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Assumption #4:

The United States should prioritize the promotion of democracy around the world over other key US objectives

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SUMMARY

The promotion of democracy around the world is a central component of US foreign policy. This paper examines the assumption that the United States should continue to prioritize democracy promotion over other goals. It discusses two component assumptions: that the American people should support democracy promotion as a key foreign policy objective and that the United States has the capacity to successfully support democratization abroad. This paper also examines some lessons learned from successes and failures of democracy promotion and concludes with policy recommendations that derive from the analysis.

- US democracy support should follow a triage approach, providing assistance to countries on the precipice of democratic backsliding, while investing in civil societies that hold promise for advancing democratic values.
- The United States should leverage its assets while working with partners and allies to fight disinformation and support equitable economic growth and entrepreneurship, while exercising caution about relying too heavily on supporting elections and empowering foreign militaries.
- The United States should focus its efforts and resources on the health of its own democracy in order to receive buy-in domestically and from foreign publics for democratization efforts.

The New American Engagement Initiative's Assumptions Testing series explores some of the foundational beliefs that guide US foreign policy. By questioning the conventional wisdom, and exposing these assumptions to close scrutiny, the series aims to open a new seam in the policy debate and generate a more lively, fruitful, and effective strategic dialogue—one that is capable of producing a sustainable, nonpartisan strategy for US global engagement.

The **Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security** works to develop sustainable, nonpartisan strategies to address the most important security challenges facing the United States and the world. The Center honors General Brent Scowcroft's legacy of service and embodies his ethos of nonpartisan commitment to the cause of security, support for US leadership in cooperation with allies and partners, and dedication to the mentorship of the next generation of leaders.

The **New American Engagement Initiative** challenges prevailing assumptions governing US foreign policy and helps policymakers manage risks, set priorities, and allocate resources wisely and efficiently. The United States confronts a range of national security challenges, but the marketplace of ideas defines these too expansively, fails to prioritize them effectively, and limits the range of options for addressing them. Unconventional thinking is needed to help Americans put dangers into perspective, and encourage them to embrace global engagement through diplomacy, trade, and mutually beneficial cultural exchange.

INTRODUCTION

For decades now, the United States has explicitly acknowledged in its foreign policy that it will use its power to support the adoption of democracy.[1] Although how that power is exercised has taken different forms, the idea at the heart of the policy—that the United States can and should promote democracy abroad—has remained one of the few constants in US foreign policy.[2] Continuing this tradition, President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.'s first foreign policy speech as president made repeated pledges to defend democracy around the world and convene a Summit of Democracies in order to turn the tide against growing authoritarianism.[3]

The adoption of democracy by various countries is generally beneficial for the United States. Decision making by democratic governments is more transparent than that of autocracies, which makes bilateral relationships easier to maintain.[4] Democracies are also less likely to go to war with one another.[5] Beyond the practical benefits of democracy, there is the alignment with stated US values. If the United States is to stand for freedom, it would necessitate the support of democracy—a system of governance that allows individuals to express their beliefs and collectively control their government.

Despite the promotion of democracy by the United States, its partners, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), democracy is receding globally. According to the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project, democracy has been in a steep decline during the past decade: "The level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2020 is down to levels last found around 1990."[6] Fueled by the degradation of India's democracy, some 68 percent of the world's population now lives in electoral autocracies, with the number of liberal democracies dropping from 41 countries in 2011 to 32 today.[7] As stated in the most recent V-Dem report, "In North America, and Western and Eastern Europe, no country has advanced in democracy in the past 10 years while Hungary, Poland, Serbia, Slovenia, and the United States of America have declined substantially."[8] Most of the democratic backsliding occuring is not happening because of a foreign campaign to spread authoritariansim, but rather there is "a rot rising within the world's most powerful network of mostly democratic alliances."[9]

The declining state of democracy, paired with the persistent lofty rhetoric from American leaders promoting democracy globally, brings into question the assumption that the United States can and should prioritize democracy support. This paper examines two related assumptions. The first is that the American people support the promotion of democracy over other key foreign policy objectives. Whether the United States can consistently champion democracy abroad is conditioned on the country maintaining the practice of democracy itself. The second assumption is that the United States has the capacity to induce democratization abroad. The United States and its partners have made many efforts to support democritization, with varying degrees of success. Whether there are applicable models for supporting democritization, and whether they are suited for the challenges of the day, requires examination.

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1 The authors of this paper rely consistently on the Varieties of Democracy Project for comparative rankings and general democracy trends. The project does not rely on one definition of what a democracy is, but rather looks at the many components that underly differing political systems. See Valeriya Mechkova and Rachel Sigman, "Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem)," V-Dem Institute, 2016, https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/f9/08/f908eb53-c0e2-40f0-9294-e067537d8f0b/v-dem_policybrief_5_2016.pdf. For similarities in democracy promotion in the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations, see Barbara Ann J. Rieffer & Kristan Mercer, "US democracy promotion: The Clinton and Bush administrations," Global Society 19 (4) (2005): 385-408, https://doi.org/10.1080/13600820500242654. Barack Obama endorsed a Clinton-style of democracy: President Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at Clinton Global Initiative," speech delivered to the Clinton Global Initiative, New York, New York, September 23, 2014, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/23/remarks-president-clinton-global-initiative. For a history of US democracy promotion and its role in foreign policy, see Marian Lawson and Susan Epstein, "Democracy Promotion: An Objective of U.S. Foreign Assistance," US Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, January 4, 2019, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44858.pdf.

