# IIs the United States Giving Up on Democracy Abroad? the United States Giving Up on Supporting Democracy Abroad?

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When the goal of fostering and strengthening democracy abroad became a significant element of U.S. foreign policy in the 1980s, an informal network of enthusiastic democracy practitioners, activists, and scholars emerged within the foreign policy community. Over time, their numbers expanded to encompass diplomats, aid practitioners, members of Congress, and others. While still a minority within the larger circle of U.S. policymakers, this community has become a substantial and persistent voice urging that the promotion of democracy assume a central role in America’s global engagement and criticizing U.S. actions abroad that compromise democratic values.

In the 1990s, as democracy advanced around the world, democracy promotion got a hearing at the high table of U.S. foreign policy. Many mainstream policymakers embraced the idea of democratic enlargement as a core policy goal. In practice, of course, their lofty declarations of a U.S. commitment to democracy promotion outstripped the reality. Although Washington no longer needed to support dictators for the sake of anti-communism, various security and economic interests — from trade with China to the Arab-Israeli peace process — kept the United States in bed with quite a few autocratic strongmen. Moreover, behind their pro-democratic words, most mainstream policymakers did not share the faith of the democracy community in the ability of the United States to shape the political direction of other countries.

After 9/11, the cause of democracy rose once again on the policy agenda. George W. Bush’s “war on terror” incorporated the hope that helping foster political inclusion in the Middle East and elsewhere would help undercut the roots of Islamist radicalism. But again, the reality proved more complex. Serious contradictions emerged between the president’s high-octane “freedom agenda” rhetoric and his administration’s policy practice — particularly as U.S. military and intelligence efforts on counterterrorism entailed closer ties with non-democratic governments from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia. Yet, as in the 1990s, U.S. democracy enthusiasts felt that democracy was at least in the United States’ central strategic mix.

This is no longer the case. Serious pessimism about democracy’s global fortunes as well as skepticism about the value and wisdom of democracy promotion have gripped Washington. Democracy is no longer among the main areas of concern in U.S. foreign policy, as evinced by the United States’ approaches to major geopolitical rivals like Russia and China and its engagement in the Middle East.

Yet democracy enthusiasts maintain a fundamentally different, more optimistic view of the state of democracy in the world and remain convinced that supporting it should be a central priority. In short, what were once two only partly divergent perspectives have become two almost entirely separate narratives. Furthermore, the position that the United States should actively promote democracy abroad has lost ground, becoming quite clearly a minority view. The upcoming U.S. presidential election is unlikely to change this situation. Yet democracy promotion still exists, albeit quietly, in many areas of U.S. policy, and many of its adherents remain in the bureaucracy. By working to maintain and slowly expand their work out of the limelight, democracy promoters can ensure that the new pessimism does not extinguish decades of valuable gains in knowledge and capacity about how best to support democracy around the world.

The new pessimism starts from a bleak assessment of the state of democracy in the developing and post-communist countries. The heady democratic expansion of the 1990s has been replaced by democratic stagnation or even recession. As measured in the [Freedom House index](https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world-2016/overview-essay-anxious-dictators-wavering-democracies), the number of democracies in the world is no greater today than it was ten years ago. Discouraging cases of backsliding or fragmentation are multiplying, whether it be military rule in Thailand, the rise of antidemocratic populism in Hungary and Poland, polarization and near chaos in Venezuela, the closing of political space in Turkey, civil war in Yemen, or extended presidential rule in Burundi. Meanwhile, various authoritarian regimes are exhibiting a new self-confidence on the international stage, adopting more assertive security postures, and expanding their support for other non-democratic forces. A hallmark view of the early post-Cold War years — that democracy has no serious ideological rival — has been replaced by the worry that the “China model” and other authoritarian exemplars are winning hearts and minds in many places.

One might expect this view to spur the U.S. to do more on democracy promotion and try to reverse the trend. But instead, it is hardening the skepticism about the United States’ capacity to promote democracy abroad that many policymakers have felt all along. The punishing experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan contributed greatly to this trend. Both interventions appear to be glaring examples of why the United States should abandon what John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt have recently [called](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-06-13/case-offshore-balancing) “the democracy delusion.” In his new book, [Mission Failure](https://www.amazon.com/Mission-Failure-America-World-Post-Cold/dp/0190469471), Michael Mandelbaum portrays these two cases, along with the United States’ attempts to support democratic change in Haiti, Bosnia, Russia, and other places, as a litany of failures driven by the United States’ misguided belief in its ability to transform the politics of other countries. The disastrous outcomes of most of the Arab uprisings of 2011-2012 also resounded loudly in U.S. foreign policy circles, serving as a further warning about the apparent folly of democracy promotion. Pessimists conclude from the violent or ambiguous outcomes in Libya, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere that the United States had no real capacity to foster positive change in the Arab world, and that in fact it made things worse by trying.

