the needs of smaller communities because that was all they were trying to represent in their efforts. Freed from the weight of being broadly representative of a variety of issues and interests, NGOs could thoroughly advocate for their constituents by focusing in on a few key issues.

In D’Sa’s eyes, this made him and his organization a truer representative of those who sought their help. The underlying implication was that party politics actually made those who
ended up as elected representatives less than deserving of the title. Electoral representation was compromised, superficial representation. It was representation that was not courageous enough to fight for the needs of some constituents if it entailed battling other current or potential constituents. It was representation that cared more about achieving something for the individual political or the party—primarily seats in government—than about achieving concrete policy for constituents.

**Political Parties and the Acceptance of Defeat**

The corollary to political parties being satisfied with “shallow” victories in the form of electoral contests was their acceptance of defeat, something which was not widely tolerated among the representatives of NGOs and other civil society organizations I spoke to in South Africa. They were certainly accustomed to not getting their way, but there was a definite aversion to interpreting losses as lost causes. No matter how many times that the SDCEA lost specific battles with the state or private companies, for example, it did not intend to give up on the underlying issues. When it did not prevail in a given instance, the SDCEA would not reevaluate the cause or issue so much as it would reevaluate its tactics in advocating for the issue (D’Sa 2013). Other NGOs took the same general stance; they did not consider if they were wrong about a specific issue, but how they had been wrong in advocating for that issue. The expectation was that after a loss they would immediately regroup and reengage on the same issue.

Political parties, on the other hand, approach defeat in a much different way. The loss of an election on the part of candidate or party is recognized as a clear loss, and the defeated candidate or party accepts, however begrudgingly, the mantle of the vanquished. Like a civil society group, a political party usually takes time to regroup, but what often changes when they
reemerge is both the content and the manner of their advocacy. That is, political parties will often shed issues or concerns that they determine to be losing issues. The defeat of a political party in an election is often read as a defeat of one or more of their policy proposals. While the SDCEA, for example, may view its inability to convince the government to adopt a certain environmental protection proposal as a sign that it needs to approach the issue with different tactics, a party that campaigns with the same proposal may view its defeat in the polls as a sign that it should abandon the proposal altogether. Thus, political parties and civil society groups tend to take a fundamentally different approach to losses in episodes of political contention. This makes it difficult for them to work together, and makes it especially difficult for civil society groups to assent to a version of democracy in which the main players in politics are parties.

Indeed, the fact that civil society groups see parties’ approach to political defeat as a crucial limitation has important implications for the former’s approach to democracy. A political party that accepts its defeat in the polls and uses its loss to reform its campaign platform and slate of candidates is a party that is playing by the rules of the game; for scholars looking for signs of democratic consolidation, it can be a positive indicator (Schmitter and Karl 1991). But if civil society groups are dismissive of this quality of political parties—their willingness to compromise in order to “win”—and do not follow it themselves, then perhaps we should reconsider if one of civil society’s contributions to democratic consolidation is respect for the rules of the democratic game. At the very least, we should think critically about which rules of the democratic game that civil society tends to privilege over the others. Participation in an NGO or other civil society group that refuses to accept defeat and continually engages in the same political battles over the same issues may instill feelings of self-worth and dignity in participants. It may keep important issues on the table that would otherwise be disregarded and train
participants to recognize that larger-scale social, economic, and political change requires longer time horizons and considerable effort. But it may also blunt toleration for compromise and concessions in policymaking, and impair the formation of coalitions of groups and individuals with disparate interests, which some would argue are key features of making democracy work in practice.

**Framing NGOs as the People’s “True” Representatives**

One of the chief reasons for the difference in how political parties and civil society groups approach their losses involves framing. Provided that elections are generally free and fair, a political party will have difficulty claiming that its loss in the polls is somehow also a loss for democracy. To assert that its loss means that the people have not been heard or that the public will has not been followed rings hollow given how it was that the party achieved its loss—by failing to get enough people to vote for it. But the meaning of a civil society group’s loss is much more ambiguous and open to interpretation.

The East Cape Agricultural Research Project (ECARP), for example, is an NGO that dedicates a significant portion of its efforts producing policy analysis and recommendations regarding issues that affect farm workers. The state, according to Lali Naidoo and Sonto Shelle of ECARP, is not always willing to entertain the suggestions of the NGO, let alone implement them. To these “defeats” to the organization and its mission, ECARP’s general response, summarized by Naidoo, is: “Mr. Government or Mrs. Government, you are not handling this well. Your priorities are really out of sync. Because you have surrendered to the market and left the people behind” (145).

ECARP, like many other NGOs that are critical of the state, thus frames its defeats in political contention with government actors as blows to democracy and state accountability.
They can interpret the organization’s losses as a sign that grassroots have not been heard or that the popular will has been thwarted. A political party that does not get its way, whether in the electoral or legislative process, does not have the same luxury. Most likely it will have to consider what it is doing wrong. It may face questions as to its purpose or very existence. Absent significant electoral irregularities, a losing political party cannot credibly claim that its loss does not represent popular will. An NGO, on the other hand, can lose and argue that its vanquisher is the one that needs to consider what it is doing wrong. An NGO’s reason for being may actually be reinforced and its existence may seem all that more important the more the government resists its demands. It is not difficult to understand why oppositional NGOs would be wary of supporting or allying with opposition parties when the former have transcended the latter by being capable of turning losing into winning.

There is a boldness to Naidoo’s characterization of ECARP’s reaction to defeat at the hands of the state that can be overlooked on first blush. Here is an organization that has not been chosen through a democratic process telling one that has (the government) that its priorities do not accord with those of the people who elected it as their representative. ECARP, like practically every other NGO, does not have the elected government’s degree of democratic legitimacy, and yet it is claiming superiority in knowing what it is that “the people” want and need. It is arguing that the government should listen to the NGO in order to hear the government’s constituents, despite the government having more direct channels—such as elections—through which to hear its constituents’ voices.

The audaciousness of ECARP’s insinuations, however, is hardly remarkable among similar NGOs, nor is it something that many would find unwarranted. In fact, most of my civil society interlocutors in South Africa would agree that NGOs such as ECARP do in fact have
policy preferences that are more in line with the general will than the popularly elected state. Naidoo and Shelle (2013) can also attest to the fact that the South African government does not take kindly to being criticized by NGOs for “leaving the people behind,” which is an indication that its criticisms carry a good deal of legitimacy with external audiences. Indeed, to remark that grassroots NGOs advocating for marginalized groups are making bold claims when comparing their democratic bona fides to those of the government might actually be the bolder claim.

That fact that NGOs like ECARP can claim to be a more faithful representative of the people than the state and its popularly elected government points to the general place of privilege that they enjoy within democratic society. Because they are framed as emerging from the grassroots as the result of voluntary organization, civil society groups enjoy a reputation for being more representative of the actual needs and interests of communities. This is especially true, if, like ECARP, these NGOs advocate for groups that are widely understood as marginalized within society and underrepresented in mainstream institutional politics, such as the poor or minority groups. As they have professed no interest in taking a position of power in the state, with all the privileges and perquisites that entails, and because most are non-profit, such grassroots and advocacy NGOs are deemed to have “purer” motives than other political actors. They are understood to represent certain policies not for the sake of promoting their organizations, like a politician or political party might, but for the merits of the policies themselves.

The genius of NGOs is that they attain democratic legitimacy precisely by avoiding the messiness inherent in electoral democratic politics. They are unsullied only because they refuse to place themselves in a position where they might get dirty. While there can be considerable debate about whether NGOs actually are more representative of the grassroots or should occupy
such a elevated place in the popular imagination of democratic societies, the fact remains that they do enjoy such a privilege and that it depends on them remaining outside of political society. If ECARP were to ally with opposition parties, it would not be able to so easily frame its defeats at the hands of the government as the latter having ignored the popular will. NGOs do not have to accept defeat, which has the potential to be very demobilizing and detrimental to the organization, if they can say that their defeat was also a defeat for democracy.

**When NGOs Lose, Does Democracy Also Lose?**

Indeed, staying above the fray of elections and party politics allows NGOs to weather losses in political contention with the government, but if the blows avoid NGOs, it seems that they fall on democracy instead. The necessity and value of NGOs like ECARP and SDCEA can be reinforced despite their defeat at the hands of the state only if, in denying the demands of NGOs, the state is also understood as denying the demands of the people. NGOs can only “win” if they can legitimately issue the rejoinder: “Mr. Government or Mrs. Government, you are not handling this well” (Naidoo 145). The defeat of an NGO has to have wider implications—it has to involve a failure of the democratic state to be accountable to the grassroots or a marginalized constituency—if it is going to prove the worth of the NGO. If an NGO is going to lose to the state, then it is best if democracy seems to also lose with it.

This has several important implications. First, it indicates that the rhetorical and symbolic stakes of political contention between civil society groups and the state are higher than they are for political contention between the state and opposition parties. Some observers of post-apartheid South Africa have suggested that the rise of oppositional social movements and civil society actors is the result of a “crisis of democracy” in which the institutional practices of representative democracy have proved inadequate in meeting the needs of the people (McKinley
and Veriava 2005: 75). But if oppositional civil society is a reaction to a crisis of democracy, it might also be a contributing factor to the continuance of the crisis, as losses by civil society to the state only add to the perception that democracy is not working. The more the state seems to be ignoring the “grassroots,” the harder it becomes to claim that the state is by and for the people. This perception of a crisis of democracy, whether fair or not, can be potentially unsettling, especially in societies with only a short history of institutional democracy. Civil society’s role in consolidating democracy is certainly in question if it has the power to foster a feeling that democracy is in crisis so long as it does not get its way.

A second implication again points to why NGOs and other more institutionalized forms of civil society pointedly reject political parties and electoral politics. When the stakes of political contention include the future and nature of democracy, there is a place for NGOs. When the stakes of political contention are not as high, political parties can crowd out NGOs. For an oppositional NGO to support an oppositional political party is for it to imply that institutional, representative democracy can work, but oppositional NGOs appear to be more vital when they can claim that institutional, representative democracy is not working. Among the political left in South Africa, NGOs are often criticized for being too moderate in their aims and too accommodating to the state, yet even they are dissatisfied with the low stakes of the political contention involving the state and opposition parties. ECARP\textsuperscript{23} and other NGOs that aim to be the state’s watchdogs and partners in policy implementation do themselves no favors by claiming that the state’s unaccountability failures can be fixed by changing who sits in the government; failures need to be rooted in deeper problems to recommend the services of even the more

\textsuperscript{23} It is important to note that ECARP would not consider itself to be a moderate NGO that is given to state cooption or accommodation. Naidoo and Shelle consider their organization to be very critical of the state and characterize their relations to the state to often be quite adversarial. There are some within South African civil society, however, that consider all NGOs, by their very nature, to be less oppositional to the state than social movements.
“moderate” and “accomodationist” NGOs. Opposition parties, quite simply, are not radical enough for oppositional civil society, including oppositional NGOs.

The Rhetoric of Rights

Closely related to the tendency of NGOs to frame their battles with the state as litmus tests for the very quality and strength of democracy is their inclination to invoke the cause of rights in their opposition to state policy. Oppositional NGOs in South Africa, as elsewhere, take pains to couch their specific proposals and demands in the more universal language of “rights.” For example, asking the state to reconsider its refusal to provide free antiretroviral drugs that prevent mother-to-child transmission of the HIV/AIDS virus, as the Treatment Action Campaign did, became the organization reminding the state of its constitutional obligation to protect and promote the health of all citizens. Likewise, when the SDCEA opposes a government policy relating to industrial pollution, it frames the matter as one in which the state has no choice but to comply with its proposals; the state will change its policy because doing so is the only way for it to fulfill its duties. In this rights-based framing, NGOs make no promises that the state or government will benefit politically by following its advice. The idea of some sort of quid pro quo in which the government receives something in return for its actions, such as votes or popular support, is antithetical to the rights frame. Rather, the state will take certain actions to protect and further the rights of its citizens because that is the essence of its existence as the democratic state.

NGOs’ choice to use rights to frame their political contention with the state has several benefits. It immediately puts the state on the defensive by suggesting that states have an obligation to follow the demands of NGOs. Furthermore, it bolsters the image of NGOs by “invest[ing] their activities with a sense that they are endorsed by a higher code of good” (Ballard et al. 206; 402). It becomes much more difficult to condemn a NGO as self-serving or a
mere interest group when it claims to be pursuing universally guaranteed rights for its constituents. The rhetoric of rights can thus prove to be quite beneficial for NGOs in their advocacy for specific causes.

Beyond these strategic advantages, however, is the fact that the rhetoric of rights also works best given how NGOs position themselves within the polity. Framing their advocacy and opposition to state policy as a matter of protecting constitutionally enshrined rights speaks to the role that NGOs have adopted in the majority of democratic societies. Their designation of as non-governmental is important; although NGOs may work with or for the government, they are not part of the government, nor do they aspire to be. This means that if an entity is advocating for certain policies as a non-governmental organization, then it must believe that the state, not it, has the ultimate authority and duty to implement these policies. The NGO may expect to play a role in helping the state to enact these policies, but it also expects that the ultimate owner of these policies will be the state, not the NGO. If an NGO believed that its agents needed to attain positions of power within the state to ensure the realization of certain policies, then it would cease being non-governmental. As long as entities remain content to lobby, monitor, and advise the state—but not to join it—they can claim non-governmental status and a place within civil society.

The language of rights preserves NGOs’ outsider status both with regard to the state and to political society. When an organization champions a certain policy as a “right”, it is not asserting that it needs to join the state in order for that right to be realized. In fact, it is not asserting that any changes need to be made in the composition of the state at all, including which individuals and parties occupy seats and the distribution of power among those parties and groups. This is because, as Greenstein (2006) notes, rights refer to “inalienable claims[s] to
certain material and symbolic goods independently of state policies and priorities” (418). Unlike entitlements, which are “demands that are raised and met in a political process” (Greenstein 2006: 418) rights are state obligations that transcend electoral or partisan politics. Rights-based advocacy permits NGOs to remain non-governmental because they imply that the solution to its advocacy is not political. No political party or civil society group “owns” the foundational rights guaranteed and protected by the democratic state; the democratic state owns them. As Jay Kruuse of the Public Service Accountability Monitor (PSAM) emphasized, the organization’s argument when confronting the South African state always hinges on the fact that it is not asking the state to choose among competing political factions. At the same time, it is not asking the state to act in a way that pleases PSAM or to enact a policy that “belongs” exclusively to PSAM: “We really seek to drive home the point [that] the Constitution expects this of [the state], these are the obligations placed upon the state by the laws of the country” (Kruuse 132). As long as non-governmental organizations like PSAM do not aspire to state power, then it makes the most sense for them to frame their activities as pertaining to state obligations—rights—rather than political preferences.

Of course, the conceptualization of rights as state duties that are not to be put to vote alienates NGOs from political parties, which traffic in competing preferences. Likewise, the corollary that rights can be upheld regardless of who occupies that state drives a wedge between the two groups, as the latter are premised on the belief that it matters a great deal who holds the reins of power within the state. Even in situations in which the state routinely fails to uphold its constitutional duties or when certain parties campaign on a platform of protecting rights, NGOs may still decide to remain aloof from party politics. In post-apartheid South Africa, many of the rights-based NGOs have chosen to battle the ANC government not through opposition parties
promising to champion rights, but through the courts (Greenstein 2003). This route furthers the sense that rights are not the policies or preferences of certain political factions—only to be a state priority when those political factions are in charge—and that the state can be compelled to change its policies without a change in who sits in the government.

**NGOs’ Ideal Adversary: The Strong State**

It stands to reason that a weak adversary should be easier to vanquish. An army rent with internal divisions and varying levels of support for the cause among the troops should be more likely to surrender to the opposite side. But political contention between oppositional NGOs and the state is not akin to military battle, and so the preferences of NGOs regarding their sparring partner are—initially—counterintuitive. NGO and other more institutionalized civil society actors that criticize and oppose state policy actually prefer to confront a strong state with a politically homogenous government. They do not want a state that crumbles in the face of external criticism or a government that easily accommodates civil-society dissatisfaction by channeling it through the “loyal opposition,” which can potentially neuter it. They want a government that speaks with one voice at the head of a state that can get things done. Oppositional NGOs prefer a model of democratic governance that dispenses with qualities that are both its limitations and its hallmarks: inefficiency, compromise, and modest ambitions. Like social movements, they have an implicit preference for a one-party dominant democracy.

While some of my interlocutors in South Africa’s social movements dismissed oppositional NGOs as being too moderate in their politics and aspirations, I discovered that many NGOs were actually quite ambitious. Barely two decades after the official end of an insidious system of institutionalized inequality on every dimension—political, economic, and social—oppositional NGOs were demanding that the country become the world’s most
progressive democracy not just on paper (in its Constitution) but also in practice. Like many of the social movements, they were asking a state that had once been designed to marginalize the majority of its population to completely reverse course and empower them through the realization of a broad array of rights. While South Africa is one of the richest states on the African subcontinent and has one of the region’s strongest economies on the African subcontinent, the World Bank only classifies it as upper-middle income. Yet many oppositional NGOs called on the state to implement and expand costly programs that might be considered ambitious even in rich countries. The Right2Know Campaign, for example, was pushing for a state-subsidized amount of free basic cell phone airtime and data for all South Africans as part of the realization of the “right to communicate” (Weinberg 2013). While this was not the kind of social and political revolution that some social movements seemed to be aiming for, it was still a bold goal, one that R2K knew would not be easy to achieve (Weinberg 2013).