2 For the purposes of this paper, we use "democracy promotion," "democracy support," and "democracy assistance," interchangeably. All three terms refer to programs, either from governments or NGOs, meant to induce the adoption of democratic forms of government. These programs include, but are not limited to, aid to civil society, capacity-building of political institutions, conditional aid, and advocacy for democratic values.

3 The White House, "Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World," speech delivered at the State Department, Washington, DC, February 4, 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/.

4 James R. Hollyer, B. Peter Rosendorff, and James Raymond Vreeland, "Democracy and Transparency," *Journal of Politics* 73 (4) (2011): 1191-1205, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022381611000880.

5 While there is a preponderance of evidence that democracies rarely ever go to war against one another, there is much debate over the causal effect. See Sebastian Rosato, "The Flawed Theory of Democratic Peace," *American Political Science Review*, 97 (4) (2003): 585-602, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3593025.

6 Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem), University of Gothenburg, "Autocratization Turns Viral: Democracy Report 2021," https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/74/8c/748c68ad-f224-4cd7-87f9-8794add5c60f/dr_2021_updated.pdf.

7 A system classified as an electoral autocracy has *de jure* multiparty elections for the chief executive and the legislature but no de facto multiparty, or free and fair elections. See Anna Lührmann, Marcus Tannenberg, and Staffan I. Lindberg, "Regimes of the World: Opening New Avenues for the Comparative Study of Political Regimes," *Open Access Journal* 6 (1) (2018): 60-77, https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v6i1.1214.

8 Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem), University of Gothenburg, "Autocratization Turns Viral: Democracy Report 2021."

9 Max Fisher, "U.S. Allies Drive Much of World's Democratic Decline, Data Shows," *New York Times*, November 16, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/16/world/americas/democracy-decline-worldwide.html.

BIDEN'S STRONG DEMOCRACY STANCE AMIDST DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

With the advent of the Biden administration, there is a growing assumption by elites—partly fanned by the administration—that the United States can reverse the global decline of democracy. President Biden pledged in his presidential campaign to convene a summit of the world's leading democracies in order to "honestly confront the challenge of nations that are backsliding" and strengthen democratic institutions.[10] Biden has so often framed the central issue of US foreign policy as the need to bolster democracy against growing authoritarianism that some are already calling the approach his own "Biden doctrine."[11] In his first press conference as president, Biden framed his view that the main conflict globally was between an American-style democracy and autocracy:

> It is clear, absolutely clear . . . that this is a battle between the utility of democracies in the 21st century and autocracies. If you notice, you don't have Russia talking about communism anymore. It's about an autocracy.[12]

In many ways, the assumption that the United States should aggressively promote democracy abroad is a product of the Cold War. Leaders such as former President Ronald Reagan saw a clear dichotomy between communism and democracy and went to great lengths to brand American-style democracy as the path to prosperity and freedom for others. By the 1990s, democracy had become, in the eyes of the United States, "the world's new universal religion."[13] The triumphalist spirit that permeated US leadership in the post-Cold War unipolar moment was accompanied by a belief that liberal democracy would be the clear preference of publics around the world and would spread largely unencumbered.[14] Political support for democratization had merged with human rights movements, leading to combined efforts in Central America and South Africa.[15] This period was marked by several successful cases of democratization—discussed later—but perhaps the greatest success in the view of democracy promoters was the collapse of democracy's nemesis: the Soviet Union.

Compared with the proposed dichotomy of democracy versus communism, the post–Cold War period has seen a far less clear-cut ideological schism and a growing list of failures by the United States to build democracies. The calamitous invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 under the guise that the United States would bring democracy to the country laid bare to many that the rhetoric of democracy promotion could be used to justify patently anti-democratic behavior.[16] More recently, the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, culminating in the US-backed elected leader Ashraf Ghani fleeing the country, marked another instance of a major investment by the United States and its partners that has failed to establish a resilient democratic system. The combination of high-profile failures in using military force to transition countries from authoritarianism to more democratic systems, and the positive relationships the United States has maintained with many authoritarian states, has called into question Washington's devotion to universalist democracy promotion.

The American public does not prioritize support for democratization as the political establishment does. There is an ironic tension between a US foreign policy that pledges to support democracy abroad and the views of a majority of Americans. In recent polling from the Pew Research Center, Americans ranked the promotion of democracy as their lowest foreign policy priority.[17] Similarly, polling from the Center for American Progress found that just nine percent of respondents listed "promoting democratic rights and freedoms abroad" in their top three most important foreign policy priorities for the United States.[18] Public views have not changed elite views, however. Although President Biden has clearly articulated

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10 Biden Harris Democrats, "The Power of America's Example: The Biden Plan for Leading the Democratic World to Meet the Challenges of the 21st Century," https://joebiden.com/americanleadership/.