This pessimistic view of democracy promotion not only questions whether the United States has the capacity to promote democratic change but also whether it is in its interests to do so. Pessimists insist that the many urgent security challenges facing the United States, from radical Islamist terrorism to the rise of China, overshadow and often conflict with the democracy promotion endeavor. The United States’ current counterterrorism policy, in particular, continues to be conducted in a way that puts it at direct odds with support for democracy, particularly when it entails direct cooperation between U.S. security agencies and foreign counterparts that are known for repressive practices. The United States regularly finds itself downplaying the topics of democracy and human rights in conversations with governments that are viewed as useful allies in the fight against terrorism, not just in the Middle East (such as Jordan), but also in place like Ethiopia and Malaysia.

The troubled state of democracy within the United States itself completes the pessimistic picture. Traditionally, mainstream U.S. policymakers and analysts have assumed the United States’ political superiority relative to developing countries. But today, many of them frequently highlight America’s myriad domestic woes. They [argue](http://www.cfr.org/politics-and-strategy/foreign-policy-begins-home/p29767) that the U.S. must concentrate on getting its own house in order, or that America’s domestic troubles undercut the credibility of U.S. democracy promotion. In a July interview with the New York Times, Donald Trump said, “When the world sees how bad the United States is and we start talking about civil liberties, I don’t think we are a very good messenger.”

Then there’s the opposing view. Democracy promoters are certainly aware of the above-mentioned challenges. Yet their optimism runs deep, and they reject the pessimists’ main conclusions. To start with, they acknowledge the global stagnation of democracy, but view the situation as, at worst, a mixed picture. They emphasize that, alongside the cases of backsliding, a good number of positive democratic developments have taken place. Bad news on democracy attracts headlines, they note, while good news tends not to. Making the case for a more positive view on democracy and democracy promotion in Foreign Affairs earlier this year, for example, Larry Diamond cites Burma, Nigeria, and Sri Lanka as encouraging cases.

Moreover, the optimists insist on a longer-term perspective, arguing that while the number of democracies has not increased in the past ten years, it remains close to its historic peak, and that polling in most countries reveals a strong preference for democracy over any other form of government. Today’s democratic stagnation, they contend, should be viewed — at worst — as a pause in a multigeneratonal trend of democratic growth. They argue, for example, that it’s much too early to declare the Arab Spring a failure. Democratic change often occurs in fits and starts over an extended period. In their view, the key fact is that many Arabs have recognized the need for fundamental political change and have been willing to push for it, even when it has meant paying with their lives.

They also differ with the pessimists regarding the durability of the authoritarian surge. They see the greater assertiveness of authoritarians — such as Russia’s actions in Ukraine and China’s in the South China Sea — not as evidence of the authoritarian model’s success, but rather as a sign of its weakness. In this view, Russian and Chinese leaders are fearful of their citizens’ reactions to economic slowdowns and bad governance, and are playing the nationalist card of external belligerence as a way to shore up their legitimacy. They regard the growing “autocracy promotion” on the part of some authoritarian governments as a call to arms against democracy support. In their view, it should prompt a vigorous response akin to President Ronald Reagan’s embrace of democracy promotion in the early 1980s in reaction to the Soviet Union’s efforts to win the global “war of ideas.”

When it comes to the United States’ capabilities, democracy optimists agree that Iraq and Afghanistan have been disastrous experiences. But they see them as exceptional cases from which general rules about democracy building should not be drawn, beyond the proposition that military-led regime change is rarely a good method of promoting democracy. These, the democracy promoters say, were not the cases they asked for. Rather, they were military interventions driven by security imperatives, with democracy building becoming a post-invasion afterthought. Nor do democracy promoters see the aftermath of the Arab Spring as proof positive of the limits of the United States’ capabilities in democracy promotion. In general, they don’t believe that the U.S. government made a very significant effort to affect the outcome of these uprisings. They argue, for example, that the disappointing outcomes in Egypt and Bahrain can be explained more by the United States’ failure to make use of its leverage to promote democratic change than by any failure of its (essentially insignificant) democracy promotion efforts.

The optimists dismiss the broader argument that U.S. democracy promotion policy since the early 1990s has been nothing more than a sorry string of failed efforts, arguing that this view requires cherry picking a handful of the hardest cases and willfully ignoring dozens of less prominent, more typical examples of democracy support — ones in which the United States and other Western democracies have been able to make clear and meaningful contributions to democratic progress. Such positive cases include Burkina Faso, Chile, Colombia, Indonesia, Mongolia, Burma, Senegal, Slovakia, and Tunisia.

Democracy promoters also take strong exception to the view that counterterrorism need necessarily trump commitment to democracy. They acknowledge that compromises with some helpful authoritarians are an inevitable part of U.S. counterterrorism policy. But they insist that encouraging political pluralism in Muslim-majority countries must be a foundation stone of the United States’ long-term approach to countering violent extremism.