NGOs seemed to understand that the enormity of their demands required a target of similar scale. As such, they were wary of targeting specific parties or hanging their hopes on a changing of the political guard. Instead, they self-consciously bypassed parties and political factions and focused on the state, the political institution with uncontested authority, superior resources, and long time horizons. As Kruuse of PSAM impressed upon me when discussing the organization’s work regarding the undersupply of water in Grahamstown: “The problem of water in Grahamstown isn’t going to go away in the next election. Even if we have a changing of the guard. The problems require long-term commitment. Rapid change in the political persuasions of people in town is not going to fix the problem” (136). Kruuse clearly believed that making water a partisan issue only undermined the chance of real success in that area. It would tie the

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24 http://data.worldbank.org/about/country-and-lending-groups#Upper_middle_income
government’s response to the problem to the electoral cycle and the changeable political persuasions of the electorate. To pretend that replacing one set of politicians with another would solve the problem took responsibility away from the state, which actually had the resources and mandate necessary to address the problem. Water, Kruuse (2013) told me, was too vital of an issue to chance to a political party, even one as electorally dominant as the ANC. Like any political party, the ANC had a history of changing its positions and preferences as time went on. The state, as he saw it, would likely be more steadfast in its commitment to the adequate provision of clean water once it adopted it as duty. Large, long-term problems required large, long-term solutions, and the state could be considered the largest and most long-term solution possible.

The State as the Solution

Thus, a key insight that is often lost in the study of oppositional civil society is that as much as oppositional civil society criticizes the state and identifies it as the cause or facilitator of specific problems, it very often sees the state as integral to the resolution of those problems. The very fact that opposition to state policy arises within civil society implies recognition of the power of the state and the possibility that it can change its ways. If civil society thought that the state could not reform offensive policies, then it would simply seek to avoid or escape it. While there are elements of oppositional civil society that are purely defensive, seeking to insulate individuals and communities from what they see as the toxic effects of state policy, these elements are marked for their dogged disengagement and avoidance of the state. Rather than writing policy briefs criticizing the government, filing cases in constitutional courts or organizing demonstrations against state policies, as NGOs like TAC, ECARP, PSAM, and SDCEA have done, this defensive strain of civil society seeks to remain invisible, eluding notice,
and thus intervention of the state. (Habib 2013) The rest of oppositional civil society, on the other hand, craves attention from the state, and wants the state to turn its resources and political will towards the issues that it has identified.

Especially in Third-World states, civil society opposition is often not a defensive reaction to an overweening state, but an offensive tactic to get the state to do more. Chabal and Daloz (1999) have noted that civil society movements in post-colonial societies are frequently a response not to state hegemony, but rather to the lack of hegemony. The post-colonial state is often incapable of occupying a central organizing role in society, and that is precisely what civil society organizations want remedied. As post-colonial societies tend to be divided by such factors as ethnicity, race, religion, and class, the state stands out as the key entity around which individuals can coalesce and through which major progress can be achieved.

A state that has gone what critics deem the “wrong way” is especially worrying in post-colonial and Third-World societies because the state represents the single largest concentration of power and resources that can be applied to a given issue, and one that cannot be matched or neutralized through opposite action by non-state actors. Thus, the goal of much oppositional civil society action is not to simply stop the state, but to change the direction of its action. Because many within oppositional civil society do not see an effective alternative to the state that would be capable of stepping in and fill the void left by its weakening or division, their goal is to preserve the strength and unity of the state while convincing it to pursue different policies. Their aim is not to introduce competition or diversity into the state through their criticism, but to push the state in a different direction. Oppositional civil society is often not seeking accommodation or compromise; they want to win. When they win, they want the full weight of the state to then be applied to their cause. The strong state was a formidable opponent when they were
challenging or criticizing it, but if they could get it onto their side, it would be the best ally they could ever hope for.

**Seeking a “Big State”**

Comparatively, post-apartheid South Africa is what some have called a “Big State” (Powell 2013), both capable and willing to undertake significant action on a variety of domestic issues (Robins 2008). It comes with a progressive constitution that seems to mandate proactive protection and advancement of a wide variety of rights, as well as considerable resources to pursue such policies. While those on the political left charge that it is sliding into a more laissez faire approach, the South African state can still be considered a relatively robust welfare state (Robins 2008).

The oppositional NGOs I spoke with were willing to acknowledge this about the South African state, and some suggested that it was part of the reason they had chosen civil over political society as the site of their opposition. Criticizing the ANC-dominated state through political society—through opposition parties—risked squandering the “bigness” of the state as the ANC diverted its resources and energy to remaining in power, rather than doing something with that power. If the stain of apartheid had cowed the democratic state, reducing its ambitions and checking its impulse to intervene in society, then, my NGO interlocutors told me, they might have chosen to run for office or join opposition parties calling for a more activist state. But the ANC seemed committed to the big state, and the way to reaffirm this was to confine their criticism to civil society. If they agitated as agents of a political party, then the proactive advancement of the welfare of the citizenry could be understood as a temporary policy of a particular administration or government rather than what they preferred: an integral, inherent quality of the state. To keep the big state they wanted in practice, NGO leaders recognized the
importance of cultivating the image of the big state in the minds of those who controlled it. They
could not risk having those who controlled the state to think that they were vulnerable.

Oppositional NGOs in South Africa also recognized that their vulnerability to attack by
the government was reduced when the state was strong and politically homogenous. In a study of
civics shortly after the end of apartheid, Lanegran (1995) noted that these community-based
NGOs had more cordial, more operationally autonomous relations with the ANC in those locales
where the ANC enjoyed dominant political power (120). When the ANC felt secure in its hold
on power, it did not lash out at civil society groups or attempt to control them. It was more
willing to constructively engage with their criticism when it did not think it was at risk of losing
elections or being significantly challenged by opposition parties. This echoes what I heard from
NGO leaders about how they tended to feel safer in their criticism and opposition to the ANC the
safer the ANC felt in the polls. Some did note that absent viable opposition parties, the brunt of
ANC attacks on their critics fell to oppositional civil society. But if these attacks did prove one
thing, it was that the ANC was paying attention to oppositional NGOs, and that there was some
potential for the NGOs to affect state policy.

Indeed, the specter of irrelevance is one of the most significant vulnerabilities of all
NGOs. Oppositional NGOs have difficulty justifying their existence if they can escape notice of
and engagement with the state. When competition between political parties is low and one
political faction dominates the state, those in power are likely to take notice of civil society.
When the state is “big” and pursues interventionist policies in domestic society, it will of
necessity interact with civil society. In many cases, this interaction will be deliberate on the part
of the state. As South Africa’s Minister of Social Development recently made clear, an important
component of its ambitious plans involved significant input from NGOs: “The basic twin
expectations of government are that NGOs will firstly, continue to act as monitors of the public
good and safeguard the interests of the disadvantaged sections of society…The government’s
second expectation is that NGOs will assist in expanding access to social and economic services
that create jobs and eradicate poverty among the poorest of the poor” (Habib 2013: 139, 161). As
this makes clear, the “big” South African state believed that it needed NGOs. Whether it felt that
it needed NGOs to criticize and challenge its actions is more doubtful, but if NGOs could frame
their opposition as part of their efforts to assist in expanding access for marginalized groups, the
government could not summarily dismiss them.

Thus, a big state with a relatively homogenous political class is beneficial to civil society
because it makes it more likely that the latter will actually be heard by the state. Even when
resistance to their criticism is strong, NGOs matter when the state is strong and its government is
united. The opportunities for oppositional civil society to engage with the state only multiply the
stronger the state becomes. The more the state sets out to do, and the greater it believes its
mandate to be, the more opportunities NGOs potentially have to say, “Mr. Government or Mrs.
Government, you are not handling this well. Your priorities are really out of sync” (Naidoo 145),
and the more opportunities there are for that criticism to sting.

Indeed, the more ambitious the state and incumbent government is in its policies, the
more ambitious civil society can be in its demands. Several of my interlocutors in South African
NGOs suggested that the grand plans and promises of the post-apartheid ANC state emboldened
them in their opposition. They knew that a government touting such a robust electoral mandate
from the grassroots would have to pay attention when civil society challenged them, lest they
look hypocritical. They knew a state that publicly claimed its intention of “safeguard[ing] the
interests of the disadvantaged” and “eradicat[ing] poverty among the poorest of the poor” (Habib
2013, 139, 161) would feel some sort of obligation to listen to NGOs that claimed that it was failing in its duties. Ambition on the part of the big, one-party-dominant state begat ambition on the part of civil society that sought to engage with the state. As such, civil society evolved to prefer the political status quo and its current state and government adversary even as it waged battle with it.

In their study of civil society organized criticism of the government in the Cape Town township of Khayelitsha, Thompson and Nleya (2010) noted a trend that I also saw in the rest of South Africa: that civil society mobilization followed state action and tailored itself to state ambitions. According to Thompson and Nleya (2010), there was a “strong trend to self-organize and mobilize around issues and grievances that stem from weaknesses in state-sponsored forms of participation and deliberation on the delivery of public goods and services, as well as on pro-poor policy initiatives” (240). In other words, civil society took its cues from the state, homing in on the issues the state had identified as priorities rather than focusing on other issues. While this may be partially the result of the state and civil society having similar policy preferences, it also points to the fact that even the most pro-active of political civil society organizations behave in ways that can be understood as essentially reactions to the state’s present or predicted actions. In Khayelitsha, there were more opportunities for citizens to self-organize and mobilize because the state was trying to do more; the vibrancy and activism of civil society was in many ways predicated on the activism of the state. Civil society was actually benefiting—in the sense that it had multiple openings within the political structure for its influence and voice—from a strong, politically united state with grand, if unrealized, plans. These unrealized plans were a rallying point for oppositional civil society and a reason for their continued salience. Thus, as much as civil society organization wanted the state to make good on its policy promises, it first wanted
the state to remain committed to those policy promises. In turn, civil society preferred the status quo in political society.

**Electoral Politics: Unnecessarily Taming State Ambitions**

The desire to reinforce the power and efficacy of the state, despite criticizing it, leads oppositional NGOs to ignore and underplay the importance of electoral and partisan politics. Highly competitive elections and continual churn in the parties occupying positions within the government can create a state that is too unsettled to get much done. They also may create a self-reinforcing cycle in which state actors expect constant criticism and second-guessing and thus do little to address the cause of constituent dissatisfaction. Electoral politics can be threatening to NGOs with grand plans for the state because they may function to tame state ambitions.

Both Kruuse of PSAM and D’Sa of SDCEA, for example, expressed skepticism that elections were the right way to hold officeholders accountable. Rather, they believed that elections could weaken the resolve of the state on any long-term policy initiatives and undermine efforts to serve constituents beyond the narrow confines of winning votes. Again, as Kruuse (2013) argued: “Rapid change in the political persuasions of people in town is not going to fix the problem. It’s about getting communities to do this engaging with their state. Not just every five years when there is an election, or when there is a by-election, but to be asking those hard, tough questions, and asserting yourself every day.” Elections do provide an opportunity for dissatisfied individuals to communicate with the state, but in the eyes of the NGO leaders I spoke to, such communication was not constructive. They permit voters to express their mistrust in the state and to sow divisions among state actors, which dampens state actors’ proclivity to take bold action, especially on big issues. They provide voters with one opportunity to ask “hard, tough questions” and politicians with one opportunity to answer. That one answer, in turn, is moderated
to win votes and thus be as uncontroversial—and thus as unambitious—as possible (Kruuse 2013).

Elections do not require the kind of continual engagement of state and society that insists that the state can and will do better. They are regular battles for survival that require significant time and energy from competing politicians and parties. They can potentially weaken the state by continually putting its actors on the defensive. “Throwing the rascals out” sends the message that the incumbents are incapable of satisfying constituents; keeping the rascals in while protesting their wrong moves sends the message that incumbents are capable of satisfying constituent demands, and just as importantly, are expected to do so.

**Consistency, Consensus, and Community**

NGOs’ preference for a strong state dominated by a single political faction is not the sole reason they dislike electoral politics. NGOs are also much more likely than social movements to endorse, whether consciously or not, a technocratic model of politics that promotes rule by experts over the masses and relies on reasoned consensus over brokered compromises. When faced with the opportunity to oppose the state and incumbent government by supporting rival political factions, many NGOs will balk because that is not how they practice politics. Ghia Nodia has dubbed the “anti-political attitude that regards politics as dirty and the work of civil society NGOs as clean by contrast” as “civil society narcissism” (Gershman 2004: 27). While it may be unfair to use such a loaded term as “narcissism” to describe NGOs, it does appear the NGOs often do seek to distinguish themselves in their approach to democratic politics, and that this prevents them from reaching out to opposition parties or upsetting the electoral status quo.
The Shortcomings of Electoral Politics

Like the leaders of post-apartheid social movements, the representatives of oppositional NGOs in South Africa that I spoke to were not convinced that elections could be the chief mechanism by which an effective and accountable democratic state would be sustained. But if social movements disliked how elections engendered a shallow engagement on the part of government actors with their constituents, NGOs seemed equally worried about the effects of elections on the quality of constituents’ interactions with their representatives.

Elections, my NGO interlocutors insisted, made democratic participation seem both too easy and too inconsequential to communities. Elections suggested that citizen input in the governance had a distinct and circumscribed time, place, and method: election day, the polling booth, and the choice of a small list of pre-chosen candidates or parties. They implied that it was both acceptable and expected that individuals would wait for some prescribed period of years before they communicated their preferences to those in power. When they did communicate their preferences, they would not be broken down into individual issues and policies, but bundled up in the single choice of a person or a party.

Kruuse (2013), of PSAM, was highly critical of this model. His organization wanted communities to engage with the state “not just every five years when there is an election,” but sought to inspire them to “assert [themselves] every day.” Likewise, he believed that even the most decisive action on the part of voters, the complete “changing of the guard,” could not be counted on to address all or even most of issues that dissatisfied communities (2013). If communities were upset with how the government was handling the issue of water provision, the answer was not to evict the government and hope that that action sends a message to the future government; it was to go to the incumbent government and ask them bluntly: “Why isn’t there
water?” (Kruuse 2013). Ousting the current government would sacrifice any progress already made on certain issues and blunt any forward momentum. Opposing the incumbent government through elections was viewed by many in the NGO sector of civil society as a type of destructive opposition, one that encouraged citizens to block, thwart, and impede the state, but not to engage with the state. The hard work of constructive opposition required constituents to maintain their faith in incumbents rather than giving up on them; it required them to keep them in office and keep their feet to the fire.

Indeed, there was concern among oppositional NGOs that elections could paint aggrieved communities as too mercurial for their concerns to be taken seriously by politicians. Elections serve several communicational purposes. Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes (1999) identify two key conceptualizations of the function of democratic elections. In the “accountability” view of elections, they function as retrospective assessments of incumbents’ performance, allowing voters to hold officeholders responsible for their past actions. In the “mandate” view, elections serve to select good policies and good politicians, and thus can signal voters’ preferences for future state policy. A loss at the polls could mean that an officeholder or party displeased voters during their term, but it could also mean that voters have changed their minds about what they want. Of course, there is also nothing to prevent elections from serving both purposes at once, and they frequently do. But the possibility of electoral results having such mixed messages, or the possibility that they may have multiple valid interpretations, can be troubling to those oppositional groups that work hard to have clear, consistent demands. Several NGO leaders I spoke to worried that elections would send the wrong message, if they sent a message at all.

It is much too easy, I was told, for political society to interpret electoral results as the whims of a fickle society. Desmond D’Sa (2013), of SDCEA, for example, lamented how
elections encouraged politicians to treat communities as if their demands were temporary and superficial. Prior to elections, politicians come to communities asking them what they want inserted into their platforms in exchange for their support, with few, according to D’Sa (2013), actually intending to follow through on these proposals should they be elected to office.

The underlying implication of soliciting eleventh-hour citizen input then immediately ignoring it after elections is that voters’ policy preferences are both weakly held and prone to change. Elections train politicians to view citizen demands as one-time vehicles for propelling candidates and parties to victory or defeat. The SDCEA, D’Sa (2013) insisted, refused to respond to such craven outreach efforts. Not only did it view them as insincere, but the SDCEA also did not want politicians to think that communities’ demands are anything like elements of campaign platforms. They were not aspirational goals or temporary preferences that communities would easily give up or forget about in a few months. They were deeply held convictions of a committed group of citizens. These preferences would not only help determine how voters behaved in a single election, but would shape their engagement with the state over the course of their lives.