11 Hal Brands, "The Emerging Biden Doctrine: Democracy, Autocracy, and the Defining Clash of Our Time," *Foreign Affairs*, June 29, 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-06-29/emerging-biden-doctrine.

12 The White House, "Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference," speech delivered in the East Room, Washington, DC, March 25, 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/03/25/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference/.

13 Paul E. Corcoran, "The Limits of Democratic Theory," in Graeme Duncan (ed.), *Democratic Theory and Practice*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 14.

14 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, (New York: Free Press, 1992).

15 Thomas Carothers, "Does Democracy Promotion Have a Future?" in *Democracy and Development*, June 23, 2008, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/DemocracyDevm-Carothers-sec.pdf, 123.

16 For a detailed discussion of the anti-democratic nature of the war in Iraq, see David Beetham, "The contradictions of democratization by force: the case of Iraq," *Democratization*, 16 (3) (2009), 443-454, https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340902914338. In 2004 and 2005, Gallup polled Americans on the question "Do you think the United States will—or will not—be able to establish a stable democratic government in Iraq?" At no point did a majority of Americans believe it would be possible to do so. "Iraq," Gallup, https://news.gallup.com/poll/1633/iraq.aspx.

17 Bruce Drake, "Americans put low priority on promoting democracy abroad," Pew Research Center, March 2, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/03/02/americans-put-low-priority-on-promoting-democracy-abroad-2/.

18 John Halpin, et al., "How Americans Envision a More Perfect Union: A Common Path Forward for the Country," Center for American Progress, May 26, 2021, https://www.americanprogress.org/article/americans-envision-perfect-union/.

his belief in democracy promotion, he is far from alone. Even during the Trump administration, which was ambivalent toward the concept of democracy generally, Congress passed into law a major expansion of US democracy support in Asia while maintaining spending on democracy-promotion projects in other regions.[19] This bipartisan, multi-decade dedication to US democracy promotion does not align with the expressed views of the American public.

Meanwhile, the state of democracy in the United States itself has degraded, undercutting attempts by US leaders to champion democracy's cause abroad. Multiple indicators of US democratic health show warning signs. During the past decade, the United States has fallen sharply in Freedom House's ranking of democracy, now finding itself on the level of more nascent and unstable democratic countries like Croatia, Panama, and Romania.[20] This trend is recognized by foreign publics. In a survey conducted earlier this year in 16 countries, Pew found a median of just 17 percent of respondents believed democracy in the United States was a good model to follow, with 57 percent saying that it had previously been a good example but is no longer an exemplar.[21]

Although political scientists have warned for years of democratic backsliding in the United States, recent events, particularly the violent storming of the US Capitol in an attempted political coup on January 6, 2021, make it clear that the United States has not perfected a model of democracy that can be readily exported to other countries.[22] Foreign leaders quickly used the January 6 insurrection to attack US policies, which they framed as hypocritical. Zimbabwean President Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa tweeted,

> Last year, President [Donald] Trump extended painful economic sanctions placed on Zimbabwe, citing concerns about Zimbabwe's democracy. Yesterday's events showed that the US has no moral right to punish another nation under the guise of upholding democracy. These sanctions must end.[23]

The Chinese Communist Party's *Global Times* used the January 6 attack to justify its crackdown on democracy advocates in Hong Kong, writing, "The US National Guard moved to deal with the rioters in the Capitol, which is also a slap in the face for the US over its previous remarks on similar incidents in other countries and regions and in China's Hong Kong."[24]

The lack of public support for prioritizing democracy promotion, paired with the declining health of US democracy, makes the declarations that democracy is a prime value of the United States open to question. Before Washington elites raise their expectations too high, it is useful to recall some basic facts about democratization and past examples—not all negative—of US democracy promotion.

TOO MANY SPECIFIC CASES FOR A UNIFORM POLICY

US support for democracy abroad has been far from a consistent, beneficial policy. The assumption that the United States should prioritize the adoption of democracy around the world over other key US objectives runs into roadblocks on every continent. The United States has not worked that hard to promote democracy in Egypt, operating under a belief that security cooperation and maintaining diplomatic ties outweighs the potential benefits of lending aid to opposition groups. In a retrospective on why the toppling of dictator Hosni Mubarak did not lead to a transition to democracy, Shadi Hamid, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, commented on the US role, writing:

> For its part, the Obama administration neglected to use US leverage in favor of democracy. Well before the 2013 coup, it missed critical opportunities to rein in the military's antidemocratic moves, such as the 2011-12 crackdown on pro-democracy NGOs and the June 2012 dissolution of the democratically elected parliament. And . . . key US officials gave the military a de facto green light in the run-up to the coup, leading to a crowning failure of US policy.[25]

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19 Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018, S. 2376, 115th Congress, introduced April 4, 2018, https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/2736; Congressional Research Service, "Selected Trump Administration Foreign Aid Priorities: A Wrap-Up," January 21, 2021, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/2021-01-21_R46656_94d814b840fcf5771b694267d2e44f5011f7abb0.pdf.

