

Professor studies link between foreign aid and democracy

BY LISA GUO

HUSTLER ASSISTANT NEWS EDITOR

A Vanderbilt political science professor has received a grant to study the effectiveness of U.S. democracy-building assistance in countries around the world. Professor Mitchell Seligson, along with political science professor Dinorah Azpuru and two other colleagues from the University of Virginia and the University of Pittsburgh, will measure the results of U.S. aid in helping to stabilize democracies in the past decade.

Seligson met with the other researchers in Washington, D.C. last week to determine the common data set they will be using for their analyses, which will consist of all foreign assistance in the area of democracy given between 1990 and 2003. The researchers also agreed on the statistical models they will be using.

Seligson noted that this research addresses an issue that is especially timely right now.

"The U.S. is now on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq trying to promote democracy under difficult conditions," Seligson said. "We're trying to figure out what works in those situations."

Examples of aid that the U.S. has provided to different countries in the past include providing courses for journalists to increase the quality of reporting on political matters, training judges, reconsidering the criminal code and providing election assistance, such as getting people registered for an election.

Seligson said that in nearly every situation, the United States promotes civil society organizations to make citizens more aware of their rights. The focuses of these organizations range from "human rights to women's rights," Seligson said, "but all attempt to hold elected officials accountable for decisions they make."



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Professor Mitchell Seligson lectures in Ecuador on his democracy research.

Seligson said that his colleagues will be using several indicators to measure a country's level of democracy.

Given these indicators and the data, the researchers must "separate U.S. assistance from all other factors, including economic growth of the country itself," Seligson said. "If the country is experiencing economic growth, it will tend to promote democracy, but that effect had nothing to do with U.S. assistance."

Seligson noted that another danger is selection bias. Because the United States often chooses the countries that need the most help, and thus are least democratic, it

may seem at first glance that the countries to which the United States provides aid have the lowest levels of democracy.

"We have to be very careful," Seligson said. "It might look like we're giving up on these countries, but they're really doing very well."

The grant of \$296,590 was given jointly by the Association Liaison Office for University Cooperation in Development and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

The results of the study will be presented in several workshops this year, as well as in a final conference, all of which will be held in Washington, D.C. ■