When politicians asked D’Sa, as the head of the SDCEA, what they can add to campaign platforms to garner the support of its constituents, D’Sa told them that he had nothing new for them. Politicians needed merely to look at the SDCEA’s history of activism to understand the long-standing and deeply held desires of the communities it represented (D’Sa 2013). In other words, the SDCEA did not want politicians to believe that a series of last-minute tweaks to a non-binding promissory statement was the proper response to the political preferences of the communities it represented. As such, the SDCEA under D’Sa did not oblige politicians by offering amendments to its campaign platforms, nor did it suggest that its demands could be
linked to the success of candidates and parties in any individual election. Elections made politicians want citizen demands to have the lifespan of a single campaign, but D’Sa and his NGO wanted politicians to understand citizen demands as originating long before, and enduring long after, the final ballots are cast.

**Enduring Demands, United Communities**

This points to an important feature of politics of NGO-driven opposition: it seeks to present a consistent, enduring front. Much like how oppositional NGOs prefer stability in the identity of their state adversaries, they also strive for an image of internal stability and perseverance. In contemporary South Africa, oppositional social movements come and go with some frequency, but oppositional NGOs, I was told by their representatives, plan to stay active for the long run. The infrastructure of NGOs certainly attests to this fact, both in South Africa and other countries. As discussed earlier, NGOs tend to have dedicated offices and telephone lines, websites, salaried employees, and official literature. Many aggressively seek out donations and funding not just to finance their activities in the short term, but also for their future plans and initiatives. Likewise, NGOs often refer to themselves as state watchdogs and monitors, implying an ongoing mission. Democratic states can also adopt this language, as the South African state did in describing their expectation that NGOs would “continue” to “safeguard the interests of the disadvantaged” (Habib 2013, 139, 161).

NGOs can further burnish their reputation of unwavering commitment to their cause by promoting an image of uniformity among those they represent. Oppositional NGOs in post-apartheid South Africa rarely frame their advocacy as being on the part of distinct individuals. Rather, they speak of representing the will, needs, and desires of “communities” residing in certain areas or whole classes such as the “the poor,” “shack dwellers,” or “farm workers.” While
there is considerable debate as to whether the communities that NGOs claim to represent are real or fictitious—accusations of NGOs “renting a crowd” to populate their events are quite common (Sacks 2013; Pithouse 2013; Fogel 2013)—what is important for our purposes is that there is an expectation, especially among civil society actors, that NGOs should be representing “communities.” That is, they should be representing individuals so united by shared interests, so undifferentiated from one another due to their common needs, that they can be bundled together and considered a singular whole. There is an underlying sense of unity and uniformity in the term “community” that NGOs can take advantage of in order to project strength and resolve in their efforts on behalf of the groups they claim to represent.

The image that oppositional NGOs present of themselves as resolute, dogged advocates of united communities certainly affords them some strategic advantages in their interactions with their adversaries, particularly the democratic state. It is much more difficult for the state to ignore oppositional NGOs if they know that these organizations are committed to remaining a thorn in its side. Likewise, it would be unwise for a democratic state to pay no mind to organized groups of citizens demanding its attention, as doing so is widely considered an essential duty of the state in democratic systems.

But what proves to be a strategic advantage to oppositional NGOs in their interactions with the state can also drive a wedge between these NGOs and oppositional political parties. NGOs’ steadfast devotion to certain issues and causes, for example, can put them at odds with political parties, whose commitment to specific policies and ideas is more prone to change based on their calculations of what will resonate with a sometimes fickle electorate. It does not make sense for oppositional NGOs to reach out to opposition parties if it will introduce concerns about their commitment to issues. In fact, allying with opposition parties may be a waste of effort given
that NGOs see themselves as outlasting all incumbent and alternative governments. At the present moment, for instance, PSAM’s role as one of the government’s civil-society watchdogs most closely overlaps with that of out-of-power political parties. Should one of these opposition parties win control of the government, however, PSAM would lose this potential oppositional ally as different parties shift into the role of out-of-power government watchdogs. PSAM can always count on alternative governments comprised of out-of-power opposition parties to be their potential partners in monitoring and opposing the incumbent government, but it cannot count on these alternative governments to always be the same year after year. Again, the stability and commitment to the cause that NGOs seek to cultivate is at odds with the reality of what it means to be a political party in a democratic system, where the role of any one political party or faction in the state is supposed to be uncertain and in flux.

On the other hand, citizens who understand that role of any one political party in the democratic state, along with the focus of their policies, is likely to change, may be more inclined to support opposition NGOs over opposition parties. If they believe that NGOs will be their steadfast and enduring advocates, then they may not believe that they need opposition parties. PSAM’s drive to engage communities in their governance, and to support them in “asserting [themselves] every day” (Kruuse 2013), for example, may blunt any inclination these communities may have to reach out to opposition parties for help with their issues. As it stands, PSAM has a relatively good history of serving as a kind of stand-in for political parties, assisting various groups that had been unsuccessful in getting the state to pay attention to their demands (Kruuse 2013). Unlike the political parties that come to settlements in South Durban seeking their opinions only prior to elections, the SDCEA, according to D’Sa (2013), has a years-long presence in the area, and is open to input from communities whenever they want to raise an
issue. The stronger an oppositional NGO is and the longer it has operated, and aspires to operate, the less need there seems to be for aggrieved individuals to seek out opposition parties to press their issues.

NGOs’ commitment to advocating for unified “communities” can further alienate these organizations from the politics of political parties. The policy preferences of political parties are meant to enter into a larger debate with competing political factions about the government’s actions. Political parties expect their preferences to be questioned and criticized, and they understand that they must work to convince outsiders of the merits of their positions. They know that both their political adversaries and those unaffected by certain policies will have the ability to vote—whether directly or indirectly—on their policy proposals.

But NGOs, by representing “communities” instead of partisans, often will expect to, or desire to, bypass this process of external scrutiny and sanction of policy preferences. I discovered that for many NGOs and other civil society groups in contemporary South Africa, the claim to represent a “community” is a claim to represent a singular will or a point of consensus that is to be immune from the normal process of democratic debate or bargaining. The demands of “communities” are often presented as objective needs rather than subjective preferences, and as such, they are expected to be above scrutiny or question, particularly by those outside of the community.

In lamenting how political parties treat community demands as inputs in the democratic process—as potential planks in a campaign platform of a party or politician that will then be subject to debate and a vote by the polity at large—D’Sa (2013) spoke for many in the civil society sector when he insisted that community demands were actually outputs of a prior process of democratic deliberation at the grassroots. Representing these community demands as part of
the SDCEA was about instructing the government of its marching orders. It meant more than simply suggesting what policies the government might want to pursue in order to gain or maintain support; it meant telling the government what policies it needed to pursue if it wanted to retain its claim to being democratic. The emphasis on serving as representatives of “communities” again allows NGOs and civil society groups to distinguish themselves from political parties as guarantors of democracy and monitors of the democratic state.

By serving as representatives of communities, then, NGOs and other civil society organizations can sidestep some of the challenges that political parties, particularly opposition parties, face. Most importantly, they acquire a veil of legitimacy and often a place at the policymaking table simply by claiming to be a representative of or advocate for a community.

NGOs are hardly alone in emphasizing—and some might even say romanticizing—the importance of “communities” and “the grassroots” in democratic governance. Nor are they the only ones suggesting that NGOs and other civil society groups are the face of the grassroots. The belief that civil society is uniquely positioned to involve the grassroots in democratic governance has a long history (de Tocqueville [1835] 1966; Putnam et al. 1991) that continues to influence how NGOs are presently viewed.

Democracy promotion efforts often favor NGOs for their ability to bring the grassroots to democracy and democracy to the grassroots. Funding has then followed (Ottaway and Carothers 2000). The vast majority of oppositional NGOs I encountered in South Africa reported that external funding, especially from foreign foundations and governments, allowed them to operate. This funding is contingent on “deliverables,” but some of my interlocutors admitted that because NGOs are assumed a priori to represent “communities,” the standards for these deliverables are relatively lenient. Producing reports, providing lists of members or participants, or organizing
workshops were often sufficient to “prove” that an NGO was playing its presumed role of community advocate. If an NGO was physically located in a specific area and did work there, then it could claim to be a representative of that “community” and enjoy the privileges assigned to such community representatives. Donors would provide their support. The media would contact NGOs for their comment on community affairs. Even the government would solicit their input as a way of involving communities in local administration.

This is a marked contrast to oppositional political parties, who face a higher burden of proof that they have a rightful role to play in democratic governance. While NGOs are often assumed to have community or grassroots support, political parties have difficulty portraying themselves as legitimate community advocates or representatives of the grassroots without concrete numbers—specifically votes—to back up their claims. Political parties can only claim to be representatives of a specific community if that community has actually elected its members into positions of authority. In contemporary South Africa, a small cadre of middle-class whites can establish an NGO and claim, without widespread skepticism, that their group is the culmination of grassroots organizing among the poor and non-white populations (Fogel 2013; Pithouse 2013).

A political party, on the other hand, needs evidence of a “mass base” for its claim to have originated from the grassroots to be credible (Fogel 2013). Likewise, evidence of this mass base is needed before political parties are offered a place at the policymaking table: that is, political parties need to be voted into government positions that sit at the policymaking table. Unlike NGOs, political parties need to be chosen by those they claim to represent in order to receive an

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25 There are enough critics of such NGOs in contemporary South Africa that this organization’s grassroots bona fides would not go without challenge. However, my research suggests that the trend among those with the most power to confer legitimacy—donors, the government, the media, and to some extent academia—is to uncritically accept such NGOs as true representatives of the grassroots.
invitation to act as their representatives in official policymaking forums. Thus, it makes little sense for NGOs to reach out to oppositional parties for support. Doing so would only introduce hurdles to their legitimacy and influence that they had already overleaped as a result of being viewed as champions of the grassroots. Rather than being potentially welcomed as community representatives, NGOs would open themselves to scrutiny and rejection as partisan shills. Indeed, in contemporary South Africa, one of the most effective ways to cast doubt on an NGO’s position as a community advocate is to accuse it of working for an opposition political party or an aspiring politician (Fogel 2013). Following a zero-sum logic, the NGO can either be a voice of a community or a party/politician; it cannot be both at the same time. Seeking out the support of a political party is perceived as effectively abandoning the community.

The notion that NGOs, and civil society groups in general, can represent either communities or political parties speaks to an underlying belief that communities are not composed of partisans. This is not unique to contemporary South African politics; instead, this belief undergirds much of the thinking about civil society and democracy, particularly in scholarly and policy circles in the West. Central to Robert Putnam’s (1993) influential theory of democratic efficacy and efficiency are “civic communities.” Civic communities are marked not only for their ability to sustain robust democratic governance, but also for their ability to essentially transcend partisanship. In comparing the “uncivic” south of Italy to the “civic” north of the country, Putnam et al. (1993) were careful to point out that northern Italy was not lacking in partisan fervor. But the trust, reciprocity and equality, the “social capital”—that gave the communities in the north their civicness, were not the providence of individual political parties,

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26 Some democratic states and governments do exhibit hostility towards NGOs and civil society groups, so the degree of welcome they receive to the policymaking process varies. It is noteworthy, however, that a common charge made against those NGOs that governments dismiss is that they are too partisan, or that they are merely fronts for political parties. This again suggests that the state believes that “true” civil society organizations have a rightful role to play as community representatives.
nor were they nourished in these exclusionary organizations. Civic communities were those that played and prayed together, not those that voted in lockstep. These communities found ways to solve collective problems and shared challenges despite the differing political persuasions of their members because these members saw each other as neighbors and fellow citizens above anything else. Civic communities may have partisans in them, but they are not communities of partisans. If groups of individuals can, and must, shrug off partisanship in order to become “civic” communities, then the NGOs and other civil society organizations that claim to represent these communities must also resist ties to political parties.

**Shared, and Possibly Imagined, Constituencies**

More importantly, the notion that NGOs’ monopolization of the “business” of community representation hinges on their avoidance of alliances with parties is more than just theoretical. Some of my South African interlocutors emphasized that they found the mantle of “community advocate” easiest for NGOs acquire when the NGOs placed no demands or restrictions on communities’ ability to form additional partnerships. The NGOs that did not attempt to tether their constituent communities to exclusionary alliances or ideological stances were those that could claim the strongest grassroots support.

Mark Weinberg of the NGO Right 2 Know (R2K), for example, noted that small community-based groups often seemed eager to collect as many NGO sponsorships as possible. It was not unusual for R2K to learn during their meetings with local community groups that the previous day the community had hosted another NGO or social movement that R2K found “undemocratic” or otherwise contrary to the political ideals of R2K (Weinberg 2013). But the community leaders did not care about the contradictions among their current and potential sponsors. These groups were often “desperate, just want[ing] houses, just want[ing] water,” and
so they would welcome the help of as many outside NGOs as possible (Weinberg 2013). Likewise, they did not want their catholic approach to sponsorship to be questioned or for their sponsors to ask them to pick a side. NGOs like R2K knew that if they tried to “discipline” communities, telling them which other groups (including political parties) and political ideologies they should or should not support, it was likely that they would not be invited back. (Weinberg 2013) Communities viewed NGO sponsorship that linked them to a political party as ultimately limiting, as it cut off the full range of avenues open to them when pursuing their demands. Thus, the best way to ensure that NGOs actually had the support of communities was to be willing to share them among other civil society groups.

The sharing of communities and among NGOs is not just a boon to the former; NGOs also benefit from a system in which their constituencies can overlap with those of other NGOs. Again, the contrast between civil society and political society is significant and indicative of why civil society actors might be wary of linking arms with political parties. Competing political parties and politicians either cannot share constituencies or do not want to share them. The candidates for elected office who visit communities seeking their support cannot afford to ignore the fact that their rivals came calling the day before. Rather than pretending that differences between themselves and their political rivals do not exist, they must emphasize them. They must exhort communities to take a definitive side and to work with them at the expense of working with others.

NGOs, on the other hand, can avoid this zero-sum game in which a win for one group accompanies a loss for another. This is not to suggest that there is no competition between NGOs or that the pool of resources available to them is unlimited, but in the civil society sector, several different groups can claim to represent the same communities without outsider observers raising
serious concerns or external funders immediately questioning each NGOs’ success. More than a few of my interviewees suggested that the leaders of NGOs probably would not thrive in political society, where competition is fierce for supporters. In civil society, activists can carve out a space for themselves and their organization without having to evict others already in that space. This ability would be jeopardized if civil society became too closely aligned with political society, which demands exclusivity and discipline on the part of their supporters.

That civil society activists can relatively easily carve out a space for themselves in an already crowded field means that the communities that these activists and their organizations command are not only frequently shared, but they may also be quite small. One journalist in Cape Town insisted that opposition parties were not concerned by the fact that they were not backed by oppositional NGOs and social movements because, when all was said and done, civil society groups had “no votes to offer” (Fogel 68). Either these groups had very little control over their supporters, rendering them a sort of imagined constituency, or the communities they could mobilize were so small that they were politically inconsequential to parties seeking the broad base needed to propel them into elected office. Small communities with particularized demands may not be especially helpful to candidates and parties looking to build a large base, as advocating for them may actually be more trouble than it is worth. The civil society sector, however, can benefit if communities are small and highly differentiated, whether by locality or interests. This allows for a proliferation of many different communities, each of which can be parlayed into a different NGO or civil society group.

**Conditions Necessary for an Alliance**

Given all the reasons that NGOs have for disliking electoral politics, and given the advantages that they accrue from remaining planted on its sidelines, is there reason to believe
that oppositional NGOs would ever join forces with oppositional political parties to install the latter into office? Is the question of an alliance between the two a moot point, an academic exercise with little practical purpose? I argue that the issue only seems like a non-question when the relevant players are all operating under the assumption that there is only one political game in town. Once we relax the assumption that the nature of the state and the regime are not on the line in electoral politics, we can understand why even staid, doggedly non-partisan NGOs would become active players—and why this is likely to be an infrequent occurrence. In order for oppositional civil society to join forces with oppositional political society, political contestation must shift from who will run the state to what the state will be and how it will be run.

When I questioned NGO activists about the reasoning behind their organizations’ non-partisan stances, the most frequent answer I received was that there were no significant differences among the political parties. They argued that the ANC’s embrace of neoliberal orthodoxy—its chief sin according to leftist civil society actors—only brought it closer to its main opposition party, the DA. The implication was that there were not any political parties for leftist civil society to support. But in listening to activists talk about the ANC and DA, I discerned that the chief similarities of the parties that activists found most consequential extended beyond policy preferences. It was not just that civil society activists expected the DA to pursue similar policies were it to replace the ANC in government, but also that they expected the party to act the same way as the ANC in its approach to governing. Their shared commitment to neoliberalism disfavored them both equally, while their shared commitment to the rules of the democratic game favored neither over the other. Neither the ANC nor the DA seemed committed to the specific policies favored by oppositional NGOs, but they did both seem committed to the political system that oppositional NGOs believed could produce their favored policies. Thus the
best approach of oppositional civil society was not to replace one party in power with the other, but to convince whichever party already had the power to honor their commitment to constituent accountability. PSAM’s Kruuse (2013), for example, emphasized that no matter which party occupied governmental positions, he expected that they would be interested in PSAM’s work as a monitoring body. His organization did not need to support a specific political party because all could be expected to be at least begrudgingly supportive of PSAM’s work (Kruuse 2013). Public accountability would be important to any political party that played a role in the democratic South African state, and they would all achieve it imperfectly.