20 Sarah Repucci, "From Crisis to Reform: A Call to Strengthen America's Battered Democracy," Freedom House, 2021, https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2021/crisis-reform-call-strengthen-americas-battered-democracy.

21 Richard Wike, et al., "America's Image Abroad Rebounds With Transition From Trump to Biden," Pew Research Center, June 10, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/06/PG_2021.06.10_us-image_REPORT.pdf.

22 See "The Attack," *Washington Post*, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/interactive/2021/jan-6-insurrection-capitol/.

23 Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa (@edmnangagwa), "Last year, President Trump extended painful economic sanctions placed on Zimbabwe, citing concerns about Zimbabwe's democracy. Yesterday's events showed that the US has no moral right to punish another nation under the guise of upholding democracy. These sanctions must end," Twitter, January 7, 2021, https://twitter.com/edmnangagwa/status/1347176848694931457?s=20.

24 *Global Times* staff, "Chinese netizens jeer riot in US Capitol as 'Karma,' say bubbles of 'democracy and freedom' have burst," *Global Times*, January 7, 2021, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202101/1212074.shtml.

25 Amy Hawthorne and Andrew Miller (ed.), "Why Did Egyptian Democratization Fail?: Fourteen Experts Respond," Project on Middle East Democracy, January 2020, https://pomed.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/200128b_EgyptDemocracy.pdf.

The choice to back the Egyptian military was a failure in terms of supporting democracy. The Obama administration calculated that the military would be likely to retain significant influence, and therefore that maintaining good ties to it would allow the United States its greatest degree of leverage. In backing the Egyptian military, the Obama administration's approach would appear to be in line with other choices the US government has made over the years.

The desire to maintain influence in a country has frequently been at odds with backing democratic movements. The United States has made little effort to promote democratic reforms in Saudi Arabia because of the risk of undermining the close relationship with the authoritarian monarchy, which falls in the bottom 10 percent of countries based on indicators of liberal democracy.[26] The pro-democracy movement in Saudi Arabia, to the extent that it exists, is too small, relative to the outsized power of the monarchy, to offer any real upside to an outside partner like the United States.

Although the United States reaps some advantages when more countries become democratic, democratizing countries are often unstable, rendering it hard for the United States to have consistently productive relationships with them. While voicing support for democratic change, the United States has often shown a preference for stability that non-democratic leaders can provide. The examples of US presidents supporting autocrats are far too numerous to list here, but a few are illustrative. A president seen by many as a champion of democracy, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, provided support to Francisco Franco by embargoing his enemies in Spain.[27] After being sworn in as president, Reagan was quick to voice his support for Chile's Augusto Pinochet, who had violently overthrown a democratically elected government. The Reagan administration backed Ferdinand Marcos, who, despite clearly meeting the definition of dictator, was praised by then Vice President George H. W. Bush for his "adherence to democratic principles."[28]

US leaders claim to universally support democracy, but they do not consistently do so. Thus, many believe that the United States selectively promotes democracy in order to undermine its adversaries. Russian leader Vladimir Putin has repeatedly blamed the United States for fomenting opposition to his rule, arresting opposition leaders, and banning NGOs that Washington has supported.[29] These perceptions are not entirely misplaced. US and NGO funding for groups in Georgia, Serbia, and Ukraine, all of which experienced "color revolutions," went more to political actors than civil society programs, indicating a desire by donors to achieve a certain outcome regarding who led the country, rather than seek long-term democratic institutional reform.[30]

The stated belief by many US policymakers that democracy is universally desirable routinely clashes with US policy in reality. The United States has different interests in Russia compared to Saudi Arabia, and applying the same policies to the two countries would inevitably lead to poor results in both. A foreign policy that places support for democracy as the top priority, regardless of the context, leads to cascading, negative consequences. It provides autocrats and their defenders an easy talking point when they are criticized by the United States for their illiberal policies, making the important buy-in of foreign populations for democratization more difficult to secure.

Perhaps more important, this contradiction leads to policies within the US government that are at odds with one another, reducing efficacy across the board. As Jake Werner, a research fellow at the Global Development Policy Center, observed in *Foreign Affairs*, US democracy promotion frequently supports the policies of a handful of wealthy nations, which happen to be democracies.[31] Nonetheless, far more people live in developing democracies, which US policies frequently overlook or disadvantage. US trade and industrial policies have placed significant burdens on the developing world, for example, which ultimately hinders democratization.[32] Werner summarizes the outcome of policies intended to perpetuate

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26 Sarah Repucci, "From Crisis to Reform: A Call to Strengthen America's Battered Democracy," Freedom House, 2021, https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2021/crisis-reform-call-strengthen-americas-battered-democracy, 33.