Finally, democracy promoters recognize the mounting problems with democracy in the United States and feel their effects in their work. But they disagree that these shortcomings disqualify the United States from fostering democracy abroad. In their opinion, such a view rests on an out-of-date notion of democracy promotion as the exportation of the U.S. model, mixed in with one-sided “lecturing” of foreigners by Americans. They argue that, although such an impulse may have been present in the earliest democracy promotion efforts, it has more recently been replaced by a more sophisticated, interactive conception of democracy support in which the United States can help make available comparative experiences from multiple sources to officials and activists struggling to achieve democracy in their own countries. Some democracy promoters argue further that if Americans who work in democracy promotion openly acknowledge the United States’ own political defects, this can in fact open rather than close doors to U.S. democracy support by helping deflate perceptions of American arrogance.

In short, the gulf between the democracy community and the pessimistic mainstream view of democracy promotion is vast. In Washington, the drumbeat of negative events around the world relating to democracy has become almost deafening. President Obama and his administration have not fully embraced the realist perspective that Mearsheimer, Walt, Mandelbaum, and some others advocate, but they are not far from it. There is no transformative ambition evident in any of the main lines of U.S. foreign policy, whether toward Russia, China, or the Middle East. Instead, realist engagement with rivals dominates. Obama’s early declarations of broad pro-democratic aspirations, such as those he laid out in Cairo in 2009, are very much a thing of the past. The old U.S. habit of making do with authoritarian allies for the stake of stability or security is making itself felt once again — not only in U.S. relations with the Arab world, but in Africa (such as with Rwanda and Ethiopia), Asia (such as with Vietnam), and Turkey.

Yet democracy promotion is not off the table. In Ukraine and Tunisia, the United States has stepped up support for democratic consolidation. In numerous other transitional countries of secondary policy import, U.S. diplomats sometimes nudge their official counterparts in favor of democratic outcomes. President Obama has responded to the global trend of closing space for civil society with the “Stand with Civil Society” call to action. The administration strongly backs multilateral initiatives that advance democratic norms, such as the [Open Government Partnership](http://www.opengovpartnership.org/). And U.S. democracy assistance programs remain numerous and seriously pursued in dozens of countries, though the amount of such assistance has declined since the early Obama years.

Broadly speaking, U.S. engagement on democracy issues has shifted. There was a time when democracy promotion occupied policymakers at all levels — from the “high policy” end of the spectrum (which involves top-level engagement that seeks transformative change in strategically important countries) to the “low policy” realm of quiet, low-key methods that seek long-term, iterative change in countries of lesser policy relevance. Today, it’s mostly the “low policy” side that’s left. The democracy promotion community chafes at this shift, and continues to argue for higher-level U.S. attention to democracy support. Yet the chances for substantive change anytime soon are slim.

If the American people choose Donald Trump for president, democracy promotion would likely fall off the stage of U.S. foreign policy almost entirely. This is plain to see given Trump’s apparent admiration of strongmen like Russian President Vladimir Putin, his determination to pull the United States into a defensive crouch, and his florid disrespect for basic principles of democracy and rights even at home.

If the next president is Hillary Clinton — who evinces a strong commitment to democracy and human rights abroad — democracy promotion will continue. As Secretary of State, Clinton frequently met with activists in other countries and supported U.S. efforts to protect endangered civil societies. Yet the grip of the pessimistic narrative is strong throughout the U.S. defense, diplomacy, and intelligence establishments, and is likely to keep U.S. democracy policy aspirations very modest. Moreover, the events in the Arab world that took place while Clinton was Secretary of State have clearly influenced her outlook. In her 2014 book, Hard Choices, for example, she emphasizes that she “counseled caution” to President Obama in discussions about how hard to pressure Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to step down in February 2011. The outcome of the Libya intervention also presents a strong cautionary note to any upcoming U.S. administration.

Nevertheless, looking back at U.S. efforts to promote democracy over the last several decades yields two crucial underappreciated facts that may provide some consolation for frustrated fans of democracy promotion. First, it’s important to note that, while the “high policy” side attracts most of the public attention given to democracy issues, the “low policy” side of democracy work is far bigger. Even as high-profile strategic engagement on democracy issues has waned, assistance programs, quiet diplomacy, and other long-term efforts have continued in as many as 100 countries.

This work has led to many meaningful results, undramatic though they may be in any single instance. These have included, for example, helping build lasting institutions that administer free and fair elections in Latin America, contributing to significant gains for women’s political empowerment in Africa, building active networks of pro-democratic politicians in Asia, and nurturing countless civic activists dedicated to greater governmental accountability in many regions.

This is not to say that the democracy promotion community should give up arguing for a place at the high policy table. For example, it’s imperative to keep making the argument that returning to an embrace of authoritarian stability in the Arab world would be dangerous and counterproductive. No less important (or true) is the fact that any efforts at counterterrorism will fail without attention to issues of political inclusion, pluralism, and tolerance. But given the global headwinds on democracy, it is persistence on the “low policy” side that will allow the democracy community to conserve a significant place for democracy in the U.S. policy landscape and gradually build a bridge across the gulf that has opened up between it and the rest of the U.S. foreign policy community.