The SDCEA’s D’Sa likewise lamented the seeming insincerity of parties and politicians that made last-minute visits to communities in hopes of wooing them, but argued that these visits provided reasons for guarded optimism for all political parties and a disincentive for his organization to support one party at the expense of the others. All parties made these last-ditch pleas for votes because none believed that stealing elections was a legitimate or viable option. None believed that they could govern without the consent and advice of their constituents. Other NGO activists pointed to the Constitution and other foundational documents of the country as a reason for their organizations to view the opposing political parties as functionally equivalent. These documents would ensure that on the issues that most concerned these NGOs—principally the realization of certain human and citizenship rights—any party in government would ultimately have to side in favor of the NGOs. NGOs did not have to do battle to get the “right” political parties and politicians into office; all parties and politicians had the capacity to be “right” if they accepted principles of the post-apartheid democratic order and discharged of their duties of office as provided by the country’s institutions.
What was remarkable to me about these assessments of South Africa’s contemporary parties was not how they glossed over very real differences in their histories, constituencies, and policies, but how they demonstrated that NGOs’ primary concern with political parties was that they accepted democracy as the only game in town. Given that the country had only celebrated two decades since the fall of apartheid and was a neighbor to multiple countries where political society had slid towards authoritarianism after the achievement of independence and/or democracy, perhaps this should not have come as a surprise. But if these criteria are the focus of NGOs and other civil society organizations, then it means that NGOs need a political party to reject the political status quo in order for them to be considered sufficiently different from other parties, and thus a candidate for support. The way for opposition parties to stop being seen as the same as the ruling party in the eyes of the oppositional NGOs is for them to endorse fundamental change in the nature in the state and political regime. The way to stand out to oppositional NGOs is to go beyond opposing the government to opposing the state.

The ANC: Setting the Standard for the State-in-Waiting Parties

D’Sa (2013) demonstrated this reality when he tied his rejection to working with opposition parties to his past experience supporting the ruling party. Because of what he knew of the ANC, he was convinced that no political party was able to adequately address the needs of its constituents: “Having come from the ANC, I am against party politics as I cannot see any one of them [political parties] representing the needs of the community” (2013). This comment seems to suggest that D’Sa has wholly given up on political parties, and as such, seems to challenge my theory that civil society actors are inclined to become involved in electoral politics when the nature of the state is stake. But D’Sa’s directly connects his rejection of party politics to his tenure with a single political party, claiming that his experience with the ANC revealed the
nature of all parties. This only follows if he sees the ANC as the model for all other political parties in the system. As a standard-bearer that ushered in the post-apartheid democratic state, the ANC has indeed played an outsize role in shaping the institutions, norms, and rules that define the behavior of the political parties and politics more generally. For D’Sa to say that his time with the ANC taught him not to support any political party is for him to say that as long as opposition parties present themselves as nothing greater than alternatives to the ANC government, that is, as governments-in-waiting—he will not become involved in electoral politics. It is for him to say that he does not see the current slate of opposition parties as seeking to improve upon the ANC model of representing communities. D’Sa is suggesting that oppositional NGOs have a high bar when it comes to getting involved in partisan politics: they are looking for a situation in which opposition parties look like the ANC of old—as states-in-waiting.

During the anti-apartheid struggle, the ANC, then the oppositional political party, was not simply a government-in-waiting, seeking to take the reins of the South African state midstride from the ruling National Party (NP). It promised to install an entirely new state upon its ascension to power, chiefly by dismantling apartheid. And it was this promise, coupled with the increasing likelihood that the ANC would vanquish the NP, which drove oppositional civil society of all stripes—social movements and NGOs alike—to pick a side. Civil society, I was told again and again by my interlocutors, did not have the option of remaining non-partisan during the anti-apartheid struggle. The winning political faction would determine the rules of the game, and these rules would affect everyone involved in politics, even those in civil society. There was a reason virtually all of the contemporary civil society activists that I interviewed who were old enough to support a political faction during the anti-apartheid struggle had indeed done
so: they implicitly understood it as a precondition for their post-apartheid civil society activism. They were members and supporters of the ANC then because they believed it would allow them to separate from all political parties later and continue their activism. What was crucial to them was that a non-racist democratic state was installed, and the ANC presented the most viable route to that endpoint.

**Democracy: Permission for NGOs to Remain in Civil Society**

Madlingozi (2012) has noticed a major shift in the discourse of civil society activism since the defeat of apartheid; the “power discourse” that once animated oppositional activism has largely been replaced by “rights discourse” (223). While the effects of this shift are much debated, there is more clarity as to its cause. The rights discourse, which centers around issues such as “formal equality,” access and invitation to “state-created institutions of participatory governance,” and the realization of Constitutionally-guaranteed state obligations to citizens (Madlingozi 2012: 224) would not be dominant if civil society did not believe that democracy had been achieved and a democratic state had been at least partially entrenched. If civil society perceived democracy as under threat, or saw it as but one option among many being debated in political society, then it would not have settled on the rights discourse. It would not have moved on from the power discourse.

Oppositional NGOs, then, are not inveterately opposed to joining forces with oppositional parties and political movements. The past actions of South African civil society groups during the revolutionary period and the present pronouncements of oppositional NGOs suggest that an alliance between oppositional civil society and opposition parties is possible, although circumscribed to certain relatively rare scenarios. Most importantly, opposition parties and movements must reject the prevailing game of politics. They must seek government control
as a way to overturn the state. They must convince activists like D’Sa and Kruuse that what civil society knows about the state and working alongside and against it may no longer hold true if they are installed in power. They must force civil society to see the differences between the competing political parties, negating any excuse civil society has to remain indifferent. Civil society will care what opposition parties are doing when they can credibly claim to be doing something different than the ruling party.

Conclusion

Some of my interviewees in post-apartheid South Africa were sheepish in their admission of being part of an NGO. They seemed to approach it as if it were a confession of weakness or defect. This seemed to be the result of the prevailing atmosphere within the activist community that deemed NGOs as less important players in the game of oppositional politics than social movements and that accused them of being “sell-outs” to the political status quo. This chapter has ushered considered support for my theory’s propositions that civil society leaders prefer one-party dominant democratic state and elect to remove themselves from electoral politics so long as the nature of the state is not at stake. While not as preponderant, the evidence for civil society regarding elections warily and serving as a platform for its leaders to practice a politics without constituents is also highly suggestive. Overall, this chapter has demonstrated that oppositional NGOs do have a tendency to be quite supportive of the status quo of post-apartheid South African politics. Through their rejection of electoral and partisan politics, preference for a strong, united state as adversary and potential partner, and evocation of community representation and consensus, NGOs that are critical of the ANC government have indeed allowed opposition parties to flounder unaided in their challenges against the ruling party.
In this sense, however, oppositional NGOs are far from inconsequential, as they have joined social movements in working to cement ruling party opposition in civil rather than political society. Moreover, the charge of “selling out” to a one-party dominant democratic system misunderstands how the mode of politics that NGOs have long espoused naturally prefers the political arrangement such as the one that currently exists in South Africa. Supporting opposition parties is an infrequent activity for oppositional NGOs, but to fault them for that is to misunderstand them. Thus, the other frequent posture adopted by interviewees from NGOs: defensiveness. They were clear to point out that what so many outside observers seemed to expect of them had never been their intention.

In the concluding chapter, I will revisit the insights gleaned from the South African case study of both NGOs and social movements to consider whether the academic and policy-oriented perspectives of civil society and democracy have similar misguided expectations. First, however, I will address the issue of my theory’s generalizability the following chapter. I will argue that there are several contexts in which my theory is quite applicable: where NGOs, despite being highly critical of the actions of the incumbent government, should remain doggedly non-partisan as long as electoral contests are between alternative government-in-waiting parties.
CHAPTER V. MOVING BEYOND BORDERS: GENERALIZING THE THEORY TO SPECIFIC REGIME TYPES

South Africa stands out among its neighbors. It is the subcontinent’s economic and political powerhouse, outpacing all other sub-Saharan African countries in status and prominence on regional and international stages. Democrats across the globe admire its relatively smooth transition to multiracial democracy and its liberal Constitution, and for some, it has come to symbolize the positive prospects for political progress in sub-Saharan Africa. Yet the fact that South Africa stands out is not the same as it being wholly idiosyncratic. In fact, the belief that South Africa could be a positive standard-bearer for other African countries points to how the country already bears many of the standards of its neighbors. In particular, the country displays a political party system that is the norm among both democratic and autocratic regimes across the subcontinent. According to Manning (2005), this modal African system consists of a single dominant party, usually either the pre-transition incumbent or the party that won the first transitional elections, surrounded by a “proliferation of small, weak parties” (716) with limited power within the government. Contemporary South Africa, then, is an important case but not a unique one, making it possible for us to seriously consider the generalizability of theories built using it.

In this chapter, I will ultimately argue that this dissertation’s theory has the potential to apply beyond the sub-Saharan region, extending even to cases and countries not traditionally considered to be directly comparable to South Africa or part of its sphere of influence. In particular, I will contend that this theory might help make sense of civil society-political party relations in countries that fall under one or more of three categories: dominant-party democracies, consolidating democracies, or countries governed by former liberation movements. In each of these settings, the mechanisms underlying civil society’s reluctance to participate in
electoral politics and sole interest in state-in-waiting parties are activated, albeit in different ways and for different purposes. In what follows, I will somewhat cursorily discuss the potential applicability of my theory to these three categories of cases, as well as offer suggestions for future research. I will also offer brief sketches of additional cases which initially appear to support my theory, and thus are worthy candidates for more thorough analysis: Botswana, a dominant-party democracy; Thailand, a country moving towards democracy; and Namibia and Zimbabwe, both countries ruled by former liberation movements. While I do not claim that my theory can be applied to all places or times, its generalizability, even outside of sub-Saharan Africa, should not be immediately rejected because it was constructed through the analysis of a single case, even one as seemingly standalone as contemporary South Africa. At the same time, I argue that recognizing and enumerating the limits to my theory’s generalizability neither automatically debases it nor discredits the work that went into building and initially testing it. In fact, a theory that forces us to spell out its boundaries is one that compels us to think critically about and explore a whole range of adjacent concepts in a way that we would not have to do with a theory that we deem universal and axiomatic.

**Dominant-Party Systems**

Not all civil society groups voice their displeasure with government actors by hoisting empty coffins, like AbM did in its protests of Councillor Baig in Durban. Some leave symbolism aside for concerted action that actually “kills” offending officeholders, mobilizing their members to go to the polls and vote for opposition candidates and parties. In the United States, for example, politicians from the Republican party pay close attention to their rating from the National Rifle Association (NRA), knowing that if they were to slip in the organization’s estimation, it would not hesitate to place its full weight—comprising both votes and money—
behind their political challengers. Indeed, the United States, one of the world’s oldest
democracies, looks very different from South Africa, one of its youngest, in that many of its
politically oriented civil society groups are willing to involve themselves very directly in
electoral politics. Despite the fact that the two major political parties in the United States are
both government-in-waiting parties—and quite ideologically similar\textsuperscript{27}—civil society groups often
find themselves picking a side.

Of all the possible reasons that this dissertation’s theory fails to explain the United States,
I argue that the most important one concerns the fact that the United States is not, nor has ever
been, a dominant-party democracy at the national level. Not only has there been regular rotation
in power between the two major parties in terms of controlling the presidency and houses of
Congress, but the aggregate votes shares of the Democratic Party and the Republican Party at the
national level are also so close as to be almost equal. It is difficult to think of the parties as some
sort of ruling-opposition party dyad; both are simultaneously ruling parties and opposition
parties. Without a single party dominating national politics, the logic underlying the relationship
between civil society and political parties described in my theory is not activated. A dominant-
party system is the first condition that is sufficient to make my theory potentially applicable
beyond the contemporary South African case.

Dominant-party systems are those in which one party “outdistances all the others”
(Sartori 1976: 193). Pempel (1990) has identified four key dimensions of dominance that are
necessary of dominant parties. First, the dominant party must dominate the electorate, winning a
larger number of seats than its opponents. Second, it must hold a dominant bargaining position,

\textsuperscript{27} Although ideological polarization between the average Republican party member and the average Democratic
party member appears to have increased in recent years, political scientists continue to view the two parties as
having only limited ideological distance between them, especially compared to the wide spread in ideological
positions seen in other countries. As competitors for the median voter, both the Democratic Party and the
Republican Party have long tended towards the center of the ideological spectrum.
allowing it to continually stay in government as a result of its ability to effectively bargain with smaller parties to form governments. Third, the dominant party must be “dominant chronologically” placing it at the core of government for an extended period of time (3). Finally, a dominant party is characterized by its ability to dominate governmentally, “carr[y]ing] out what many would call a historical project, a series of interrelated and mutually supportive public policies that give particular shape to the national political agenda” (4). In short, dominant parties are those whose extended reign makes them effectively synonymous with the government and the state.

The majority of recent scholarly literature clearly places dominant-party systems closer to the autocratic pole of the regime spectrum and studies them as either a type of authoritarian regime or hybrid regime combining limited democratic institutions (competitive elections, multiple parties) with authoritarian outcomes (Greene 2007; Levitsky and Way 2002; Magaloni 2006). Magaloni and Kricheli (2010) deem dominant-party regimes, in which opposition parties are allowed to participate in multiparty elections, as similar enough to single-party regimes, which pointedly proscribe opposition parties from running in elections, to combine the two into a master category of “one-party regimes” when analyzing their internal structure and relationship to democratization. They contend that such one-party regimes have come to define contemporary authoritarianism, as they have become the most common type of authoritarian rule and have proved to be longer-lasting, more stable, and better performing economically than other types of authoritarian rule (Magaloni and Kricheli 2010).

If empirics were not enough to drive scholars of autocracy to claim dominant-party systems as their own, definitional concerns have also led scholars of democracy to forfeit them. Some democratic theorists suggest that dominant parties should not exist within democracies; by
definition, they insist, the two are incompatible. In fact, some scholars contend that a regime cannot be considered a democracy if its leading party is so dominant that it lacks an effective opposition. In their influential work on democratization, Przeworski et al. (2000) emphasize that political parties in democracies must be fallible, and they include alternation-of-power among two or more parties at the national level as a requirement for democratic designation. As a result, they have refused to categorize certain countries—including Botswana and South Africa—as such despite others’ assessments that they have achieved or are approaching consolidated democratic status. Instead, they stipulate that they will retroactively change their designation of these countries only when the dominant party loses. Carothers (2002) has similarly decided that states that have instituted multiparty elections will remain in the “gray zone” between the ideal types of authoritarianism and democracy if opposition parties cannot mount a real challenge to the incumbent party.

The claim that dominant parties are incompatible with democracy stems from the idea that democracies are those political systems in which officeholders are accountable to those they represent. The farther a single party outdistances its competition, the less responsive the party needs to be to its electorate. The less likely it is that an opposition party will be able to challenge the incumbent party’s hold on power, the less restrained the incumbent party believes itself to be. As Scheiner (2006) points out, the best check on arbitrary governmental action is the fear among those holding office that they will lose their seats if they act in a manner inconsistent with the desires of their constituents.

Yet the histories—and in some cases, the present circumstances—of countries including Sweden, Japan, Italy, Israel, Botswana and South Korea bear witness to the fact that dominant parties can and do exist in democratic states. Pempel et al. (1990) called such states “uncommon
democracies,” and for them, the adjective modifying “democracy” was not meant to signal that these regimes were diminished forms of democracy, but rather that they were comparatively rare and unanticipated by theorists. In the quarter-century since Pempel et al. were writing, however, the number of states combining dominant-party rule with democratic procedures and institutions has expanded to the point that it is difficult to deem them “uncommon.” In fact, according to Manning, (2005) the modal party system in sub-Saharan Africa, present even in those regimes that most fully meet the criteria for democracy, consists of a dominant single party, which is usually either the pre-transition incumbent or the party that won the first transitional elections, surrounded by a “proliferation of small, weak parties centered around a well-known public figure but devoid of organizational extension and structure” (716). Surveying the legislative elections that occurred across the subcontinent between 1989 and 2007, Rakner (2011) further reports that, “even in the countries with the most institutionalized democratic elections, the opposition rarely gains more than 20% of the seats in the legislature,” and that, “the most institutionalized electoral processes are found in the dominant party regimes.” Thus, South Africa is not alone, especially among its neighbors, in combining dominant-party rule with significant democratic institutions and procedures. Theories built using South Africa’s “uncommon democracy” should be candidates for application beyond its borders.