27 See Perry Anderson, *American Foreign Policy and its Thinkers*, Verso, 2013, Chapter Two, Footnote 11, 21. Anderson points out that Roosevelt had also expressed admiration for Mussolini, see John P. Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 279–281.

28 Raul S. Manglapus, "Buttery Toast in Manila," *New York Times*, July 10, 1981, https://www.nytimes.com/1981/07/10/opinion/buttery-toast-in-manila.html.

29 Steve Gutterman and Gleb Bryanski, "Putin says U.S. stoked Russian protests," *Reuters*, December 8, 2011, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia/putin-says-u-s-stoked-russian-protests-idUSTRE7B610S20111208; Andrew E. Kramer and Anton Troianovski, "With a Ban on Navalny's Group, Putin Sends Clear Message to Biden," *New York Times*, June 9, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/09/world/europe/navalny-ban-putin-biden-summit.html.

30 Susan Stewart, "The interplay of domestic contexts and external democracy promotion: lessons from Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus," *Democratization*, 16 (4) (2009): 804-824, https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340903083034.

31 Jake Werner, "Does America Really Support Democracy—or Just Other Rich Democracies?: Washington's Fight Against Autocracy Will Fail If It Leaves Out the Poor," *Foreign Affairs*, July 9, 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-07-09/does-america-really-support-democracy-or-just-other-rich.

32 Michael Colaresi and William R. Thompson, "The Economic Development-Democratization Relationship: Does the Outside World Matter?" *Comparative Political Studies*, 36(4) (2003): 381-403, https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414003251174.

the economic order, rather than promote development, writing, "The democracies of the global South have struggled to upgrade their economies, remaining stuck between Washington consensus restrictions on effective development techniques and China's highly successful program of evading such restrictions."[33]

DEMOCRATIZATION IS LARGELY BOTTOM-UP

Democracy advocates widely agree that democratization is primarily a domestic process. Whether a country becomes democratic is far more dependent on its "domestic capacity, history, [and] development of democratic institutions and civil society" than US or other outside support. In a study of past US democracy-promotion programs, Nicole Bibbins Sedaca and Nicholas Bouchet wrote that while those efforts have "played a clear—albeit varying—role in supporting democratization in many countries . . . [such efforts] cannot be seen as the primary cause in any one case."[34]

Globally, democratization has come in "waves" as Samuel Huntington so aptly coined the term.[35] The most recent third wave, between 1974 and 2000, saw successful transitions from authoritarianism in Southern Europe (Greece, Portugal, Spain), South America (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay), and Central Europe (Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland). This led to heightened hopes after the end of the Cold War that regime change would follow in the former Soviet Union (USSR) and Eastern Europe. The difference was that "the third-wave countries boasted relatively high levels of development, robust civic and opposition groups, functioning states, and extensive ties to the West."[36] Unfortunately, these "conditions were not present in the African and ex-USSR states that ousted autocrats in the late 1980s and early 1990s."[37]

The reality that democratization is inherently a bottom-up process means that broad democracy support programs can risk missing important political and cultural differences. To be sure, recognizing the importance of different cultural contexts is not to say that some cultures are incompatible with democracy. Democracy is not a single, defined system; it can be adapted to suit different cultures, while democratic cultures can also emerge. But democratic systems are particularly complex and rely on an array of interlocking components that vary from country to country. Broad approaches to democracy promotion, like supporting elections, risk creating "façade democracy," that have legitimacy primarily in the eyes of their external backers but not buy-in domestically.[38] There is widespread recognition in the democracy support field that "the impetus for democratization needs to come from within."[39] Attempting to externally implement democracy is not just unlikely to be successful, but, as a Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation literature review of democracy support found, "risks doing significant harm."[40]

WHAT IS POSSIBLE?

In enlisting regional experts to analyze a dozen regionally diverse case studies of where US democracy promotion has tried to make a difference, some lessons became clear. [41]

Not surprisingly, the importance of civil society in the democratization process surfaced in many examples, but with some warnings. Several cases showed that smaller grants from outside governments to local organizations are more effective than projects implemented by larger foreign-based civil society organizations. Pro-authoritarian movements have recognized this, leading them to fund local think tanks and advocacy organizations that compete with groups promoting democratic values.[42] Reaching out to traditional civic actors like social

33 Werner, "Does America Really Support Democracy?" https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-07-09/does-america-really-support-democracy-or-just-other-rich.

34 Nicole Bibbins Sedaca and Nicolas Bouchet, "Holding Steady? US Democracy Promotion in a Changing World," Chatham House, February 2014, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/home/chatham/public_html/sites/default/files/170214DemocracyPromotion.pdf.

35 Samuel P. Huntington, "Democracy's Third Wave," *Journal of Democracy*, Spring 1991, https://www.ned.org/docs/Samuel-P-Huntington-Democracy-Third-Wave.pdf.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Jörn Grävingholt, Julia Leininger, and Oliver Schlumberger, "The Three Cs of Democracy Promotion Policy: Context, Consistency and Credibility," German Development Institute, 1/2009, https://www.die-gdi.de/uploads/media/BP_1.2009.pdf.

39 Lise Rakner, Alina Rocha Menocal, and Verena Fritz, "Democratisation's third wave and the challenges of democratic deepening," Overseas Development Institute, 2007, https://www.eldis.org/document/A33505.

40 Marta Foresti et al, "Democracy Support through the United Nations: Literature review: What have we learnt about donors' support for democratic development?" NORAD, February 2011, https://www.oecd.org/derec/norway/48085855.pdf, 9.

41 Examples were examined in Mathew Burrows and Maria J. Stephan, *Bolstering Democracy: Lessons Learned and the Path Forward*, (Scots Valley: CreateSpace Publishing, 2018) https://www.amazon.com/Bolstering-Democracy-Lessons-Learned-Forward-ebook/dp/B078YYSYKX. Cases included: Indonesia, Ethiopia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Cuba, Pakistan, Philippines, and Kyrgyzstan among others.

42 Nadège Rolland, "Commanding Ideas: Think Tanks as Platforms for Authoritarian Influence," National Endowment for Democracy, December 2020, https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Commanding-Ideas-Think-Tanks-as-Platforms-for-Authoritarian-Influence-Rolland-Dec-2020.pdf.

movements could help widen support for democracy activists, building an ecosystem.[43] Outside actors need to know when to back off from managing civil society.[44]

All that said, pro-democracy civil society organizations by themselves cannot bring about democratization or sustain it unless other social conditions—such as a sufficient middle-class base—are in place. Although civil society organizations were able to organize impressive protests at the time of the Arab Spring, "Egypt did not manage to sustainably democratize." However, Tunisia did, at least for a time.[45] There, democratic rules existed prior to the revolution, which allowed civil society organizations to help organize meetings to bring together "secular liberals and Islamists [who] were both opposing the authoritarian government."[46] Nevertheless, the United States and others should support civil society organizations even if the context is not right for sudden democratization. The successful Ukrainian revolution in 2013 was facilitated by continued support from the United States, the European Union (EU), and others, who helped Ukrainian civil societies to develop and learn from their mistakes after earlier failures.

Getting allies and others to take the lead was important in cases such as Cuba, where US help on its own was counterproductive and sometimes endangered the activists the United States was trying to help. Partnership between the International Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Catholic Church, as well as US support for the National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections and other church-backed civil society efforts, illustrated in the case of Marcos's 1986 ouster in the Philippines how external actors can partner with local groups to serve as a "force multiplier."

A 2016 survey of 1,100 democracy activists in ten countries underscored many points regarding how the United States and other outside governments could do better. [47] The survey asked respondents to list what outside support they wanted and also to rate the support they were receiving. These activists appreciated the value of sharing strategic advice and receiving training in community organizing—as well as the facilitation of learning among activists and across movements—as much or more than funding efforts. The activists did not appreciate an outside agenda being imposed on them. They flagged the importance of donor-funded activist exchange programs—not just to gain skills and learn from others' experiences, but also to better understand how their struggles were interconnected.[48]

Foreign governments were not in the top tier of highly rated outside actors. Respondents in Uganda and Venezuela specifically cited the failure of foreign governments to put pressure on their governments for systematic human rights abuses. Others said foreign government support had been "largely beneficial" in cases where activists were being intimidated, arrested, and imprisoned, but there was also a downside in that the support helped regimes label activists as "foreign agents." Overall, what activists wanted most was training, financial backing for their projects, and support for their efforts in news and social media coverage.[49]

POLICY PRESCRIPTIONS

Recognizing both the limits of US democracy-promotion efforts and US interest in strengthening democracy, US policymakers should reassess democracy-support programming on a case-by-case basis. Policies can be improved, or caution is needed, in seven broad areas.

Take a triage approach

Given limited resources, the US government should adopt a triage approach, concentrating on supporting civil society organizations in the most promising countries for democratization, such as Indonesia, Tunisia, and Ukraine—where it should put the greatest investment—or where semi-autocratic governments are already weak and opposed by broad-based opposition coalitions, such as Venezuela. The most promising present situation could easily backslide in the future without greater support for civil society. Trying to prevent this backsliding in countries such as Hungary and Poland should also be high on the list of US priorities. The third category is authoritarian states where the focus should be on cultivating democratically inclined institutions. Support for civil society has to be carefully calibrated so as not to endanger civil society organizations.

43 Burrows and Stephan, *Bolstering Democracy*, 239-245.

44 Ibid.

45 Sandra Grahn and Anna Lührmann, "Civil Society and Post-Independence Democracy Levels," Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem), University of Gothenburg, January 2020, https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/55/60/5560f0cd-a32a-4e72-be96-0bc0e0452990/wp_94_final.pdf.