What South Africa and other dominant-party democracies have that is important for the dynamics of my theory of civil-society-political party relations is a state that is synonymous with its ruling party and a ruling party that is synonymous with the state. In dominant-party systems, the state and ruling party “belong” to one another; it is difficult to conceptualize the state as existing separately from the party that governs it. Duverger considered a party dominant when its “doctrines, ideas, methods and style coincide with those of the epoch,” (1954: 308) and if we
accept that the state is the central political institution of most epochs, then a dominant party is one whose doctrines, ideas, methods and style coincide with the state. I do caution against equating the synonymy of the state and its ruling party in dominant-party systems with the existence of a party-state, which scholars tend to treat as a distinct sub-type of dominant-party system in which the dominant party brooks little internal or external opposition and employs administrative bodies to carry out party functions in a conflation of party tasks with public tasks (Widner 1992: 7). What matters here is simply that the doctrines, methods, and ideas of the state are also seen as the doctrines, methods and ideas of its ruling party.

The synonymy of the dominant party and the state in popular imagination affects the strategic calculus of oppositional civil society in such a way that should make my theory applicable. In dominant-party systems, the choice of oppositional civil society to support opposition parties over the ruling party can be interpreted as a rejection of the state itself. Allying with an opposition party rather than protesting and engaging with the dominant party can be understood as a sign that the civil society group no longer supports the doctrines and ideas of the state. In multiparty systems, the choice to support an out-of-power party or politician does not normally implicate the patriotism and commitment to the state of the individual or the group making the choice. In a sense, opposition is easier in multiparty democracies because it can be confined to simple opposition to specific policy of a party or politician in government. In dominant-party systems, the conflation between state and ruling party make it difficult for actors to argue that their opposition to a certain policy of the dominant party is not also opposition to the state. As a result, oppositional civil society in dominant-party democracies is reluctant to engage with electoral politics until electoral politics actually becomes what it is often erroneously interpreted to be: a competition between rival visions of the state.
The conflation of the state and party under dominant-party systems also conditions civil society to see state-in-waiting parties as the only legitimate political actors. The dominant party sets the standards to which other parties are judged, and if rival parties do aspire to the same degree of fusion with the state, they may not be deemed serious or committed enough to warrant investment from civil society. In fact, dominant-party systems may train oppositional civil society actors to think that there are only two valid ways of resolving their disagreements with the policies of the incumbent government: either reform the dominant party from within, or completely replace the state with a new dominant party. These dynamics are absent in multiparty systems. Civil society actors are used to seeing political parties as governments-in-waiting to be regularly cycled into and out of power. They are accustomed to viewing their policy disagreements with the incumbent government as problems that only require a reconfiguration of the government, not a potentially wholesale reconfiguration of the state. The stakes of opposition are lowered in multiparty systems, and this allows oppositional civil society to be much more involved in electoral contests.

The final consideration that should make my theory more applicable to dominant-party systems concerns the unequal balance of power between oppositional civil society and opposition parties in dominant-party systems. When opposition parties are electorally and ideologically non-competitive, civil society can more easily assume the mantle as the leader of “the opposition” to the incumbent government. From this place of privilege, it may be difficult for civil society groups to “debase” themselves by supporting weak, ineffectual opposition parties or to subordinate their goals to those of opposition parties. In multiparty systems, on the other hand, civil society groups are more likely to benefit from allying with opposition parties and tapping into their legitimacy and place of prestige within the political system. In dominant-
party systems, waiting for state-in-waiting opposition parties to arise means oppositional parties waiting for worthy allies; in multiparty systems, government-in-waiting parties are likely already more than worthy partners for likeminded civil society groups.

Kenneth Greene’s (2013) work on the resilience and demise of dominant parties in both democratic and authoritarian settings makes a similar point about the importance of the dominant party’s monopolization of state resources. He finds that dominant parties continue to win elections as long as they can “politicize public resources,” and only begin to lose at the polls once “privatizations put the state’s fiscal power out of their reach” (Greene 2013; 24). While Greene is concerned with individual voters defecting from the dominant party, it follows that civil society groups might also be more willing to embrace opposition parties when the dominant party loses its control of state resources. The costs of allying with opposition parties go down when the dominant party’s own resources diminish, as do the rewards of indirectly supporting the dominant party.

**Botswana: Civil Society’s Deference to and Defense of its Dominant Party**

Botswana, South Africa’s northern neighbor and fellow “uncommon democracy” (Pempel et al. 1990) would be an ideal candidate for extending this dissertation’s theory. While time and space do not make it possible to rigorously determine whether Botswana supports or refutes my theory, an initial, cursory, analysis suggests that the behavior of civil society in the country is broadly consistent with it. The Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) has ruled the country and dominated the presidency and parliament without interruption since Botswana’s independence in 1966, making it one of the world’s longest ruling democratic parties. While civil society in Botswana is generally weak and apolitical, those groups that do take positions that put
them in conflict with the government are still careful to avoid alliances with any parties or
groups that may challenge the power or prestige of the ruling party, and by extension, the state.

For example, Good (2003) relates the case of Ditshwanelo, a NGO focused on human
rights, which rejected the opportunity to join with likeminded civil society groups—and amplify
its opposition to government policy—as soon as its potential allies started acting in ways that
could embarrass the ruling party and raise questions about the legitimacy of the Botswanan state
and its commitment to democracy on the international scale. For years, Ditshwanelo had
campaigned tirelessly on behalf of the San people and what it viewed as the state’s abrogation of
their human rights. But when the London-based Survival International took up the cause of the
San, demonstrating outside the Botswana High Commission in London and launching an
international publicity campaign decrying their treatment, Ditshwanelo quickly moved to
disassociate itself from Survival International and condemn the outside group for its abrasive
manner.

Good (2003) and Scanlon (2002) posit that the refusal of oppositional civil society groups
in Botswana to embrace one another or opposition parties stems from their worry that doing so
would harden the ruling BDP against them and put them in an inferior bargaining position vis-à-
vis the state. Indeed, in dominant-party democracies, the fusion between the state and the ruling
party certainly affects the dynamics of contention so that choosing to support the ruling party’s
political opponents may not pay. But what is notable about the Ditshwanelo example is that
when Survival International moved to make the plight of the San an international issue, it was
actually putting the NGO in a better position to bargain with the BDP and receive policy
concessions. With the rest of the world looking on, especially that part of the world that provided
Botswana with the bulk of its foreign aid, the BDP might have been sufficiently embarrassed to
make concessions to those groups agitating for the San people, like Ditshwanelo. And yet Scanlon (2002) has found that the great majority of NGOs in Botswana, even those that disagree with the BDP, do not want to embarrass it or cast doubt on its prestige. Instead, their primary goals were to emphasize the state’s achievements in democracy and stability as a way of reinforcing and expanding upon them.

Here, my theory can step in and help make sense of why oppositional civil society in Botswana would not want to make use of every opportunity to achieve their policy preferences. To question too forcefully the democratic bona fides of the ruling party and its commitment to human rights in a dominant-party democracy is to question the state itself. Civil society in Botswana is so invested in the narrative of the country being “the darling of the North” (Good 2003) that it defangs its criticism of the BDP. For Ditshwanelo to allow the BDP state to be embarrassed on an international scale and prompt its foreign financial backers to reconsider their support would be particularly reckless given that there are no alternative state-in-waiting parties ready to take over if the BDP falls. Thus, when operating in the context of a dominant-party democracy, oppositional civil society in Botswana, like its South African counterpart, avoids actions that would threaten the ruling party’s hold on power so long as the there are no viable state-in-waiting political parties. While more work will need to be done to assess how well this dissertation’s theory truly explains Botswana’s civil society, it does seem that the presence of a dominant-party democracy is one promising dimension along which to generalize the theory.

**Non-Democratic Systems**

Given that the theory in this dissertation is especially suited for dominant-party democracies—which some refuse to consider true democracies—it is worth considering whether its application outside of South Africa actually extends to all non-democratic systems. Is it
necessary to stay within the democratic universe when using the theory to understand civil society’s approach to political parties?

In a sense, I have already extended the reach of my theory in arguing that it can help make sense of the differences often observed between civil society’s behavior regarding political society prior to and after democratic transitions. State-in-waiting political factions almost automatically attract the support of democracy-favoring oppositional civil society during the run-up to the transition, while government-in-waiting parties do little to excite civil society’s passions once its ultimate goal of democracy has been achieved. While it is tempting to extend this insight further backward, applying it to the behavior of civil society groups in autocratic systems where the specter of democracy is not on the horizon, some caveats should be noted first.

To begin, we should be careful about what we mean by oppositional civil society in non-democratic settings. Some, like Howard (2005), specify that a desire to overturn the state is key to defining civil society as oppositional within autocratic contexts. If we accept this as our definition, then my theory borders on tautology, as it essentially argues that oppositional civil society supports state-in-waiting parties because its goal, by definition, is the creation of a new state. My theory does not solve the “puzzle” of oppositional civil society’s behavior toward political parties because under this conceptualization of oppositional civil society, it never was puzzling in the first place. Thus, if we are to apply my theory to oppositional civil society groups in non-democracies, we need to employ the same starting assumption implicit in its application to democracies: that oppositional civil society groups, as critical as they are of the incumbent government and its policies, do not necessarily believe that the extant state is incapable of addressing their issues. I argue that this is an easier assumption to make in democratic states,
which are premised on the principle of state responsiveness to citizen preferences. The same underlying logic does not always animate autocratic states, which is why it makes sense to conclude that civil society groups that oppose the government’s behavior also desire change in the basic operating principles of the state. It is possible for there to be civil society groups in autocratic states that oppose actions of the incumbent government but are still supportive or agnostic about the autocratic state. In this smaller set of cases, my theory may be applicable and helpful.

The second major caveat to applying this theory to non-democratic systems concerns the freedom that civil society groups within these regimes actually have to choose how they interact with opposition parties. My theory assumes that civil society groups are relatively unconstrained in these actions. At the very least, they have the legal right to associate with parties and political actors as they see fit and will not face official punishment for supporting parties that are not part of the ruling faction. While this stipulation of freedom on the part of oppositional civil society is a legitimate assumption to make under democratic regimes, we cannot automatically expect it to be the case in autocratic systems. Thus, we should be careful in ensuring that autocratic regimes meet our starting assumptions before attempting to apply this dissertation’s theory to it.

**Consolidating Democracies**

In addition to explaining the dynamics of dominant-party democracies, my theory also seems well suited for analyzing newer democracies. In referring to the age or “newness” of a democracy, I do not have a specific number of years in mind; rather, I am more interested in the degree to which democracy can be considered consolidated. In perhaps the most succinct and potent definition of the term, Linz and Stepan (1996) specify that a democracy is to be considered consolidated when it is “the only game in town,” accepted by all relevant actors as
the way that politics works (5). Once a democracy has become consolidated, there is little chance of it relapsing back into autocracy. I consider newer democracies to be those that are not entirely consolidated. For any number of reasons, there is still a legitimate concern whether democracy will hold going forward.

Concern about the survival of the democratic state should make oppositional civil society—or more specifically, oppositional civil society that supports democracy—circumspect about becoming involved in electoral politics. My original theory posited that elections could be threatening to civil society because they could expose its superfluousness; if elections are perceived as a way of communicating citizen preferences to government and holding officeholders accountable to their constituents, then civil society may not seem particularly necessary or important. In unconsolidated democracies, on the other hand, elections can be unsettling to civil society actors because they could also expose the fragility and failures of the democratic experiment: the very thing that undergirds the existence of civil society. Thus, where elections work too well, the ideological underpinning of civil society might be imperiled; where elections do not work well enough, the material foundation of civil society might be in danger. In newer, unconsolidated democracies, civil society groups may adopt a stance of neutrality towards political parties and non-participation in elections as a way to avoid inflaming electoral politics, which could potentially destabilize the still uncertainly democratic state. This is especially true when elections involve only government-in-waiting political parties. Such elections should become the norm when democracy is the only game in town, and thus do not need to acquire an outsize significance as a result of civil society involvement.

Of course, when competing political factions are state-in-waiting parties, elections naturally implicate civil society’s place within the polity. As a result, my theory’s contention that
civil society will wait for the rise of state-in-waiting parties to get involved in electoral politics seems like it should still stand in unconsolidated democracies. In consolidated, “older” democracies, the procedures, routines, and institutions of the game have become so cemented that civil society may feel it has more freedom to associate with government-in-waiting opposition parties. Having already secured its place in the political life of the polity, civil society may not worry about how its alliances and support for government-in-waiting parties could endanger itself.

The intuition about my theory’s applicability to newer, unconsolidated democracies requires further research. Is there a significant difference between how civil society groups in unconsolidated democracies approach electoral politics and how they behave in consolidated democracies? If this is the case, can it be traced to an underlying concern for the fate of democracy, or just part of civil society’s maturation, as it comes to acquire new roles within the realm of elections? In consolidated democracies, civil society may have developed an independent identity and place within politics that provides them with a sense of security that were they to support political parties during elections, they would not be subsumed or undermined by them. Alternatively, does it make sense for civil society to be concerned about and attuned to whether any given party in a consolidated democracy is a government-in-waiting or a state-in-waiting when the consolidation of democracy means that all major political actors have accepted the democratic state as the only game in town? Are there actually any serious state-in-waiting opposition parties or the prospect of them in consolidated democracies such that oppositional civil society will even bother looking for them?
Civil Society in Thailand’s Nascent Democracy

The shifting relationship between civil society and political parties in Thailand over the past twenty years presents just one possible avenue for expanding my theory beyond South Africa to other consolidating or democratizing countries. Several scholars have seized upon Thailand as an example of when civil society can fail to promote and/or can actively derail democratic progress. Wakefield (2002) and Kuhonta and Sinpeng (2014) both share this pessimism about Thailand’s civil society, although the reasoning behind their evaluations show just how much civil society had changed in the country in the twelve years separating their work. What is important for our purposes, however, is that these changes initially appear to support this dissertation’s theory and my contention that it is generalizable to states where democracy is not yet consolidated.

Writing just five years after the 1997 democratic political reforms that brought Thailand its “People’s Constitution,” Wakefield (2002) lamented the “depoliticisation” of Thai NGOs, arguing that it was leading the country’s civil society to “perpetuat[e] structures of political exclusion and weak democracy” (41). Her description of such depoliticized NGOs accords with much of my theory’s contentions about oppositional civil society in newly democratic societies lacking credible state-in-waiting opposition parties. Thai civil society groups, she observed, were doggedly committed to their “status as civil society organizations” (38), deliberately avoiding involvement with political parties. Although their goals coincided with those of some of the country’s opposition parties, oppositional NGOs wanted to carve out a separate space for themselves in the new democratic landscape. They also did not perceive any of the country’s political parties as differing in their vision of the democratic state, or their commitment to further democratization of it (Wakefield 2002). For their own part, these civil society groups were
committed to the ideals of participatory democracy and grassroots governance, and sought to take advantage of the fact that because democracy was still a *new* game in town, they had a chance to shape it to their specifications as it moved to being the *only* game in town.

Wakefield’s (2002) criticism of Thai civil society in 2002 was that by withdrawing completely from political society, it was actually helping to cement a version of democracy that did not meet its own ideals. Twelve years later, Kuhonta and Sinpeng (2014) reached the same conclusion about how civil society was imperiling Thai democratic progress, but did so through a starkly different claim: that oppositional civil society was intervening in political society as part of a successful strategy to protect its narrowly-defined—and anti-democratic—self interests.

They focused on the creation of the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) that formed in 2006 to oust Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawtra and his TRT (Thai Rak Thai) party and overturn his populist restructuring of the state. PAD represented an alliance of civil society groups and opposition political parties both willing to take extreme measures, including boycotting elections and supporting the two military coups that gripped the country in 2006 and 2014. It was followed by the People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), which consisted of civil society groups and the Democrat Party, whose goal was to oust—but not through elections—the subsequent PTP (Pheu Thai Party) 28 government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra.

What is most remarkable for Kuhonta and Sinpeng (2014) is that the two civil society-political society movements were “unabashedly anti-democratic” (344), but what is most important for this dissertation’s theory is that they were alliances between oppositional civil society and opposition parties. While Thai civil society had been content in the early years following democratization to alienate themselves from political parties, this changed once the

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28 The Pheu Thai Party, PTP, is the direct descendent of Thaksin Shinawatra’s Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT).
ruling party started reforming the state in ways that threatened civil society’s place in the political order. According to Kuhonta and Sinpeng (2014), Thaksin’s populist platform was seen by the NGO community as a direct attack against them, “tantamount to encroaching or taking over political space occupied by the people’s sector…NGOs were forced to compete with the state” (341). Earlier, I argued that civil society in consolidating democracies might be especially wary of getting involved in electoral politics for fear of destabilizing a still-shaky political order that nonetheless undergirds their existence. In the case of Thailand under Thaksin, the democratic state was no longer protecting or promoting the interests of civil society, and so NGOs were propelled to support alternative political movements promising their ideal vision of the state. The opposition parties that oppositional civil society supported as part of the PDRC campaign, with their call for “Reform before Election” (Kuhonta and Sinpeng 2014) were much closer to state-in-waiting parties than to government-in-waiting parties, and that is precisely why civil society backed them.

Thus, the recent history in Thailand appears to support my theory that oppositional civil society will wade into politics primarily when there exists credible state-in-waiting political parties, as well as my argument that these dynamics are especially pertinent in consolidating democracies. More research into the Thai case is of course necessary, but we can be more confident in applying this dissertation’s theory beyond Thailand to other consolidating or democratizing countries.

**Post-Liberation Societies Governed By Former Liberation Movements**

Beyond newer, consolidating democracies, my theory should also shed light on the interplay between civil society organizations and political parties in post-liberation societies now governed by former liberation movements. I define post-liberation societies as those in countries
that have relatively recently freed themselves from some form of oppressive rule largely perceived as illegitimate by the populace, whether it was imposed from outside in the cases of colonization and occupation or arose from within the country itself, in the case of domestic dictatorships (Clapham 2012). A liberation may be defined as having been “relatively recent” if less than a generation has passed, but what is more critical, as Clapham (2012) argues, is that “consciousness and experience of [the liberation] struggle” is still shared among the majority of the population (4). Another criterion might be that the individuals and/or parties that led the liberation struggle subsequently govern the country; indeed, for the applicability of my theory to post-liberation societies, I consider this to be a necessary condition.

In such post-liberation settings, as in consolidating democracies, civil society is likely to still be struggling to find and define its place in the new political order, and oppositional civil society finds itself in an especially fragile position. Former liberation movements-turned governing parties have amassed a great deal of trust and goodwill on the part of the populace that insulates them from criticism. Attaching themselves to opposition parties, even those that share in its criticism of the post-liberation government, could be a risky and unnecessary decision that could marginalize civil society organizations. As Melber (2002) has observed in the case of post-liberation countries in southern Africa, “any opposition or dissent is considered to be hostile and branded as an enemy to the people and the national interest” (163). Given the ability of the liberation movement to ultimately emerge victorious in the past struggle for freedom, citizens are likely to believe that it can also right any missteps it takes in governing post-liberation, deserving time and latitude to reform itself rather than challenges to its right to rule. As a result, oppositional civil society has the incentive to ignore electoral politics and instead engage with the incumbent government as if it were the only or most legitimate political force.
That is certainly the case in Namibia, where civil society is overall quiescent and even those groups that are critical of the government are careful to avoid being seen as opposing SWAPO (South West Africa People’s Organization), the liberation movement turned ruling party (European Union 2015; Melber 2009). SWAPO routinely brands its critics within civil and political society as enemies of the state and supporters of the former apartheid regime, and the result has been that most civil society groups remain quiet, especially when it comes to public opposition to the government. A study of Namibian civil society groups by the European Union found that most groups prefer to discuss concerns and offer criticism to the government in private settings (European Union 2015). Likewise, there are efforts made to couch criticism of SWAPO under the guise of helping the ruling party deliver on its promises and become a better representative of the Namibian people. The implication is that no opposition parties could possibly do better, or even approach SWAPO, in guiding the country.

Post-liberation societies are also those in which individuals have grown accustomed to “transformational” political actors. The dominant parties and politicians in their most recent memory were liberators, smashing the old political order and freeing society for something new and liberating. In many cases, former liberation movements-turned governments still traffic in this image of themselves (Melber 2002; Clapham 2012). Future research may investigate if the distinction between government-in-waiting and state-in-waiting political parties is more salient for individuals living in post-liberation societies, as I suspect it is. Thus I posit that it may strike civil society actors as natural or normal to remain alienated from political parties until one rises

29 As an undergraduate student studying in Namibia, I interned at the Legal Assistance Centre (LAC), one of the few advocacy NGOs in the country, and one of the few willing to challenge the SWAPO government in court. My task at LAC was to create a database of all the political, economic, social, and human rights the government had committed itself to upholding as the result of its constitution, legislation, and treaty commitments. My supervisors explained to me that their intention was to use the database to show the SWAPO government how “right” it was in its promises rather than to point out where it had gone “wrong.”
up with the revolutionary zeal and promises of transformation to rival political movements during the struggle for revolution. That is, in post-liberation settings, critics of the government within civil society may be waiting for state-in-waiting political parties. The hurly-burly of normal electoral politics, pitting alternative governments-in-waiting against one another, may not seem consequential or interesting enough for an oppositional civil society that cut its teeth during an independence movement or liberation campaign.

On this issue of preferring a transformational, state-in-waiting opposition party in post-liberation settings, Zimbabwe may prove instructive. Unlike its neighbor to the south, Zimbabwe’s oppositional civil society has been willing to challenge the country’s liberation movement-turned ruling party, ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front), by directly supporting the party’s political opponents. In fact, civil society groups and political forces together founded the country’s chief opposition party, the MDC (Movement for Democratic Change) in 1999. Oppositional civil society’s support of the MDC party clearly conforms with this dissertation’s theory, as its founders intended for it to serve as a democratic alternative to an increasingly authoritarian ZANU-PF state. Under the leadership of Robert Mugabe, the ZANU-PF organized a referendum in 2000 designed to significantly alter the constitution, and the MDC was a direct reaction to this proposed change in the character and future direction of the Zimbabwean state.

But relations between oppositional civil society and the MDC have begun to sour as the political party has moved away from being a state-in-waiting to a government-in-waiting political party. This became especially apparent when the MDC joined the Government of National Unity (GNU) in 2009, an internationally brokered deal that produced a coalition government involving ZANU-PF and MDC and which placed Morgan Tsvangirai of MDC as
Prime Minister beside President Mugabe of ZANU-PF. Civil society groups then confronted the choice of continuing to support the MDC and hoping to reform the government from within, or breaking with the MDC and pushing for democratic transformation from without. Takura Zhangazha (2009), the director of MISA Zimbabwe, an NGO that advocates for freedom of the press and free speech, reflected that many within civil society were not willing to believe that fundamental change in the nature of the Zimbabwean state could transpire as the result of “compromises” made with the political incumbents. Instead, they were looking for a new liberation movement, a party that viewed its mission as part of a “struggle for democracy.”

While MDC’s involvement in the GNU ultimately did not lead to Zimbabwe making significant strides towards democracy, many of the parties involved in the negotiated settlement that created the GNU believed this was a possibility; not only would the GNU help resolve political and economic instability in the country, but it would also set the stage for a democratic progress. That many in Zimbabwe’s oppositional civil society were wary of a pacted transition path may speak to the country’s recent experience as having undergone a liberation movement. As much as oppositional civil society in present-day Zimbabwe loathes ZANU-PF, it does seem to admire its revolutionary fervor, and long for a party of its mold—but with a democratic conception of the state—to arise. Thus it seems that post-liberation societies might be especially primed to demonstrate the dynamics of this dissertation’s theory, as civil society continues to expect the rise of new state-in-waiting political parties.

**Conclusion**

Specifying that my theory seems most applicable to dominant-party democracies, consolidating democracies and post-liberation democracies does narrow its scope, but it also makes a necessary point about the importance of context in understanding the behavior of civil
society. Too often civil society is paired with an unspecified, ambiguous concept of “democracy,” and the result is that it can be difficult to generate testable and theory-driven predictions about its behavior. By acknowledging that different democratic contexts condition the actions of individuals in civil society in potentially different ways, I am able to draw attention to the variety that exists within the false monolith that is civil society, as well as indicate a source of some of this variety. This then allows us to consider and theorize about a larger range of actions on the part of civil society, such as its involvement in elections and support of opposition parties. In addition, looking at the generalizability of my theory across different categories of regimes invites comparisons that are not readily apparent but potentially fruitful; it is not unexpected that a theory that makes sense of South Africa would also be applicable to the nearby countries of Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Botswana, but it is somewhat surprising that such a theory could also shed light on political dynamics in Thailand. This dissertation offers no grand theory purporting to explain all civil society behavior, but it does provide the theoretical scaffolding to explain a smaller range of actions that are of practical interest and import.
CHAPTER VI. CONCLUSION: TIRELESS, BUT NOT BORDERLESS, CIVIL SOCIETY OPPOSITION

As the afternoon wore on during my third day at the UPM’s office in Grahamstown, I noticed that the gaze of its leader, Ayanda Kota, a man not known to be easily distracted, frequently shifted from those before him to the window at their backs. I assumed that he was waiting for someone to arrive—people cycled in and out of the makeshift office on a regular basis—but it turns out that what was consuming his attention had been sitting there, immobile, the whole time: my shiny red rental car. While I had managed to get around using taxis in South Africa’s larger cities, the lack of easily available transportation options in this small town meant that I was finally forced to get comfortable driving on the opposite side of the road. When we first met, my rental car was a source of fascination for Ayanda and the others because it was automatic transition—it was unfathomable to them, not to mention quite amusing, that I did not know how to operate a manual transition automobile—but now the car held Ayanda’s attention because of the possibilities it presented. He and a few others from UPM were planning a call to action later that afternoon in the townships, mainly to spread the word of the protest march the next morning. But the shack settlements that comprised the townships were several kilometers from the center of Grahamstown where the office was located, and they were sprawling developments. Covering them on foot would be an arduous task requiring several hours. Still, Ayanda waited until I asked if I could tag along to observe to finally ask the question that must have been on his mind for hours: could I drive them around instead?

And so I spent two hours that day as the afternoon slipped into evening inching up and down the townships’ dirt roads, reminded at regular intervals by my passengers that I could still go even slower, as Ayanda and two others hung out the windows with megaphones, cajoling the passersby to attend UPM’s march the next day. By the time we stopped, darkness had completely
blanketed the lanes, chasing virtually all of our targeted audience indoors, and the other two activists had grown hoarse from shouting. Ayanda’s voice, however, remained clear and strong as ever, and as he directed me back to his own home within the township, it was tinged with laughter. What a shock it would be for his wife to see him home so soon! Would he catch her with dinner still cooking, the children not yet bathed? What would he do with all of this unplanned free time? Would he watch television with his family? Might he even get to go to sleep early?

Such a “strange night,” as he laughingly called it, was not to be, however. By the time I pulled up in front of his small house, Ayanda had already used his cell phone to arrange for a meeting with other UPM activists to go over their plans for the next day. Exiting the car, he thanked me again for letting him accomplish so much that day and for giving him more time that night to work. I, on the other hand, needed to get home to immediately to rest; doing all that driving, he said, without a trace of a wink, must have been very tiring.

Ayanda was hardly the only tireless oppositional civil society leader I encountered in South Africa. I was continually impressed by how much they were willing to do to advance their causes, especially given their resource challenges. A rental car and willing driver were rare luxuries, but that did not seem to alter their calculus as to what these leaders sought to accomplish and how they went about it. This indefatigability, however, continually raised the central question of this dissertation. If individuals are displeased enough with the incumbent government to found, run and participate in civil society groups opposing and criticizing the government, dedicating their days and nights to their opposition, why is it that they do not also commit their time and energies to supporting alternative parties and candidates for office? Why are they impatient in their organization of community meetings, protests, and demonstrations,
but willing to sit back and wait for the “right” party to arise? Under what conditions does the unflagging advocacy of these leaders cross the border between civil society and political society? When does their opposition become borderless in addition to tireless? When were they going to ask me to drive them to the headquarters of opposition parties, only a few kilometers away?

The theory that I have developed through a close study of the contemporary South African case points to the importance of the type of opposition parties competing with the incumbents; the presence of state-in-waiting opposition parties compels civil society to participate in electoral politics in a way that government-in-waiting parties do not. In this concluding chapter, I will reiterate and refine this theory based on my case study research. More importantly, I will tease out the major theoretical implications of the theory, some of which will require further scholarly development, and all of which deserve more scholarly attention.

**Reiteration of the Theory**

As a political system, democracy distinguishes itself not by simply tolerating opposition, but by expecting, protecting, and championing it. Organized opposition can take many forms, but we can broadly separate it into two types. Both oppositional political society and oppositional civil society consists of groups of citizens who disagree with elements of government policy and hope to change it. Oppositional political society, however, pursues this goal as part of its larger aim to win control of the state or at least some position within the state (Diamond 1999); its chief representatives are opposition political parties and their candidates for elected office. Oppositional civil society, on the other hand, does not aspire to state power or positions within the state, but seeks instead to influence those within the state to change the policies it opposes.

The most prominent subtypes of oppositional civil society groups include social movements and NGOs. I have defined social movements as forms of collective action with
looser organizational structures and a more transitory nature that arise outside of the formal, institutionalized channels of state-society engagement. They largely consist of the hitherto unorganized and unrecognized making demands on those in positions of authority, often involving resistance or promotion of large-scale change in the social order. NGOs, or non-governmental organizations, are institutionalized, professional, or semi-professional voluntary groups of private citizens who serve as mediators between the state and society, pressing those in positions of authority for the interests of the group. Oppositional civil society does not solely consist of social movements and NGOs, but I chose to undertake case studies of these two ideal types of oppositional civil society in order to determine whether, despite their significant differences in resources, organizational culture, and political outlook, their leaders shared a similar perspective on involvement with electoral politics.

This is a further important point to emphasize: my theory is concerned with the leaders of oppositional civil society, not the rank-and-file members of such groups. I do not believe there is sufficient theoretical justification for treating leaders and casual participants as interchangeable, but I do contend that civil society leaders can be treated as valid representatives and substitutes for the groups they oversee. Thus, when speaking of oppositional civil society, it is to be understood that I am talking about the leaders of oppositional civil society groups.

While an oppositional group cannot be both a member of political society and civil society, it can support likeminded oppositional groups on the other side of the political/civil society divide. NGOs and social movements can endorse candidates and political parties, for example, and political parties can provide funds to social movements or sponsor legislation authored by NGOs. Likewise, individuals are free to participate in both political society and civil society groups. However, such cross-participation and support is not guaranteed, particularly
when it applies to the leaders and most active members of oppositional civil society groups. Why is there variation in whether civil society groups and their leaders actively back alternative parties and candidates for office? Under what conditions are they most likely to become involved in electoral politics?

This dissertation has developed the theory that oppositional civil society bases its decision to support opposition political parties on the identity—and aspirations—of opposition political parties. This does not simply mean that oppositional civil society groups choose to support likeminded opposition parties, which is a rather facile theory around which to engage in scholarly analysis. Rather, oppositional civil society groups pay close attention to whether oppositional parties are *government-in-waiting parties* or *state-in-waiting parties*. The theory argues that oppositional civil society groups that are highly critical of the incumbent government will support the electoral efforts of political parties when they perceive opposition parties to be states-in-waiting. That is, when opposition parties are understood as pursuing control of the state as part of an effort to significantly reform and transform it, oppositional civil society groups will broaden their repertoire of contention to include actively supporting their preferred party in its electoral efforts. Conversely, when opposition parties present themselves as alternative governments, or government-in-waiting parties, eager to gain control of the state but not to significantly alter its form or function, oppositional civil society groups will choose to be largely disengaged from electoral politics. Civil society actors will reach across the border between civil and political society when political parties make credible moves to breach the border between status-quo-supporting and revolutionary political action.

My theory is rooted in four general propositions about the nature of civil society. The first suggests that elections, those necessary—but not sufficient—institutional bases for
democratic governance, can actually be threatening to civil society groups. The second theoretical proposition argued that civil society has an implicit preference for one-party dominant states. The third proposed that civil society was particularly attractive to would-be members of political society seeking to practice either a politics without compromise or a politics without constituents. The final proposition argued that civil society waits for the state to be imperiled before it becomes involved in partisan and electoral politics.

Oppositional social movements and NGOs in post-apartheid South Africa provided ample support for my theory. In the previous chapter, I suggested that this was partially true because contemporary South Africa embodies all three categories of regimes to which my theory is most applicable: dominant-party democracies, consolidating democracies, and post-liberation societies governed by former liberation movements.

It is important to note that this dissertation’s theory makes no claims that the preferred political parties of all oppositional civil society groups will be the same, nor that these civil society groups will necessarily prefer opposition parties over the ruling party or parties. In the case that a competitive opposition party is a state-in-waiting but ideologically misaligned with oppositional civil society groups, the latter may choose to electorally support the very ruling parties whose policies they had originally organized to oppose. This theory is primarily concerned with when oppositional civil society will become involved in electoral politics, not who it will support when it does so.

By focusing on the distinction between and importance of government-in-waiting and state-in-waiting opposition parties, this theory seeks to develop a generalizable proposition from the multitude of ad hoc and particularistic explanations that are routinely proffered to explain the behavior of specific oppositional civil society groups. While these explanations can be useful in
examining certain individual civil society organizations, they shy away from making more broadly applicable claims and theorizing about civil society as civil society. The theory built in this dissertation seeks to distill what is common about many of these explanations to arrive at what is common about oppositional civil society groups. Thus, from the claim that oppositional civil society groups refuse to become involved in elections because in some instances they do not like the opposition political parties, this theory suggests what it is about opposition parties that civil society groups do not like is that the parties are governments-in-waiting. From the contention that civil society groups will not be interested in electoral politics as long as they see all parties as the same, this theory argues that what makes political parties effectively the same in the eyes of civil society is their plans to continue the status quo and govern the state as it currently is.

**Waiting for Higher Stakes**

This raises an important point that this dissertation has sought to make about civil society groups: their interest and involvement in electoral politics increases with the stakes of individual elections. The greater the chance that the election could usher in significant political, economic, and social change, the less the chance that civil society groups would not become active participants.