46 Grahn and Lührmann, "Civil Society and Post-Independence Democracy Levels."

47 Burrows and Stephan, Bolstering Democracy, 229-239; See also: May Miller-Dawkins, *Understanding Activism: How International NGOs, Foundations and Others Can Provide Better Support to Social Movements*, Rhize, July 2017, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54c7f971e4b0d312f4d794ef/t/59655b4446c3c406d8e91f32/1608148450384/Understanding+Activism+%28July+2017%29.pdf.

48 May Miller-Dawkins, *Understanding Activism: How International NGOs, Foundations and Others Can Provide Better Support to Social Movement.*

49 Burrows and Stephan, *Bolstering Democracy*, 230.

Fight disinformation

One of the ways in which the United States can best support civil society and prevent backsliding is to work with partners on developing methods of countering disinformation. The title of the 2021 V-Dem report on the state of democracy globally was "Autocratization Turns Viral," and for good reason. While each context is unique, a trend has been seen around the world that begins with disinformation and utilizes the seeded media environment to crack down on opposition groups and change laws. As the report describes it, "Ruling governments first attack the media and civil society, and polarize societies by disrespecting opponents and spreading false information, then undermine elections."[50] The case of the coup in Myanmar was a stark example of the role that technology can play in spreading the disinformation of authoritarians, with Facebook as a platform amplifying the statements of the military following their coup and prior, hosting calls for genocide against the Rohingya people.[51] The United States has double the incentive to work toward solutions in the disinformation space, having its democracy attacked by disinformation campaigns previously. This is an area in which policymakers should leverage the unique capabilities of the United States—namely, its tech giants—while working with individuals on the ground to understand the role the digital environment plays in political and cultural outcomes.

Economic empowerment

The United States should work to align its economic development policies with democratization, facilitating equitable economic growth and supporting entrepreneurship in targeted countries. Although economic growth does not cause democratization, societal values align with how states construct their political systems. Countries in which there is a generally equitable economic distribution are more likely to have political systems in which power is more diffuse.[52] Promoting entrepreneurship has shown to be an effective tool and may be increasingly so in authoritarian states that are introducing more market reforms, such as Saudi Arabia. The growth of the private sector has helped to anchor Indonesia's democratization. The opposite occurred in the Philippines in the 1980s. By curtailing access to credit, global financial institutions drove a wedge between Marcos and the economic elites who previously supported him. Political reforms often have a way of riding on the back of economic ones. As reforming regimes reach out to international financial markets for help, the United States and its allies have another lever for engendering political change.[53]

An election does not a democracy make

Washington should be cautious about championing elections, even free and fair ones, as clear signs of progressing democratization. While there may be benefits to elections in their own right, an electoral process can provide legitimacy that can be co-opted for authoritarian ends.[54] The George W. Bush administration learned this the hard way, being surprised by the victory of Hamas in the US-supported Palestinian elections in 2006 and going to great, and anti-democratic, lengths to try to overturn the results, only for Hamas to consolidate its power.[55] There has been a trend of leaders elected through democratic processes transforming those systems into authoritarian states, capitalizing on the legitimacy provided by elections. The most notable recent case is that of India, where the leadership of President Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party has led to autocratization that "largely followed the typical pattern for countries in the 'Third Wave' over the past ten years: a gradual deterioration where freedom of the media, academia, and civil society were curtailed first and to the greatest extent."[56] Support for the advancement of rule of law and independent judiciaries is likely to have a greater impact on democratization than elections would in the absence of such developments.[57]

Use military assistance with heavy caution

Linking military and security cooperation with broader democracy and human rights concerns and trying to convince the military in authoritarian states to avoid taking sides against pro-democracy activists has proved effective in some cases,

50 Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem), University of Gothenburg, "Autocratization Turns Viral: Democracy Report 2021," 18.

51 Global Witness, "Algorithm of harm: Facebook amplified Myanmar military propaganda following coup," June 23, 2021, https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/digital-threats/algorithm-harm-facebook-amplified-myanmar-military-propaganda-following-coup/; Paul Mozur, A Genocide Incited on Facebook, With Posts from Myanmar's Military," *New York Times*, October 15, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/technology/myanmar-facebook-genocide.html.

52 James Robinson and Daren Acemoglu, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); James Robinson, "Economic Development and Democracy," *Annual Review of Political Science*, 9:503–27 (2006) https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/jrobinson/files/jr_econdevelopment.pdf.

53 Burrows and Stephan, *Bolstering Democracy*, 31.

54 Michael K. Miller, "Electoral Authoritarianism and Human Development," *Comparative Political Studies*, 48 (12):1526-1562 (2015), https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414015582051.

55 David Rose, "The Gaza Bombshell," *Vanity Fair*, March 3, 2008, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2008/04/gaza200804.

56 Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem), University of Gothenburg, "Autocratization Turns Viral," 20.

57 Jorgen Moller and Svend-Erik Skaaning, "Requisites of Democracy: Conceptualization, Measurement, and Explanation," Taylor & Francis, 2011.

but it does carry risks.[58] US training of foreign militaries has been found to be correlated with an increased chance of coups occurring —the very opposite of what democracy aid should seek to accomplish.[59] The case of Myanmar is again an informative example of the dangers of providing support to a country showing signs of democratization, only to see such countries rapidly backslide. Myanmar had been one of the great prospects for democratization, which led to large allocations of US aid aimed at furthering the country's institutional reforms.[60] Serious human rights abuses against the Rohingya minority group in 2017 led the United States to cancel its support for the Myanmar military, but aid was still provided to the country, despite warnings that abuses were likely to continue.[61] In 2021, the Myanmar military staged a coup against the democratically elected government, leading Washington to cease its assistance and cancel a planned trade deal.[62] As with other forms of US aid meant to foster democratization, security-sector assistance should be conditional in order to avoid enabling militaries and leaders that subsequently commit abuses.

Generally, there should be greater investment in pushing institutional reforms versus standard "train and equip" in authoritarian countries where the United States has established strong security cooperation.[63] While there is an obvious desire to see the most-authoritarian states transition to democracy, the reality is that countries with larger, established militaries are less likely to democratize. The political scientist Jesse Dillon Savage found that providing democracy assistance to an authoritarian country with a large military could lead to more repression, as the militaries seek to keep their important role and undermine challenges from civil society.[64] Policymakers need to be aware of this dynamic and recognize that it can be wasteful or counterproductive to provide democracy support in authoritarian states with powerful military establishments.

Patience is a virtue

However much it is in US interests to have stronger democracies in the world, several recent cases demonstrate that the frontal attack against undemocratic states by the US government has been counterproductive. It must be remembered, too, that regardless of efforts to empower the democratic forces in a given country, democratization is a long process and patience is required. In the 62 countries that experienced democratic regime change between 1950 and 2014, V-Dem researchers found the median length of time spent undergoing such a liberalization process was four years. Moreover, a majority of liberalization episodes—43 countries—in the V-Dem sample did not end in successful regime change. Instead, the majority experienced repeated "democratic episodes yet never became democracies."[65]

Democracy begins at home

The United States finds itself in a period of democratic decline at home and abroad, with relatively diminished power on the international stage. Recognition of that situation requires using resources judiciously and setting clear priorities in all aspects of foreign policy. While this paper identifies some places to focus triage efforts abroad, the greatest investment should be on resurrecting the United States as a model for democracy around the world. Successfully aiding developing democracies requires, first, that the American people buy into democracy at home. If the United States experiences continued democratic backsliding, it will be less capable in most aspects of its foreign policy and unable to sustain support for democratization efforts elsewhere. In his victory speech after winning the 2020 presidential election, Joe Biden proclaimed, "And we lead not by the example of our power, but by the power of our example."[66] In supporting democracy abroad, US policy should follow that mantra.

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58 For effective cases, see Burrows and Stephan, *Bolstering Democracy*, 30-31. For risks and some cases of failure, see Aude Darnal and Evan Cooper, "Reality Check #9: Ensure US security sector assistance serves US interests and values," Atlantic Council, August 4, 2021, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/reality-check/reality-check-9-ensure-us-security-sector-assistance-serves-us-interests-and-values/.

59 Jesse Dillon Savage and Jonathan D. Caverley, "When human capital threatens the Capitol: Foreign aid in the form of military training and coups," *Journal of Peace Research*, 54(4):542-557 (2017), http://www.jstor.org/stable/44511233.

60 Anne Décobert and Tamas Wells, "Interpretive Complexity and Crisis: The History of International Aid to Myanmar," *The European Journal of Development Research* 32(2): 294-315 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1057/s41287-019-00238-y.

61 Martin D. Bourmont, "U.S. Pulls Military Assistance to Myanmar Over Rohingya Abuses," *Foreign Policy*, October 24, 2017, https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/24/u-s-pulls-military-assistance-to-myanmar-over-rohingya-abuses/.

62 Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (115th Congress), "Assessing US Policy Towards Burma: Geopolitical, Economic, and Humanitarian Considerations," statement by W. Patrick Murphy, October 24, 2017, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-115shrg37332/html/CHRG-115shrg37332.htm.

63 Jesse Dillon Savage, "Military Size and the Effectiveness of Democracy Assistance," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61(4): 839–68 (2017), http://www.jstor.org/stable/26363877.

64 Savage, "Military Size and the Effectiveness of Democracy Assistance."

65 Vanessa Boese and Markus Eberhardt, "Democracy Doesn't Always Happen Over Night: Regime Change in Stages and Economic Growth," V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg; Sweden School of Economics; University of Nottingham, Centre for Economic Policy Research, February 2021, https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/37/08/3708dd3e-63f1-4429-9612-0a5ac9b33def/wp_114_final.pdf.

66 "Transcript of President-elect Joe Biden's victory speech," *Associated Press*, November 7, 2020, https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-joe-biden-religion-technology-race-and-ethnicity-2b961c70bc72c2516046bffd378e95de.

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