When opposition parties have very little chance of being elected into office and having a meaningful effect on government policy—as in the case of single-party regimes—it makes little sense to think of them as either governments- or states-in-waiting, despite their aspirations.\(^{30}\) In these situations, oppositional civil society should have almost no interest in elections. But as competitive opposition parties move from offering an alternative vision of the government to an

\(^{30}\) If anything, perhaps it is better to think of such parties as governments-in-dreaming or states-in-dreaming.
alternative vision of the state, oppositional civil society groups should find it more and more
difficult to remain on the sidelines during elections. In fact, the same should also apply to civil society groups that are not critical of the incumbent government or its policies. The more that political contests become about the future of the state rather than the future of the government, the more likely it is that civil society groups of all types will become actively involved in these contests.

This is not to say that civil society, particularly oppositional civil society, is normally complacent or uninterested in politics, only taking a side in political contests when extraordinary circumstances make it practically impossible to remain non-partisan. While bowling leagues and bird-watching societies may be latecomers to political contests when revolution looms, oppositional civil society groups, of both the social movement and NGO type, are highly attuned to politics. But they are able to wait—and according to the theory, most often choose to wait—for high-stakes elections to endorse parties and candidates and work to see them elected into office.

There are several reasons why this should be the case. First, it has been argued that civil society is inherently statist in its orientation. That is, at its core, its actions regarding the political sphere and political issues are directed at the state rather than the specific individuals or groups that comprise the current government of the state. This does not mean that civil society has no interest in who sits in government or that it does not engage with whomever currently occupies state positions, but it means that civil society’s interest and interaction with specific government officials is premised on the fact that these officials are agents of the state. In the contemporary South African case, oppositional civil society targets the ANC party not because its ideas and
policies are the most offensive to it or because it believes that it is the party most likely to be persuaded to its side, but because as the ruling party, the ANC controls the state.

Civil society is not likely to become actively involved in normal electoral contests—those that involve the choice of a new government, not the choice of a new state—because in general civil society only recognizes and engages with actual governments, not potential governments. Only seated governments, having state power, can serve the interests of the individuals represented by civil society groups; before potential governments have state power and thus the ability to deliver on their promises, they are of little use to civil society. High-stakes electoral contests involving state-in-waiting parties, on the other hand, change the equation. Now the very state power that can be wielded by governments to serve the interests of civil society’s constituents is subject to possible redefinition.

This points to the second reason why high-stakes elections are primarily the only ones that preoccupy civil society. Civil society patterns its behavior around the state as it currently exists; it has developed to work within the framework of institutions, rules, and norms that define the state. While individual governments are ever changing, the state is a constant. By orienting itself to this constant of the state, civil society can effectively ignore the identity of individual governments. Civil society knows that no matter which parties or politicians are in power, the same basic rules will govern state authority, the rights of citizens, and state-society interactions. But an election with the potential to change the state threatens to change these foundational rules of political life. The way that civil society operates could potentially change. The very ability of civil society to operate could potentially change. Thus, political contests between state-in-waiting parties are existential crises for civil society groups. To sit on the sidelines during these political contests involves a level of risk not present in political contests between government-in-
waiting parties. The outcome of a political battle between two alternative governments may spell the political defeat of a specific campaign of any one civil society group, but the outcome of a battle between competing versions of the state could decimate civil society as a whole. To say that civil society groups are statist, this dissertation has argued, does not simply mean that civil society targets the state with its actions, but that it also recognizes the state as the ultimate author and guarantor of its own place within the polity.

Indeed, the theory developed in this dissertation has emphasized the vulnerability of civil society, even within democratic states. The third key reason explored here for why civil society groups wait for high-stakes elections to become active participants centers on how normal electoral contests between government-in-waiting political parties can threaten to undermine the importance and purpose of civil society.

Very few scholars would suggest that regular, free, and fair elections are all that is needed to ensure maximal state accountability within democratic systems. Likewise, few would suggest that only political parties are necessary to effectively represent the full range of citizens’ interests. But elections do enjoy a special place in the popular imagination of what it means to be a well-functioning democracy, and across the globe, political parties are regarded as the default organization for individuals seeking to press for their interests in the political realm. In my case study of post-apartheid South Africa, I found evidence that civil society groups can feel inferior to political parties and regard the run-up to elections as particularly trying moments in their battle to remain politically relevant. Rather than supporting and allying with parties and candidates during election time and potentially promoting their already-superior status, some civil society groups ignore elections altogether as a way of signaling their own independent importance in the democratic polity. Again, the high-stakes nature of contests between state-in-
waiting parties changes this calculus, but as long as elections are not going to undermine
democracy itself, civil society can brush them aside and focus on what it has to offer that
political parties cannot.

All together, the theory built in this dissertation helps to address a familiar pattern noted
in democracy studies: the fact that within a given country, civil society groups are often much
more visible and vocal allies of pro-democracy groups during the transition to democracy than
they are active participants in post-election political contests. A civil society animated by the
goal of ousting the non-democratic state will certainly be attenuated in the aftermath of its
success, not the least because its reason for being will have disappeared. It will also take time for
what remains to reorient itself and new groups to find their footing. But the theory developed
here suggests that when civil society groups do find their footing in a consolidated
democracy, they likely will not approach political contests between those competing for state
power with the same degree of interest and enthusiasm as their predecessors did pre-transition.
The changed nature of political parties, from states-in-waiting to governments-in-waiting, will
free civil society to distinguish itself from political society.

**Further Important Insights**

Beyond the key contention of this dissertation’s theory—that oppositional civil society’s
inclination to become involved in electoral politics increases as competitive opposition parties
more closely resemble state-in-waiting alternatives—there are several additional corollaries with
enough case-study support to warrant additional theorizing and analysis. I will briefly outline
them below, as well as their potential contributions to future scholarship in the areas of civil
society, democracy, and political parties.
Political Opposition Beyond Parties

There is an unspoken bias to the question of which conditions will compel oppositional civil society to become involved in electoral politics. It is the same one that underlies much of the scholarly literature on democracy. This bias assumes that political parties are the leading face and most consequential segment of the opposition to the incumbent government (see, for example, Lipset 2000; Levitsky and Cameron 2003; Pempel 1990; Schattschneider 1942; Scheiner 2006). Indeed, scholarly consensus about the importance of opposition has perhaps too easily become a consensus about the importance of opposition parties. If democracy has become “unthinkable” without political parties (Schattschneider 1942: 1), then it also seems that opposition to the government and ruling party has also become synonymous with political parties. For Lipset, the opposition in a democratic system is essentially “an alternative government” (2000: 48) or “one or more sets of leaders, out of office” (1959: 71). That is, the opposition exists within the realm of political society, wherein political parties are the major players. Countless others agree that political parties are crucial to democratic opposition (see, for example: Scheiner 2006; Levitsky and Cameron 2003; Pempel 1990). Opposition parties ensure that ruling parties remain responsive to those they govern and check against unrestrained power. Over time, competition between ruling and opposition parties helps inculcate democratic norms and rules.

In asking when civil society will support political parties, I am agreeing that political parties matter in democracies. But I am also attempting to widen our understanding of “the opposition” within democracies so that it encompasses a fuller range of actors. More importantly, in posing the question and building the dissertation’s theory, I have drawn attention to the fact that the opposition—broadly defined as encompassing all organized criticism and
resistance to the actions of the incumbent government—does not necessarily see political parties as its leaders or even most important players in checking the incumbent government. My argument that oppositional civil society largely ignores electoral politics when the competing parties are governments-in-waiting suggests that the “normal,” modal form of political party in consolidated democracies may be of little interest to organized political actors outside of the realm of political society. As much as civil society may be said to “make democracy work” (Putnam et al. 1993), it may actually be quite apathetic about the key institutions and procedures—political parties and elections—through which democratic politics actually works.

**Civil Society Action as a Choice**

As much as scholars have debated the definition of civil society, they have largely settled on the fact that it encompasses what Heinrich (2005) calls “collective voluntary action.” Compelled participation in societal-level groups, such as was the case in many Communist regimes, clearly does not fit with the reigning academic conceptualization of civil society. That said, there has been much written that complicates what it actually means for civil society participation to be truly voluntary. Several schools of thought suggest that the turn to civil society action may not always be that much of a choice, particularly given the narrowly circumscribed opportunities available to marginalized members of society. Piven and Cloward’s (1977) work on poor people’s movements made the point most emphatically when it argued that, “modes of participation and non-participation in electoral-representative procedures were not…the freely made political choices of free men and women,” and that for the poor, “protest tactics which defied political norms…were the only recourse” (3). Participation in civil society may not be forced, but forces beyond the control of certain marginalized groups may drive them

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31 Of course, many of these society-level organizations were actually organs of the Communist Party-State, which further prevents them from being considered part of civil society, given that it is understood to be largely autonomous from the state.
to participate in civil society if they wish to have any sort of political impact. Opposition to
government policy that lies outside of the institutionalized structures and processes of politics
may be effectively the only option—and perhaps the only potentially effective action—of those
individuals never allowed inside so-called normal, institutionalized politics.

The theory explored in this dissertation does not dispute the argument that options for
political opposition are often quite limited for the poor, but it does suggest that poor people’s
movements can be a choice—for their comparatively privileged leaders. Insomuch as they
agitated for the interests of the country’s poor and dispossessed and counted such classes as their
rank-and-file participants, the social movements and NGOs that I studied in contemporary South
Africa were certainly poor people’s movements. The majority of them, however, were led or
organized by individuals that were members of the middle-class or who were relatively
privileged compared to the average individual in the communities that they sought to represent.
Even those who lived in the shack settlements and had little personal wealth, such as Mr. James
of AbM in Sweet Home Farms and Mr. Kota of UPM in Grahamstown, were privileged in that
they had access to political society and had the opportunity to transition from playing a
leadership role in civil society to one in political society.

My South African interlocutors who held leadership positions told me of being actively
courted by parties and politicians with offers of financial rewards or official positions of power
in exchange for their support or deliverance of votes. Not surprisingly, then, it was these civil
society leaders who framed their activities and those of their organizations as deliberate choices.
They were the ones who spoke of participation in electoral-representative procedures as options
they had rejected in favor of civil society-level opposition. These individuals could have chosen
to run as candidates for office or organize political parties as part of political society, but they
decided instead to serve as leaders within civil society. Their organizations could have supported specific parties and candidates in elections, but they chose not to and urged their participants to do the same. Thus, organizing the poor in protest may be a choice for the leaders of these movements that then becomes the “only recourse” for the people they organize. This dissertation asks that in future scholarship we more carefully consider how the voluntariness of civil society action can and does vary among different classes of individuals, even those involved in the same group, and how this dynamic affects the overall behavior of poor people’s movements.

Recognizing that civil society opposition is a voluntary choice for its relatively privileged leadership class allows us to better understand how such civil society opposition operates and theorize about how it can be expected to operate in the future. One theme that emerged in this dissertation’s case study was the insistence, particularly among the social movements challenging the government, on ideological purity and remaining true to certain core principles of political action. Of particular interest to our purposes was the wholesale rejection of electoral-representative politics and refusal to support ideologically flawed and “impure” opposition parties.

While some of my informants suggested that this stubbornness was somehow a unique feature of leftist politics in contemporary South Africa, it actually makes sense when we consider opposition movements of the poor and dispossessed as the voluntary collective action on the part of the relatively privileged and those who would be, or could be, part of political society. Such individuals have a different stake in oppositional activity than the poor constituents that they represent, which allows them to insist on ideological purity. Achieving an opposition movement’s policy goals may matter less to its leaders than prolonging the movement. Rejection of opposition parties may be more about the civil society group’s leadership’s attempts at self-
preservation than the specific causes that the group champions. The prior choice made by the leaders of civil society groups to not be part of political society when they could have been helps explain subsequent efforts on the part of these leaders to differentiate their organizations from political parties. The stubbornness of the South African left may really be just an example of the luxury enjoyed by those who choose civil society action from among several options for oppositional politics.

The suggestion that the interest in ideological purism and the commitment to certain political principles above practical concerns are luxuries primarily reserved for the relatively privileged is not without precedent in the literature. It follows the line of thought underlying the discussion of “post-materialist values,” which argues that as the basic survival needs of individuals and societies become more and more assured, they are freed to turn their attention to higher-level values, such as self-expression, autonomy, and quality of life (see Inglehart 1977 to begin). Future academic work could build on this dissertation by comparing civil society organizations’ approach to political parties based on the degree of socioeconomic privilege enjoyed by the leaders of these organizations. The distinction between state-in-waiting and government-in-waiting opposition parties may matter less to oppositional civil society leaders who are less insulated and removed from the struggles for survival and dignity that animate the lives of those represented by their organizations. The dynamic described in this dissertation’s theory may be most apparent where the leaders of civil society organizations possess post-materialist values, who may then choose to opt-out of electoral politics until it addresses the issues that matter most to them.
Rights, Communities, and the Rejection of Partisanship

If interest in post-materialist issues can serve to alienate civil society leadership from an electoral politics centered on bread-and-butter concerns, so too can a focus on universal human rights force a wedge between civil society groups and political parties. In this study, we encountered evidence suggesting that by framing their advocacy around universal human rights, oppositional civil society groups set their sights beyond any one particular government (current or future) and instead looked to the state as their ultimate target. Human rights are not campaign promises or elements of any party’s platform; they are, according to the civil society leaders I spoke to, foundational elements of the state. Politicians are not to make promises to protect and further these rights in exchange for votes; no matter who holds office and which individuals voted for him or her, as agents of the state, they have the duty to help all citizens realize these rights. Thus, the frame of human rights compelled civil society groups to act as if political parties did not matter, so long as these political parties all aspire to administer the same state. It is only when political parties speak of fundamentally altering the state that they aspire to administer that human-rights-oriented civil society groups feel obligated to weigh in on the choice among political parties. Human rights, then, is a frame that can make oppositional civil society wait for the emergence of state-in-waiting political parties to follow their lead into electoral politics.

Of course, there certainly exist civil society groups that do not couch their opposition to government policy in the language of human rights. Future research may want to investigate the variation in the degree that civil society groups employ a human-rights frame to see if this has an effect on the variation in the way that such groups approach political parties. The distinction between state-in-waiting and government-in –waiting political parties may be more apparent and significant when civil society groups have already adopted a human rights frame.
On the other hand, it has been an intention of this dissertation to start a discussion about the affinity between the human rights frame and political advocacy on the part of civil society organizations. Even if it can limit civil society groups from working with political parties, the frame can be a powerful tool that can make their work seem more legitimate, important, and normatively “correct.” When a group claims that its complaints are issues of human rights, it immediately implicates the state and seems to necessitate a state response, especially in democratic polities. It can actually vault oppositional civil society groups ahead of opposition parties in terms of presenting a complaint that the sitting government, as the head of state, which in turn is the guarantor of human rights, must consider.

Moreover, the human rights frame can serve as cover for a complaint that has a very small or not very politically significant constituency. Opposition parties have to prove that they have the societal-level support—votes—in order for the government to take up its agenda. But oppositional civil society can bypass this test by claiming that their complaints encompass foundational human rights, meaning that the state must address these complaints, no matter how few people actually care or are affected by them. Civil society bypasses political society to directly connect society to the state, and human rights are uniquely positioned to facilitate this jump.

In addition to human rights, civil society groups frequently adopt the frames of community and/or grassroots advocacy, which also serve to distance the groups from political parties. Like those organizations fighting in the name of human rights, civil society groups that agitate on behalf of “the community” or “the grassroots” can lay claim to a sort of post-partisan politics. Communities, in the romanticized view, are not composed of ideologically-driven individuals with competing wants and needs, but are collectives built around shared experiences,
often involving their marginalization by outside structures and forces (the state, economic forces, etc.). Community and grassroots organizing resists partisan politics as the latter creates false divides among similarly situated people and shifts attention away from achieving state accountability towards capturing state spoils.

Whether this carefully cultivated image of community organizing and grassroots advocacy is true in most cases, this dissertation has argued that it nevertheless has an effect on how civil society, especially its leadership, approaches political parties. Earlier I have argued, and found preliminary support for, the idea that adopting the frames of community or grassroots organizations works to limit civil society groups from becoming active and decisive forces in normal electoral contests (that is, electoral contests where only government-in-waiting parties are competitive). Future research may want to investigate whether variations in the degree to which civil society groups embrace the mantle of community or grassroots advocacy correlate with their openness to partnership with political parties. Likewise, it might be worthwhile to consider whether there is a point at which civil society groups become so invested in the ideals of community and grassroots organizing that they remain politically neutral even when competitive political factions represent differing conceptions of the fundamental nature of the state. Might some grassroots and community-based civil society organizations reject all political parties, even in extraordinary, crisis situations, because they represent a model of politics that they deem unworthy of defending?

Indeed, an idea this dissertation has sought to bring to the forefront is that the valorization of community/grassroots governance carries an implicit rebuke of political pluralism. Those I interviewed sometimes spoke of the individuals who would be affected by their activism as if they had one voice; “the community” or “the grassroots” sometimes become shorthand for what
was presented as the consensus opinion among those who were part of some marginalized group. I have argued that the erasure or masking of diverging ideas and interests among those represented by civil society groups can serve a strategic purpose, elevating the standing of civil society groups vis-à-vis the government and increasing the weight of their demands. But it may also lead to an idealized view of democratic governance with an overly exacting standard of consensus among constituents. And if feints of unified communities do help the causes of civil society groups by leading to enhanced government accountability and responsiveness to societal demands, they can also have the perverse effects of silencing minority voices—the out-groups within such communities—and limiting the tolerance for democratic debate or compromise among competing interests. The social capital that flows through Putnam’s (1993) civic communities, and helps democracy function properly, can be exclusive and exclusionary. Civil society groups that claim to be the voice of the grassroots may actually narrow the scope of government accountability to only the strongest voices within the grassroots. The singular interests and preferences of community leaders can then stand in for the supposedly singular voice of their communities.

If parties are the embodiment of political pluralism, then unified communities do not necessarily need political parties. A politics of the grassroots, abundant in social capital and operating through trust and consensus, can render political parties superfluous, or potentially wasteful of time and energy. This, I have suggested, contributes to the alienation between civil society groups and political parties and can help to explain why civil society groups would be most willing to work with, and consequently legitimize, political parties during periods of crisis when the nature of the state is at stake.
Overall, civil society’s approach to political parties, which represent institutionalized forms of political pluralism and competition, can elucidate just what scholars tend to mean when they speak of a democracy that works because of, and through, civil society. I make no claims as to whether the democracy of civil society, as opposed to the democracy of political parties, is normatively superior or more empirically accurate. It is most likely that preferences for specific types of democratic systems vary just as widely as do the actual democracies in existence. An overarching claim of this dissertation, however, is that the relationship between civil society and democracy cannot be theorized or explored without first theorizing and investigating what is meant by democracy itself.

**Participatory vs. Representative Democracy**

Most salient for this dissertation has been the juxtaposition of representative and participatory democracy. Tracing its roots back to Schumpeter’s (1942) classic definition of democracy as an “institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide via a competitive struggle for the people’s vote,” representative democracy involves citizens choosing among potential government leaders who will then make and implement policy. Citizen involvement in politics is largely circumscribed to choosing representatives to act on their behalf. Participatory democracy imagines an expanded and more active role for citizens as they participate between elections, communicating their preferences to their elected representatives and holding them accountable for their behavior throughout their time in office. In participatory democracy, the ideal citizen is as active in the governance of the polity as is any individual who is actually part of the government.

I have argued that political parties are hallmark institutions of representative democracy while civil society organizations embody participatory democracy. Political parties facilitate
representative democracy by serving as clearinghouses to identify and nurture candidates for office and connecting them to the constituencies for whom they can best serve as representatives. While they also serve to guide and discipline government officials in policymaking while they are in office, political parties are uniquely suited to help citizens and aspiring politicians navigate elections. Politically oriented civil society groups take a different approach, emphasizing the wide range of ways in which citizens can participate in governance outside of elections. They help maintain the connections between citizens and their elected officials, emphasizing an ongoing partnership throughout the tenure of the latter.

While representative and participatory democracy are sometimes conceived of as complements that can together forge the fullest realization of rule by and for the people, by examining the relationship between civil society and political parties, this dissertation has highlighted how the two forms can be in tension with one another. In particular, the better that elections work or appear to work to hold politicians accountable for their behavior and communicate constituent preferences, the more politically-oriented civil society worried about its relevancy and appeal. The frequent claim of some South African civil society leaders that elections do not matter was as much an assessment of the current state of affairs as a fervent hope. These leaders either ignored elections entirely or urged their followers to boycott elections. Few offered clear endorsements of candidates or parties, acting as they had much more important issues on which to focus. There seemed to be a fear that civil society groups would be swallowed up if they became too involved in electoral politics. A tentative insight from this dissertation is that while civil society may indirectly support representative democracy by connecting citizens to the government in the time between elections, it may also be concurrently inclined to directly
undermine two of the most important institutions of representative democracy: elections and political parties.

Political parties did not show this same level of hostility towards civil society groups, but reported that their efforts to reach out to likeminded organizations were often rebuffed or only accepted on the condition that partnerships remain unpublicized. I have argued that this unequal embrace reflects the facts that civil society is often conceived of as a junior partner to political society in democratic governance and that participatory democracy is frequently conceived of as an aspiration only to be fully pursued once representative democracy is firmly entrenched. The theory developed in this dissertation was tested in a newer democracy, where representative democracy is a recent innovation for the majority of the country. It is worth considering whether South African civil society’s indifference and animosity to political parties and elections partially stems from the fact that in the early years of a democracy, these elements take on outsize importance and attention. Once enthusiasm for voting naturally dies down and political parties loose their luster as transformational political organization for effective political action, will civil society feel less existentially threatened by representative democracy and thus willing to actively participate in it?

Civil Society and Statism

If this dissertation has endeavored to reveal the tension between representative and participatory democracy, then it has also sought to dispel the notion that civil society, even oppositional civil society, is somehow “against” the state. My theory argues that civil society has eyes almost exclusively for the state, which is why it frequently feels it can sit out elections between government-in-waiting political parties but that it could never ignore political contests between alternative states-in-waiting. The state is civil society’s target. It places demands on the
state, not political parties or specific politicians. If it does single out officeholders, it is only because they have power within the state; their position is what makes them worthy of attention.

Indeed, the romantic David-and-Goliath narratives of civil society fighting for the powerless against the powerful tend to obscure just how much civil society relies on the powerful for its purposes and success. Civil society shrewdly focuses on the state because its power is greater, more enduring, and more legitimate than that of other institutions within democratic society. In South Africa, members of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) routinely defy state-sanctioned power shut-offs by illegally reconnecting the homes of delinquent ratepayers to the electricity grid. This can be seen as a risky move, given that it invites retaliation on the part of the state, including fines and jail time. But for the SECC, whose goal is to bring electricity to all South Africans, regardless of their ability to pay for the service, it might actually be a riskier choice to support an opposition party in the hope that it will win an election to office and then be willing and able to reward the SECC for its support by implementing the organization’s preferred policy. The opposition parties’ power at this moment is at best only prospective, but the state has the ability, authority, and resources right now to make the changes that the SECC wants. The SECC is attracted to state power because it makes the most sense for its goals.

The rights frame, discussed earlier, neatly reveals civil society’s statist bias. Human rights and citizenship rights are a group of privileges and protections that inhere in individuals as the result of their ontological status as either humans or citizens. They are expected to be honored and protected by the state, not by governments (too transitory) or parties (lacking the proper authority). Indeed, the very rights that are essential to the functioning of civil society—the
rights of free association and speech—can only be provided by the state. When civil society frames its demands in terms of rights, it immediately begins addressing the state.

Civil society’s statist bias is further evident in the fact that a good deal of oppositional activity revolves around the state’s failure to meet its own promises. Oftentimes, this translates into civil society action calling on the state to do what it has already committed to doing. Thompson and Nleya (2010) note that in South Africa, there is “a strong trend to self-organize and mobilize around issues and grievances that stem from weaknesses in state-sponsored forms of participation and deliberation on the delivery of public goods and services, as well as on pro-poor policy initiatives” (240). This is a pattern of civil society effectively deferring to the state, getting involved only in those areas and issues that the state has already shown interest and commitment. It is a way of criticizing and opposing the state that still reinforces the state’s power and position of leadership. Like the majority of democratic states, the post-apartheid South African state comes equipped with several tools that civil society can use to its advantage. It is bound by a constitution and set of laws enshrining a set of political and socio-economic rights. It has considerable resources available to usher towards pressing societal concerns, such as social welfare. It even has special programs for housing, land redistribution, public health, and affirmative action. These can all be used by civil society to poke and prod the state to address civil society’s concerns. But they cannot be used without legitimating the state’s authority and agenda. Likewise, they cannot be used by a civil society that rejects the state’s authority. Thus, the irony is that much of oppositional civil society activity is very much in favor of the state.

It is worth considering how this dissertation’s theory of the relationship between civil society and political parties, grounded in an assumption of civil society’s statism, would address a situation in which the state and one party and/or coalition has become fused. If the state and
party are effectively one, does that mean that the statist bias of civil society compels it to become involved in any and all elections? Would civil society’s statist bias become a bias towards the ruling party-state?

My theory would suggest that provided they are truly competitive, even the most routine elections in countries with a ruling party-state become contests between alternative state-in-waiting political parties. I would expect civil society to become involved in these elections, as the prospect of the defeat of the ruling party is also the prospect of the defeat of the ruling incarnation of the state. Whether civil society supports the ruling party or opposition parties depends on the specific vision of the state being promoted by those running in the election. If civil society groups like the version of the state being peddled by the opposition, then they will support them in the election. At the same time, if groups prefer what the incumbent party-state has to offer, then they will support it, even if some of the these groups are part of oppositional civil society, specifically unhappy with the incumbent party-state for some of its policies.

**Civil Society and the Preference for the Political Status Quo**

In fact, one of the key theoretical propositions to arise out this dissertation is that within democracies, civil society prefers the electoral status quo. This applies, however counter-intuitively, even to oppositional civil society; that is, the organizations that specifically protest the policy and behavior of the incumbent government may actually prefer that it remain in power. Continuation of the status quo partisan power balance benefits civil society because it makes for more predictable engagement with agents of the state and allows for civil society to accrue more gains against those holding state power. Civil society interacts with the state and its institutions, and the longer that the faces of these institutions remain consistent and stable, the more these civil society-state interactions become repeated games, with greater chances of
outcomes that are maximally advantageous to both sides. Quite simply, it is easier to do battle with an adversary that one knows. This accords with a common theme in the literature on civil society, which posits that certain elements of social capital, most notably trust and reciprocity, provide a sort of grease that oils the wheels of democracy, allowing it to function properly. Trust and reciprocity are easier to sustain when there is stability in the players in the game of politics, and in turn, they reinforce this stability.

When combined with its criticism of the incumbent government’s behavior, oppositional civil society’s preference for the maintenance of the political status quo leads it to remain neutral in elections, supporting neither opposition parties nor the ruling part(ies). Again, it is only when opposition parties threaten to significantly reform the state that oppositional civil society is unable to sit on the sidelines. It must decide whether it should support a state that it knows but opposes on some issues or a state that it does not know but which could potentially agree with some of its stances.

**Conclusion**

The emptiness of the coffins that AbM used in its protests against Councillor Baig is symbolic not only of the emptiness of the organization’s threat to kill his political career, but also of the relative barrenness of our understanding of civil society’s stance and role vis-à-vis political society. Scholarship has focused quite extensively on civil society’s ability to enhance democracy by fostering government-society engagement, cultivating social capital, and inculcating democratic habits, but when it comes to understanding civil society organizations’ relationships with political parties—their counterparts within political society—there is relatively little to build on. This dissertation is an attempt to address this oversight: to begin to fill the empty library.
It began with the observation that oppositional civil society does not always behave as expected, channeling its dissatisfaction with incumbent rulers into support of opposition politicians. Instead, it sometimes carries empty coffins and issues empty threats, insofar as its leadership assiduously avoids allying with or directing its constituents toward the political opponents of its adversaries in government. Through case study work in post-apartheid South Africa, it built a theory that what matters most to civil society, and what determines whether it pursues active involvement in electoral politics, is whether it identifies the political parties challenging the ruling party as government-in-waiting parties or state-in-waiting parties. Particularly in dominant-party democracies, consolidating democracies, and post-liberation societies, only state-in-waiting opposition parties increase the risks to civil society of non-participation in elections so that they meet or exceed the risks of participation.

Elections involving government-in-waiting opposition parties, on the other hand, are biased toward the status quo in the same way that oppositional civil society is, and so they do not require significant meddling on the part of the latter. That is, in certain settings, despite heated rhetoric and damning critiques, oppositional civil society tends to be quite cautious in its demands for greater governmental accountability, asking that incumbents change their ways rather than seeking to change incumbents. The task falls to opposition parties to be incautious—to call for major changes in what the state is and how it functions—before oppositional civil society makes its voice heard in one of the most fundamental of the rights of the democratic citizen: the right to choose one’s government.

Perhaps there is relatively little scholarly attention paid to civil society’s involvement in electoral politics because, at least in dominant-party democracies, consolidating democracies, and post-liberation societies, there actually is little involvement to study. On the other hand,
perhaps it is because remaining indifferent to or ignoring democracy’s core institution—the popular vote to choose government representatives—does not fit with the romantic image of civil society as democracy’s champion. The image of civil society conjured in this dissertation’s theory—as one that finds elections threatening, that benefits from a one-party state, that prefers the political status quo even if it opposes some of the policies it produces—does not immediately fit with the voluminous literature concerning civil society’s salutary effects on democratic governance. Indeed, this theory reveals conflicting and sometimes conflictive motivations of civil society regarding the standard model of representative democracy. It suggests that the ideal incarnation of representative democracy, with political pluralism, multiple competitive parties and regular alternation in power, may be sacrificed or overlooked in the pursuit of robust participatory democracy.

Thus this dissertation, which offers more in the way of theory and suggestive insights than proven claims, asks us to take a fresh look at some of the underlying assumption that have ossified the scholarly study of civil society. Like the South African protesters and their empty coffins, it does not seek to bury the objects of its interest, but to continually engage with them in a critical manner. The study of civil society may have waned in popularity, but it is not dead, and one of the best ways to revive it is to pose new questions and to listen to those who comprise it as they offer potentially new answers. It is too soon to bring out the coffins for the study of civil society. Instead, scholars should grab the keys to their rental cars and continue ahead.
APPENDIX: INTERVIEWS

Ballard, Richard. Professor at the University of KwaZulu Natal. Personal Interview. 9 July 2013.

Blake, Michael. Staff member of the International Labour Research and Information Group. Personal Interview. 6 August 2013.

Bond, Patrick. Director of the Centre for Civil Society. Personal Interview. 10 July 2013.

Booysen, Susan. Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand. Personal Interview. 24 July 2013.

Buthelezi, Bheki. Leader of the Unemployed People’s Movement, Umlazi. Personal Interview. 11 July 2013.

Ceruti, Claire. Former leader in the Anti-Privatisation Forum; Former Staff member of the East Cape Land Committee; Former Staff member at the Farmworkers’ Research and Resource Project; Editor at Socialism from Below magazine. Personal Interview. 4 July 2013.

D’Sa, Desmond. Leader of South Durban Community Environmental Alliance. Personal Interview. 8 July 2013.

Fogel, Benjamin. Editor of Amandla magazine; Member of Unemployed People’s Movement. Personal Interview. 5 August 2013.

Friedman, Steven. Professor at the University of Johannesburg; Columnist for Business Day. Personal Interview. 5 July 2013.

Greenstein, Ran. Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand. Personal Interview. 18 June 2013.

Habib, Adam. Professor and Vice-Chancellor at the University of the Witwatersrand; Founding Director of the Centre for Civil Society. Personal Interview. 29 July 2013.

James, Siya. Leader of Abahlali baseMjondolo, Sweet Home Farm, Cape Town. Personal Interview. 7 August 2013.

Kota, Ayanda. Leader of the Unemployed People’s Movement, Grahamstown. Personal Interview. 13 August 2013.

Kruuse, Jay. Director of the Public Service Accountability Monitor. Personal Interview. 20 August 2013.

Landau, Loren. Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand. Personal Interview. 19 June 2013.
McKinley, Dale. Founder of the Anti-Privatisation Forum; Leader at Right2Know. Personal Interview. 19 June 2013.

Mngeni, Mzimasi. Staff member of the International Labour Research and Information Group. Personal Interview. 8 August 2013.


Ngwane, Trevor. Founder of the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee; Founder of the Anti-Privatisation Forum. Personal Interview. 17 July 2013.

Pillay, Devan. Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand. Personal Interview. 26 June 2013.


Redelinghuys, Marius. Director of Communications and Research for the Democratic Alliance in the Gauteng Provincial Legislature. Personal Interview. 16 July 2013.

Runciman, Carin. Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the University of Johannesburg; Member of the International Labour Research and Information Group; Convenor of the Popular Protest and Social Movements Working Group for the South African Sociological Association. Personal Interview. 29 July 2013.

Sacks, Jared. Founder and Executive Director of Children of South Africa; Freelance Journalist. Personal Interview. 2 August 2013.

Satgar, Vishwas. Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand; Leader in the Democratic Left Front. Personal Interview. 23 July 2013.

Shelle, Sonto. Staff member of the East Cape Agricultural Research Project. Personal Interview. 26 August 2013.

Southall, Roger. Professor at the University of the Witwatersrand; Managing Editor of the Journal of Contemporary African Studies. Personal Interview. 1 July 2013.

Tabensky, Pedro. Professor at Rhodes University. Personal Interview. 22 August 2013.

Weinberg, Mark. National Coordinator of Right2Know; Former Coordinator of the South African National NGO Coalition. Personal Interview. 5 August 2013.

Xhali, Mthetho. Staff Member of the International Labour Research and Information Group. Personal Interview. 5 August 2013.
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